"I'M NOT A MUSEUM": NARRATIVES OF ACTIVISM AND AGEISM

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the ways in which a "wave narrative" of feminism may inform group and individual understandings of feminist action. Presenting data from semi-structured interviews with thirteen women who are currently active in two feminist activist organizations in London, this paper seeks to evaluate the extent to which ageist attitudes are both supported by and complicated within the stories we tell about our feminist activism(s). The women from this sample are of two age cohorts, representing voices of young and old feminist activists. I explore the narratives these women provided about their experiences with feminist activism –particularly narratives of group representation and community belonging, individual definitions of feminist activism, and narratives of embodied ageism among old activists. I find that the body plays a central role in old women's understandings of the interplay of age and gender in positioning them marginally in the feminist movement and in society.

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INTRODUCTION

"I'm not a museum. I am a woman. Whose rights continue to be violated every day."

This statement comes from an interview conducted with Lou, an 87-year-old feminist activist in London. Lou has been involved in the Older Feminists Network, a central London activist group, since its conception in 1982 as an initiative from the *Spare Rib*[1] magazine collective. Now a blogger who has gained a following with her angry, direct tone and her sharp commentary on various feminist events in London, Lou is an ideal interviewee—confident, knowledgeable, passionate—yet I perceived a significant change in her mood when she spoke of her marginal position in feminist activism in old age: she is not a museum, used to hold memories passed. She is politically, socially, and culturally active as an old woman[2]. Throughout our conversation, Lou seemed to be asking a question which I am now trying to answer: how can old women map their experiences onto a movement which they perceive to render them invisible?

Lou is not the first person to perceive the marginalization of old women in the women's liberation movement. 1n 1995 Barbara Macdonald, a lesbian feminist activist, wrote an "Open Letter to the Women's Movement" in which she critiqued the ageism existing between women as a result of internalized misogyny. Macdonald (1995) claims:

> Has it never occurred to those of you in Women's Studies, as you ignore the meaning and the politics of the lives of women beyond our reproductive years, that this is male thinking? Has it never occurred to you as you build feminist theory that ageism is a central feminist issue? (21).

Both Macdonald and Lou define their exclusion in relation to a singular movement, a feminism which displaces and devalues old women. That is, they perceive themselves as other to

[1] The British Library describes *Spare Rib* as, "an active part of the emerging Women's Liberation Movement in the late 20th century. Running from 1972-93, this now iconic magazine challenged the stereotyping and exploitation of women, while supporting collective, realistic solutions to the hurdles women faced". <https://journalarchives.jisc.ac.uk/britishlibrary/spareribb>.
[2] "Old woman" is the preferred term among old-age activists, as "elderly" implies a relational position to a youthful norm.

a monolithic (Western) feminism, and thus reproduce the notion that there is one feminism which follows a pattern of decay and rebirth across generations. Placing these stories of exclusion and inclusion into a collective narrative of feminist activism in a current neoliberal setting (Fraser 2013), this paper embarks from the "wave narrative" of feminism, which explains feminist thought and action as developing along a series of generations, to better understand the role of age in creating divisions between feminist activists in London. In other words, I seek to understand how the wave narrative is created and maintained as a form of exclusion within the feminist discourse provided by these particular informants, and how this might impact both internal embodiment of the cultural construct of aging by older activists and their external stigmatization.

To explore this, I spent a month conducting interviews, attending meetings, events, and reading blogs of feminist activists in London. I chose feminist activism in London as the context for this ethnographic research because it is a "world" in which action is perceived as a firmly generationally divided phenomenon (Dean 2010). In these narratives there's a tension between individual experiences of exclusion and isolation and a loyalty to reproduce a collective narrative of feminism; it is within this tension between individual and collective representation where I seek a deeper understanding of the role of age-based exclusion in both reproducing and problematizing a wave-narrative of feminism.

The objective of this research is to investigate how individual narratives are shaped and influenced by contemporary discourses of individualism (Fraser 2013), and to examine how these representations both support, reproduce, and negate such neoliberal informed discourses as individualism and productivity. In examining the barriers limiting a more intergenerationally inclusive activism among interviewees, this paper ultimately moves to question the role of an individualist undertone in feminist action today, as well as to better understand how a "positive

aging" discourse informs or is challenged by feminist activism. This contributes both to feminist understandings of ageism, as well as to infuse gerontological perspectives with feminist understandings of embodiment.

The following empirical data derives from the narratives provided by London-based feminist activists. Chapter one puts into conversation various narratives of group representation, mobilization, and visibility, to explore the ways in which these women, as group members, express a sense of collective identity, which reflects back and maps onto a generational understanding of feminist activism. Chapter two delves further into modes of self-representation and individual definitions of feminism, which highlights not only differences and similarities between activists, but also helps to expose the fault lines existing between these women in their quest to define their feminisms. Finally, the third chapter explores the stories of ageism as told through experiences of embodiment in a society deeply infused with individualist and productive discourse of aging. In moving from stories of group-representation towards more individual, embodied stories of inclusion and exclusion, I further complicate the prevailing "story" of (Western) feminism(s) as a cycle of growth and decay, and to expose the potential dangers of this "wave narrative" in flattening the very diversity which feminist activism hopes to protect and to nourish.

Literature Review

Generations of Feminism: A Wave Narrative

It is first important to understand that women's rights activism is widely understood as a generational project, which chronologically builds upon the activism of women from previous generations, or waves, of feminism (Fraser 2013; Makay 2015). This "wave narrative" supports that the feminist movement has developed in a linear fashion, emerging in the early 19th and through the first half of the 20th century as the first wave, as the second wave in the 1960s through the 1980s and in the 1990's as the third wave (Makay 2015:13). The second and third waves of feminism are also often distinguished by a difference in method (Gills, Howie & Munford 2007; Dean 2009; Fraser 2013). Where second wave feminism is seen as more direct-action, explicitly against men, and collective, third wave feminist action--arising at the same time as neoliberal thought--has been shown to be more individualistic, willing to collaborate with men, and less committed to radical, direct forms of action (Coote & Campbell 1987).

Though, as the empirical data in the following chapters will help to confirm, this wave narrative often goes unquestioned as a framework with which we can understand the "evolution" of feminist thought and praxis, scholars have begun to question the validity of such a conception. Gillis, Howie and Munford's (2010) *Third Wave Feminism: a critical exploration* is a collection of texts from various third-wave feminist writers which both support, complicate, and ultimately question the validity of an all-encompassing "third-wave" in describing the developments in feminist thought and activism since the early 1990s. This exploration is deepened by Redfern and Aune's (2010) thoughtful work, bolstered by a large survey, which engages with women's relationships with their own activism and identification with feminism. Meanwhile Dean (2010:2) identifies a 'New Feminist Politics', which he describes as a series of feminist actions in the UK

which grow in visibility, popularity, and influence over time. Though Dean's "New" feminist politics could be understood as an attempt to shrug-off third-wave associations, this text operates in congruence with a wave narrative of feminism.

This generational understanding has particular and often slightly incongruous meanings in the British context. Dean (2010) distinguishes between two different conceptions of the "third wave":

> ...one referring to a poststructuralist and postcolonial critique of the second wave –and another referring to a specific generational cohort of young feminists. I argue that the latter conception has become dominant in the contemporary British context and to a lesser extent elsewhere (Dean, 2009: 334).

Many theorists contest the term "third wave" as a symptom of the cultural ambiguity and de-historicization of late modernity (Bugeon 2011; Dean 2010; Redfern & Aune 2010; Gillis, Gillian & Munford 2010), but fewer have examined the implications this linear narrative may have on old women. The simultaneous meaning of these waves as mapped to activists' chronological ages as well as to a certain type of ideology serves to both justify age-based stereotypes and to depict old women as outdated in their ideologies (Utz & Nordmeyer 2007).

Towards Feminist Gerontology: The "Feminization of Old Age", Double Jeopardy & Intersectionality of Age and Gender

Moving from an early feminist project to define "Woman" as a collective category which has been constructed as the "other" to a male norm (de Beauvoir 2002), theorists began to tease apart the construct of "woman", and to explore and highlight the differences within this social category. The concept of intersectionality was developed within gender theory in the 1990s; this term highlights the ways in which power relations play out as dynamic interactions, rather than as a linear summation (Collins 1998; Crenshaw 1993, 1994). The concept of intersectionality begins

from the understanding that social categories such as gender, ethnicity, and class, are constituted through the interaction of individual subjects; they are "done", rather than as existing as objective qualities of the individual.

