The very first time I went to Julie's International Salon to get my hair cut—some eight years ago—I could sense that there was something compelling about it, though I could not quite put my finger on what exactly was going on there. But it had to do with older women congregated together in an all-female salon, manifestly for purposes of hair and nail care, who seemed to be part of a lively and affirming community. For the next three years I toyed with the idea of doing a study of this beauty salon. I was held back by respiratory allergies, which I thought would be incompatible with the aromas of hair care products characteristic of beauty shops. Finally, in 1991, I could resist the place no longer; I resolved that I would deal with the air quality as best as I could.

Unlike most scholars who do ethnographic work, I did not set out to study this setting. It called out to me, as it were. The emotional climate of women's friendship, support, and camaraderie beckoned to me initially.
Once I actually began the study, I came to realize that women’s relationships also conveyed significant moral meanings, as did their views of themselves as women, in general, and as older women, specifically. Other issues readily presented themselves, most centrally the act that the clientele was largely composed of older women, most of them Jewish, and that they were committed to traditional practices of femininity and beautification. A perusal of the existing literature plus my own knowledge of American culture quickly revealed that little is known about the subjective experience of older women, less about older Jewish women, still less about their self-understanding regarding their physical appearance.

In the course of this study I came to realize the extent to which our society is age segregated. Few of us get to interact in a meaningful way with older people who are unrelated to us; as a consequence, until recently I knew little about old age. May Sarton captures this situation when she writes, “The trouble is that old age is not interesting until one gets there, a foreign country with an unknown language to the young, and even to the middle-aged.” This remains the case despite the fact that as a society we are aging very rapidly, constituting a virtual demographic revolution, often referred to as “the graying of America.” The number of elderly people is increasing significantly at the same time that the number of children is declining. In 1985, those 65 and over came to exceed those under the age of 18. Those over the age of 85 are the fastest growing age group in the U. S., and they represent a figure 21 times as numerous as in 1900. In 1990 there were 32 million elderly Americans, constituting 13 percent of the population. By 2020, the figure is estimated at 52 million; by 2030, 20 percent of the population will be made up of the elderly. Of those 85 and older, most will be women. These trends relate to dramatic increases in longevity and changes in birth rates—very high for the baby boom, very low at present.

While we have all these figures at our fingertips, as a culture we don’t know very much about the subjective, existential, or moral experience of older people. As Thomas Cole puts it,

Our culture is not much interested in why we grow old, or how we ought to grow old, or what it means to grow old. . . . Focusing narrowly on a reified “problem of old age,” apart from the actual lives and cultural representations of people growing older, the scientific management of aging [gerontology and geriatrics] denies our universal participation and solidarity in this most human experience.

We know even less about the experience of older women, specifically, as research about them began belatedly in the field of gerontology. Until very recently, older women have been absent from feminist scholarship, perhaps because the energies of younger feminists have been directed to issues that affect their own lives, like reproductive rights and equitable pay. In a 1985 speech to the National Women’s Studies Association, Barbara Macdonald took academic feminists to task for their failure to acknowledge older women, charging that younger women see them the way men do, “that is, as women who used to be women but aren’t anymore. You do not see us in our present lives, you do not identify with our issues, you exploit us, you patronize us, you stereotype us. Mainly you ignore us.” This book is an effort to learn more about certain areas of older women’s experience—experience that has been rendered invisible. Simone de Beauvoir wrote that the problem of aging is “carefully passed over in silence: and that is why this silence has to be shattered.” My work is an attempt to contribute to the project of shattering the silence around older women’s lives.

In the absence of factual knowledge about, and direct exposure to, older women, both mythic and prosaic stereotypes have come along to fill the vacuum: The Wicked Old Witch, the Old Bad Mother, the Little Old Lady “cloud the individuality of every woman past sixty.” The dependable grandmother is a more positive stereotype, but it renders the older woman a servant to others. Feminists have done little to contest or reclaim these stereotypes. This may be the case because feminist work has been written, as a rule, from the perspective of younger women: from the daughter’s side, not the mother’s or grandmother’s.

Representations of older Jewish women are even more problematic, for Jewish women must also cope with the stereotype of the Jewish Mother used to characterize them. Generated by Jewish men before the Second World War, the Jewish Mother is the most prominent figure in contemporary Jewish humor today and has attained currency in American society as a whole. She is seen as overprotective, overbearing, self-sacrificial yet demanding attention; she boasts about her children, pushes food upon them, and induces guilt in them.

Women’s concerns with physical appearance are often viewed in an ambivalent, if not negative, manner. Our still androcentric culture insists, on the one hand, that women must present attractive appearances if they are to be deemed acceptable and achieve social status. On the other hand, women’s preoccupation with appearance is seen as shallow and narcissistic. At a time when many Americans profess commitment to gender equality, women’s concerns with physical appearance are likely viewed by many as both anachronistic and embarrassing: anachronistic because women should attend to more important matters, such as the pursuit of interesting careers; embarrassing because women’s interest in attractive-
ness is often seen as competitive, an effort to best other women, when energies ought to be used, instead, to engage in solidarity for the sake of common goals. As a consequence, as Polly Young-Eisendrath puts it, "Because women’s concerns for beautiful appearances are so widely conceived as trivial and false, even women are reticent to speak among themselves about appearances." Simply speaking about their looks may ratify the view that appearance is all women are concerned about.

Caroline Evans and Minna Thornton argue that "the practices which a culture insists are meaningless or trivial, the places where ideology has succeeded in becoming invisible, are practices in need of investigation." I agree with this insight, and it was this conviction that propelled me to conduct this study of older women and beauty shop culture although I felt hesitant about pursuing my research once I received permission to proceed. Despite my enthusiasm about the beauty salon as a possible site of study, I remember asking a friend, an academic also involved in feminist work, "Do you think it is serious enough?" I had evidently internalized mainstream values and was nervous about how such work would be perceived in the academy. My friend was encouraging, and I quickly moved ahead, but my misgivings were not without foundation. I soon discovered that the face of it, a study of a beauty salon populated by older Jewish women was not taken seriously by everyone; for some, it was a source of amusement. For example, when I answered my home phone one day, a male university colleague’s first words were, "Is this Frida Furman’s beauty parlor?" I could not read a friend’s response after I described the project to him: "That’s the thing that needs doing," he said, nodding his head energetically. Was that irony or mild sarcasm in his voice, I asked myself. When I told a colleague in sociology about the study, he assured me, with a laugh, that he knew all about that generation of Jewish women; he was alluding to his mother. Another sociologist seemed intrigued and encouraging, yet he laughed as he described older Jewish women’s "blue hair," suggesting that their hairstyles—and by extension, they themselves—were in a "time warp." The director of my university’s research council reported on the council’s deliberations on my proposal for a leave to pursue field research. Council members needed to be persuaded that the subject and subjects of the study were not trivial.

Nonetheless, in the years since I’ve been working on this project, there has been a great deal of enthusiasm expressed about it in many quarters. Women’s responses have generally been affirming, perhaps because women know, first-hand, about beauty salons and the imperatives regarding beauty experienced by all women in this country. Many have been impressed by the innovative nature of the study. The most enthusiastic reaction to this project has come from academics doing research on women, women with older mothers, older women themselves, and professionals who work with the elderly.

Writing about older, mainly Jewish, women within the context of a beauty salon means entering some unexplored intellectual terrain. There have been gerontological studies of older women, but they usually do not address issues of appearance. Recent writing on femininity beauty tends to focus on younger women. Very little work has been done on older Jewish women altogether. Virtually nothing has been written about beauty salons, as such. On the other hand, gender as a critical analytic category has been at the heart of feminist writing for over twenty years. More recently, an explosion of interest in the body as a site of cultural meaning has been in evidence across many academic disciplines.

In this book I combine some of these interests in new ways. I explore the meaning and experience of the female body for older—mostly Jewish—women in the context of a youth-loving, male-dominated society. Such exploration is not exhaustive: I focus on the body as presented to the world. I investigate the construction and maintenance of the feminine body—and of moral selves—as women recall their lifelong beauty practices, as they discuss, and I observe, their contemporary efforts at the beauty salon (chapter 2). I document and analyze perceptions of, attitudes toward, and experience of the aging body, which slows down, sags, grays, becomes limiting and sometimes painful, acquires wrinkles and added weight (chapter 3). The aging female body comes into deep conflict with cultural representations of feminine beauty, which in U.S. society—and increasingly across the world—today demands youth, slenderness, agility. I discovered in the course of study and writing that such a body is construed and experienced within the context of multiple power relations: male and female, young and old, gentile and Jewish. The body of the older Jewish woman is culturally constructed, I argue, from the perspective of the male gaze, the youthful gaze, the dominant-culture’s gaze. Women, like men, are embodied selves, and embodiment has cultural meaning and significance. We cannot understand who women are as socio-moral beings apart from the reality of their embodiment.

