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## “Would you call that activism?”: Elder women defining what counts as activism and who is an activist

Jennifer L. Utting

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**“Would you call that activism?”:**

**Elder women defining what counts as activism and who is an activist**

by

Jennifer L. Utting

Bachelor of Arts (Hons.) – History/International Relations, Mount Allison University, 1996

MAJOR RESEARCH PROJECT

Submitted to the Faculty of Liberal Arts

in partial fulfilment of the requirements for

Master of Arts in Social Justice and Community Engagement

Wilfrid Laurier University

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## Abstract

This research emerged from the author's own need to identify and make visible the various activist practice of elder women with the hope of shedding new light on unseen activism among women who are not part of high-visibility identity-based activist groups. Research to date has focused on a few very prominent movements like the Raging Grannies. However, there has been little attention to the unseen activism that elder women are engaged in. Using critical feminist gerontology and principles of autoethnography, individual interviews were conducted with six women (age 50+) to discover their views on social justice and their place in activism and advocacy. The results revealed three key findings. The first is that elder women struggle to identify as activists, preferring to align themselves with advocacy. They also questioned what activism is and what it includes. The second was that the women's positionality and intersectional identities impacted how they viewed, understood, and practiced activism. And finally, the women had a very strong tendency to downplay their contributions resulting in self-invisibilization of their activism and advocacy. As many of the women are currently advocating for issues directly related to aging and their future well-being, self-invisibilization could pose challenges if their actions and their voices are not seen and heard. In addition, the intersectionality of age, race, and gender emerged as an area requiring further exploration. The women's varied life experiences greatly impacted how they engaged, the issues they focused on, and their perspective on the importance and value of their work. Overall, the findings contribute to fuller understanding how elder women engage in advocacy and activism and how we can support them in grassroots movements and organizations.

## Acknowledgements

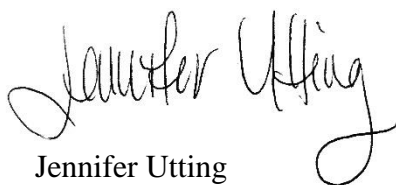
Research is a team effort requiring the skills and talents of many people to make it a success. With that in mind, I would like to thank those who made this project not only possible but a wonderful, enriching experience:

First and foremost, Dr. Jennifer Root, for taking on the role of being my supervisor and for trying her best to help me understand the language of social science. I appreciated your enthusiasm for and interest in this topic. Thanks also to Professor Sonia Meera who happily came on board as my second reader and provided exceptional feedback.

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Jennifer Utting

August 29, 2023

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1. Figure 1: Word cloud of adjectives used by interview participants to describe themselves.

## A Life in Protest

Straight from Elsie Inglis, more or less,  
 onto a demo – five months –  
*Och och get oot the Holy Loch*  
*(Fancy putting submarines on the HOLY loch!*  
*The HOLY loch) for we dinny want Polaris!*

My brand-new mum carrying wee me.  
 My brother in a pram pushed by  
 Hugh MacDiarmid, black beret on, bead eyes.  
 Lined face, – *but greet and in yer tears*  
*ye'll droon the hale clanjamfrie!*

1974: When Madame Allende comes to Glasgow,  
 After Pinochet's coup and Allende's murder,  
 We learn Venceremos, raise our fists.  
*Venceremos, venceremos*  
*Mil cadenas habra que romper.*  
 Hasn't Madame Allende got beautiful hair?  
 My mum says, isn't *Madame Allende eenty-teenty?*

At seventeen, *you learned the truth*  
 And took to the streets, umpteenth time.  
*BACK TO THE NIGHT!* – candlelit processions.  
*Because the night belongs to WIMMIN,*  
 blazing, banging saucepans, tins.  
*Why should we stay in? Make men stay in.*  
 Why should the Yorkshire Ripper rule our lives?  
 Fear in the night air; the moon cleaved  
 by a butcher's knife: the stars jagged in the sky's dark bed.

1984: marching, marching with Pride through London!  
 Lesbians and Gay Men dressed to the nines.  
 Me with my double headed axe, yes,  
 My denim dungarees, bless, my pink triangle badge,  
 My red Kickers. Don't mess with me!  
*Sing if you're Glad to be Gay*  
*Sing if you're happy that way*  
 Watching people watching us,  
 Out in the streets staring, shouting.  
 Peering into the depths of us.  
 Like we were barely human,  
 Strange new creatures,  
 Many feathered, flamboyant.

What do I remember, Ingrid?  
 I remember staying with Shaila Shah  
 in South London, I remember coming down



from Glasgow and everything being different.  
 I remember the first OWAAD like a first kiss,  
 and the first BLG, the euphoria, faces  
 I'd been missing my whole life:  
 Olivette, Mo, George, Carmen, Gloria  
 Gail, Liliane, Hansa, Adjoa  
 Femi, Berni, Claudette, Vadnie, Grace.  
 Change your life meetings at A Woman's Place.

Or singing and dancing in that house in Brixton  
*Police and Thieves, Junior Marvin*  
*Chaka Khan's I'm Every Woman*  
 Grinding and waacking, *heads thrown back,*  
*we are family, we are family*  
*I got all my sisters with me, tossing the dreads*

Locked smiles on our black and brown faces.  
 I remember wearing an Afro like Angela Davis.

Or joining the women at Greenham Common,  
 peering into their made-up lives, their tents,  
 and woolly jumpers, camp cookers and tin mugs of tea,  
 their sparky, fence-cutting defiance,  
 and campfire peace songs.  
*Woman tiger, woman love*  
*Help to save the world we love*  
*Velvet fist in iron glove*  
*Bring the message home*

And the summer before last, nearly sixty  
 I joined the protest, masked, in my local park  
 And we took the knee next to the Beech and the Ash  
 For a full nine minutes for George Floyd and the rest.  
 And we were silent, just the breath of the trees  
 In and out, in and out. Out and In. Out and In.  
 On our bended knees.

I remember my mother, my father  
 Marching to free Nelson Mandela,  
 And Matthew, two, in his push chair  
 Raising his tiny fist, and everyone singing  
 The Specials *Free Nelson Mandela, I'm begging you*  
 The black and white anti-apartheid banners,  
 (Which some pronounced a part theid  
 And others pronounced apar theid).

And much later in the lived life,  
 My mother, my father, back  
 At George Square under the Green Party Banner  
 My dad with his silver Infirmary issued stick

My mum with her William Morris groovy one  
 Singing Give Peace a Chance at 78 and 73 in 2003!  
 NOT IN MY NAME banners. STOP THE WAR IN IRAQ

I'll not stop till I drop, my mother used to say  
 Singing Paul Robeson's Joe Hill or  
 Suddenly, randomly on a clear May day  
*There is a balm in Gilead*  
*To make the wounded whole*  
*There is a balm in Gilead*  
*To heal the sin-sick soul.*

Later still, housebound with Suzanne at her side  
 My mum relaxed in her  
 Lift-your-feet-up turquoise armchair,  
 A revolutionary in red dressing gown  
 Her *I may be old but I voted Remain* badge on  
 Sent by Frankie, her  
 wide width red slippers on.

*Let me go away from the Mississippi, Suzanne roars.*  
 Mum joins in: *Sure thing*, she says, *sure thing*.  
 A call and response sister, you tell it sister  
 As next door's high fence blows down in the winds  
 As city seagulls swoop down for stale scones  
 As winter rains flood the back garden.  
 As the weeping willow weeps along

*Your willow O willow when the sun goes down*

Across a lifetime

*You and me we sweat and strain,*  
*Body all aching (sure thing)*

*I'm tired of living but scared of dying*  
*Cos old man river, he just keeps rolling along*

*Keeps rolling, he just keeps rolling*  
*(sure thing sure thing sure thing)*

*Jackie Kay, poet*

## Prologue

Even when my children were young, a time when many parents find it hard to do much more than the basics of life with children, I found a way to be involved in social justice and community development. From participating in community gardens growing for the local food bank to starting a documentary screening series to showcase stories from around the world, I found a way to share my passion for making the world a better place. But, I always longed to do more, to be on the frontlines of protest because I felt that somehow, these gestures weren't enough. As my children have grown and become more independent, I now have more time and energy to devote to grassroots issues in my community. To date this has included both visible and invisible activism. Whether bringing my body to a protest to offer support to marginalized individuals or coordinating the development and purchase of a lawn sign for ReAllocate Waterloo Region, I do what I can, when I can, how I can, taking instruction or cues from those on the front lines.

Yet, I still want to do more. When I re-entered grassroots spaces in mid-life, it wasn't easy. Talking to peers I came to understand that activist groups can be hesitant to welcome new people for reasons that include positionality, safety for the group, and appropriateness. I cannot ignore how I appear to others and the impact that can have in some spaces. Like Chazan (2018) stated

I have become more aware of my own changing embodiment. I re-enter older, with grey hair, with a body that has given birth twice, and often with young children in tow. In these [activist] spaces I have fielded comments about how my hair and children... mark me as safe, non-threatening, and respectable. I sit uneasily with this, perhaps because

comments such as these serve as a reminder of the unearned privilege I derive from my body. (p.5).