Embarking from the notion that one does not perform one's gender as an isolated process, but that we also 'do' class, ethnicity, sexuality, ability, age, etc. (West & Zimmerman 1987; Butler 1990; West & Fenstermaker 1995), theorists began to explore the ways in which oppression, stratification, and privilege operate within the women's movement. Individuals who have experiences 'deviant' to the two gender categories are often marginalized, if not made completely invisible, in both early and even in current gender theory (Krekula 2007). This is known as a process of 'othering', by which 'the other' is constructed in relation to a dominant norm (Pickering 2001).

Though many scholars have demonstrated how "Woman" as a homogenous social category others women whose experiences differ from a white, middle-class, heterosexual, able-bodied norm (Carby 1982; Haraway, 1991; Mirza, 1997; Collins, 1998), much less effort has been spent on the inclusion and comprehension of age as a dimension of othering (Estes 2001; Minkler, 2001; Krekula 2007). According to Rosenthal (1990), feminism has always had a tendency to, "bind its issues to younger age cohorts", despite evidence that issues often focused on by feminist activism continue to affect women as they move into old age.

Old women, existing at the intersection of age and gender, experience gender differently than the younger women to which feminist thought and praxis often caters. For this reason, many activists and theorists from critical gerontology have begun to advocate for a 'feminist gerontology', to more centrally frame the experience of gender across the lifespan:

> Feminist gerontology views gender as a relational construct that provides women and men with advantages and disadvantages throughout the life course. Feminists pursue a

> holistic view of people's lives, emphasizing strengths, oppression, differences, and abilities; analyzing old age in a more inclusive manner; and advocating social change to reduce inequities (Hooyman et al. 2002: 10).

However, in social gerontology, the relationship between age and gender is most frequently referred to as a "double jeopardy", or as a summation of two spheres of oppression, which necessarily places old women at a more disadvantaged position (Svihula & Estes 2008). For example, political-economy research on gender differences among elderly highlights the relative disadvantage of women in regards to access to social services, pensions, and comprehensive health care, but there is far less focus on older women's advantages compared to older men, such as stronger social ties or less stigma for attaining a position of dependence (Estes 2001).

By understanding age and gender as a double jeopardy, the identity of older women has frequently been described as stigmatized and at a disadvantage to old men, necessitating a comparative othering relationship between the two overly homogenized categories (Hochschild 1978; Matthews 1979; Paoletti 1998). This perspective promotes overly simplistic understandings of women's experiences in old age, and flattens other categories of difference (Utz & Nordmeyer 2007). Applying intersectional analysis to the experiences of older women will help to dispel simplistic, linear understandings of women in old age, and will ultimately promote the conception of old women as subjects within a matrix of social action, rather than as mere objects of social theory (Cruikshank 2008).

Critical Gerontology: Positive Aging, Embodiment, and Governmentality

> Aging is a physical process—and not in itself a medical one...Ageism, on the other hand, is a form of oppression. It has little to do with physical aging. Ageism refers to the contempt or invisibility that male society projects onto old women when we are no longer useful to them sexually or able to bear their children (Macdonald & Rich, 1983).

Critical social gerontology is the study of ageism within society and the ways in which age serves as a point of discrimination on political, social, and individual levels (Estes 1999; Biggs

2008). Critical gerontology does not aim to deny the realities of aging, but to counter reductionist understandings that currently surround issues faced by those in old age (Estes 2010; Longino & Powell 2002). Social gerontology has been dominated by a biomedical perspective since the beginning of the twentieth century (Katz 1996), and this biomedical perspective often employs a discourse which simultaneously argues that aging is a universal "truth", and a symptom which can be cured for loyal consumers (Biggs & Powell 2001). Even today, studies within the realm of social gerontology often tend towards a biomedical perspective, which places the aging individual as an object of study, rather than as a subject within a complex set of interactions (Bloor & McIntosh 1990; Brooke-Ross 1986; and Armstrong 1983). However, largely because of the pervasiveness of this perspective, many critical social gerontologists have since shied away from discussing the body in gerontological research.

With the shrinking of public safety nets, individuals and communities are required to fill in the ever-widening gaps left by a diminished welfare state, framing personal responsibility and self-governance as values within an individualistic ideology (Powell 1998; Estes 1999). A dominant discourse of positive aging normalizes this neoliberal self-governance by demonstrating the positive effects of civic engagement (Castel 2000), implying that acceptance or success may be achieved by exhibiting productive behavior (Estes 2000; Biggs & Phillipson 2003). Today, the positive aging perspective remains the dominant discourse on aging in the media and in public policy (Hill 2011; Lamb 2014). Adhering to a neoliberal logic, positive aging glorifies the elderly individual as a symbolic entity which possesses the ability and implied responsibility to disprove stigmas of the elderly as sick, needy, and a drain to public resources through self-governance and adherence to certain healthy behaviors (Allen 1992; Biggs 2008). In existing research, elderly

individuals have demonstrated internalization of positive aging, explaining that they feel obligated to behave in certain ways based on their age (Zimmermann & Grebe 2014).

Instead of promoting a biomedical understanding of the process of aging or embracing the stereotypes of positive aging, critical gerontology examines the experiences of old age from a political economy perspective relating patterns in social welfare and social policy (Biggs 1999; Estes 1998; Svihula & Estes 2008; Laliberte 2014). Theorists within the field of critical gerontology argue that neoliberal adjustment on the structural level has significantly impacted the elderly and that it is only through a structural overhaul that we may begin to see justice and well-being for elderly on a global scale (Biggs 2001; Estes & Minkler 1999; Estes 1979). This perspective views the norms of activity and productivity as enactments of a neoliberal ideology, which disadvantages those who do not maintain a "certain" level of activity into old age (Katz 2000; Katz & Marshall 2003; Rozanova 2010). Existing literature within critical gerontology views both the over-medicalization of the elderly and the discourse of positive aging as a mode of governance (Nettleton 1995).

The marginalization of older women in society is mirrored by a marginalization of older women in academic theory and in praxis (Macdonald 1983). While critical gerontology has benefitted and included feminist thought, feminists at large do not acknowledge a critical gerontological perspective (Krekula 2012). Biggs (2008) notes that in its development, critical gerontology draws upon, "neo-Marxist political economy, civil rights movements, and the insight, taken up most forcibly by political feminism, that the personal was now political'' (116). The contributions that feminist thought and praxis have had upon the formation of critical gerontology is clear, but, as some scholars have pointed out, issues and visibility of aging remains peripheral to feminist theory (Estes 2000; Sarton 1999). Critical gerontology has resisted centering the body

within its study of old age, as a reaction to a biomedical gaze and to the governance of the old body. This has had repercussions, as it abandons theory of embodiment in old age to medical studies, thus losing a central feature of the experience of aging. This paper argues that a gerontology may be informed by other areas of study, such as gender and disability studies, where the body's position has been viewed as socially constituted (Butler 1993; Hughes & Patterson 1997; Jackson & Scott 2001).

"Third-wave" Individualism and Identity-Politics: Setting the Scene

In light of this wave narrative, this paper hopes to yield a clearer understanding of the ways in which these activists position themselves against and within the narratives of feminism, especially in the context of a current neoliberal logic of individualism. Neoliberalism, as David Harvey explains, "is, in the first instance, a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets and free trade' (2005:2). Neoliberal policy relies upon an individualist logic which has culturally infiltrated many strata of society (Rich 2005). It is this individualist logic with which the third wave has often been associated (Fraser 2013; Redfern & Aune 2010; Walkerdine 2003).

Neoliberal policy also describes the context in which current activism is spurred; in the UK, an increase in threats to public funding has outraged many activist communities. These cuts are also of direct concern to the elderly; privatization threatens funding for safety-net programs, while a neoliberal logic favors independence and self-reliance (Biggs 2008). Intergenerational barriers are politically manipulated with the idea of generational equity, which poses that the elderly drain resources which could be better spent on more "valued" sectors of society (Minkler 1991).