The themes of gender and aging cut across the entire book. These are not themes that surface only in women’s private thoughts and reflections. At Julie’s International Salon, the customers’ shared gender and age—among other factors—give rise to a lively community where women unabashedly discuss their aches and pains, their facial lines and double chins (chapter 1). The prohibitions of the public sphere against speaking about these matters are suspended. The beauty salon emerges as a site of support, friendship, and yes, moral action. Women engage in caring work with each other in the course of their weekly visits to Julie’s, giving and
ceiving care in both subtle and obvious ways. Whereas in public, older Jewish women may be perceived as Other, inside the salon they develop a community of selves.

The theme of care surfaces once again in customers' familial relationships. I investigate the expectations women have faced since their youth to be for husbands, children, and parents (chapter 4). I specifically address customers' current obligations to provide care for elderly spouses and their concerns and anticipations regarding who will care for them. As our population ages, caring for the elderly emerges as an urgent issue, one that just questions our taken-for-granted assumption that it is women's work. Questions of justice, I suggest, must be raised in the context of caring.

When I told an anthropologist friend of my intention to study a beauty salon, he responded by quoting a line from William Blake's "Auguries of Innocence": "To see a world in a grain of sand." I do not claim in this work to uncover the whole world of older Jewish women's lives. This book addresses their lives outside the beauty salon—their daily activities, intellectual and cultural interests, volunteer commitments, religious and social involvements, and close friendships—only in passing, if at all. It presents their familial relationships, not in the fullness of their being, but from the perspective of caregiving.

The book attempts to meet a feminist goal: to rediscover, revalue, and bring to public view women's experiences that have been obscured, chided, or devalued because they have been seen as socially insignificant morally irrelevant. These include experiences in the home and in other aspects of the private sphere, areas of human life that are too long have been neglected or denied in social, philosophical, and religious thought. For purposes of this study, I look at women's lives within the context of the beauty salon, their experience of femininity and of aging, and their role in caring. Instead of seeing these arenas as bereft of socio-moral significance, I believe that they deserve description, analysis, and critique, for they tell us as much about our society as they do about older women themselves. I view study participants as social actors and moral subjects whose experiences reveal a socio-moral order frequently oppressive to women. Women's narratives expose structures of power, inequality, and resistance the way women perceive their reality, make choices, and live in their worlds. As actors in an inequitable social order, these women often conform to socio-cultural norms—frequently contributing, thereby, to their subordination—but sometimes defy or use them to their own advantage, as well. Like people everywhere, they live with complexity and paradox. Their perspectives are not always neat and satisfying, and neither are reflections and conclusions. I sometimes raise questions for which I have no answers, but I let these questions stand to remind us that the complexities and problematic of our collective and individual lives need to be repeatedly confronted and addressed. The book concludes with this awareness, as the problems it raises are massive and therefore not easily resolvable. I offer some suggestions for socio-cultural change, arguing that our best bet, if we are to revalorize women and their experiences in older age, is to resist and contest cultural assumptions and social relations that currently contribute to their devaluation (chapter 5).

This study is broadly interdisciplinary in approach. I engage the fields of sociology, anthropology, gerontology, communication, religion, and feminist studies more generally. I am trained as a social ethicist, however, and the concerns of feminist ethics have guided me most centrally. Feminist ethics recognizes that historically, women's moral identity and moral action often have been ignored or denigrated. Its interests include rectifying this record by, among other ways, investigating spheres of women's moral experience yet unexplored. This field is also involved in identifying, calling to public attention, and critiquing instances of oppression toward women in contemporary society. In the latter case, feminist ethics as a discipline mirrors the more general feminist commitment to justice for women. In addition, a guiding goal for feminist ethics, and for this project, is the well-being of women, as societal arrangements have frequently militated against women's well-being.

In the process of hearing women's voices and observing their worlds, I became aware of the many ways in which our society compromises the well-being of older women. This awareness emerged in an inductive manner as I listened to women's stories and their conversations, as I observed their interactions and other behaviors. In this book I present their experiences via these narratives and observations. I situate and analyze these experiences in larger contexts of cultural meaning and social relations. I then examine the ethical implications of such contexts for women's well-being. Thus, I make ethical judgments, not by distancing myself from the lives of actual people into a realm of abstract principle, but by locating sources of pain, injustice, and virtue in the everyday lives of ordinary women. So, for example, I ask, and attempt to answer, What does it mean when a woman in her seventies insists that she is not older, but middle-aged? What does this tell us about our cultural conceptions of oldness and their impact on women's moral identity? Elsewhere, I investigate why another woman feels shame and disgust about her body, which now has lost its firmness and carries extra pounds; and I question why countless women feel guilty when they can no longer take care of an ailing parent or spouse.

I also identify and celebrate women's moral virtues and moral work within the context of their lived experience—in the relatedness they
establish with one another at the beauty salon, in their caregiving to their families, in their resistance to both descriptive and normative levels of analysis. This study thus operates at both descriptive and normative levels of analysis.13

I hold an expansive view of the moral life and the task of doing ethics. The standards of moral value and the many oughts that people live with do not come to them strictly through the evaluative judgments and Thou Shalts/Thou Shalt Nots spoken from home, school, or pulpit. They are also embedded in cultural discourses and visual images that communicate and socialize people into standards of behavior and value, cultural norms, regulations in social relations. These are not only areas for the sociological gristmill, though they are that. All these imperatives communicate moral meanings: what is good or bad, right or wrong, virtuous or evil, responsible or irresponsible, obligatory or optional. They go a long way to constitute moral identity, to shape—or misshape—who we are as moral agents. The ethical task includes the identification and analysis of such meanings and their deconstruction from systems of ideology and power. Since such meanings are to be found in the lives of ordinary people, this approach might be understood as fitting within the ethics of the everyday, as opposed to the more traditional orientation of ethical analysis, which so often has focused on quandary situations resolved via abstract moral reasoning.14

In a previous work I argued,15 following H. Richard Niebuhr, that the ethicist’s task is to begin with description, to ask “what is going on” morally in a community, and to discern the community’s values, ethos, and identity. “Out of this discourse in the community,” Niebuhr thought, “can come an understanding of what ought to be done.”16 I still subscribe to that perspective, but now I believe that the distinction between descriptive and normative tasks is less easily differentiated into two phases. Description frequently implies prescription: Lived experience embeds instances of injustice or moral virtue, patterns of domination and subordination or, conversely, relationships of mutuality. The telling of such experience, by extension, frequently embeds moral judgment, positive or negative. For, after all, both ordinary people and ethicists render such descriptions equipped with some type of moral map. In my case, I entered the field with a set of feminist commitments to justice on behalf of the quality, inclusion, and well-being of women. The next stage of ethical analysis involves the development and clarification of these embedded judgments, their application to larger socio-moral contexts, and the call or needed socio-cultural change.

My commitments to justice arise not only from secular feminist visions, but also from a profoundly religious perspective, that of my own tradition. I see the dignity and uniqueness of every human being at the heart of Jewish teaching, most succinctly articulated in the biblical view of the imago dei, the idea that all human beings are made in God’s image. Judaism teaches, as a consequence, that all human beings are equally valuable. Prophetic and rabbinic teaching addresses the obligation of all Jews to struggle for the eradication of injustice. In this work I attempt to implement some of these imperatives as I identify and critique sources of older women’s pain and disempowerment in unjust social relations, assumptions, and expectations. Older Jewish women, like all other human beings, must be perceived and treated as intrinsically unique and valuable persons. The ultimate goal of my work, then, is liberatory in nature.

Methodology

It was a morning in May at Julie’s International Salon. Julie, the shop’s owner and my beautician, was cutting my hair when I asked her permission to conduct an ethnographic study of her salon. She happily agreed, suggesting that she herself had more than once thought her customers’ stories would make a good read. While Julie may not have known exactly what an ethnographic study entails, she seemed flattered by my interest in her work and her world. She was a fine advocate of this project from the start, enthusiastically introducing me to customers and directing me to potential participants for intensive interviews. Most women I approached about being interviewed readily acceded. Two refused, saying it wasn’t their “thing.” Everyone at the salon that I spoke with in a more informal manner was interested in the study and happy to discuss my interests. Not a few women told me of their willingness to participate because it might help me with my work. Some women felt flattered that I, a highly educated, professional woman, was interested in them and their lives.

For eighteen months I conducted ethnographic fieldwork at the salon, using participant observation and informal interviewing as research tools. I simply spent a great deal of time there, observing the proceedings as I interacted with women in various ways: one-on-one conversations, group discussions, quiet chats with the staff, the occasional sharing of food. I did not take notes in public during this time because I wanted to establish rapport with people without alienating them in the process. So from time to time I used the shop’s restroom to jot furious notes on a small pad. Within a few hours of my visits, I typed out the notes along with my recollections, appending reactions and queries to be pursued further.