Chazan touches on themes of bodily changes that come with age, the societal role that motherhood gives her, and the privilege her body gives her simply by being part of the dominant culture. I am keenly aware of my own aging body that no longer holds appeal for younger eyes, that my sagging breasts, wrinkled and stretch-marked skin, and less firm muscles do not attract the attention they once did. My comfort with and acceptance of that comes and goes, following the hormonal whims of my peri-menopausal body.

While approaching the end of my reproductive value, I am still in the thick of motherhood, parenting two teenagers. By choosing to have children, I am part of a global community forged through motherhood, yet my experience is so different from the majority of the world. I got to choose. It was not forced upon me before I was ready. I have had the financial resources to meet my children's basic needs and then some. I do not know the poverty that Marjorie described: "I remember standing outside an ice cream shop one day and crying. I wept. I have two children, and everybody wants ice cream, and I couldn't even buy ice cream for my kids." I have been able to rant about the challenges of mothering without the fear of someone calling child services on me because I am a "bad mother."

My body, while aging, is white, cis, queer (though I present heterosexual) and able bodied. I am educated, employable, and married. These things provide me with safety, power, and unearned privilege. The challenges I face with my body, namely obesity, are not worsened by race, socio-economic status, gender, or sexuality.

That being said, when I wanted to deepen my engagement and increase my activism, I wondered if age may play a role in how others view me and their beliefs about what I may have to contribute or my politics. This is the origin of my question and my research grew out of a very personal need to explore what activism can be outside of how we usually view Big A Activism. Admittedly, my own definition of activism is broad and encompasses everything from using your car and dryer less to chaining yourself to a bulldozer, solitary acts and those done in community, any and all defiance, resistance, or advocacy done in the name of building a more just, equitable world. Yet, even with that broad definition, and my ability to see others diverse practices as activism, I still didn't feel what I was doing was the real deal. What I wanted to know was, can I be old and also an activist? Will what I have to contribute be valued as activism or seen as inconsequential? Will I be seen as an activist or just a middle-aged lady? How will people know that my commitment to social justice is a lifelong pursuit not just something I feel pushed to now as the world burns and the very foundation of democracy is crumbling? In other words, am I legit?

## Introduction

Grassroots activism has always been where my energy and interests have been because it is possible to see tangible results right on your doorstep, which is not always the case when you are working on national or global issues. Grassroots organizing is connected directly to my day-to-day life and the issues that matter in the community where I live. At present that is Kitchener, Ontario, a small city 90 minutes west of Toronto. The biggest grassroots issues I have been paying attention to are poverty, homelessness, and defunding the police. These are intimately connected because allocating funds to increase policing removes funds from social services like housing and income support.

We are fortunate that in Waterloo Region there are many committed individuals and organizations working at a grassroots level to address issues of poverty and homelessness. This includes Dr. Jessica Hutchison, professor of Social Work at Wilfrid Laurier University, and Leilani Farha, who was the former Special Rapporteur (2014-2020) on the right to adequate housing. committed individuals and organizations working at a grassroots level to address the poverty and homelessness. This includes the late Ron Doyle who offered space to the region's first Tiny Homes project; the Social Development Council Lived Expertise Group; Unsheltered Campaign, a coalition of individuals and organizations working to support the unhoused while addressing issues with local politicians and raising awareness; Fight Back KW supports the encampment in Willow River Park (Victoria Park); Food Not Bombs cooks every Friday night to distribute food to those in need; and, KW Community Fridge provides fresh food to whoever needs it from its location at the Kitchener Market. This is not a full list but many of the groups I am aware of or have worked with.

Activist movements are often spaces where younger individuals are more prominent and visible and the public forms of protest that are often part of grassroots activism feature prominently. (Chazan et al, 2018). Elders are often “not recruited or even welcome in organizations and groups that work for social change.” (McHugh, 2012, p.284). While that may be true in mainstream activist spaces and some grassroots organizing, there are specific communities and groups where elders do take roles in organizing and mobilizing. The Indigenous protests against the Trans Mountain Pipeline feature elders like Freda Huson who are on the frontlines but there are also those in the background who are acting as mentors to a younger generation of protestors. (Unis'to'ten Camp, 2019). Aging activist friends have shared that there is sometimes a resentment towards older people because some youth view them as responsible for the political, environmental, economic, and societal problems young people are left to deal with. Barnes (2018) stated,

Old people have become scapegoats for the harms experienced by a younger generation. The image of old people as to be pitied because of the decline in their circumstances and the disadvantages they face has shifted to one where old people are now seen as clinging on to advantages that their children and grandchildren are unlikely to enjoy. (p. 208).

This may in part explain why elder activists often form groups of their own, e.g., The Raging Grannies (Sawchuk, 2009), Knitting Nannas Against Gas and Greed (Larri & Whitehouse, 2019), the Gray Panthers, Older Women's League, and Lavender Seniors (Minkler & Holstein, 2007).

Several authors wrote how elder activists, especially those embodying the little old lady stereotype (Larri & Whitehouse, 2019; McHugh, 2012; Sawchuk, 2009), used their identity as strategy (Sawchuk, 2009). In a UK survey, one of the main themes that emerged from questions

about invisibility was being “grandmotherized, namely seen through the lens of (often incorrectly) presumed grandmotherhood.” (Westwood, 2023, p. 5) It would seem an aging woman’s appearance can be both a feature and a bug.

As my inquiry progressed, I identified gaps in the research, namely who is written about and what is considered activism. As a result of these gaps, I focused on mid-life and older women (50-75 years old) and the “quieter activism” that have to date not been given sufficient attention (McHugh, 2012). In addition, I noticed in the literature was that there was a surge of writing on this topic in the early 2000s and then, nothing. I have a lot of questions about this, which is an opening for further inquiry beyond this project.

Quieter activism can include “educating, organizing, advocating, creating, mentoring, and record-keeping, which older women so often do [and] tends not to be considered ‘activism’ to the same extent as the more outward forms of protest and rally.” (Chazan, 2018, p.7). I would also include parenting, as raising little humans to be critical thinkers and engaged community members could be considered a quiet activism. Often women believe their child-bearing years “might have appeared apolitical from the outside; yet as they fought battles around domestic abuse, divorce, and custody of children...they became part of the wider struggle...” (Roy, 2018, p.25).

Every now and then through the stories we have collected comes a recurring word or description that echoes through the pages, used by woman after woman to describe her lived experience. In the case of older women, that word is invisible. (Bates, 2016)



From Jane Fonda<sup>1</sup> to the Grey Panthers<sup>2</sup>, there is significant evidence in the grey literature that after age 50, women no longer attract the same kind of attention they did when younger. This is referencing both the realm of the physical and the social, and not just attention from men. In a UK survey of 158 women aged 50-87, 84% of respondents “slightly agree” or “strongly agree” with the statement “Women become less visible as they age.” (Westwood, 2023). Interestingly, while invisibility is a prominent “meta-narrative in accounting for the social experiences of older women” (Ward & Holland, 2011), older women also experience the “hypervisibility” of being “marked by the physical signs of aging” (Bouson, 2016). Thus, “[I]nvisibilization is...a process of mis- and nonrecognition,” (Westwood, 2015, p. 12) and it is the intersection of sexism and ageism where women “experience prejudice and discrimination” (Bates, 2016; Bouson, 2016; Bytheway, 2005; Gullette, 2013; Nelson, 2004;), a situation that has been referred to as “sexageism.” (Bouson, 2016). Westwood’s (2023) research showed that:

The overarching argument...is that older women’s loss of social and cultural visibility and value is underpinned by sexism, exacerbated by ageism, the latter feeding into and reinforcing sexist norms and stereotypes. As such, both sexism and ageism need to be addressed to improve the recognition and social inclusion of older women and promote their enjoyment of social justice in later life. (p. 2).

As Ann Burack-Weiss (2015) writes in *The Lioness in Winter*,

---

<sup>1</sup> Jane Fonda has been an award-winning actor, an exercise icon, and longtime activist. Her protests began in the 1970s with the Vietnam War and continue today where she supports a wide range of issues including feminism and the environment. (“Jane Fonda”, 2023). For a [wonderful interview with Jane Fonda](#) that covers her life and career, listen to *Wiser than Me*, a podcast hosted by Julia Louis-Dreyfuss where she interviews elder women about their lives.