The ills of neoliberal policy do not end at a policy level; many theorists have begun to expose the subtle, cultural effects of neoliberal logic so pervasive in current social action. Nancy Fraser is a well-known critic of the third-wave feminist tendency to, "subordinate social struggles to cultural struggles, the politics of redistribution to the *politics of recognition*" (Fraser 2013:4, my emphasis). The difference between redistribution and recognition is useful in this analysis, as it shows the limitations of identity-based rights activism, and supports the argument that we need a more structural, class-based analysis of social injustices (Fraser 2013:54). This paper is concerned with the role that politics of recognition plays in current feminist activism to understand the prevalence of identity politics, and the role this may have in fragmenting collective action between age cohorts.

This link between liberalist ideology and feminist action is long-running. In "The Feminist Critique of Liberalism," Nussbaum identifies three critiques feminists have typically held against the liberal tradition: that it is too 'individualistic'; that it holds an abstract ideal of equality; and that it consistently emphasizes reason over care and emotion in both the moral and the political (1997). However, feminism was born of liberalism, and the struggle to emancipate feminist thought from its liberal ties is a centuries-long battle. Alison Jaggar (1984) posited that, "the liberal conception of human nature and of political philosophy cannot constitute the philosophical foundation for an adequate theory of women's liberation." It is the individualistic tendency of liberal thought, which has seen a resurgence in contemporary feminist activism (Makay 2013; Fraser 2013), that this paper hopes to further explore.

Methods

> The oral history document created in the interview is the result of a three-way dialogue: the respondent with him or herself, between the interviewer and the respondent, and between the respondent and cultural discourses of the present and the past. (Abrams 2010)

This study centers as its unit of analysis the narratives of 13 women activists in two London-based feminist activism organizations. Since narratives are able to both convey the influences of social and cultural elements, as well as to highlight, or center, individual interpretations, they offer an ideal method by which we can view the relationship between public discourses and individual experiences (Chase 2011; Zinn 2005). In order to remain "true" to these women's interpretations of their activism, this study foregrounds the personal. Due to the nature of these activist organizations as closed groups with bounded activities, they allow for participant observation as well as semi-structured interviews with individuals. London is a suitable community in which to conduct this study since it has recently been described as a location where direct-action protests of austerity cuts have been on an upswing, while poverty risk is on the rise, with an increasing number of people depending entirely upon state social assistance (Biggs 2008).

The interview questions were designed to elicit the stories of becoming involved in this community of activists, while engaging with perceived ruptures in collective action, barriers to intergenerational solidarity, and attitudes about the chronology of the UK feminist movement. Though the data is derived from a series of semi-structured interviews with activists, I have also assumed the role of insider to the community and have, therefore, weaved first-person account into the narrative of this text. "Being there"—attending and participating in events and watching the unspoken dynamics between actors—shaped the interview process as informants would often refer to events at which we were both present, or to people to whom I'd been previously introduced (Watson 1999). Additionally, my identity as a woman gave me an insider's access to these

narratives, which speaks to the way in which interviews between women 'capitalize on their natural communication encouragement work' (Abrams 2010). Similarly, my ethnic and class identity and age affected the nature of these conversations.

It is important to mention that the final sample selected is not statistically representative of older or younger feminists in London, nor is this a claim I wish to make. Additionally, this paper is roughly comparative in structure, as I engage with narratives from members of two different groups, but it is not my ultimate aim to pin these two groups against one another, nor to make any claims on the organizations themselves. These populations allowed me to explore the individual motivations of these activists; it is not my aim to make any normative or prescriptive judgements on the organizations themselves.

The episodic interview (Flick 2009) was influential in the flow and structure of the interviews for this study. The episodic interview operates under the assumption that life experiences are encoded and remembered as both episodic knowledge, that which is drawn from life experiences, and semantic knowledge: the abstract concepts and the connections we build between them. The episodic interview has been shown to be not only successful in prompting participants to discuss and elaborate upon abstract beliefs and the connections and assumptions they form between these concepts, but also in allowing for participants to situate their concrete experiences within the wider context of their life history (Flick 2009). Both semantic and episodic knowledge are of concern to the present study, as they are inextricably connected in the process of self-reflection and positioning within a wave narrative of feminist action.

The episodic interview allows for the collection of data through participants' chosen stories, thus informing not only on experiences and expectations of activism, but on the generative quality of attitudes surrounding perceived barriers to intergenerational solidarity. For example,

when asking participants to define feminism (semantic knowledge), the interview question would include a component to encourage the recollection of life experiences that further illustrate lived interpretations of feminist activism, thus drawing upon episodic knowledge. Episodic knowledge involves concrete events and situations; it draws directly from life experience and is more autobiographical (Flick 2009). In the case of the present study, episodic knowledge about ageism in activism might yield explanations about behaviors in regards to a perceived barrier to solidarity (e.g., specific events where age was made invisible, embodied experiences of ageist treatment, witnessing age-related biases).

Population and Accessibility: Finding Old-age Women in a Youth-centric Movement

> For you yourselves - activists and academicians - do not hesitate to exploit us. We take in the fact that you come to us for "oral histories," for your own agendas, to learn your feminist or lesbian or working-class or ethnic histories, with not the slightest interest in our present struggles as old women (Macdonald 1983).

This study draws from interviews with thirteen activist women of different ages, sexualities, classes, ethnic and cultural backgrounds. In order to locate elderly activists, I was directed to the Older Feminists Network, a group specifically designed to give space for self-identifying old women (loosely defined by the group itself) to discuss issues particular to feminism in old age. Since this group is already focused on age and gender, the responses gathered speak more directly to the issues of age in activism. I see this not as a confounding factor as much as an opportunity to explore how feminist praxis isolates age as a token category rather than as a natural and continuous aspect of Women's experiences.

Memory Field, a Navigation

I began the interview by first asking for a temporal explanation for the interviewee's activism. I did this intentionally, to help position her to memory back to the beginning, so that

when I asked the first question: "Could you first describe how you got involved—that is, the process of becoming an activist in this community?", she would provide me with a story of the beginning, rather than promoting the organization. I wanted to find a way to ask her about her personal experience, as a member of the group. This method was successful; most responses begin with a vivid story of the activist's first encounter with the group—of being enchanted by the, "big, rowdy, loud, joyous, angry group of young women" she saw on the street that summer day in London, or of experiencing the disabling effects of an illness, thus propelled into identification as an old woman. These "conversion stories" are a central component of my analysis.

Throughout the narrative, interviewees engage with both past memories and current experiences, they consciously tell a story with a beginning, a middle and into the present.
In doing so, the interviewees effectively engage with and place themselves within a larger discourse—their narrative transition between individual and group identity. This is where the strength of oral history as performance shines through—the interviewee takes this opportunity to practice or act the out role of teacher/representative for this community to which she belongs. She describes both her vulnerability in her individuality, and demonstrating her belongingness in the group. It's a story of becoming, a story in which the interviewee actively and progressively embeds herself within the community that she aims to represent. She simultaneously tells a personal story and practices her role as a representative of the group. The final product--the narrative gleaned from these interviews--is a *representation* of a memory of becoming part of a community, but it is clear that the interviewees do not represent a story with a final ending, but rather a process of becoming integrated, a process which has not been completed.

Personal memory is embedded within and designed by what Lomsky-Feder (2004), refers to as a memory field, which offers the individual a selection of interpretations from her social

context. Cultural criteria effectively distribute access to different collective memories according to one's social entitlement, or one's position in her social environment. Each narrative is one interpretation given by an individual member of a community, and her tone and language describe not only her experiences, but her role and the unique way she sees herself as embedded within her social context. The memory field is socially constructed, and the embeddedness of the individual's narrative is socially constructed--the process of making this individual's experience visible is a play between these socially constructed actors.

CHAPTER ONE: COLLECTIVE ACTION & GROUP REPRESENTATION

This first chapter aims to explore the ways in which activists narrate their courses of action. Putting into conversation the stories told about mobilization, action, and visibility, this chapter explores representations of the generational fragmentation of the feminist movement through narratives of collective action. This chapter is divided into two main sections. The first examines the narratives provided by activists from the Sisters Uncut, a women's only direct-action feminist group which has gained in support and media visibility in the past year. The second chapter examines voices of older feminists, in reaction to the Sisters Uncut and then in representation of the Older Feminists Network, a group designed to address ageism within the "feminist movement". Women from each respective community tend to frame their narratives in reaction to a wave-narrative of feminism as reflected in the media and in feminist thought.