A few months of “hanging out” at Julie’s and getting acquainted with customers and staff allowed me to identify questions that seemed important in this setting. I then proceeded to conduct intensive interviews in private homes with twenty salon customers,17 ranging in age from 55 to 86, with a mean age of 73.5 years old. These interviews, which lasted from two to four hours, were tape-recorded and later transcribed. The longer
interviews were divided into two sessions. It was not uncommon for women to serve me lunch, tea, or cookies during these visits.

A major goal of these interviews was to explore the relationships among a woman's appearance, her aging, and her self-understanding. Soon after I started participant observation, I discovered that asking women to reflect on their facial wrinkles and other marks of aging was too intrusive and intimidating a request. It got too close to the vulnerabilities women experience as they age. I decided that during intensive interviews I would make use of photo-elicitation as a research tool; in advance of my visit, I asked interview participants to select photographs of themselves from the time of their youth, their middle age, and the current period. During the interviews, I requested that they look at the photographs, tell me something about their lives at the time, and what they thought then, and now, about their appearance as portrayed by the photo and in their recollections. By treating the photograph as a kind of artifact, participants were able to gain some distance from it and to feel less self-conscious. Some women offered me recent photos of themselves taken with a standard camera. In some cases the women did not have such a picture available; I used a Polaroid camera to take their pictures in such instances. Photo-elicitation proved to be a valuable research instrument. Among other things, it facilitated discussion of women's lives that lay beyond issues of appearance. It made it possible for participants to direct the course of the interviews in directions they themselves chose.18

Participants in intensive interviews are almost evenly distributed between those who are married and those who are widowed (only one woman was divorced in her youth and remains unmarried). Sixteen of the twenty currently reside in the metropolitan area of their birth. Only one is foreign-born. Many have children and grandchildren living in the area; theirs do not. Nine women completed high school, three are college graduates, and two others earned master's degrees. One received a midwifery diploma following high school, while five never finished high school, as economic necessity demanded they get jobs to help their families. All would consider themselves to be middle-class, though they represent a wide economic range, as evidenced by their homes, which reveal oddest to affluent means. Fifteen out of the twenty own their residences, hether house or condominium; the others rent. During the course of this study, one woman, a widow, was moved into a residential facility by her family. Eighteen of these twenty participants are Jewish, roughly representing a similar ratio of Jewish to non-Jewish customers at the shop. Needless to say, the names of the salon and of everyone associated with have been changed to safeguard confidentiality.

As a consequence of the particulars just listed, the women of this study represent a specific social location in American society: They are white, middle-class, and mostly Jewish. They are also older and American. I have every indication that they are also heterosexual. Despite the diversity found among American women, these women share with other women certain characteristics and experiences related, especially, to their gender and age. Jewish middle-class women may also represent a highly successful adaptation to American middle-class values,20 which may speak for the experience of other women, as well. While my findings and interpretations may not be generalizable to all American women, I believe they suggest some shared experiences, especially when seen against a backdrop of dominant cultural meanings regarding the body, physical appearance, aging, and old age in the United States today.

As a Jew, I shared most study participants' ethnicity, which made for easy entry into the field site and for generally comfortable rapport. Shared gender and class status undoubtedly contributed as well.21 I am certain that my being a woman was a critical asset in data-gathering about physical appearance, the beauty shop, and aging. Unlike me, though, virtually all the women were born and raised in the United States; most are second- or third-generation Jews, whose parents or grandparents were immigrants from Eastern Europe. I came to this country from Chile at age thirteen. Some aspects of Jewish American culture frequently manifested in women's relationships, discourses, and behaviors at the beauty salon were consequently not necessarily self-evident to me. This provided me with a certain measure of distance, thereby preventing me from "going native." On the other hand, areas of shared experience gave me access to subtle and sometimes subjective meanings that might be lost on the complete outsider.22

Other factors separated me from study participants, the major one being age. At age forty-eight, I am one generation younger than most of the women in the study; I am two generations younger than those in their mid-eighties. Generation and educational level undoubtedly colored other differences between us, most notably my strong feminist perspective and the absence of explicitly feminist awareness and analysis on the part of most study participants. While I honor women's views and work toward making these visible, I sometimes disagree with them.

Procedurally, I took a phenomenological perspective in initially grasping and reporting women's experience from their own point of view. It was especially important for me to place their voices at the center of the text. In this book I try whenever possible to allow a woman's own words to express her individuality, hence I refrain from editing repetitions in a woman's speech, for example, because I want to retain her inflection and her usual manner of self-expression. My analysis and critique arise inductively from women's narratives. I do not absent myself from the text,
however; I report my engagement with women’s discourses, and I frequently let the reader in on my responses, puzzles, and worries. In short, I take a position against the erasure of myself from the text.

The text that emerges is ultimately of my own making. More than a decade of reevaluation and critique of ethnographic method and writing has demystified the notion that ethnographic work achieves an objective rendition of observed reality. After all, while I let women speak for themselves about a variety of topics in the text, it was I who structured the sequence of topics, selected quotable speech, and often pulled out of the interview context a woman’s particular viewpoint. The ensuing text, therefore, is a product of my mind and goals. In the end, it represents my interpretation of other people’s reality. I have to trust that the epistemological dilemmas raised by this method nonetheless allow the reader access to older women’s experience.

The ethnographic process was demanding, exciting, and politicizing. This is an extraordinarily labor-intensive approach. In my experience, the richness of the process itself via its intense engagement with other people is compensation enough for the long hours involved in the field; the sorting, organizing, and analyzing of data; and, eventually, the writing. I feel personally transformed by how I now notice and relate to older people. I have become extremely sensitive to the ways in which older women are culturally represented and talked about. I support Evelyn Rosenthal’s clarion call to feminists to enter into an analysis of ageism parallel to that leveled against sexism in order to uncover “similar mechanisms at work constructing the nature of old age. . . . By investigating the lives of old women, we can challenge stereotypes, critique age old as a social construction, and discover that much of what we women fear about our own aging is not natural to old age.”

By temperament and conviction, I choose to study living people whom I can see, hear, and interact with. In this regard I differ from most social ethicists, who until recently almost universally relied on the written word as a source of their work. I have wanted here to investigate directly the social dynamics and cultural values and judgments that shape older women’s lives. What better way to do so than to study women in their flesh and blood—in person, in their bodies. Ethnography is a congenial approach to me as a feminist, as it offers me a possible route “to get closer to women’s realities” since it “makes women’s lives visible, just as interviewing is a important feminist method if it makes women’s voices audible.”

The ethnographic process also raises a set of serious moral issues, issues that perhaps are ultimately resolvable. Working with people in an ethnographic setting potentially leads to power inequalities and exploitative relations. The method of participant observation in fieldwork, for example, is not ethically neutral. On the one hand, it may produce an objectification of study “subjects” or “informants” if the researcher emphasizes observation over participation, thereby converting participants into objects of the ethnographic gaze. The ethnographer is then the authority who can define and characterize her subjects in whatever way she sees fit, under the protection of scientific “objectivity.” On the other hand, the ethnographer who becomes a full participant may enjoy closeness with study participants while the study lasts but then may walk away from people, as well as from the setting. She enters a “culture of indebtedness” but may not readily know how to reciprocate. Either situation gives rise to the question of ethnographic representation: how one characterizes those one studies.

Following interviews in private homes, more than one woman asked me to come back and visit. A few called me at home weeks and sometimes months later. One calls me annually, “just to say hello.” What long-term responsibilities, if any, does the ethnographer have toward participants? Are these any different when participants include people who are potentially dependent, e.g., children or the elderly? Does this situation set up an experience of abandonment? In what ways is the ethnographer accountable to study participants? I asked myself these additional questions during the period of field research and thereafter, prompted at times by participants’ needs.

I don’t have satisfactory or definitive answers to these questions. During the data-gathering facet of this project, I tried to engage in reciprocal relationships with Julie’s women, inasmuch as I entered into mutual exchanges, attempted to reveal my vulnerabilities, and moved beyond simply eavesdropping on theirs. I had to earn their trust. Often this happened once I expressed interest in them, shared my own experiences, offered my emotional support for their situation, and became present to them.

In representing the women of this study, I made an effort to enhance their subjectivity by allowing them to speak for themselves as much as possible. I tried to provide an empathetic picture of who these women are. I include myself in the text, revealing sometimes my exchanges and disagreements with them. I refer to them as “participants,” not subjects, in an attempt to contest objectification and the asymmetry of the researcher/subject tradition.