<sup>2</sup> The Grey Panthers was a movement founded by Maggie Kuhn to “encourage activism — sometimes radical activism — among the country’s older people.” (Douglas, 2020). By the late 1970s, the movement had 100,000 members in more than 30 states and actions ranging from “opposition to the Vietnam War, to support of women’s liberation, to the creation of a national health service.” (Sandler, 2022).

I had grown used to being invisible, had all but forgotten what feminists call ‘the male gaze,’ until accompanying my visiting granddaughters down New York City streets I became aware of a change in the atmosphere. Men turned around to check them out. There were catcalls from construction sites. (p. 54)

Burack-Weiss (2015) talks about being an “old woman who can’t do all she used to do but still wants to do all she can.” (p. 119). Madeleine L’Engle’s writing reminds Burack-Weiss (2015) of “the value in the smallest acts of good we can manage.” (p. 119). Often, however “older women’s positive contributions to society are less likely to be recognized than those of older men, and they are more likely to be regarded as a “burden” or a “problem” needing attention.” (Age International, n.d.).

Westwood (2023) states that “the lack of recognition of older women is then an issue of social justice that goes beyond whether one is seen and heard.” (p. 12). It relates to whether older women matter; whether their thoughts, views, needs, and wishes are taken into account; and whether their perspectives are included in social policies relating to older people and to older women. (Mahler, 2021). Older women are fighting for social justice for others while they themselves face similar challenges in their own lives, most prominently, being invisible. Being seen and valued is central to achieving social justice for themselves as well as others because recognition means access to resources and representation. (Westwood, 2023).

My hope is that this research into quiet activisms and non-typical activists could provide women with exactly this kind of recognition for their contributions and inspire social justice activism through means other than highly visible practices. Recognition of elder women will contribute to social justice for them as well as the causes they care about, potentially increasing

the engagement of women in grassroots activism throughout their lives and achieving social justice for older women.

### **Literature Review**

There are two overarching areas in the research literature: (1) general research related to women's experience of aging (emotionally, physically, economically, socially etc); and (2) literature that highlights women activists and their visible protest.

### **Successful Aging**

Globally, by 2050 there will be more people over 60 than under 15. (United Nations, 2013). Alongside the fears of “the graying of modern societies” (Minkler & Holstein, 2007, p. 197) – workforce shortages and too expensive social programs for example – there has been a push to reimagine how elders can continue to be part of their communities. Neo-liberal discourse related to “successful aging”, or “productive aging” includes the idea that elders only have value to society if they are *doing something* hence the emphasis on civic engagement or for those with less economic resources, continued paid work. While an alternative to the “biomedicalization of gerontology” (Estes & Binney, 1991), or the idea of aging as a process of disease and decay, successful aging suggests staying productive is what aging is all about (Minkler, 1999).

McHugh (2012) believes that “women aged 50 and older have had several experiences and advantages that can position them as uniquely qualified to contribute to a movement for a new society, a society that incorporates social justice values.” (p.280). To counter, Minkler & Holstein ask, “whether the status of contemporary later life as a unique time in human history necessitates the carving out of a new set of ‘productive’ roles in order for its occupants to be valued.” (2007, p. 196). Burack-Weiss (2015) explores the loss of societal roles that elders face which leads to “a diminishment of self that had to be replenished if old people were to retain a

purpose in life.” (p. 120). She identifies how the civic interaction provided under the guise of successful aging creates new roles to allow elders to have a purpose, *a value* and to prevent social isolation. This prevents “the process of disengagement...from the concerns and activities of the larger society (Cummings and Henry 1961 as cited in Burack-Weiss, 2015, p 120). But Burack-Weiss (2015) also asks: “does the old person pull away from society or does society pull away from the old person?” (p. 121).

Successful aging rests on a “vision of civic engagement...[which] is essentially a depoliticized strategy to encourage, facilitate, and normalize community participation in old age.” (Minkler & Holstein, 2007, p 197). It recasts “older people as a communal resource, rather than a burden” and is “simultaneously an expectation and a choice.” (Minkler & Holstein, 2007, p 201). Holstein (2007) notes that:

civic engagement as a goal for an aging society...is targeted at the privileged few who have the time, good health, resources, and prior experience that allow them to engage in significant volunteer activities...The explicit message is ‘if we can, we ought’ to be engaged in community activities.” (p. 199).

One of the main criticisms regarding the successful aging narrative is raised by “feminist gerontologists [who] have pointed out that the narrative socializes citizens to pick up the slack when the social safety net has gaping holes.” (Netting, 2011, p. 246). The conflation of civic engagement with volunteerism (Minkler & Holstein, 2007, p. 201) does not demand change to social political realities and therefore does nothing to remedy the very social and economic inequality that “places some people perpetually at the margins” (Minkler & Holstein, 2007, p.199), including women elders.

Instead, the idea of “comfortable aging” (Freixas et al., 2009, p. 54) “emphasizes the advantages of aging offered by the acceptance of old age as a gift that enables us to enjoy the long period ahead.” (Freixas et al, 2012, P. 55). Comfortable aging includes lifestyles chosen by the individual rather than dictated to them as a should or a must. The move to productive aging “may be one more barrier to a rich and feminist appreciation of old age’s gifts.” (Holstein, 1999, p. 372).

### **Why do women become activists?**

McHugh (2012) stated it was not just “discrimination and/or dissatisfaction” driving women to activism but the need for empowerment. (p. 285). Defining activism beyond “taking direct or militant action to achieve a social or political or social goal” (McHugh, 2012, p. 282) shows that “older women demonstrate a rich and varied history of activism. Women are everyday activists; they volunteer, organize political forums, help people in need, and make older women visible in the community in myriad ways.” (McHugh, 2012, p. 285). Women view “later life as an opportunity to engage more fully in the issues that motivated them in their youth.” (Chazan & Baldwin, 2016, p.79). Many of the women who participated in research described “doing” activism because of their grandchildren or a perceived communal responsibility. For Black, Indigenous, racialized or 2SLGBTQIIA+ women, doing activism can be about surviving. Yet it can also be about thriving, about living, about simply existing in a place or system that doesn’t want you to so just that. That is very different than the women who figure prominently in the existing research. Regardless of the motivation or outright need for activism, the focus of the research into older women activists has been the practice, the how and not for what it the practice means to them, especially as they age. Uncovering that meaning is central to my research question.

### **Prominence of high-visibility identity based activism**

Several high visibility groups – like The Raging Grannies in Canada and the Knitting Nannas Against Gas (KNAG) in Australia – offer older women space to be activists. Through song or craft, women are using the stereotype of the “little old lady” to create identity and use it strategically in protest as resistance. The ‘Grandmother identity’ has “served somewhat as a protective function for [The Raging Grannies] and other activists.” (Sawchuk, 2009, p. 183). Members of The Raging Grannies have spoken about serving as

a buffer zone between police and young activists because police were hesitant to tell their elders to ‘move it along’ at protests...Granny Vicki commented that ‘Nobody’s going to put a little old lady in handcuffs.... Who’s going to arrest or beat up a little grandmother?’ Granny Jane noted that arresting a Granny would be a public relations nightmare for the police: ‘It would look very bad on the national news to be dragging eccentric looking grannies off in handcuffs.’ (Sawchuk, 2009, p. 180).

### **Re-defining activism**

Netting (2011) reminds us that:

buried in [successful aging narrative] are expectations and messages that tell persons without resources that they are not successful if they are not engaged in certain ways; that privilege formal activities, such as volunteering through established dominant channels; and that neglect to consider the invisibility of provisioning (the mutuality of care relationships) that weaves the social fabric. (p. 46).

Provisioning is a quieter activism that women do not take or receive credit for performing and may not even consider an activist gesture. Chazan & Baldwin (2016) note women in their

research who were unable to act in highly visible ways, but many were still engaging with feminist issues professionally, through volunteer work, or personal struggles such as “advocating for children in schools, fighting divorce and custody battles and so on.” (p. 79). I think of this as *resisting in place* and would consider that to be a perfect example of the quiet activism that has been performed by women.

Much of the research focuses on visible, loud, prominent acts of resistance, rage, and action. (Chazan & Baldwin, 2018; McHugh, 2012). Angela Davis’ lecture “How Does Change Happen?” (University of California Television, 2008) addresses the unglamorous work in activism. She uses the example of the Civil Rights Movement and the boycott that happened after Rosa Parks was arrested thanks to the women who

stayed up all night long mimeographing. They stayed up all night long making those leaflets and that’s how the bus boycott got started.... If they hadn’t worked that mimeograph machine, if they hadn’t gotten people to go out and distribute all of those leaflets at six o’clock in the morning when people...were getting on the bus...it wouldn’t have happened the way that it did. (University of California Television, 2008).

Chazan et al. (2018) explain that the purpose of their book is to “unsettle existing assumptions about activism – about what is typically ‘considered activism’ and who is assumed to be an ‘activist’.” (p.3).