"We aren't saying new things, we are just saying them more loudly": Younger women and a "revival" of direct-action feminism

Suffragette was set to premiere in October 2015. The film, starring Meryl Streep, tells the story of British Suffragettes, and the legacy of women's rights activism in the UK. However, the event was suddenly disrupted by a London-based direct action group, the Sisters Uncut, who stormed the red carpet and staged a protest, laying on the carpet and chanting "dead women can't vote". The group, gaining international attention for its disruptive actions, organizes around issues of austerity cuts to domestic violence services in the UK, linking the prevalence of domestic violence to a structural violence against women. In an interview with Ceasefire Magazine (2015), one activist explains the logic behind the *Suffragette* action:

> Adopting the very tactics of the Suffragettes carries a special significance for us. The Suffragettes used direct action – blowing up post-boxes, smashing shop windows, disrupting public events – to create a politically toxic environment in which the issue of women's right to vote, and women's liberation more generally, could no longer be ignored. We intend to use those same tactics because we recognise the urgency of the fight for domestic violence services. After all, as we reminded those on the red carpet yesterday, dead women can't vote.

The group, organized by young women across London, makes the argument that the issues the suffragettes fought for are far from resolved. Furthermore, they express that the current wave of direct-action must disengage from its "white-washed" heritage by centering the experiences of women of color, and engaging with an intersectional understanding of women's oppression:

> Since our collective, Sisters Uncut, is a militant, feminist direct action group, what better place to interrupt another whitewashed version of women's history than at the premiere of the film, alongside actors telling their one half of the story? (Ceasefire, 2015).

The women involved recall the action warmly; most cite it as their first "big break" into the "activist scene" in London. The sense of pride and of ownership of these actions is palpable, as is the sense that this form of action is new:

> Because you know, one thing that I really love about London that I found out is that it is a very politically active city. There's a very big, I mean, many people who are out there. And there's a lot of anger against austerity, so *I think there is also a lot of people who weren't political before who have since become active, and I arrived at a good time* (Reba).

> Since they have started they have really made this name for themselves because they do have this *particular brand of feminism*, which is like, energetic and angry, and unapologetic for their rage" (Sarah).

> I am honored to be part of a movement which will most definitely go down in history. I have never seen this level of anger, this demand for women's rights in the UK before. This is our anger, and we are using it to make change (Iza).

But this "particular brand of feminism" has been done before. This "level of anger, this demand for women's rights" is hardly new. Second-wave feminism is also well-documented as an "era" in which direct-action activism, prioritization of women-only space, and where groups aimed to

expose capitalism's deep androcentrism and to assist in a complete structural overhaul (Fraser 2013).

The "loud, angry brand of feminism" which Sisters Uncut promotes is a draw for new membership; the group has tripled in membership in the last year. This is because, according to the women interviewed, the group satisfies a lack in "tangible feminist activism" in London. Leah, an 18-year-old student from Egypt who "collided" with the feminist community during an action last year, supports this notion. Her eyes shine bright with excitement as she explains her "Sisters Story":

> I was attending a march last year, and the girls I was with wanted to go for drinks. I said, 'Hey, we're not done here! The march isn't over' But they left. So I decided to keep walking alone. It was raining, and I had my sign and felt rather indignant about it all. But suddenly I saw this group of women chanting, with signs, and they just looked really vivacious and I asked who they were, and they said 'We are the Sisters Uncut! Walk with us!'. And I joined. And well, I have been involved since. (Leah).

Reba, 26, from Wales, has been active in domestic violence services for years, but she did not identify as a feminist until she was involved in activism. Similar to Leah, Reba describes her involvement with the group as spurred by public visibility of the group:

> And as we were walking down the street, there was this big rowdy loud joyous, angry group of young women, with--they were just so...their energy was so magnetic, and they were so hyped, and that was Sisters Uncut! and I asked the women I was with, ya know, who are they? And she said they are Sisters Uncut, they're a new movement, a direct action group, fighting against cuts to domestic violence services in the UK and yeah they're really kick ass, and everybody thinks they're really cool…(Reba)

The group's visibility to the public was a common motivation for membership among the interviewees. The women also described a process of first being an outsider to the group, but that through active participation, they could eventually gain an "insider" position. This is reflected further when respondents' express need to feel "ownership" of the group's action in order to feel part of the community:

> They lept over the fence and had a "die-in" on the red carpet...in front of like Helena

> Bonham Carter, and screamed and shouted about austerity and it was SO great! But the thing is, because I hadn't been a part of sisters, during the planning and anticipation leading up to that...I was so inspired by it, but I wasn't--I mean, *I didn't feel as if I had any ownership.* (Reba)

This illustrates the interviewee's perception of herself as an outsider to this group, and this illustrates the idea introduced by Anderson and Jack (2010) of the "muted channel of women's subjectivity", where they tend to play down their own feelings, while privileging activities (Abrams 2010). In early stories of group membership, the interviewees would speak of the group in third person, never inserting themselves into the actions. Similarly, with questions meant to prompt stories about the women's individual activism, ("When did you become a member of this group?") would more likely elicit descriptions of the group, rather than of the individual's experiences:

> They are ferocious. My friend attended a few meetings before I tagged along. The meetings are...well, you need a bit of confidence to insert yourself in this room of the most outspoken, well-read, intense women I had ever seen...they meet once a month, or is it twice a month, officially? Well they meet and hold a general assembly style meeting and then there are always a few parties, at houses and pubs. Everyone's invited but it's definitely a bit of a scene. (Lulu).

> They are a strong group of women. They really catch one's attention. No surprise they've gotten so much attention [in the media]. (Maya)

Putting the group first hints to a trend to prioritize group visibility over personal experience, when explaining activism to an outsider. Playing upon this insider/outsider dichotomy, I find that most young women are quick to use prescribed language about their activism. Additionally, the women describe membership as "addicting", "life-changing", and even, "the best thing that has ever happened" to them. Another common trend is that the women describe a process of joining the group based on a desire to become more politically active, to be part of a "scene" with so much visibility and perceived effectiveness, and then maintaining membership and growing more involved, based on social ties and shared experiences within the group:

> Now I am a Sister, I don't see so many things the same as before. I swear it's like, my identity as a sister is so important to who I am in other areas of life, not just when at a meeting or an action, but like, all the time. (Iza).

> These are my family, these women. These are my memories, my version of London. I am a university student, but I feel that I am more an activist, more a Sister. Student comes second. (Leah).

> I am a part of you know, the experience of staying up late into the night painting these massive banners... then being a part of the march itself and watching all of the work going down the street in this like sea of really awesome, angry women, was just, that was I think the moment when I think I felt really, like a sister. And when someone yelled out 'Sisters!'to have us assemble, it really felt like...me. Like I was a part of that. (Sarah). They've become the people I see every day, and the people I talk to and think about every day...and most people have heard of them, at least most people that I meet, and so it I think it becomes, definitely a part of my identity. (Reba).

> There aren't many places in London without some kind of Sisters' memory attached to it. (Lilly).

The women tell stories not only about joining a political organization, but also about identity-formation, belongingness, and transitioning to a new community. This suggests that membership in this direct-action feminist activist community is not purely based on its potential to incite political, economic, and social change, but that this group is formed and held together based on individuals' needs for a sense of community, for a new way of being more holistically involved in their social worlds. One gets the sense these women use narrative, not only to promote their organization, nor just to give a personal narrative, but that this narration is a hybrid: a representation of the self and a promotion of values.

The warm, nearly adoring nature with which these women speak about the group can also be understood as a process of ritualization of a community narrative, the use of storytelling to define a community means that over time across actors and contexts, these stories and memories become formalized within a community (Portelli 1991). This may reflect on the fact that this group is in its early stages; the parameters of this group are still being defined, and membership and belongingness are negotiated. The solidification of a group narrative plays upon a widely

accepted wave narrative, as is reflected in media coverage of the group's actions. These women move between providing personal accounts of belongingness, and more "public" stories of group promotion. Of the six women interviewed, five introduced the group by first explaining that, "domestic violence claims the lives of two women per week in the UK". The informants search for power and confidence in group membership which is based on identity, and the act of telling this story becomes a validating activity for the informant (Abrams 2010):

> It's not without its flaws, and as we grow I can see cracks in our initial harmony. But it's ours, and it's...it goes beyond the actions we do for media exposure. It's a home, and a safe home is where ideas are nourished. (Maya).