I have tried to be accountable by writing a book that, I hope, is accessible to everyone at Julie’s International Salon, one that avoids technical jargon and “academese.” I have also requested from my publisher that the font size be large enough for older people to read without difficulty. While I do not resolve the ethical issues at hand, I have struggled with
them, as have others, including an increasing number of feminist ethnographers. The issues are broad and contested, but they need to be addressed nonetheless.30

Cast of Characters

Study participants weave in and out of the text throughout this book. In an effort to provide a coherent image of each individual at the beginning of this study, and for the reader’s future reference, I draw a thumbnail sketch of each woman at the time of the interviewing process. In addition to the twenty participants in intensive interviews, I include salon staff members and a few customers whose voices are heard repeatedly in these pages. Names are listed alphabetically under each category.

Participants in Intensive Interviews

Alice, seventy-two, is a practical, straightforward, emotionally reserved woman with short brown hair. Widowed for the last eleven years, she was married for thirty-six years and has three daughters.

Anna, sixty-eight, is a solidly built, practical, generous woman with a keen sense of responsibility, a warm smile, and very short salt-and-pepper hair. Married for forty-three years, she has been widowed for the past six. She is the mother of a son and a daughter, Jenny, forty-two, who routinely accompanies her mother to the salon.

Beatrice, eighty-two, is a petite, bespectacled, silver-haired woman who wears a mantle of vulnerability. She is an intense person, with firm opinions and a sure sense of self. Married for fifty-five years to her ninety-year-old husband, she has no children.

Beth, fifty-nine, is a handsome, expressive, friendly woman with beautiful, natural silver hair. She returned to college after her children were grown and is now enjoying a professional position. Married for forty years, she has four children.

Clara, eighty-five, is a thoughtful, reflective, articulate woman with light-colored hair, a beautiful face, and a sunny smile. Widowed after fifty-three years of marriage, she is the mother of two children.

Dori, sixty-four, is a blue-eyed, light-haired, attractive woman—friendly, outgoing, and high-spirited. As a result of a car accident thirty years ago, she is a paraplegic and uses a wheelchair. Married for forty years, she has three children.

Edie, fifty-five, is a jovial, outgoing, optimistic woman, short in stature, with glasses and brown hair. Five years ago she suffered a massive stroke; through sheer hard work and perseverance she has regained most of her speech and mobility. Divorced following a brief marriage in her twenties, she has one daughter.

Evelyn, seventy-seven, is a small, intense, intelligent woman with light brown hair. The mother of two children, she has been widowed for some five years following a forty-five-year marriage. The loss of her husband has left her in a continuing state of depression she seems unable to shake.

Harriet, seventy-two, is a short, witty, quick-minded and quick-tongued woman with auburn hair and sharply delineated eyebrows. Married for forty-four years, she has been widowed for the past eleven. She has three children.

Leah, eighty, is a gentle, kindly, heavy-set woman with eyeglasses, dark-blonde hair, and the habit of earnestly looking right into her interlocutor’s eyes. Recently widowed for the second time, she is the mother of a son and a step-son.

Lucy, sixty-two, is an amply built, intelligent, opinionated woman with blue eyes, blond hair, and a handsome face. Married for forty-two years, she has two daughters.

Marie, sixty-four, is an intelligent, articulate, statuesque woman with brown hair and a stylish, sophisticated demeanor. Currently the owner of her own store, she has been married for forty-four years. She is the mother of three children.

Martha, sixty-seven, is a thoughtful, articulate, highly accomplished, brown-haired woman, now retired after a successful career in public service. Widowed twice in her youth, she is now married, with no children of her own.

Marie, eighty-six, is an intelligent, thoughtful woman who gives careful consideration to her words before she speaks, a tendency nurtured perhaps during her long career as a school teacher. Bespectacled, blue-eyed, with beautiful silver hair, she carries herself with a kind of patrician grace. Married for sixty-two years, she has a daughter.

Reva, seventy-five, is a tall, serious, reflective woman with ash-blonde hair and a tailored look. Married for forty-five years, she has been widowed for nine. She has two daughters.

Sadie, seventy-nine, is a thoughtful, emotionally intense yet publicly reserved woman who wears glasses and blond hair in a kind of pageboy style. Married for thirty-five years, she was widowed eight years ago. She is the mother of three children.

Sara, seventy-eight, is an intense, talkative, self-assured woman with a slight build and salt-and-pepper hair. She has been married for fifty-six years and has no children.

Shelley, eighty-two, is a small, thoughtful woman with a reflective temperament, an intelligent face, and short brown hair. Married for fifty-eight years, she is the mother of two sons.

Sylvia, seventy-seven, is an intense, inquisitive, expressive woman, small
in stature, with platinum-blond hair. Born in Poland and a survivor of the Second World War, she has been married for fifty-three years; her husband now suffers from Alzheimer’s. She has two children.

Teri, eighty-six, is a friendly, warm, life-affirming woman with a sunny disposition and light, ash-blond hair worn in curls atop her head. She was married for thirty years and has been widowed for the last twenty-four. She is the mother of one daughter.

Other Active Participants

Blanche, in her seventies, is a short, serious, intense, talkative woman with auburn hair. She is married and has children.

Carmela, in her seventies, is a short, plump, friendly and interactive woman with a round face and golden-blond hair. She is married and has children.

Pam, mid-sixties, is an attractive, friendly, chatty woman with blond hair. She is widowed and has no children.

Shaina, in her seventies, is an imposing, self-mocking, handsome woman with an acerbic wit and silver hair. She is married and has children.

Salon Staff

Helen, in her forties, is principally responsible for hairwashing. She is a short, brown-haired, sweet, gentle woman, with a kind word for everyone. Greek by birth, she is married and has no children.

Julie, in her late thirties, is the shop owner. She is a kind, accepting, diplomatic woman with black hair and an attractive face. Born in Korea, he is married and has three children.

Karen, in her forties, is a part-time beautician, working at Julie’s only on Saturdays. She is a quiet, reserved, good-looking woman with golden-blond hair. The only American-born staff member, she is divorced and has no children.

Svetlana, in her fifties, is the manicurist. She is a short woman with a round face, brown hair, friendly eyes, and an earnest yet reserved disposition. Born in the former Soviet Union, she is married and has two daughters.

Verena, in her late fifties, is a beautician. She is a blond, handsome, amiable woman who often speaks her mind. Born in Germany, she is married and has three children.

Victoria, in her thirties, is a beautician. She is a thin, lovely, friendly woman with reddish brown hair and a ready smile. Born in Greece, she is married and has three children.

CHAPTER ONE

Women’s Territory

Community and the Ethic of Care

at Julie’s International Salon

She has women friends here who will neither let her starve nor weep.

—E. M. Broner, A Weave of Women

Julie’s International Salon—Julie’s, for short—is located in a residential neighborhood of a large midwestern city. More precisely, it is to be found in a nondescript mini shopping strip at the intersection of two busy streets. A large picture window sports the shop’s name, along with hair-design posters, which are tastefully displayed and infrequently changed. Not uncommonly, hand-written signs, posted on the window or the glass door, note changes in shop hours; they decidedly convey an air of informality to the place. Moving indoors, the customer first steps into a rectangular reception area. To the left of the entrance is the shop’s desk; it serves as a cashier’s station and is not regularly staffed. It is usually Helen, who is in charge of hair washing and general shop upkeep, who transacts payments behind the desk. On a wooden surface over the desk, a pen is attached to a chain for the convenience of customers writing checks. Salon pocket calendars often rest sloppily on this surface for the taking. Several chairs are arranged haphazardly near a television set. Two walls are lined with wood-grained, glass-faced cabinets that display various kinds of merchandise for sale, including custom jewelry and women’s clothing. Some of this merchandise has remained in place for years and looks rather shabby for wear. A small room to the right of the entrance functions as a coatroom.

Customers arrive at Julie’s in various ways. Many drive their own cars, which they park in the shopping strip’s parking lot, within view of the beauty shop. Some are dropped off by husbands, or more rarely, by children or friends. A few walk from their homes in the vicinity of the salon. Still others
CHAPTER FIVE

Energetic Anger

An Invitation to Resistance

Anger must be the energy that has not yet found its right channel.

—Florida Scott-Maxwell, The Measure of My Days

We live in a society uncongenial to old age, at a far distance from the time when men and women alike used white powder on their wigs, or on their natural hair, to garner some of the respect then extended to the elderly. Few people seek out the old as repositories of wisdom and experience any longer. In this regard, the writer Allegra Taylor is an exception, for she literally searched the world in quest of older women who could be models for her own aging.\(^1\) We commonly romanticize traditional cultures for their presumed positive treatment of older people; their attitudes, on the whole, may suggest a more positive orientation to old age than our own, but in actuality they have often revealed ambivalence, reflective, perhaps, of the existential fears associated with old age, loss, and death, or with the necessary power struggles between the generations.