Baumgardner and Richards (2005) redefined activism as anyone who “accesses the resources that...she has as an individual for the benefit of the common good.” (p. xix). This ties into ideas around aging collectively rather than independently, the gold standard for neo-liberal successful aging. (McHugh, 2012). Defining activism in terms of highly visible actions means

that things like care work (Minkler & Holstein, 2007) are not considered activism. Much of the change work that women do is not seen by anyone. Often, they themselves may not identify it as activism and do not think of themselves as activists.

Expanding how we define activism to include “arts-based interventions, land-based practice, performance, cultural resurgence, creativity, survivance, refusal, ceremony, advocacy, and more (Meadows, Thurston, and Laagendyk 2009; Kauanui 2016; Hodgson and Brooke 2007; Pain 2014)” (Chazan, 2018, p.4) and valuing “the activism of people who do not necessarily have the mobilities or abilities required to attend large protests, or who are made disproportionately vulnerable at such protests, particularly in the presence of police.” (Chazan, 2018, p 8) allows us to see the unseen activism of women.

Revamping the definitions of activism and activist could provide researchers with a better understanding of the ways racialized women ‘show up’ for themselves and their community. Importantly, expanding the definition of activism could give legitimacy to acts of caring that often remain hidden or are not identified as activist impulses. Aging Indigenous, Black, racialized, and queer folks have a multitude of factors that impact how they practice activism which can include race, gender, class, ability, and income. It is important to note that “activism by/for BIPOC communities are central to survivorship and living across gender/class/ability/age etc. and benefits all communities.” (Sonia Meerai, personal communication, June 20, 2023).

### **Research gaps/tensions**

Sawchuk (2009) states “it should be noted that the movement [Raging Grannies] as a whole appears to lack ethnic and socioeconomic diversity.” (pp. 182-183). This was a common theme across all the writing because “much of the work in this area remains focussed on a few



well-known movements of ‘grandmother activists’, certain overt...forms of activism, and the contributions of relatively privileged groups of older women.” (Chazan, 2018, p. 6).

Chazan (2018) says that there is a lack of “scholarship with and of older Indigenous, Black, racialized, and LGBTQIA2s+ [sic], the work of those living with disabilities, and the dynamics of aging and intergenerationality across movements, remain especially limited.” (p. 6). However, during further research I did discover that there is a significant body of work on activism among Black American women. So perhaps it is not a lack of scholarship but a lack of awareness of that scholarship? What does that say about anti-Black racism and White supremacy in academia that scholars have not acknowledged other work by and about Black women's activism? These are questions that need to be explored, particularly if we are committed to anti-racist practices in our research. Chazan (2018) does state that she wishes to expose the “overarching whiteness and heteronormativity of existing scholarship in this area.” (p. 6). My research may show there are significant barriers to participating that make quieter activism more accessible to women who fall outside of the dominant activist groups and perhaps even preferable.

One participant speaks to the tension between volunteerism and active advocacy: her busy home-life coupled with her busy work-life meant that she had limited time for activism: Sam described her work as a volunteer as ‘community service’ as opposed to ‘active advocacy,’ she remained engaged in feminist work – both paid and unpaid – throughout these years. (Chazan & Baldwin, 2016, p.79).

This distinction between volunteering and advocacy is interesting because in the “successful aging” strategies, volunteering is considered important, a chance to give back and stay connected to the community. I am left to wonder if volunteering is seen as a passive exercise that supports

the status quo rather than challenging it or supporting change. Minkler & Holstein (2007) noted “the pleas for civic engagement (read: volunteering) to fill gaping holes in the safety net.” (p. 197). However, are all gaping holes filled equally? Are some opportunities for volunteerism more appealing than others? Do the communities and organizations with the greatest need get the support they need from those who are able to volunteer?

Elder women can infuse “feminist struggles with much-needed labour, experience, perspective, and critical thinking. Their words, actions, and convictions all challenge lingering ageist notions that activism is, or should be, the work of youth, and that older feminists are anachronistic or obsolete.” (Chazan & Baldwin, 2016, p. 83). McHugh (2012) echoes the tendency to see activism as the purview of the young, which she believes may be why there is so little research on women’s political activism.

Often the realities of elder women are viewed through a lens of frailty, dependence, and past usefulness. In parallel literature, Wilbur et al (2022) stated that the acceptance of migrants is “built upon the notion that immigration is economically useful for Canadians.” (p. 162). This is the theme that pervades the successful aging narrative – that only those who can contribute in some way can be valued... and studied.

An additional gap that I am seeing in hindsight is the meaning of quieter activism to individuals rather than impact of actions. Fillieule identified that research looks overwhelmingly at organizations rather than on the effect the institution or actions have on people. In other words, we know more about what is achieved rather than what it means to the people to be involved. This gap was central to my questions about women, age, and activism.

## Theory and Methods

There were several methodologies that informed my thinking about this subject including practice-based research, community development methodology, social movement learning theory, and critical life-course perspective. However, as I continued to refine the research questions and broader study design, I determined a multi-theoretical and multi-methodological approach would best support the intricacy of the research problem and proposed methods. I will illustrate how critical feminist theory and critical gerontology frame this research, using autoethnography and aspects of participative narrative inquiry.

Initially I planned to rely solely on Critical Feminist Theory and methodologies to support this project given my focus on women and the meaning of their lives. This framework emphasizes “power relations and inequality, on how power influences male and female identities, and on gender as a dynamic structural force in the life chances of men and women.” (Netting, 2011, p.241). However, I determined Critical Feminist Theory alone would not offer what I needed in a project dedicated to the lived experiences of elder women because even within feminism, ageism is still an issue. Calasanti et al. (2006) note that women grow “invisible as sexual beings through the aging process – not only in terms of the disappearance of the desirous male gaze, but also in terms of neglect by younger members of the women’s movement.” (p. 21). This they believe makes us participants in our own oppression as feminists assume old women are just like middle-aged women but older. Calasanti et al. reference Brook (1999) who wrote about how many feminists’ attention to older women ends at when menopause begins.

According to Pohl and Boyd (1993) “when existing feminist theory is reviewed, the issues consistently concern women as workers, child bearers, mothers, and wives” (p. 202). They

looked at three forms of feminism – liberal, radical, and social – and across all three, the issues facing older women were not a focus.

For Liberal Feminists, the focus is on individual power and empowering free choices. This however is of no benefit to ageing women who need a communal approach to their issues including poverty, housing, food insecurity etc. Radical feminists on the other hand view women's experience of oppression as universal, which it is not. Their focus is on the control of women's bodies, primarily sex and procreation. Pohl and Boyd (2013) ask "what does control of one's body mean at age 75?" (p. 200). Bodily autonomy is not an issue that ends when child-bearing years do.

In socialist feminist literature, age is not mentioned as a "distinguishing feature of women's experience" (Pohl & Boyd, 2013, p. 200). Socialist feminists criticize Liberal feminists for their insistence on the divide between the private and the public, claiming it hides issues like Intimate Partner Violence. This separation limits public dialogue or the development of needed policies. Yet, despite their critique, socialist feminists have rarely looked at women's issues beyond parenting and child-rearing. It appears that in many ways, feminism continues to support the idea that a woman is only of value when she is productive as a worker and as a mother.

Feminists, by ignoring the issue of ageing, keep "the fastest growing segment of the U.S. population invisible" (Pohl & Boyd, 1993, p.201). There is strong evidence that "older women – outliving men by eight years; widowed for 15 years; if single, ending up in poverty and/ or nursing homes after years of providing care for their family members – remain invisible within feminist theories" (Datan 1989 as cited in Pohl & Boyd, 1993, p. 200).

Similarly, Autoethnography as a sole approach was considered given the literature indicates that the activism of marginalized older women are relatively unknown, yet I feel autoethnography is not the best fit. As a white woman, centering and amplifying my experiences is unnecessary. This is why I chose to use the Prologue and Epilogue as it allowed a space for my voice and reflections but outside of the main work. Given the very personal origins of this research question, there was a need to include my voice and this felt like a way to include the autoethnographic component that was the genesis of this project.

In addition, I considered Narrative Inquiry for its capacity to “communicate the lived experiences, and the social, political, cultural, and institutional influences (or narratives) that have shaped an individual’s lived experiences...[and] its ability to provide a rich and nuanced understanding of the ways individuals understand the world. (Wilbur et al, 2022, 164). Weil explains the importance of a life course perspective to do this (Weil, 2023, p.1). Life course perspective examines

the way that individual lives are bound within historical, temporal, societal, and cultural contexts. The approach suggests that we examine multiple identities, roles, and statuses of older women simultaneously.... The life course perspective reminds us that we need to look at older women’s lives in both an individual sense and also within the advantages and disadvantages of the time and place in which one lives and their intersectional characteristics. (Weil, 2023, p.1).