> ...if I meet someone and they say, ya know, well if they ask me a pretty basic question about like, what I do or who I am, or what I did yesterday...You know, that kinda thing? Then Sisters Uncut inevitably comes up and um, and most people have heard of them, at least most people that I meet, and so it I think it becomes, definitely a part of my identity (Reba).

The young activists describe experiences of discovery, invention, and of quenching a thirst for tangible action in the name of women's rights, but these are also deeply personal narratives of finding support, companionship, and community. Within these narratives exists a sort of retrospective blindness--which speaks to a perceived disjunction in the feminist trajectory. Though their political tactics have been used for decades, they often describe them as if they are a product of the Sisters Uncut. This "pioneering" attitude is reflected in media representations of the group, and is also present in narratives from individual members of the group when they are promoting their group's actions. This reflects upon a "mainstream" narrative of feminist action, an attempt to conceptualize and define every new action as building upon its past.

"Not many people want to hear about my aches and pains": Old Women and Community

Many of the older women with which I interviewed were familiar with the Sisters Uncut. They expressed mixed reactions to the group and to younger women's activism in general. Most interviewees expressed pride, but a few were skeptical:

> I reallylove the direct action stuff. I think you guys are just great. (Maureen).

> It's flashy, exciting stuff. But it astounds me that they do not ponder for a moment about the lack of old bodies among them. Sometimes it seems that activism is really a young woman's world. (Rose)

> Young women do not remember that the liberties they enjoy today were fought for--and sometimes I worry they will forget that it's a fight we still need to have everyday. (Nanette).

Some of the women had very little knowledge of the action of younger women, assuming that all young women are, "busy on the internet" or "listening to Beyonce and that's enough". A dismissal of young women's activism reflects a reaction to the overall trend that feminism has veered towards a more culturally-focused recognition perspective which centralizes the ways in which gender-specific forms of status subordination, as opposed to a more distributive focus on the ways gender informs and shapes class subordination (Fraser 2013: 162). Similarly, a reference to Beyonce, who has been associated with cultural feminism at large, reflects on the prevalence of this politics of recognition in contemporary feminism.

It isn't that intergenerational solidarity is not on the agenda for many of these women. Lou had tried to organize an intergenerational event at a conference several years ago, and the experience, she said, had turned her off to continuing with intergenerational actions. With teary eyes, she recounts the event:

> They didn't want to hear about the issues facing us now, of what might come for them in the future. They only wanted to hear about how it was to be an activist in the 1960's. To me, this felt very disappointing. I am not sure what I'd envisioned...I suppose some sort of effort towards intergenerational solidarity. Well, I am not sure I believe it is possible. (Lou).

When asked if she'd be willing to attend a meeting of a group which is composed of a younger membership, Lou said that she would not feel comfortable:

> I am also tired of being banished to the periphery. I go to events, to conferences and marches and the truth is that there is almost no representation, old women are not showing up. (Lou).

Congruent with Lou's observations as well as my own, old women activists tend to organize around issues specific to old age.

In a small community center in central London, the OFN meets monthly for a conference, complete with a potluck style lunch and an afternoon tea. Central to the event is the consciousness raising workshop, a product of the 1970's feminist movement, and still very much valued among the group. Millie, a retired nurse in her 80's, tells me that she attends these conferences because of the consciousness raising groups, a two-hour segment of the meeting in which women break off into smaller groups to discuss various issues to do with being an old woman:

> These groups are the reason I come all the way from Kensal Green every month. Not many people want to hear about my aches and pains, but these women have really been through it, are going through it, and want to share in the experience with me. (Millie).

OFN members begin trickling in around 11am, and by 12 the room is full of around 40 women, ranging from middle-age to their late-nineties. At one point, a woman loses hold of her walker and falls to the ground. Several others run to support her, as a woman next to me whispers, "Welcome to the circus". The women have a self-ironic tone about their old age throughout the day. I receive some suspicious glances. A few women jokingly ask if I identify as an older woman, again in reference to the politics recognition associated with young women's activism.

I am here at the invitation of Lou, who regularly attends OFN meetings, but does not view it as her primary activist community, which is an old women's film club (without official name or membership). A few days later, we are sitting outside at a cafe and as she explains:

> The Old Feminist Network started as a group which was very concerned about the issues specific to old women. But I think that over time, they have begun to cater to feminist issues, and the identity of old age has become periphery to OFN action. They do not wish to grow irrelevant, so they must address reproductive health and other issues, which are obviously not directly old-age related. *They are a feminist group, not an old feminists group.* (Lou)

This sentiment is held by other old women. Joan, a 70 year-old woman from York explains the tension in re-working an activism which addresses the issues particular to old women:

> We emotionally feel ageism. We emotionally feel sexism. But we struggle to practically address the two simultaneously. We are good at highlighting the issues of young women, because that is what is discussed by policy makers, and by the media. And it is important to show support and speak up. But as a group we still struggle to advocate for ourselves. (Joan)

In most of my conversations with old feminists, it is clear that they feel a need to more thoroughly advocate for the needs and desires of old women, but that this has yet to materialize. This is congruous with my expectations, but what is more surprising is that despite a clearly-expressed critique of their current status, they are not organizing around the issues of old women, and are instead often in conversation with "younger women's activism", or to the past, perhaps because they feel the weight of age-based stereotypes:

> I know we seem to you like a group of old ladies having tea and chattin' about. But I cannot tell you how much I look forward to these meetings, to the experience of talking to people who feel passionately about politics like I do. (Rose).

> We are probably a boring group compared to those younger ladies. But we've got our charm, we've got our spunk. I wish we could meet more often, really, but it's so hard to get here in the center of London. Most of us cannot afford to live in this neighborhood, so we come from all over the London area to get here. (Millie).

> This crazy group, we take hours to do anything and once we do, half have forgotten it. But it is important, to take the time, to not just socialize, but to socialize in ways that matter to us the most--to meet with like-minded women. (Nanette).

The intersubjectivity of these particular interviews, informed by a specific age dynamic between the interviewees and myself, is formative of these interactions (Abrams 2010). The old women, when discussing the social value of their group membership, tend to compare it to an

imagined younger women's experience, and often dismiss it as "uninteresting" or "not very radical". I am often asked why I would be interested in hearing about an old woman's experiences with activism, even when in the same breath as a brilliant critique of ageism in society.

This chapter has explored the narratives on participation in the two activist communities. In interviewing women from the Older Feminist Network (OFN) and the Sisters Uncut, it becomes clear that, though each individual expresses a strong commitment to dismantling patriarchal oppression, they also express a desire for community membership in their respective activist group. It becomes clear that, when describing the value of participation in activist communities, group action is inextricably linked to social needs of the individuals. The young women begin their narratives from a position of group-promotion, and lead into stories of becoming part of a community and the reflexive benefits of this achieved status. The old women provide similar narratives in temporal scale and theme, but these accounts are peppered with self-criticism, criticism of the group's effectiveness in comparison to younger activist communities, and doubt in the validity of their personal benefits from the community. Women from both groups provide narratives which reply to the same linear understanding of feminist activism in the UK. It is also important to repeat that the young feminists' action is celebrated in the media, and in a mainstream format, which likely informs and guides members' self-representation. In the following chapter, we move past group representations, and look at individual interpretations and representations into the feminist movement to see if this reflects a similar trend.

CHAPTER TWO: RADICAL SAFE SPACES

This chapter moves beyond narratives of collective action and group representation to explore the women's self-representation as feminist activists and they ways in which they map themselves as individuals onto the "women's liberation movement". Exploring varied understandings of radical feminism, the waves of feminism, and safe spaces, this chapter puts individual narratives into conversation, looking for trends in thought between and among these two groups of activists.

"We're not your second-wave radical feminists": (Re)claiming Radical Feminism?