In this book we have seen that in our socio-cultural order, older women must cope, not only with ageism, but with its conjunction with sexism, as well. We have witnessed repeatedly in these pages that the systemic devaluation of old age and of women's intrinsic worth have serious consequences for the well-being of older women. Inhabiting an older body—being an older body—comes to rob older women of respect and public visibility. The cultural values and social relations that have shaped their moral identities often make such women feel like moral failures, weighted down by guilt, shame, or the experience of insufficiency: for having wrinkles, for not being thin enough, or for their inability to continue caregiving tasks.

It is time that we begin a process of reconstructing old age by rejecting those elements in our cultural values and social structures that detract
from older people's well-being. David Maitland believes that as people age they come to form part of a counterculture, one that passes judgment on socio-cultural values. From that vantage point, some countercultural groups are already in existence. While Julie's International Salon ratifies some of the ways in which society at large judges and mistreats older women, as an unintentional community it also acts as a community of resistance, as an "oppositional community," to use Ann Ferguson's term. There is no self-conscious ideology of liberation operative at Julie's, few pronouncements about the coercive norms of beauty and youth, and certainly no political agenda to take into the streets. Rather, resistance to socio-cultural oppressions is embedded in the way that older women treat one another—with respect, affection, and attentiveness; in conversations and gestures that affirm and hence make visible older women's pride in and attention to their bodies, and that acknowledge the pain, suffering, and loss that accompany embodiment; in discussions of their work of caring as work that is valuable, necessary, and demanding. Women in this context affirm their own experiences, experiences that are glossed over as insignificant or occluded from vision in other quarters. So while Julie's does not constitute a politically transforming community, it offers a safe space for older women to be themselves and to be supported in their lived experience, in contradistinction to what more commonly happens in the public sphere.

It is at Julie's, after all, that Beatrice enthusiastically exclaims as she gently caresses Teri's neck, "Isn't she pretty? And sweet, too." Or that Blanche bemoans Carmela's departure for the winter: "I am so sorry." Or that Carmela and Sara engage in spirited competition about their respective maladies. Or that women like Sylvia and Paula empathically discuss their caregiving to partners with Alzheimer's, or others share the burdens and the joys of cooking for a large crowd for the Passover seder.

It would be possible at this point in this study to end the story told by the customers of Julie's International Salon. But as a feminist social ethicist with commitments to social change, I cannot let the story end here. Until now this book has largely involved the inductive derivation of theoretical insights from the narratives of study participants themselves. At this juncture this study changes tone, as I move from a largely descriptive and interpretive orientation to a largely normative one, one whose goal is to find some concrete solutions to problems raised in this book. In concluding, I explore some existing and some prospective ways that unjust cultural assumptions and social practices, exposed in earlier chapters, can be resisted. The discussion that follows is suggestive and by no means exhaustive. I invite others to join me in this work of resistance.

In *Gender and Later Life*, sociologists Sara Arber and Jay Ginn strike an optimistic note when they write, "By rejecting the patriarchal ideal of femininity, by challenging the sexual division of labour, by asserting themselves as competent, strong, and resourceful, women can begin to reclaim their right to age without stigma." Although I believe that these goals are easier named than achieved, they provide us with a compass to search for ways of addressing some of the problems we have encountered in this book, which revolve around older women's experience of femininity, aging, and caring. In short, in what follows I attempt to address the social marginalization of older women and their devaluation as moral subjects.

**Religious Values and Ritual as Mechanisms of Resistance**

As someone trained in religion and social ethics, and of a religiously "musical" temperament, I immediately think of religious institutions as potential settings for questioning unjust social values, as natural locales for doing the work of resistance. Of course, not all religious organizations fit this profile. Some behave in a "priestly" manner, while others act in "prophetic" ways, depending on the stance they take toward the larger society in which they are situated. A so-called priestly position mirrors the values and structures of society; it represents a conservative perspective, one that supports the status quo. A "prophetic" position challenges unjust social values and relations, condemning them for their failure to meet the tradition's normative aspirations. When it comes to the position of older people in this society, Beverly Harrison argues, "Many congregations are structured to marginalize older persons at every turn." In doing so, of course, they reveal the unquestioned embrace of extant socio-cultural values that injure the elderly, or, short of that, that fail to contribute to their well-being. Harrison calls for a prophetic stance when she argues that congregations must "take responsibility for not reproducing the alienated patterns of relating to older persons in the internal life of the church itself."

David Maitland reveals a similar prophetic stance in his view of the church as a "Community of Support and Defiance": "Central to our vocation is the obligation to name and resist evil where and when we encounter it. Society's antipathy to whatever may be aging's proper agenda is, for me, such an evil. We need images that will encourage efforts to expose and to defy this evil." While these authors write out of a Christian context, undoubtedly the same could be said about many Jewish and other religious congregations, as well.

Jewish and Christian traditions subscribe to the imperative to care for "the widow, the orphan, and the stranger"—the marginalized of the biblical world. This prophetic vision is not limited to those categories in
our own time: All marginalized people must be attended to and included in our communities. Given the logic of their own traditions, Jews and Christians have an obligation to address the situation of older people today both within their own congregations and outside. Considering that 69 percent of Americans affiliate with a religious organization, congregations have the capacity and opportunity to raise many people’s consciousness about the experience of aging. They can utilize the talents and wisdom of their older members to educate their congregants about the reality of aging, the injustice of ageism, and the desirability of honoring and integrating older persons into all types of activities. In various ways religious organizations can function as communities of resistance: by affirming the givenness of aging, the reality that “it is for whole lives that we are made in God’s image” (emphasis added); by recognizing that older people may pursue interests that are different, neither better nor worse, than those of so-called “adulthood”; by noting the wide diversity among elders and in the experience of aging; by using older persons as models, “as witness that the fullness of life is possible into death.” “To share this subversive work,” Harrison argues, “is the serious business of ministry in our time.”

Another way in which religions can contribute to the well-being of older persons is to mobilize their religious resources for ritual-making in the interest of making the elderly visible and contesting existing power imbalances. Religions have long developed rituals to mark important moments in people’s lives. Known as “rites of passage,” these ceremonies facilitate the movement of the individual from one social status to another. In Judaism, for example, the brit mila (circumcision) celebrates the entry of the baby boy into the covenant with God; the wedding signals the passage of the bride and groom from single to married status; the bar mitzvah marks the religious maturity of the boy, and hence his entry into the community with full religious privileges and obligations. Considering Judaism’s 4,000-year history, the move to introduce women-specific rituals parallel to those of men has been long in coming. For example, while bar mitzvah ceremonies of various types have been known for some time, rituals fully equivalent to the bar mitzvah are of recent vintage. The past twenty years have been a fertile time in the development of Jewish women’s rituals of all kinds. One such ceremony, known as the brit bat, in an effort to acknowledge publicly and in community the significance of a girl child’s entry into the covenant.

Ritual does not only mark moments of significance in individuals’ and communities’ lives. It also serves to maintain power relations or to call them into question. So, for example, congregations that refuse to offer the bat mitzvah for girls or to support the brit bat for newborn girls are de facto affirming the importance of boys’ rituals alone. They are in effect acknowledging the significance of ritual in people’s lives—but only male people’s lives—matters in this instance. Institutions that try out new women’s rituals make a political as well as a ceremonial statement. They destabilize established power relations, calling for change in the direction of gender equality and inclusion. Other forms of inequality can be challenged, and need to be challenged, through the use of rituals. A case in point is ageism.

A variety of rituals that celebrate women’s bodily experiences and transition points have been created in recent years, mostly by independent groups of women from a variety of established and newly emerging religious traditions. These include ceremonies that acknowledge the beginning and end of menstruation, childbirth, weaning, and entry into old age. New rituals are emerging or have yet to be created that celebrate retirement, becoming a grandparent, leaving one’s home, and entering a nursing home. These kinds of rituals, done in communities, may be seen as acts of resistance against cultural values that militate against the importance of women’s transitions, especially the transition into older age.

The “croning” ritual, which celebrates such a transition, might be of special significance in contesting culture’s dualistic preference for youth over old age, mind over body. For, as Penelope Washbourn observes, “The image of humanness that predominates [in] our industrialized society is based on the mind controlling the body. To be limited by our bodies, whether in sickness or death, or particularly by the female body processes, is considered weakness and threatens our ‘normal’ forms of mastery and self-control.” While Washbourn is addressing here the need for ritualizing the onset of menopause as the entry into womanhood, I believe her observation applies equally to the need to respond to our society’s judgment of the older woman’s body. Celebratory rituals that applaud women’s maturity and entry into old age—however defined—would serve as mechanisms of resistance against oppressive cultural premises. As Rosemary Ruether argues,

The words for old women such as “crone,” “hag,” “witch,” and “old bag” evoke images of women who are ugly, withered, decrepit, useless, repulsive, and evil. A “croning” liturgy transforms this negative connotation of... old women into a positive one. It connects the word crone with cronus (time) and the wisdom of long life and experience. To become a “crone” is to become one of the “wise old women” who have gathered up the fruits of their long experience into profound understanding, and who serve as resources of wisdom for younger women.