Participatory Narrative Inquiry involves collecting personal stories to make sense of complex situations to make better decisions. (Kurtz, 2014, p. 85). Ledwith and Springett (2010) explain:

the idea that personal narratives reveal the political nature of our lives is fundamental to Freirean pedagogy (Freire, 2000). In dialogue with each other, we are often introduced to critical insights that slice through entrenched taken for granted attitudes about everyday reality, and in a process of reflection we redefine ourselves, reposition ourselves in relation to reality.” (p.110).

The interviews will provide me with insight into the lives of women whose life-path may serve as a guide as I enter my fifties and look forward to what the remaining decades will hold and what I can do. This is why I was drawn to what Burack-Weiss (2005) wrote in her introduction to her book *The Lioness in Winter*: “I was seeking what would later be termed a “Narrative Compass” in which to map out the next part of my life which was, as yet uncharted territory.” (p.3). I referenced above the use a prologue and an epilogue as a way to bookend my research by situating myself before the research with the questions I was asking myself and the feelings I had about aging and activism, and then after, to highlight how the research has influenced my thinking and what direction(s) has(have) been provided by the narrative compass of the stories of the women I interviewed.

Critical gerontology is “concerned with the problem of emancipation of older people from all forms of domination. Hence, in its mode, critical gerontology is concerned with identifying possibilities for emancipatory social change, including positive ideals for the last stage of life.” (Kastenbaum et al., 1993, p xv). It encompasses “a commitment not just to understand the social construction of ageing but to change it.” (Phillipson and Walker, 1987, p.12). In addition, critical gerontology “analyzes the extent to which political and socioeconomic factors interact to shape the experience of aging, and it regards gender, ethnic background, and social class as variables on which the life course of individuals pivot, insofar as it predetermines

their position in the social order.” (Freixas et al., 2012, p.44). The term arose in academia in the 1980s and 1990s as “an umbrella term encompassing a variety of post-structural, post-modern approaches to studying the aging experience.” (Burack-Weiss, 2015, p. 12). Minkler and Holstein (2007) found “critical gerontology an exciting means to bridge a passion for social justice work with a scholarly desire to explore the social construction of aging within a broad socio-political and humanitarian context.” (p. 196). Critical gerontology emphasizes

the political and socio-structural embeddedness of concepts like civic engagement... Critical gerontology further exhorts us to challenge a moral and epistemological hegemony that is gender and race stratified. And it has us look carefully at unanticipated consequences, e.g. how the heavy emphasis on civic engagement may unwittingly devalue those older adults for whom such engagement is not possible or not chosen (Minkler & Martinson, 2007).

Combining critical feminist theory with critical gerontology will provide the tools to “analyze older women as vibrant challengers to the status quo, instead of as merely victims of the inequities of the established order.” (Sawchuk, 2009, p. 173). I will be using a critical feminist gerontology approach, that includes limited autoethnography, influenced by principals of participatory narrative inquiry. Freixas et al (2012) claim that:

feminist gerontological research attempts to document the experiences of elderly women and to promote new interpretations of female aging. Among its basic goals is that of enabling and empowering this population, revealing unequal social regulations that mark the lives of elderly women, encouraging development of more complete and more complex interpretations of their lives, and has discussed the necessity of studying and understanding the life trajectories in greater detail. (p. 46).

This is exactly my hope – to shed new light on unseen activism among women who are not part of high-visibility identity-based activist groups.

### **Sampling Protocol**

This study invited six woman-identifying individuals to participate in an interview with me. Participants were identified through my own networks and through colleagues and friends. I interviewed women aged 58-79 who are engaged in acts to improve their communities and who are recognized as changemakers and allies of justice and equity. Here are their bios (quotations indicate that the bio was written by them):

Sister Barbara, 79: School Sisters of Notre Dame nun, educator, anti-human trafficking community organizer, trainer/educator in South Sudan, published author, aspiring painter and singer.

Lesley, 58: “Hi! Lesley CPA, CA, MBA here...you might guess from all the initials and my upper 50s age range, that I came to activism later in my life. And quite by accident. After burning out in Corporate Toronto, I began searching for meaning. How could I truly make a difference? Volunteering at the Social Development Centre WR slowly answered that and many other questions about social justice. I had always been vocal at work when I saw unethical actions. My unique skills while required afforded me to speak out when others had a concern but felt at risk to voice it. I attended my first protest, went to my first encampment and cooked my first meal for the homeless during COVID. COVID was a real game changer for me. I also realized my power as a tax paying, white, middle age, middle class woman when it comes to speaking out. On the personal side, I am a happily single mum of 2 grown men, 2 dogs and 4 cats. Teach part-time at Conestoga College and doing ad hoc consulting.”



Cheryl, 62: “Cheryl is a self-employed book-keeper and has plenty of real-world business experience, including various management positions. One of her recent roles was the Donations Co-ordinator for Food4Kids Waterloo Region, raising funds that help children throughout the region who are experiencing chronic hunger. She has been a proud participant in local activities ever since she moved to Wilmot 16 years ago, and she considers public service to be an opportunity to contribute to the well-being of the community. In 2013, she and her husband, Nigel, began organizing the Wilmot Terry Fox Run. Now leading their tenth campaign, they've raised \$262,000 out of a total of \$283,500 since the first local run was held in 1996. She served as the president and treasurer of Healthy Wilmot for several years, working with businesses, community groups, churches and citizens to improve our community's health. She has been a steering committee member of 100 Women Who Care: Wilmot since the group was founded in 2015. Born in Toronto and raised in Kitchener, Cheryl graduated from the University of Waterloo with a B.A. in Fine Arts. After living in England for nine years, she moved to Wilmot in 2006 with Nigel, so they could be closer to their family.”

Cheryl notably omitted that she served four years as a councillor for the Township of Wilmot. During that time, Cheryl was a vocal advocate for Indigenous people, particularly in regard to the placement of statues of Canada’s prime ministers, including Sir John A. MacDonald. The hate and threats that were directed at Cheryl and her husband, Nigel, who is racialized, resulted in them leaving New Hamburg and moving to Waterloo.

Maedith, 71: “Maedith Radlein grew up in Jamaica and immigrated to Canada, (Waterloo Region), in 1987. A proud mother of two and grandmother of five, she acknowledges her privileges as a settler and is grateful to the Anishinaabe, Haudenosaunee and Neutral for nurturing and sharing the land she now calls home. She's thankful to the Arawaks, the

Indigenous people of Jamaica, for stewarding the land from which she came. She is committed to Indigenous Right Relations through reconciliation and to the creation of a society which values and respects all people for who they are. Maedith worked with the Waterloo Region District School Board as an elementary teacher and principal. She retired in 2014. She then worked part-time at Wilfrid Laurier University in the Faculty of Education's B.Ed. program as well as doing supply work for the school board. Over the years Maedith has volunteered with many community organizations. In 2003, she received the Oktoberfest Woman of the Year Award in Arts & Culture and in 2007, the Focus on Friends Award for immigrant women for her achievements in education. In 2018 she was Waterloo's Senior of the Year. She is currently a trustee for the Waterloo Region District School Board."

Marcia, 72: Born in London, England, Marcia moved to the Waterloo Region in 1982 for a teaching position. She became the first Black teacher at Kitchener Collegiate Institute. Almost immediately upon joining the Waterloo Region District School Board (WRDSB) she became involved in OSSTF. Ensuring equity of outcome for student and colleagues alike has been a big focus of her career. After four years as a Department Head at Galt Collegiate in Cambridge, Marcia moved into the WRDSB position of Human Resources Officer. Her main areas of responsibility included implementation of Race and Ethnocultural Relations Policy and education in Sexual Harassment. Working with the local community and parents was key to ensuring greater understanding of Equity issues. Throughout her over 35 plus years in the Waterloo Region she has been a member of the KW Seventh Day Adventist Church and to be on the boards of many organizations; they include: The Social Planning Council; Crime Stoppers; The Kitchener-Waterloo Multicultural Centre; The Waterloo Holocaust Education Committee; Kid's Link (Children's Mental Health Residential Treatment Centre). The Congress of Black

Women - Ontario, Waterloo Region Chapter has been a big focus of Marcia's attention, an organization she joined nearly 30 years ago. Even in her retirement Marcia has continued her commitment to creating "safety nets for support" is unwavering. Increasing understanding about the impact on Systemic Racism and more specifically Anti-Black Racism has become a particular area of focus Marcia's attention. Most recently, Marcia is the co-founder of 'Black @ Waterloo Black Film Festival' and a campaign school for racialized people interested in running for public office (edited from participant bio).

Marjorie, 60: "Marjorie has a lot of lived experience when it comes to the challenges of precarious work and raising a family. She is passionate about advocating for those who struggle due to inadequate income and services. In 2018 Marjorie took her first step into politics, remains active in the Riding of Cambridge for the NDP. She continues to be engaged in her community, a founding member of Rhythm and Blues Cambridge, working with community partners to create opportunities for our BIR communities. Marjorie currently serves on the boards of The Cambridge Shelter Corp, and ACCKWA. She is presently employed as a Family Outreach Worker with the House of Friendship in Cambridge."