Drawing from Finn Makay's (2015) work on radical feminist activism in London and in the United Kingdom, I depart my analysis from the understanding that radical feminism as a concept covers a diverse set of beliefs, practices, and priorities. Though throughout these interviews, interpretation of the term varies on an individual basis, it generally implies an acknowledgment of the patriarchal structuring of society, along with an unwavering commitment to end it. Another important theme of radical feminism as yielded by the interviews is the promotion of women-only space as an organizing method, along with a focus on all forms of male violence against women and its role in the maintenance and exacerbation of women's oppression broadly. One interviewee, a young activist and social worker in a domestic violence refuge in east London, defines radical feminism as:

> ...based in anti-capitalism. It is feminism that recognizes the legacy of colonialism, that is intersectional. A perspective based on inclusion and love. (Reba)

Lou elaborates:

> Well certainly it's about economics. About politics on a grand scale. But it is a commitment...to maintaining and prioritizing women-only space, women-only ideas. It is a commitment to prioritizing the ideas and needs of women. Which really is radical,

> when one considers just how pervasive a male-dominated perspective is. It takes work. It takes focus. (Lou).

Most women interviewed identified themselves as well as the groups with which they regularly organize as radically feminist. The term was used as an indicator that one does not "fit" into cultural expectations outside of the activist community:

> We are radical feminists, of course we take up space, we are loud. We just don't have time for men. We make enemies for that, yeah, everytime we get together in public. (Maya)

> I see the world differently, I am always annoyed at these things,
> things I'd once not cared about like music in a club or being picked up on by a man in the bus…(Sarah).

> My husband dropped me off today, wheeled me down and set me here. Due back in an hour or so, well, he understands what it's like for us women, but I don't think he ever really understands what is so radically feminist anyway, about some old ladies having tea in a community center. Better that way, maybe eh? (Nanette).

> The girls tell me, 'you don't go feeling sorry for us for being lesbians--we feel sorry for you for being attracted to men'. It's funny when we say it like that, but yeah it's true. I don't really have much hope as a radical feminist. (Reba).

Many women also use the term "radical feminism" to mark a conscious decision to become part of the movement, almost referring to it as something which they perform:

> This whole radical feminist thing is totally something I have been ready for since leaving Turkey. It's time-intensive, but it's really filled in a lot of gaps in my sense of...well, in every aspect of my life really. (Iza).

> I've been a radical feminist for decades. The only thing's changed is that now I fall over when I run from authorities! (Millie).

Similarly, old women tend to speak of "radical feminism" in a nostalgic sense, referring to activism of the 1960's and 1970's, and speaking of it as an identity which they may maintain, but as something which has faded, or something belonging to a different time:

> We were all radical back then. I've slowed down a bit sure, but I was really radical, it was really something else…(Rose).

> I don't know that we can return to those times of radical feminism. It was different

> times. I was living in France, but I remember it being in the air, in all of us more awake somehow. Well maybe it's only me who doesn't feel that anymore. Maybe I've gone and become a bit dull. (Millie).

Whereas younger women tend to use the term to distinguish the intensity and scope of their current activism, though they often acknowledge that "radical feminism" is connected to the history of feminist action:

> It's just this group of radical feminists walking down the street, nobody would mess with us...and I'm like,this is amazing. 2016, baby! (Sarah).

> I'm pretty sure my mom is proud, like...she is telling her friends, oh my daughter is a radical feminist activist down in the city. Bit overdone sometimes, but she really does support that I am following in her footsteps, or so she likes to see it, anyway (Maya).

This "second-wave radical feminism" is simultaneously a relic for both groups of women; something lost for the older women, something inherited for the younger women, but not without a problematic past. The individualized understanding of what constitutes a "radical feminist" helps to comb apart the subjectivities of feminist identification, and the ways in which an individualism of feminism serves to further fracture the notion of a collective "movement".

Wave Narrative

A discourse of waves of feminism made an appearance in the interviews, but less so than expected. All women viewed current activism as something very different than second-wave feminism, and second-wave feminism as something of the past, but understandings of the waves themselves were a bit more unclear. As Dean (2009) illustrated, third-wave feminism was both used to indicate a theoretical position within the movement, usually informed by postcolonial criticisms, as well as to refer simply to age and chronology. The newly budding "fourth wave" was never mentioned, which likely speaks to the on-going dichotomy between second and third

waves (Dean 2010). Second-wave, among younger activists, was always used in a derogatory way:

> We have to be careful about what we write [on twitter], everyone is combing through these days for any sort of offensive language. The thing is that certain groups have kind of slipped up, especially on trans- rights and well, they just come across kinda 'second-wave'. They lose credibility. (Maya)

When speaking to Maya, a literature student at King's College, about various events in London, she would often deem something "second-wave" if she perceived it to lack in critical value, to be conservative about trans- rights, or "ignorant to a postcolonial perspective". In this sense, "second wave" became an adjective to describe the outdated, and a marker of irrelevance which could lead to a loss in credibility. The pressure to represent oneself as riding the most current wave of feminism in order to maintain credibility and to be included in the group seems quite high among younger feminists, especially with the visibility of social media:

> I have people check what I post, sometimes, before posting it. It's kinda a lot of pressure, to react properly to something. To say the right thing. I have seen friends who kinda missed the mark, and I know their hearts are in the right place, but I kinda ya know, wince and think, 'that's embarrassing'. (Reba).

> We are very careful about which groups we will express our solidarity. We can't support any sort of second-wave ideologies. We don't want to hurt anyone's feelings by supporting something which excludes them. (Leah).

In this sense, the chronology of the feminist movement comes second to the ideology, but the association between ideology and chronology remains, associating progressive, up-to-date politics with youth. This association promotes age-based stereotypes of other women.

Another "key term" which was frequently used in a variety of ways is the concept of safe spaces. Both the Sisters Uncut and the OFN list as an integral component of their meetings the desire to create and foster an environment in which members feel free from the "overbearing patriarchal culture so pervasive everywhere else". Sisters Uncut has a very clear and detailed Safe Spaces policy, where OFN simply states that it maintains a women-only space. The identity

politics involved in this difference of terminology speaks to the generational divide between the two groups (Fraser 2013).

Leah, a Literature student who is well-versed in post-colonial theory, feels that the Sisters Uncut allows her a space not only to discuss the theory and political issues most important to her, but that its value lies in the fact that it is a "safe space"--a space in which those who are often marginalized have the opportunity, or are encouraged, to take a more central role in action and in discussion (Safe Spaces 2014). Commitment to the maintenance of a safe space is a common thread among self-identified radical feminists:

> Our meetings should be inclusive and supportive spaces for all women--trans, intersex and cis, all those who experience oppression as women, which includes non-binary and gender non-conforming people and also those people who identify as women for the sake of political organizing. Self-definition is an individual project. (Sarah)

> It is important for me to surround myself with other women of color. To be in a group which actively, consciously, tries to construct a space where women of color have the floor.(Maya).

Among younger feminists, there is no representation of older women's issues in any of the feminist groups which aren't designed specifically for old age. They have caucuses to address diversity, such as the working class caucus, sex workers caucus, sisters of color, lesbian sisters, trans sisters, but nothing to do with age or disability.

> I think we probably do not have an older women's caucus because of issues with transphobia. *Old women tend to have a very narrow, middle-class, heterosexual idea of what being a woman looks like*. We need to insure that our trans-sisters have a safe space. (Reba).

This, despite that demand for a more intersectional understanding of experiences in old age was commonly expressed by most of the old women activists with which I spoke. Young women's narratives appear to be informed by a rigid understanding of the chronology of feminist action, and this is very deeply imbedded, to the extent to which intelligent, educated activists are imposing a rhetoric of exclusion onto their older sisters.

Members of the Older Feminist Network also cite the creation of "women-only spaces" as a central draw to the meetings:

> Self-care in old age is not only physical--making it to the doctors and maintaining the proper diet. It is also emotional, and for me that has been part of this. Coming into a group of women my age, women who understand and who listen to me. (Millie).

Social exclusion is unfortunately a common theme among my interviews with the old feminists. Rose, 90, was recently advised to move from her flat in north London to a more central community home--a sort of hybrid between in-patient care home and a "regular" flat. She expresses deep feelings of loss and isolation in her new home:

> ...the silences at meal times, the somberness of it all. One of the staff members said to me, 'your wings have been clipped'. But how can I fly again? (Rose)

Rose provides a narrative of exclusion, but not of acceptance. A long-term OFN member, she looks forward to the monthly meetings, the film club, and the actions in which they participate:

> I am still allowed to come to these because the nurses know what they mean to me, how much joy they bring me to be part of a feminist community. But letter writing and meeting my dear friends shouldn't be enough.