It was in this spirit, inspired by what I had learned from Julie’s cus-
cers, that I planned a ceremony for my mother during her most recent visit to my home. I invited some of my good women friends, whose ages range from the early thirties to the late fifties. My daughter and the daughter of a friend joined us as we all sat down to a traditional “tea”—complete with finger sandwiches, trifle, and scones. I called all of us together, I told the group, because for a long time had wanted to give my mother a special gift, and what seemed more precious than to bring her together with those women who are my special friends? But I also wanted to honor my mother, to show her off, if you will. An intelligent and intellectually restless woman, she never had the benefit of a college education. Since her retirement as a secretary nine years ago, she has turned her energies to reading the classics of Western thought as well as contemporary fiction, local and global. “How many mothers of our generation,” I asked my friends, “call us on the phone to discuss Nietzsche, James Joyce, or the latest novel by Toni Morrison?” In short, I told the group, I called together a gathering for my mother because I wanted publicly to applaud her achievements in this stage of her life and to celebrate her as a model for the aging of younger women.

Following my remarks, my friends had the opportunity to introduce themselves, to describe their connection to me, and to reflect briefly on the nature of our shared event. People felt moved by the public, ritualized acknowledgment of intergenerational relationship expressed by our gathering. Several women talked about the physical distance that separates them from their mothers, especially significant now that their mothers (or more likely their fathers) are no longer able to travel. Some saw this event as an inspiration, as a model: They expressed the resolve to mark in some meaningful and public manner their next meeting with their mothers. One woman spoke of the beauty of this moment in light of the fact that she no longer has a mother, though she thinks about her every day of her life. Another hoped that eventually she and her daughter, now a young adult, could achieve the kind of relationship my mother and I evidently had achieved to make the present moment possible.

Such ceremonies provide alternative sources of success and status to women, so that appearance ceases to be the single measure by which women, especially older women, are evaluated. I would like to see these types of rituals entering the lives of established institutions, religious and otherwise. While currently they are making an important impact on the individuals and intentional communities that gather to celebrate them, placing them in the center of ongoing social life would serve larger and more ongoing communities of people.

Rejecting the Cultural Ideals of Youth and Femininity

“When a woman gets old,” Sylvia tells me categorically, “she hates herself.” Sylvia is the only person at Julie’s International Salon to make such an extreme pronouncement on this matter. However, we have seen that aging presents many problems of self-esteem and worth for the participants of this study. Their aging female bodies often become the medium through which their moral integrity is challenged. I would wager that in this regard they represent many other women in American society today.

Of course, one needs to say at the outset that women’s self-esteem depends, from an early age, on the approval of others. This is particularly the case when we focus on women in their embodied experience. In this study we have seen that whether or not a woman thought of herself as pretty or attractive in her youth was contingent on whether someone else—parent, friend, boyfriend, or husband—thought so, as well. I have argued that women’s beauty in this society is assessed, by men and women alike, from the perspective of the male gaze. In like manner, the older person is evaluated by the gaze of youth; the older woman, via a double gaze—male and young. Jewish older women are sometimes subjected to a triple gaze: male, young, and the dominant culture’s gaze. In all three instances the actual woman is objectified, and she frequently objectifies herself.

As subordinate members of society, women have not had the power, historically, to represent themselves in public. Images of women, whether in literature or painting, traditionally were drawn by men, often as projections of male longings and fantasies, positive and negative. The actual woman herself was often lost in the process. More recently, visual images of women, in the cinema, television, or advertising, likewise fail to render women-defined representations. Such images do not simply reveal male women-defined representations. Such images do not simply reveal male perspectives; they also communicate the preferences or reflections of the ethnicity and class of those who create them. The attractive woman today is typically depicted as young; thin but with shapely breasts and legs; white or “exotic” looking; glamorous in dress, hair, and makeup; in a word, what contemporary public standards define as sexy.

The problem for women in this instance, of course, is that the vast majority do not and cannot fit the cultural ideal as popularly drawn. While some of the women I interviewed take this in stride, most fret about the loss of youth, slenderness, wrinkle-free faces, and natural hair color. Some work hard, via beauty shop care, dieting, and exercise to preserve an image as close to the ideal as they can, or short of that, one that resembles their own looks of times past. And since they are unable to do so or are unsuccessful in their efforts, many suffer pangs of guilt and insufficiency.
Theologian Ada María Isasi-Díaz, writing about the situation of Hispanic feminists in the U.S., asks, “How more invisible than invisible can you be? ... Invisible invisibility has to do with people not even knowing that they do not know you.... [Only] in the act of naming ourselves we are born. Our lives are a constant struggle to be called by name.... others so define you that they refuse to recognize the way you define yourself.” In recent decades American women of all types have made tremendous strides in naming and establishing themselves, not without struggle, as competent, capable contributors to society in a myriad of ways. There has not been the same effort invested in naming the self when it comes to issues of bodily representation, however. It seems to me that women continue, by and large, to be defined by cultural expectations, typically internalized, that have been generated by others.

Considering the influence that the media, in general, and the advertising industry, in particular, have in post-industrial capitalism, it is virtually impossible to imagine a scenario whereby advertisers, say, voluntarily would come to represent women’s bodies in realistic fashion. To show women as they really are—in their multiple shapes, ages, weights, fashions—and to do so in an accepting, celebratory way, is to stop trying to sell products designed to change them. As a rule, advertisers, working for the corporate world, will do no such thing unless they are pressured to do so. So what, if any, options are open to women who would resist cultural norms and social expectations if they only knew how? How might it be possible for older women to feel good about their facial lines, their weight, their stage of life? And how might our society learn to honor, respect, and actually see them?

We see some glimmers of a response today as we witness women’s recent anger around litigation involving silicon-based breast enlargements. Many women in this study have refused to even consider cosmetic surgery because of its potential harmful effects on their bodies. Sadie, for example, insists that surgery is out of the question: “It wouldn’t be healthy for the body or my face.” Concerned about their bodily well-being, Sadie and others opt to “look their age” rather than to regain their more youthful, feminine looks via the surgeon’s knife. This refusal may be seen as a feminist response at two levels. At a personal level, it refuses the potential loss for women of embodied personal integrity. At a collective level, it has the potential to serve as a collective strategy by speaking to the power of women as consumers to influence market conditions. In my women’s studies classes I have perceived a similar feminist attitude of resistance toward efforts to remake the female body to meet cultural norms. However, statistics suggest that cosmetic surgical options are increasing, not decreasing, as their cost is lowered and their technology is perfected; there is evidence that younger and younger women—and men—are beginning to opt for a surgical route to meet cultural standards of youth and beauty. Nonetheless, I believe that at the same time we are spying pockets of resistance in various quarters. There are growing numbers of people who are beginning to see that, as Jana Sawicki puts it, “Freedom does not basically lie in discovering or being able to determine who we are, but in rebelling against those ways in which we are already defined, categorized, and classified.”

Let us consider the mission of a group of older women meeting in San Francisco, featured in the video, West Coast Crones:

We refuse the lie
that it is shameful
to be an old woman.

We meet to
build community and
find new ways to combat
ageism, sexism, and racism.

We are inventing
our own aging and
sharing our experiences
for our mutual enrichment.

This group functions as an intentional community of resistance for its members, wherein dominant cultural expectations are examined, debunked, and, if necessary, actively resisted. These women are in the business of naming themselves as they rebuff the labels that the dominant culture places upon them. As Isasi-Díaz puts it, “in the act of naming ourselves we are born.” When these women claim to be “inventing our own aging,” they are in fact resisting external definitions and creating new meanings and visions for old age.