### **Process of Analysis: researcher reflexivity & deep engagement**

Centering researcher reflexivity, the final paper is a source of "reflection and engagement" (Root, personal communication, March 7, 2023). The data are the recordings of the interviews with the participants. I had originally planned to transcribe the recordings myself to reflect on not only what the women said but how they said it. However, the length of the interviews made this difficult and time consuming. I opted instead to use the transcription app Grain. I then engaged in the reflection as I had planned, listening to the interview to confirm the accuracy of the transcription. This allowed me to "produce knowledge from embodied emotions

and responses – both those of the participants and the researchers.” (Kinkaid et al, 2020, p. 83). In this re-listening, I was attentive to patterns, themes, what was not said, and what I expected to be said. This allowed me to still use reflective journaling (see [Appendix 1](#)) despite changing the process of transcription.

While I allow the women’s own voices to tell their stories through quotation, I analyzed the content to look for shared themes on the topics of aging and activism. I did this by looking at the terms and expressions women use when describing their experiences, how frequently terms/expressions are used, and the significance they place on them. Evaluating significance is something that required some thought because while words and sounds can convey significance, so can non-verbal gestures. During the recording, I saw them while they were speaking so I had to decide how to account for physical gestures or if I would at all given that (mis)interpretation of physical gestures can be influenced by culture, age, and class. I opted not to include anything regarding physical gestures as there were not any. However, as I am trying to understand the meaning of activism for older women, I listened and watched for emotions and feelings in their stories and responses.

Reflection is vital because “to perform feminist gerontological research, it is necessary for researchers to engage in certain personal processes that will bring them to question their implicit cultural beliefs. Only through an individual revision of ageist stereotypes will it be possible to carry out high quality research that empowers.” (Freixas et al, 2012, p.46).

### **Member checking**

Initially, I had planned to offer participants the opportunity to verify the accuracy of the transcripts before I began analysis. I agreed that edits would be made accordingly. Thematic Analysis, which I am using, does not adopt member checking because the purpose of that is to

control for incorrect research bias. But as Braun and Clark (2022) explain, if we are embracing researcher bias, do we need members to “check” the work? Instead, they suggest member *reflection* on the analysis to offer “additional insight and to generate further data on the topic at hand.” (Braun & Clark, 2022, p.3). Members were provided the opportunity to remove anything they did not wish included and to add to thoughts they had expressed. Only 3 of the participants responded with additional thoughts or clarifications on the transcripts.

### **Jargon and accessibility**

I was originally drawn to using a podcast format for knowledge mobilization because it is a medium that is accessible and allows ideas to be shared in a non-academic way. The latter was extremely important to me. Abandoning the podcast was the right decision given time and skill constraints, but I remain committed to the spirit of accessibility that the podcast offered. As such, I am avoiding jargon as much as possible and choosing language and a writing style that hopefully allows people outside of academia to engage fully with the material. Sister Barbara shared the idea of “relations of ruling,” a concept developed by Dorothy Smith at Ontario Institute for Studies in Education. As Sister Barbara explained, language can be used to subjugate or to ‘other’ people: “you develop a jargon and then theories that we know, and you don’t.” This is a practice seen frequently in colonialism. As an academic, Sister Barbara worked hard to say things simply and share knowledge broadly. She believes that “we are doing social justice by being ordinary.” With my commitment to knowledge mobilization, accessibility, and decolonizing myself and my work, I will use as little jargon and academic language as I can and just be ordinary.

## **Grey Literature**

The term “grey literature” is certainly appropriate for this topic. Reflecting on Hampton’s (1995) comment that “life feels” (Wilson, 2003, p 171), I made room for emotion in the research process, not just intellect and rationality. This is why grey literature featuring women’s voices was vital to the story being told and offered additional perspective to that found in the research literature and aided my analysis. It also offered access to voices that have been or are outside of the academia but have been thinking and writing about this topic.

## **Coding and Data Extraction**

To access the data from the interviews, I listened to the recordings while I read and edited the app-generated transcriptions. I then created an Excel spread sheet that listed the participants’ names and the questions. I populated the matrix with quotes, keywords, or examples from the women’s interviews, putting answers in the appropriate section based on relevance to the question not the order of the questions. I also created space for information that emerged that was not specific to a question but that I thought spoke to the issues we were discussing.

As the spreadsheet was populated, certain words, themes, and ideas started to emerge and as that happened, I made notes in the spreadsheet – questions, thoughts, things to come back to, connections to what other participants had said, etc. Using thematic analysis, I arrived at my results by reviewing these notes and the transcripts multiple times.

## **Interviewing racialized women**

Dwyer and Buckle (2009) point out that ‘as qualitative researchers we must be fully authentic in our interactions with our participants.’ (p. 60). In addition, we must also “honour the consequences of acting with genuineness” (Glesne, 1999, p. 105). This is one reason why reflexivity was critical to this project, especially as interviews were conducted with racialized

elders. Decentering whiteness is extremely important to me in this project and I did my best to interrupt that through reflexivity on my positionalities and ensured that my strategies for analysis are “anchored in anti-colonial, anti-racist, and non-patriarchal frames.” (Dr. J. Root, personal communication, January 25, 2023).

### **Recording the interviews**

Wilbur et al (2022) provided me with some things to consider before, during, and after recording and knowledge mobilization. I wanted to avoid triggering and re-traumatizing participants, so I embraced the steps they took which included:

- The host sharing their own journey, where and when appropriate.
- Guests reviewing a written transcript of their interview (member-checking).
- In the case of Wilbur et al (2022), their podcast host was not the researcher. They chose someone with lived experience to do the interviews. While not producing a podcast, as the researcher and the interviewer, I shared some lived experience with the participants when appropriate. I acknowledged that racialized women may have very different experiences of ageism as it intersects with other parts of their identities. I reflected carefully before and during the recording on whether my sharing would encourage participants to share or potentially shut down conversation.

Underpinning this research is my positionality as a 50-year-old white, cis, queer, middle-class woman of privilege. Aware of the pressures of aging, I wondered if I would share participants concerns about identity and what the second half of life could look like. I remained mindful of how this could shape how I listen, how it could inform the points I connected with, and how it could influence my decisions about what themes to emphasize

(Kinkaid et al, 2020, p.81). This required intentional reflexivity. That said, I agree with Barnes' call to action:

there is still a long way to go before old age achieves prominence within feminist studies and activism. One responsibility of women for whom old age has been a professional subject matter, is how we interweave our own experiences to contribute to the further development of critical gerontology (2018, p. 211).

## **Results**

The original question behind this research was to identify how elder women are engaging in activism, to determine if they viewed their social justice work as activism, and whether they even considered themselves as activists. I asked participants a series of questions (see [Appendix 3](#)) in four main areas: personal background, thoughts on the experience of aging, their participation in activism, and what it means to them as elders to continue to be engaged in changemaking.

What emerged was an overarching theme around the concept of identity, and a lot of contradictions about exactly who and what constitutes an activist identity. I had come to this research hoping to validate to outsiders that the quiet activism of elder women qualify as activism and that they are activists. What I found instead wasn't whether the acts counted as activism to an outside gaze, but rather whether the women considered who they are and what they do to be within the framework of activism.

The overarching theme of identity included sub-themes that may inform how social justice activists and society view elder women and activism:

- Identifying and Defining



- Positionality Matters
- Self-invisibilization

### Identifying and Defining

Among the first questions posed to participants was a request for them to choose five adjectives to describe themselves at this stage of their lives, which are represented below.



Figure 1: Word cloud of adjectives used by interview participants to describe themselves.

Some of these words strongly related to their physical identity (marginalized, disabled, semi-retired, healthy) while others reflected a mental identity (shocked, pensive, joyful, content). These questions elicited a theme about how women identified themselves and their activism. This came through clearly when examining the concept of ‘elder’. For example, many of the women did not consider themselves old. Marjorie shared

you never seem to think of yourself as aging or being old...But you are.... You don't think of yourself as older but then somebody called me: ‘Yes I needed to talk to you

because I felt we should speak to the elders in our community.’ And I was looking around behind me to say ‘who is she talking to? I’m not an elder.’

Cheryl does not consider herself an elder: “I look different...But I don’t feel that I am older. I can get in my bathtub and out of my bathtub with no problems.” Barbara on the other hand is only recently claiming the title of elder, a change that has been influenced by her experience with Indigenous groups and the way they value elders. Barbara said “I am growing into that and saying yeah, that’s okay. Some people need a grandmother.” She believes that aging should be approached like a transformation: “Being and becoming. What are we letting go of and what is coming?” Yet Barbara still doesn’t picture herself “as unable, which is interesting. Whether I just deny it’s coming because even to do a little less is challenging for me.”