Rose expresses a dissonance between her placement in society and her goals for action and inclusion. Similarly, Lou, expresses pain at the idea that her identity as an old woman serves as a barrier to her and the feminist community:

> I try to come anyway, to these events. And that is why I have this blog now, to give myself a voice when I feel silenced by everyone else. So I come, I observe, I'm excluded, and I go home and blog about it. An angry old feminist. It can be disheartening, to say the least. (Lou).

Lou is no stranger to adversity and adjustment; she had moved on her own to London from Accra 50 years before, where she quickly got involved in fighting for social justice in the south east London community. Today, Lou is well-known as an outspoken and charismatic feminist activist, as well as a loud critic of the London feminist movement. But, she carefully drew a distinction between her activism as a young woman, and her current activism as an old woman:

before, she was working alongside a pre-established community. Now, she often feels alone in her fight.

This chapter combed out individual interpretations of feminist activism and found that when women move away from group-representation, they tend to express more stark divisions between generations, and a more rigid understanding of the wave narrative of feminism. This is likely due to the pressure for individual women to map themselves onto a collective identity, as provided by the wave narrative of feminism prevalent in academic theory and praxis. As Hemmings (2011) explains, "our reading and writing of Western feminist stories locates us institutionally rather than only in relation to individual others" (134). Additionally, the subjectivity of various terms delve even deeper into personal interpretations, the next chapter engages with the embodied experiences of agism among old women activists, thus mapping individual interpretations of feminist activism onto the body.

CHAPTER THREE: EMBODIED IDENTITIES

Margaret Gullette (2004) identifies the "age autobiography" as a resource with which we can engage in, "a critical story of the relationship between at least two temporal selves" (153). Embodied experience was a point at which each interview with the old women would eventually arrive, and a prism through which these "two temporal selves" were most clearly illustrated--that is, where the women would examine themselves as they are now in relation to how they were before. Viewed through a neoliberal lens of usefulness and productivity, the old body is often described as something which decays, losing utility and value, and which eventually distances the old woman from society (Estes 2000).

The women discuss their bodies in various ways; the body weaves in and out of stories of becoming old, of navigating their lives in new ways, and of finding strength and confidence in their position. These narratives also demonstrate that appearance is important and their bodies' decline is often viewed as the locus of discrimination and mistreatment accompanying old age, as well as a source of anxiety and self-doubt. They talk about wrinkled skin ("if you iron me out, you'd get a lot of surface area") and of overall dissatisfaction with body shape ("letting gravity get its way"). Issues of the aging body conjure discomfort and a need to play-down painful realities. As a young researcher, I try to tread carefully when these issues arise in the women's narratives; these topics often served to highlight our physical differences, thus encouraging the women to self-criticize or compare.

The body is also discussed as a source of responsibility to younger women, and as a center for the women's navigation in society as an older woman:

> I was always very against self-criticism, you know, when it comes to appearance. Never did make myself up. Never did feel the need to. Dear, I just never wanted to be a

> self-hating woman. *I feel a responsibility to my daughter to be an example of aging with confidence, of owning this old body*. (Maureen).

> I have got a purple umbrella and silver hair. People eyeing me in the tube...you know, it's somewhat of a uniform, a bit of an indicator to people…'look I am old and independent'. There's some mystery, even some fun about it all, don't you think? (Joan)

Perhaps most common throughout the narratives of these women is the role of the body as an indicator of old age. In this sense, the body is the locus of identity in old age, and women express these moments as not only scary or disappointing, but as moments of awakening into a "new chapter of life". Joan, a retired midwife and professor of sociology identifies an injury as the key moment in which she became aware of her identity as an older woman:

> When I was 60 I lost my leg from the knee down. This was, for me, a loss of hubris. I really had to reinvent. And when I came out again into the world, I actually looked up events for older women. I went to [Lou's] film group, and I kind of embraced the new phase of my life. *For me it was very much etched into my body.* (Joan).

Maureen, in her 80's, also views aging as a heavily embodied experience. In our interview, she spoke often of trust--of the inability to trust her body as it develops into old age, and how this serves as a, "barrier to the world":

> The patronizing attitudes are nothing new, oh no. I have been feeling these same things since I can remember. But the worst for me is that I can no longer trust my body. Even if I can't always avoid the harassment of men, I once trusted my body to behave--to function--in a certain way. Now, I am wary of even myself. (Maureen).

Maureen is cited above as expressing a sense of responsibility to her daughter, to age in a way which encourages and supports her daughter's own passage into old age. This drive to nurture may come from an anxiety about the ambivalence of old age:

> There are no instructions. I remember my mother gave me books on menstruation. I hear there are even some on menopause, but I am now without a manual. (Maureen)

Millie, 90, was diagnosed with breast cancer in her early 60's. She cites the experience as a "breaking point", from which she healed, but not without undergoing permanent changes:

> That experience, of receiving the diagnosis...well I call it the veil of tears. There were

> women in the office much younger, in their 20's, 30's, and I remember thinking, 'they are far too young, poor dears'. And that's when I felt, I would not call it a peace exactly, but a kind of acceptance, of my age, and of the limitations of my body. Well, that was just nearly 30 years ago already. And I am an old woman still, today. (Millie)

It is difficult for the women to express bodily experience as separate from their emotional and intellectual development. This implies that embodiment is not merely physiological, but that it affects these women across all areas of life, and just as their physical reality influences them, they influence the world around them:

> It really has been this sort of checks-and-balances between physical changes and lifestyle adaptations. Seems everyday *I am remodeling my own identity* to better suit not only my body's needs, but my social and, well my cultural preferences I suppose. (Joan)

> I developed a film group...for us to keep a conversation going. I missed being critical of the ways women are portrayed in film, but I started to realize that the women on screen do not represent me, do not mirror my experiences of womanhood. So now we look at old women. (Lou).

> I like my life. I do things differently now than when I was 30, but that is not necessarily negative. I move in the way I like, I have time for myself, I make that time. (Lisa)

It is important to also acknowledge that these narratives represent a specific class perspective. The ability to "make time" for oneself adheres to a discourse of leisure, which remains dominantly middle-class experience, and which has been tied to a positive aging agenda (Powell, 2000). Though not all of my informants identify as middle-class, they provide narratives which fit into this middle-class norm. Old women, "othered" in comparison to a youthful norm, seek other means to identify with a norm; which often provided by the widespread positive aging discourse, which serves a neoliberal logic of individuality (Estes 1998).

Even when expressing an awareness of exclusion from a youth-centered society, many women express having no desire to achieve inclusion. They tell stories of otherness in relation to a youth-centered norm, but they do not always express a desire to behaviorally pass as younger, or to partake in many of what they see as youth-exclusive activities:

> I'm not just an aging sack of bones. It's not my idea of fun to go out on the bottle, to go dancing and shouting about all hours of the night. My life is different now than it was a few decades ago. I want to live differently, not to mention society seems to want that for me, too. *In a way it's very mutual. I stopped waiting for the invitation long ago*. (Millie)

> I'm old! It's not a secret for christ's sake. I would feel absurd if I tried to deny that I am simply a very, very old person. No use in resisting the facts. (Lou).