Meridel Le Sueur provides another instance of self-naming when she introduces her poem, “Rites of Ancient Ripening”: “The title of this comes of the fact that I’m doing away with the word ‘age.’ Aging? You’ve heard of that? Aging or age or death? Aging? You never hear of anything in nature aging, or a sunflower saying, ‘Well, I’m growing old,’ and leaning over and vomiting. You know, it ripens, it drops its seed and the cycle goes on. So I’m ripening. For ‘Age’ you can say ‘ripening.’” In renaming the experience of aging, Le Sueur infuses it with new, positive, and evocative meaning. She is birthing new possibilities for herself and for
others as she rejects inherited cultural meanings freighted with negativity. Baba Copper conveys a similar idea when she writes, “We need to reinvent the image of powerful, rebellious old women.”24 This is probably what Maggie Kuhn had in mind when she called her advocacy group for the aged the Gray Panthers. Jenny Joseph’s whimsical poem, “Warning,” expresses another image of rebellion. The first stanza reads,

When I am an old woman I shall wear purple
With a red hat which doesn’t go, and doesn’t suit me.
And I shall spend my pension on brandy and summer gloves
And satin sandals, and say we’ve not money for butter.
I shall sit down on the pavement when I am tired
And gobble up samples in shops and press alarm bells
And run my stick along the public railings
And make up for the sobriety of my youth.
I shall go out in my slippers in the rain
And pick the flowers in other people’s gardens
And learn to spit.25

Gerontologist Ruth Harriet Jacobs’ answer to older women’s situation is to recommend outrageousness. “RAGE is the middle of the word outrageous,” she writes. “Rage occurs when we are frustrated, ignored, hurt, trivialized, denied needed resources, insulted, treated as second class individuals, and in other ways injured.” She argues that “we can move beyond rage by being OUT RAGEOUS older women, refusing to accept the stereotypes or slights…. At 66, I have learned that if you are outrageous enough, good things happen. You stop being invisible and become validated.” Jacobs’ book, Be An OUTRAGEOUS Older Woman, provides modeling for circumventing and transgressing cultural expectations. Among her recommendations is for women to have “age pride, speak our ages proudly, and, if we sense discrimination, help others deal with it.” One way she educates people about ageism is by proudly wearing a variety of buttons, which include: “RASP” (Remarkable Aging Smart Person); Youth Is a Gift of Nature: Aging Is a Work of Art; The Best Age Is the Age You Are; I Am Acting My Age; Age Isn’t Important Unless You’re Cheese; How Dare You Presume I’d Rather Be Young; Better Over the Hill Than Under It; I’ve Stopped Lying about My Age.26

These examples point to ways in which older women can begin to name themselves, discover their own subjectivity, and hence contest some of the negative ways by which they are perceived, pictured, and named. But as Isasi-Díaz and Jacobs see it, and as I have suggested throughout this book, another problem is that of invisibility. Older women are seen from the
dvantage point of others, not their own; as a consequence, they are sometimes not seen at all. Efforts must therefore be made to make older women visible in the richness of their diversity.

The recent Canadian film, Strangers in Good Company, attempts to meet this goal.27 It dramatizes several days in the lives of a group of older women who are stranded in the remote countryside when their bus breaks down. The women, a varied lot who are strangers to one another at the beginning of their journey, are revealed to one another, and to the viewer, as unique, distinctive personalities. These “characters” are authentic—the women are not professional actors. In employing this device, the film does a good job, not only of dispelling stereotypes, but of revealing the diversity of older women as well as their spirit and their beauty—inner and outer. It provides a good tool for naming older women’s experience from their own perspective.

Another way to contest dominant representations of women is through the production of literature that reveals their subjectivity. Works of fiction have typically conveyed stereotypic representations of the old. In recent years a number of anthologies of photographs and writings—essays, fiction, poetry, dialogues, interviews—by and about older women have been published. They contest tired images as they present fresh portraits in their lively diversity.28

The discourses and mechanisms used by the dominant culture to name and subjugate Others can be contested in other ways, as well. One nonverbal dynamic involves the power of the gaze. As I have argued, the one who looks at another has the power to judge, and often to control. bell hooks reminds us that slaves were “denied their right to gaze” at whites, a prohibition clearly reflecting racialized power relations. hooks learned early on the power of the “oppositional gaze”: “By courageously looking [back at whites], we defiantly declared, ‘Not only will I stare. I want my look to change reality.’ Even in the worse circumstances of domination, the ability to manipulate one’s gaze in the face of structures of domination that would contain it, opens up the possibility of agency.”29 An oppositional gaze might be used by older women to begin to see, and then to deconstruct, the ways in which women—young and old—are represented in films, television, and ads. It might provide one vehicle for learning how to represent themselves from the perspective of their own experience and, consequently, to change the balance of power currently in favor of the male, young gaze.

In chapter 3, I discussed Alice and Clara’s public self-presentations. Recall that when asked if she had ever experienced ageism, Alice said, “No, because I can put on an air that’ll freeze them…. Pretend you have class.” For her part, Clara argued that given their long life experience,
older people ought to take control of the conversation at a social event rather than remaining silent and ignored. “I should be able to contain ... to maneuver the table.” A new reading of Alice and Clara’s strategies suggests to me that what they are arguing for is an oppositional stance, one that empowers the self by anticipating ageist bias and by contesting it in a preemptive way.

Another mechanism of resistance to cultural domination is the appropriation of the epithet, the derogatory remark, the denigrating name as one’s own, but reconceptualized in one’s own terms. I am reminded here of Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz’s search for a reappropriated Jewish identity—that of a Jewish lesbian. After recounting the experience of Jewish victimization through the centuries, she ventures into an exploration of Jewish women’s resistance and valor in the years of the Second World War. She writes, “Most stories of the holocaust, like most other stories, have been told by and about men. I don’t reject them for this, they are Jewish and mine. But as a woman, I need to know about the women, and that many Jews fought back, as they could, Jewish women among them.” She makes annotated lists of such valiant women. “Those were Jewish women, I come from women who fought like that.” Using this newly acquired knowledge to redefine traditionally denigrating labels, she concludes, “I want a button that says Pushy Jew. Loud Pushy Jew. Loud Pushy Jew Dyke.”

What buttons might an older Jewish woman wear to contest received, denigrating meanings of her oldness? Of her Jewishness? Might she say, with Shaina, “I’m just an old bag” but mean something other than its surface meaning? When a woman gets called a “dog” because she refuses to live up to the image of beauty or glamour expected of her, might she wear a button that says, “I am a dog,” contesting thereby the power of the social label, resisting the sting that is felt when one is told one does not fit in, one has missed the mark, one is unvirtuous? I expect only the very brave would risk, unaided, such transgression of social norms. It is virtually impossible for women—or anyone else—to find ways of transcending social definitions of femininity while standing alone against the array of cultural and economic forces stacked against them. Human beings are social beings, and complex problems call for collective solutions. A woman alone will not succeed in combating social norms and still remain within the social pale. But as a member of a group or a movement that supports her efforts, she has a much greater chance of surviving the inevitable rejection that will follow when she crosses boundaries and breaks rules. Hence the need for women to organize. Twenty women in a single locale wearing an “I am a dog” button would make a statement of resistance that would contest perceived personal idiocricity; their message could not be readily ignored or dismissed on that account.

Kathryn Pauly Morgan offers a more radical performative form of revolt aimed at destabilizing the norms of femininity. It involves “revalorizing the domain of the ‘ugly’ and all that is associated with it.... Feminists can use [the fascination with the ugly] and explore it in ways that might be integrated with a revalorization of being old, thus simultaneously attacking the ageist dimension of the reigning ideology.” Women “might constitute themselves as culturally liberated subjects,” Morgan suggests, “through public participation in Ms. Ugly Canada/America/Universe/Cosmos pageants and use the technology of cosmetic surgery to do so.”

I support Morgan’s proposal, save for her last recommendation, for to surgically convert the female body into an object of ugliness is to fetishizing as to make it into an object of beauty. But I find the idea of Ugly pageants compelling in its transgressive and destabilizing goals: It would effect an educational purpose and might open up some public dialogue about our cultural preoccupation with surface looks and the coercive norms of beauty and youth. But I would not want to see an Ugly pageant as an end in itself, as a way to replace one set of rigid standards by another by simply inverting the structures of oppression. Rather—and I expect this is Morgan’s intent—its major purpose would be to lift up to ridicule any coercive set of cultural expectations, such as those we currently experience under the tyranny of the “beauty myth.”

Visibility Through Contact

Age segregation is undoubtedly partly responsible for older people’s invisibility in this society. When I was a child in Chile, I remember birthday parties and social events that always included grandparents as well as parents and children. Likewise, study participants fondly recall many happy times when they lived in extended family arrangements, or when they raised their children in close proximity to their own parents and other relatives. Given social mobility, many children in the U.S.—my own daughter included—are raised with only occasional contact with grandparents and virtually no close relationship with other older persons. We also define our friendship circles almost exclusively along age-cohort lines. These patterns result in the separation of older persons from the lives of younger people, and, in turn, in their social invisibility. They become marginalized; they become Others.

A just society is inclusive of all its members, however. Efforts must therefore be made, by young and old alike, to find ways to integrate the interests, contributions, and concerns of older persons into the public agenda. Our predisposition to see older people as problems, to define them on younger people’s terms, to devalue who they are must be actively contested.
working on intergenerational issues and programs. In one of its recent publications, Generations United reports on intergenerational community service projects that position young and old people working together as community resources, "working as equal team members to help others. In the process, young and old learn about one another and strengthen their intergenerational ties as they perform service."36

Another way to make older people visible to the young in a balanced manner is to include materials about aging and the aged in school curricula. This applies to all school levels, including higher education. In university women's studies programs, for example, there is painfully little that is taught about, or written by, older women—an extension of the sociocultural ageism that removes older women from public view and social significance.