What Lesley sees coming is looming death but “so much as part of me sees this death and questions ‘What am I bothering for?’, the other part of me seems to be roaring forward...” Part of that ‘roaring forward’ is “building a new way of being” after the end of her marriage which includes activism.

### ***Activist or advocate?***

A subtheme that emerged from the interviews was the concept of advocacy versus activism, the public perception of activism, and whether the participants considered themselves advocates or activists. How those terms are defined and what is identified as activist practices is central to making space for the way women view and practice activism as they age. But as Maedith points out

there is no one thing, there is no one way of doing anything. That is colonialism. When we talk about black and white and the right way and the wrong way, this is that colonial mentality. We all bring what we bring.

Marcia shared that

activism is a word that's being used and not always with the right focus. To be an activist, literally, is to wake people up, to say things, to present information that might make you think about something that you haven't thought about before.

Maedith believes

activism is...more in your face, when you go march Black Lives Matter up and down the street, #MeToo. It's where you are kind of more in the face of people. You are visible you occupy space. You have messages that are more direct and targeted.

Cheryl mentioned that "I think some people think [activism] always means something negative, right?" a statement that Lesley echoed: "people also think of activism as violent protests, looney toons, antifa. And to a certain degree, that's what the news has put out over the years." She goes on to say that "nobody ever 'likes' my activism posts on Facebook anyway...but I don't really care because I felt I needed to say what I said."

In contrast, Maedith's perspective is that "advocacy...is advocating for speaking up, working towards some change that you want to see. So, there are many things there – letter writing, delegating, that kind of thing." She shared that earlier in her life, advocacy and activism had been part of her paid work but "it was less visible, less vocal...it has always been less activist. It was more advocacy...a conversational kind of advocacy." After retirement, when she no longer feared losing her job, Maedith's social justice work became "certainly more public."

On the topic of advocate vs activist, Marjorie said “it’s such a weird distinction. I will consider myself an advocate, but I don’t consider myself an activist.” She talks about her mother “working solutions” and called her “a staunch advocate.”

Marjorie believes that “an advocate is somebody who takes on causes to help somebody.” (Of note, Lesley pointed out that “sometimes we advocate for people we don’t like.”) On the other hand, Marjorie believes that “activists are usually in the middle of everything, and they’re dealing with every single thing...around a certain issue.” Lesley sees herself as “a negotiator or a changemaker behind the scenes. I don’t feel the need to be in front of the camera or the person speaking all the time.” We will return to this idea of not being front and centre later.

However, there was some confusion about what constitutes activism. Many of the participants included volunteering as part of activism. Cheryl said “you can go to St John’s Kitchen anytime and find something to do, even if it’s washing dishes right? Would you call that activism? I guess you would but perhaps maybe you wouldn’t, because are you affecting change?” Lesley worried about volunteering because she didn’t want to continue “to perpetuate the harms that I am seeing.” In addition, Lesley had problems with how organizations asked people to show up – largely with committed, scheduled volunteerism, which didn’t work for her and was ultimately a barrier to getting involved in activism. “So, it just became easier to throw money at it and try and do a little. I’d find things through work, always did a Habitat for Humanity build. And my son and I went, through a church that I was loosely affiliated with...and we did a Habitat build in Nicaragua.”

Cheryl made a distinction even within activism: “Big A activism is where you get the fear factor.” She used the example of physically standing in solidarity with Indigenous people at a protest as Big A Activism. In contrast, little *a* activism was ‘safe’ activism, something like

planting a tree. She herself identified that the activism she most often did was little *a* because “they were easy issues to get behind because it was palatable.” Marjorie indicated that many in her circle are activists “in their own way” but they do not necessarily show up in ways traditionally associated with activism or consider their work activism.

Barbara expressed that “some people call me an edgewalker which I wasn’t comfortable with when I was younger. But now I am happy with it because I don’t want to be in the middle of all the other mess and no, I am comfortable going ahead.”

Marcia considers herself an activist but “not on the grand scale that some of those other people do...I don’t relish being in the media.”

Maedith stated that "I don't know how many people understand the difference, but I do think more and more people understand that you need to speak up and challenge and push back."

While perhaps not able to readily define activism, each participant identified that small acts make a big difference. Marjorie stated “each little thing makes a difference. It doesn’t have to be big. It just has to be.” Lesley agrees:

That's what we all think, and that's where we get caught up with things like climate change, is that we don't believe our tiny daily action of any sort...we don't believe that's going to have a significant change, and so why do it?"

### ***Aging and ‘Doing Good’***

Cheryl and Lesley both entered activism in their fifties with little to no awareness of social justice. Lesley stated “I can honestly say that five years ago I had never thought about what even social justice was. I don’t even think I recognized the terminology was out of my framework.” After only five years of being involved in activism, Lesley states

activism gave me a lifeline when I needed it and so I still see that lifeline...And I think activism also gives me something I can do for the rest of my life. Because I never knew what this thing we call retirement was going to be because I am not a person that has hobbies or participates in a lot of group activities. I don't want to work any more than part time ...but I want these very unique activities that keep me energized and alive.

For others, midlife shifts allowed them to engage in different ways with the causes and issues that mattered to them. As Maedith stated earlier, retirement was the watershed moment when her social justice work shifted from advocacy to activism (her definition). Cheryl said

as you age and you gain wisdom, you can't do it all, you can't be it all, and you aren't the smartest person in the room. And you take your ego, and take your privilege, take a step back and listen and help. And I think that's where I have gotten to.

Elder women also acknowledged that at this stage in their lives they are comfortable with who they are and able to demonstrate emotions and share opinions they couldn't express or show when younger. Maedith is

bold, fearless, calling out hypocrisy, challenging those at the top, calling out their lack of integrity, which I now feel comfortable doing...I've got a thick skin now...I'm polite...but I think I am more assertive and direct.

The participants made it clear that activism for them is not only about showing up for social justice and doing the right thing. Activism is also a part of who these women are and want to be as elders. Marjorie said, "when I can make a difference for someone, I don't think there is a better feeling in the world than that because you feel like you've actually accomplished something worth accomplishing." Marcia shared that "you feel better because you are

contributing.” Maedith states “I don’t have to be at the forefront...but I can’t imagine disengaging...I can’t imagine that.” Lesley pointed out that “I’m not going to have grandkids, so I’m not going to be home babysitting them. So, I just had this vision that I was going to work for the rest of my life with some trips in between...but I want these very unique activities that keep me energized and alive...”

Women want to stay involved, to do, in the words of Barbara, what they can as long as they can.

***But, it’s not activism!***

For years, Lesley offered free tax clinics to unhoused folks and rescued food from corporate events to share with the homeless in Toronto, but she did not consider those actions activism. She did not identify her actions as activism or herself as an activist until she attended a council meeting and witnessed

the subtle rudeness and disregard for the lived experience of individuals that were speaking. So I just got up and talked...and it’s not me...being out in centre is never where I wanted to be. I was always a background person.

Interestingly, Maedith was a participant who was very clear at the outset of the interview on what advocacy and activism meant (and also very clear on her identity as advocate not activist despite activist behaviours) but at the end of the interview, she stated

I don’t think anybody can tell you who an activist is because each person, if you are going to become engaged in anything, you do it in the way that works for you...And for some people, that is working behind the scenes...For some people it is going on social

media. For some people it's organizing marches and protests. And I think it's all activism.

Lesley also addressed that sentiment when she talked about her idea of successful aging meant she was “getting out and doing what makes me happy, makes me feel valued. And that's an internal intrinsic, not what everybody else thinks, but how do I feel at the end of the day?”

### **Positionality Matters**

In addition to the identity of elder and activist, the participants' social justice practices were shaped by their backgrounds and experiences.

When asked whether they had a family history of activism, all three Black, immigrant women identified some spirit of community engagement in their family history as well as strong women role models. Maedith said “I didn't grow up in Canada so [activism] didn't look like the Canadian version.” She goes on to say she didn't grow up with activism “but with community involvement being an expected part of life.”

Marcia talked about Sunday dinners surrounded by people new to England or Canada and hearing about the challenges they faced. She credits her early awareness of injustice to her “parents' willingness to include us in the conversation as children...we weren't pushed aside.”

Marjorie came from a long line of women who got things done. Her grandmother opened Jamaica's first bicycle shop on the eve of World War Two. Anticipating the lack of fuel, she invested in bicycles. Then, said Marjorie,

somebody in the family got in trouble and she sold her business and went to go help them...her thing was, if somebody in her family needed her, then she stopped whatever she was doing and went to help them.



Marjorie stated

all these mothers of mine – my great grandmother, my grandmother, my mother – were such phenomenal women in what they have done and who they have quietly helped along the way because they have helped so many.