However, a pervasive youth-centered norm does take its influence. It is important to acknowledge that these women are not entirely free from the pressures of growing old in a neoliberal context which instills in the individual a drive to resist "irrelevance" and decline. In feminist thought and practice, the old body, it has been argued, is, "significant only in terms of its absence" (Woodward 2004: 162). Consistent with previous studies on the ways in which old age is framed within positive aging discourses (Cardona, 2008; Craciun & Flick, 2014; Minichiello et al., 2000), informants identified physiological signs of aging as both signs of reaching old age and also of irresponsibility and moral failure. Congruous with the responsibilization and activity agenda of positive aging discourses (Asquith, 2009; Higgs et al., 2009; Laliberte Rudman, 2006; Laliberte Rudman & Molke, 2009), informants illustrated several methods by which they actively "maintained" their bodies and their social lives in order to avoid seen themselves, and being seen as, old:

> I rent the rooms in my flat, and always select women in their 30's, 40's...people are always telling me that I am young-at-heart. I tend to spend time with people a few decades younger than me. (Joan)

> Well, you saw some of those women at the OFN meeting, they can barely understand what's going about. I know that someday I'll probably be in the same position, but dear, I just want to postpone it...I do what I can, yeah a little exercise--that's, I have my little memory-recall exercises. I'm old, but I'm not *old*! Like to keep it that way. (Millie)

> I bet you don't even know how old I am! Can you guess?
> Well, I'm 84 dear. Not a day younger. But I feel that I am. I am a young-at-heart. (Rose)

> I never thought of getting old. I go to a dancing class with a 96-year-old instructor! I stay active, and women might see me as old, but I think that once they start to spend time with me, to get to know me, you know, they really see that I am quite young. I am not

going to give up doing things because I am old. *I won't be like the others.* (Nanette)

In speaking this way about her age, Julia effectively demonstrates that old age is an identity which can be, which should be, transcended by individual behavior. She wishes to adhere to, what Woodward (2004) calls, "the youthful structure of the look," a pressure for women to pass for a younger age. Through their narratives on embodiment, these women often construct themselves in ways which align with a discourse on positive aging. The findings speak of how positive aging discourses encourage old women to engage in an uncertain and persistent attempts to not age, without opportunity to consider or assign meaning to bodily decline as a dimension of aging (Lamb 2014).

If I want a purple sparkly hearing aide, I should be able to buy one!

Another common theme in this data is a sense that old women are actively left out by the very consumerist culture which had relentlessly formulated and catered to their every material desire in earlier years. Sometimes the lack of options as a consumer was as strong an indicator of the invisibility of old persons in society as physiological changes had been. Ruby, a charismatic watercolor artist, and member of OFN since its beginning, elaborates:

> Well, what I want to say...maybe I'll write a piece for the [OFN] newsletter next month...Why is it that every old-person's accessory must be gray, metal...looks like a thing from a ward. Why isn't it that we have a better design for these things? If I want a purple sparkly hearing aide, I should be able to buy one! (Ruby)

Ruby and I are sitting outside at a library cafe near her home in southeast London. Throughout the interview, she laughs openly and often reverses the examination onto me, joking with me about my personal life and alluding to the, "exciting time in your 20's" with a sparkle in her eye. She has a walker decorated with plastic flowers and Mardi Gras beads, and wears a bright, furry sweater

with a golden brooch fastened on the right breast pocket. It is clear that Ruby values self-expression, and that this has become a central focus in her self-perception.

The medicalization of accessories to do with old age speaks to an overriding biomedical understanding of the elderly, which often has a homogenizing effect on all elderly individuals (Estes 2001). As women age, they pass through and leave the youth-centered consumerism of modern society (Minkler 1998). Ruby calculates this in part by what kinds of commodities are available for her. Her plastic flowers and mardi gras beads are Ruby's small protest to the irrelevance of old women in a commodity-based culture:

> I realize that it isn't the most "radical" concern. But it is just...well, more than a bit bland, isn't it! I'm not dead yet! It's that, isn't it? I'm not dead yet…(Ruby)

Ruby is, in effect, describing a cultural invisibility as promoted by structural injustices. This again speaks to the issues of cultural recognition so pervasive in current feminist action, and the redistributive recognition which should be brought to the forefront of activist demands. Other's also express this tension between the pressure to culturally perform in a structure which renders them invisible:

> I want to find a t-shirt that doesn't cut off my circulation, you know my arms, my skin bagging about... I'm still a lady and I still would like to look the way I used to--well, I know I won't look that young again, but I can at least conceal my sagging arms. *The performance continues, even when I know that nobody is watching anymore* (Millie).

"What once defined us is now not there": Experiences of homogenization

In our interview, Joan provides a direct response to an ever-pervasive discourse of positive aging. She notes that the idea of "positive aging", internalized by herself and by her peers, tends to isolate and blame the individual for the experiences of old age:

> There is such an individualizing effect to this notion of active aging. I mean, it completely ignores other factors which may place individuals differently within old age. Intersectionality may help fight the individualistic understandings of how to age happily. (Joan).

When asked to expand on what she means by "intersectionality", Joan continues:

> I am a white, relatively able-bodied, working class, queer woman. Each component of my identity interacts with what it means to be an old woman, and this interaction between categories places me in a specific experience. I experience old age differently than other women from other backgrounds. (Joan).

Joan recognizes that intersectional analysis would help to tease apart the *differences* of old age and would place old individuals as subjects of social processes, rather than as objects of study. Without using the term "intersectionality", other interviewees express awareness that different women experience old age differently:

> Sometimes I wonder if being part of this [OFN] is the best way to stay true to my identity as a black woman in Britain. I feel more black than I do old. (Nanette).

> We're all lumped into this stereotype of the purple-haired Granny. In ways, I welcome this sort of group-identity, as it were. But it's a tad unrealistic, isn't it? Because what once defined us is now not there, I mean, well it's there alright. But being old seems to cover up all else (Millie).

"All else"—ethnicity, class, sexuality, ability, et cetera—is often placed second to age-identity, as the elderly are often homogenized as a group.

How do these narratives of embodied exclusion respond to a dominant neoliberal discourse of individualistic productivity? In these narratives on embodiment of ageism, we see that an age-based stratification is not about the waves themselves, but about how their embodiment, in combination with a public perception of the conventional social attributes of aging, separates the waves within feminism. In this sense, from the perspectives of the old women, representation of these general stereotypes are translated into the framework of feminism. Using their knowledge of feminist action, and centering their embodied experience of ageism may yield a more comprehensive understanding of the interplay of being a woman and being old.

CONCLUSION

> We have no choice but to go back once again, as we have had to do before, cover old ground in new ways, and rebuild this time with a wholeness that includes all women and all the years of our lives. (Macdonald 1983:12)

Throughout this paper, I placed the narratives of activists from two London-based activist organizations: The Sisters Uncut (SU) and the Older Feminists Network (OFN) into conversation with one another in order to tease apart representations of group action and self-identification between old and young feminists. The objective of this ethnographic research was to better understand the ways in which these women represent and understand age-based fragmentation of feminist activism. Through these narratives, I demonstrate that, though each individual expresses a strong commitment to dismantling patriarchal oppression, both group and individual representations are influenced by a "wave narrative", which conceptualizes feminist activism as a series of generations (Redfern & Aune 2010). These representations reflect a cyclical understanding of feminist action, which describes a pattern of (re)birth and decay. It is within these narratives of cyclical motion that a youth-centered feminist action is supported as the norm, while activism in old age is viewed as irrelevant or outdated. This irrelevance plays out on the body, as seen in the third chapter.

Within a neoliberal framing, cultural ageism is bolstered as the norm, as it promotes activity, production, and individualism. We have seen through the narratives provided that this age-bias acts out upon the old body. These narratives not only confirm that age-based biases affect the solidarity between age-groups in feminist activism, but they also demonstrate that a sense of solidarity has been further deconstructed by a current liberal trend of political individualism. To gain understanding of the generational fragmentation of the feminist movement we have explored ways in which members' stories both shape and are shaped by collective narratives of group action,

and the ways in which these groups form collective identity, which then reflects back and maps onto a generational understanding of feminist activism.

We saw how individual motivation for old women activists tends to come from embodied, personal experiences of the intersection of age and gender. In these stories, bodies were central in old women's understanding of ageism, both in their experiences with activism and in their daily lives. This paper has argued that within a neoliberal context of productivity, the aging body not only represents, but serves as the locus upon which age-based discrimination plays out. In foregrounding these women's stories, this paper demonstrates that the body should be re-explored within the realm of feminist gerontology in order to challenge the deficiencies of a pervasive rhetoric of liberal individualism.

The claims made in this paper are based off of narratives which were built within an intersubjective space, influenced and shaped by both my position as researcher and the social positioning of the interviewee. The subjectivity of this research material does not detract from its value, but does remind us that any claims are only about the representations of memories that these women chose to tell. According to these narratives, this paper has argued that as long as old feminists mobilize around the injustices they face from other women for being old women, they will maintain a marginal position in the movement. Instead, a re-consideration of the cycle of birth and decay as portrayed by the wave narrative of feminism will require and enable us to more holistically acknowledge the interplay not only of difference, but of similarity, across generations which produce, shape, and are in turn shaped by diverse experiences.

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