Expanding Older Women's Social Roles

In chapter 4 we saw that the caregiving work performed by women—young and old—on behalf of their families is unpaid and socially undervalued. A life spent doing this kind of work, as opposed to paid employment, has negative consequences for a woman's financial status in old age. The lack of value extended to caregiving contributes to the social invisibility and moral insignificance of older women and bodes ill for the satisfaction of their own needs for care in their very old age. Valorizing the work of caregiving, and removing it from its gendered associations, remains an important goal for a just society. It is a job of such large proportions, however, that its consideration lies beyond the scope of this book.37 That being said, however, I agree with Kristine Baber and Katherine Allen that "as long as women and men do not have equal access to work opportunities and other means of accumulating social power, there will be asymmetry in caregiving responsibilities."38

Ruth Harriet Jacobs argues that older women's value is bound to increase with increased opportunities for expanded social roles. She imagines new roles by identifying society's unmet needs and older women's existing skills. Some of these roles would represent expansions of current ones. Some might be paid jobs, some could be volunteer positions. But it would take more than the willingness of individual women to change their roles, which in some cases would require training and other forms of social support. It would be a matter of public policy and hence of public will.39 Considering that increasing numbers of women, including those who have been employed, will live two decades and more after turning sixty-five, opportunities for socially useful work seem financially prudent as well as socially responsible. Shelley, though over eighty, still works as an accountant about twelve hours per week. "I love it," she says enthusi-
astically. “It keeps my mind alert.” Marion retired some time ago and misses her work. “It’s the people. It gets lonesome not working.” Recalling the job she had when she was a young woman, Sadie exclaims, “I loved it! I wish I could go to work today.” Maybe people like Sadie and Marion could do so if the opportunity were available.

Older women, Jacobs suggests, could participate in educational institutions as teacher’s aides or dorm advisers. The dorm director job would also provide housing for those older women who cannot afford to keep up their houses or rent suitable apartments. Older women interested in nurturing roles could help families in a variety of ways: by staffing homelike after-school centers, taking children to appointments or shopping for clothes, serving as telephone contacts for latchkey children, and as confidants to troubled families. In the health care field, older women could be trained to be liaisons between patients and health-care professionals, and to visit people in nursing homes. They could be advisers to those who construct and manage nursing homes, since “women who have managed homes know how to make places comfortable and attractive.”

Raised under an ethic of responsibility for others, older women might serve as models for more caring community relationships. Community service roles might include being confidants for insecure adolescents, young parents, or lonely people. Jacobs suggests that older caregivers could be given free training and interest-free loans or subsidies to upgrade day care establishments so they can be licensed. In the world of business, older women could create employment agencies specializing in older workers. They could be used as consultants by businesses interested in the elder market.

With some training, older women could play educational roles in a variety of settings, for example, giving talks on parenting problems and elder care. And they could be used in beneficial ways by the media. Jacobs concludes, “How long will it take for television to acknowledge that old women are wise, their faces showing the lines of experience? America will come of age when we see sixty- and seventy-year-old anchorwomen, just as we now have venerable male broadcasters.... Because television, films, radio, and print media influence public perceptions, they should be pioneers in utilizing the talents of older women and portraying them accurately and favorably. In the process, the overall image of older women would be enhanced.”

The model of older women’s active participation in and contribution to society that Jacobs recommends is an appealing one. It reveals older women actively engaged with society in a mutually responsible manner. In like manner, in The Fountain of Age, Betty Friedan identifies and applauds quantities of people living adventuresome and interesting lives, involved in vital and exciting activities in their old age. In this way Friedan persuasively contests the widespread yet inaccurate view that old age is a time of disease and decline of all kinds.

It may be necessary, however, to hold up another model for old age, alongside this one, to combat ageism and the invisibility of the old. Jacobs and Friedan advocate a form of “productive aging” that implicitly supports the dominant cultural view that a life well lived is a life of activity and busyness, and consequently, that a good old age is one in continuity with what has preceded it. As Harry Moody puts it, “Productive aging constitutes a reformulation of what later life should be in terms of the dominant values of the Modern Age: growth, energy, activity, accumulation, and efficacy in shaping the world around us.” The ideal of productivity “will eventually ensnare us and defeat us,” however, when we can no longer be “productive.” Moody argues that “we need a wider vision of what late-life productivity may mean, a vision that includes values such as altruism, citizenship, stewardship, creativity, and the search for faith.”

Moody believes that productive aging should remain only as an option, not something that is imposed on people who may want a more conventional retirement and who have “no desire to be productive” in any of the various meanings of the term.

Sylvia worked very hard her entire adult life, for the last thirty years of her work life in a demanding business with her husband. She “hated every day of it” and consequently she now feels relieved to be retired. So does Beatrice, who has devoted time as a volunteer in philanthropic organizations since her retirement. She uses to spend time with her husband and friends, and she now enjoys reading novels—those with a Jewish theme. “The older I get, the more I want to be Jewish. The older I get, the more I learn the brachas (ritual blessings).” She taught herself these blessings rather recently because “I want to belong to something.”

Though her husband does not wish to join a synagogue, Beatrice does, as she begins to explore her inner life and her need for ritual in her old age. Her needs in these matters become poignantly expressed as I am leaving her home after our long interview. Pointing to her chest, she explains, “I’ve been lonely. I’ve been lonely all my life. It hurts here; it aches here.”

David Maitland calls for a rejection of the values of productivity by elders who wish to deepen their spirituality as they reflect on those inner questions left neglected during much of their adulthood. Such reflection necessarily leads to a questioning of external social values, and Maitland sees the possibility of older people becoming social critics: “The aging have a distinctive qualification for taking up the vocation of social criticism. [They] can criticize with an awareness of both the achievements and the awesome failures of the period of history through which they
have lived.”

e. Given its emphasis on activity, our society does not currently honor the task of reflection that is necessary to bring integrity and coherence to a long life and to furnish meaning to old age and the inevitability of death. The work of resistance will entail turning our attention to the inner lives of older people and learning from their experiences, observations, and reflections. As Harrison sees it, the work of reclaiming “aging as a miracle of life, [as] a beautiful process that is part and parcel of abundant life, will take a united effort at subversion of the dominant political economy and its culture.”

Parting Words

The work of resistance that I have been discussing is not only theoretical for me. As far as I’m concerned, the status of older women is not of mere academic interest. With some luck, I and everyone else who is still young will become old some day. So despite some important similarities, ageism differs from other forms of systemic injustice, like racism or classism, because everyone will be subjected to its injuries unless significant change comes to pass. It is in our self-interest, and not only for the sake of others’ well-being, to combat it. My commitment to resistance stems from another source, however: the knowledge and richness I have gained through my personal acquaintance with older women at Julie’s International Salon. For me older women are no longer images on the screen or memories of my grandmothers. They are flesh-and-blood women I met at the salon, some of whom welcomed me into their homes and shared their lives with me in however incomplete a way, given the limitations of ethnographic work.

The last question I ask study participants during intensive interviews goes something like this: “What advice would you give younger women about life, given what you have learned?” Everyone has something substantive to say, something that reveals her own experience, her “take” on the tasks of life. Amidst longer narratives, some of which we have already examined in this book, women offer pithy statements that encapsulate their views:

Marny: “Have a lot of interests.”
Edie: “Stick to who you are. Don’t let men remake you.”
Alice: “Don’t just get yourself into one little corner, of house and child, and forget that there’s a world outside.”
Sara: “There are certain things in life that you must accept. You must accept, and you must have a philosophical attitude about it.”
Martha: “Look at what’s really important, not at the shallow side of life.”
Clara: “Cement your loving relationships.”
Shelley: “Definitely be involved in something.”
Beatrice: “Be kind... All we can do is be good to other people. I think that’s why we’re here.”
Teri: “Roll with the punches.”
Reva: “Be happy, be content with your life.”

These teachings do not emerge from clever theorizing or philosophical speculation. They arise from the lived experience, both happy and sorrowful, of ordinary women, who in the seventh, eighth, or ninth decade of their lives agreed to talk to me so that their voices could be heard and the silence about their experience could be shattered. Allegra Taylor traveled around the world in search of older women’s wisdom.

I had to drive only a few blocks to my neighborhood beauty shop.

Anna: “Be yourself, but be a good person.”
Lucy: “Care about the truth. Whoever it is that you are, be who you are.”
Sylvia: “Care about the family, but also care about yourself.”
Beth: “Be a good person. Be kind. Help people. Do the very best you can so you can walk with your head held high.”
Merle: “Learn how to listen to what someone has to say.”
Harriet: “Don’t try to outshine your next door neighbor.”