In contrast, the three white women who were born in Canada did not identify any activism in their backgrounds. That said, Barbara stated her parents, much like in Marjorie’s experience, “loved us and family so that’s social justice, you know, good family.” I will return to this idea of love and caring as activism in the section on how older women practice care work as a form of activism.

Lesley also had no family activism to learn from “so my philosophy was very much ‘I’m going to work and then I’m going to donate money to organizations that are going to deal with the social issues we have and I know exist.’” But as we saw in the section above, she shifted from thinking social justice work was something other people did to claiming it as work we should all do. Lesley says she finally “recognized over those years how much my head has been buried in the sand, hoping that somebody else that I was giving money to was taking care of it.” Cheryl shared a similar thought regarding financial support. Referencing local menstrual equity group Go with the Flow, she said that when she was younger

I might have just gone and bought like, 100 boxes of tampons and been done with it and not really heard what was going on and why it was needed, not realizing that menstrual equity is a huge issue.

As white women they both acknowledged the privilege they have in choosing when, where, and how they show up. They also recognized that is not the case for many Black,

Indigenous, racialized, or queer women. Cheryl was clear that “activism is not a matter of personal survival.” She added

I would love to be like a RuPaul or somebody like a John Lewis...not being afraid. They got over their fear, right? Because they HAD to. They didn't have a choice. And they might not have chosen to be an activist, but something in their life made them do that. Something forced their hand so to speak...I've never had...my hand forced. So I think I would aspire to get out of my comfort zone...I would hope I wouldn't use my age as an excuse to not.

Barbara shared that being a member of social justice coalitions “shaped me. They were wonderful because they were thinking big.” She notes that the experience was marred by sexism: “The men were working for social justice but weren't practicing it in the room with their women colleagues.” Facing the sexism inherent in the church, she was also being asked how she could stay Catholic. Barbara says

well now, that was a big struggle, would I stay Catholic...in view of the sexism? It's still painful. That's very painful...but when I look at the sexism, where would I go on Earth? Not to have it? That was a serious question – where could I go? First of all I want to be a sister and we are Catholic...There's a mighty stream of justice and there are millions of great people now in churches and abroad but we are in solidarity. So, to know me is to be in solidarity and coalition work. That's all my life.

That being said, some of the practices that elder women mentioned that may not regularly be considered activism (but were examples of quieter activism) included care work (direct aid and intergenerational care) and leadership/mentorship.

### *Care work*

All participants mentioned, unprompted, that they had cared for or were caring for their parents (with the exception of Barbara, but she is involved in the care of the older nuns, many of whom are in their 90s and 100s). This care manifested as intergenerational living and was part of their personal values. Lesley identified that she and her sister had had conversations early on about caring for their parents as they aged:

I didn't come from a family with money, so we were never homeless, but we were poor...I always understood the risk [of being homeless]. And I always knew my mom, if she wasn't living with me or my sister would be one of those seniors trying to survive on next to nothing, going to the foodbank. But my sister and I made a decision decades ago that that wasn't going to happen. **And that was built into our plans for life.**"

(researcher emphasis)

Marcia expressed a similar sentiment because as the child who didn't marry or have children, she knew she would be caring for her parents. In addition, her care work includes fellow parishioners at her church and was comprised of drives to church (addressing a barrier to inclusion), dealing with the aftermath of a friend's death when the family refused (community building), and providing meals to elders living on their own (inclusion).

Cheryl, Maedith, and Marjorie all mentioned intergenerational caregiving, usually of the older women in their families including mothers, grandmothers, and aunts. When Marjorie's grandmother turned 100, Marjorie told her "Granny, you are now officially as old as dirt. And there are a few things that are going to happen now." The first was that Marjorie would not buy her hair dye and told her grandmother to "breathe in the gray hair." The other was "you're going

to live with one of us.” It is worth noting that the responsibility for intergenerational care, particularly related to elders, is increasingly downloaded from government onto the community.

### *Leadership/Mentorship*

Maedith was frank in her feelings about social justice work but also leadership:

There are many times that I’ve said ‘I’m done with this, I can’t do it anymore.’ And I come back, I guess because I believe that I can make a difference. I must believe that being seen and being heard makes a difference. If not in terms of changing anything, in terms of maybe motivating somebody else to try and do something.

This is why at the age of 71 she ran for a position as a public-school trustee. Maedith told me “I just got angry...And I suggested to some younger colleagues but ‘I’m too busy’, whatever...I was the first person to register. I was enjoying my retirement but here we go.”

Marjorie stated that she finds “it hard to stay silent in the face of blatant inequity.” But it took a heart attack for her to know that “You have to step back every now and then and let somebody else step up...You have to give yourself time to rejuvenate.”

Marcia agreed that “we really should be passing on what we know to the next generation.” But she went on to say that “we need to create forums,” seeing that task as something elders need to take responsibility for. Lesley also spoke to knowledge-sharing and inspiring others because she wished she

could find a way to disseminate this information [about social justice] because I’m sure that there’s a lot of people out there like when I was raising my kids that were so busy working, raising kids, running to ball games, doing this, doing that, trying to take a vacation, holding themselves together, holding their family together, that they weren’t

paying attention. And it wasn't until you come up for air that you can pay attention...And I just think, how do we reach more and more individuals like that rather than waiting until they get closer to empty nesters?"

Marjorie shared that "It's almost like the older I get the more in demand I am. Really weird. Really weird." She then said

maybe it's just that I've been around long enough that people understand that I'm not a flash in the pan, that I'm not fashionably standing up for this thing because it looks good. I'm genuinely concerned and intensely searching for change.

She says at this age, she has a lot more people wanting to sit down and talk with her.

According to Lesley casual or one-off opportunities to help others learn, moments I am terming micro-mentorship, are vital to social justice. This is why she believes that dialogue with others is a form of activism because "if you are going to try to change [things]...then some of it has to be in relationships." She shared numerous examples of conversations with friends, family, and strangers that involved negative comments about individuals or movements. Instead of attacking the person, Lesley pauses to say "okay but what does that mean?" She mentioned a tool called the Five Whys where you basically ask 'why?' until you get to the root cause. She uses this in conversations with people to help them learn and ultimately advocate for change on issues that matter to them:

When you think of activism, it's kind of asking the whys thinking. So, when you are hearing things or people are talking about things...I have to try and ask the whys. And that's what I will do with my aunt or family friend. "Well, why are you anti-Pride?"

While we strive to include elder women in social movements, recognize their activist practices, and value their contributions, I began to wonder if outside recognition of activist practices even mattered because as Maedith explained “some people have told me I don’t know what I am talking about...There are young people who will look at me and tell me I am out of touch or whatever. I don’t care what they say. I know what I do and I think there’s value in what I do...”

### **Self-invisibilization**

While expressing their thoughts on what is or is not activism throughout the interviews, participants were not necessarily identifying or valuing their actions as activism. A clear theme of invisibilizing their social justice practices emerged, and one might wonder if this is a major contributor to better defining elder women’s activism and to self-advocacy. There were multiple statements where the women placed themselves in the background or devalued or failed to identify their contributions.

Marjorie shared stories about how it often wasn’t until people’s funerals that you heard about their impact:

I had an aunt who never married...she was a teacher, a headmistress...and when she died, there was standing room only [at the funeral].And the things just came out. How many students are saying, if it wasn’t for her, if she didn’t believe in me, if she didn’t encourage me. And these are all big people, man, high flying executives, doctors, teachers.

Marjorie also said “my parents were very quietly doing a lot...But you never saw it. They never advertised it.” It was only at her mother’s funeral that she learned the extent of what her mother

did. People came up to Marjorie one after another and said “if it wasn’t for your mother, my child wouldn’t have gone to school. If it wasn’t for your mother, this would not have happened. If it wasn’t for your mother, that wouldn’t have happened.” Yet even being aware of this did not prevent Marjorie from devaluing her own work.

When I asked her what activism she was most proud of, she mentioned “two small projects.” That first “small project” was working with the Ontario New Democrats Party to do anti-Black racism training

to change the way certain things are done, to change the way in which candidates are chosen, to change the ways in which the systemic pressures that are outside, but also inside, that as a party we are supposed to stand for.

The second “small project” was getting an equity person at her place of work, a large, established, Christian based charity that deals with addictions, homelessness, and community supports.

When COVID hit, Lesley explained that she saw some glaring issues and she said to herself

if I am the kind of person I think I am, and I’ve always believed I am, then I cannot let those go the way they are. I have to deal with them, and I have to try to make change.

In identifying the subsequent gains in the community around homelessness, Lesley said

I think I am just a drop in the bucket for all the other changes that went on [during the pandemic]. I think my voice definitely led to that. My logic made people think, but you know, I’m just one of many people doing that, so I’m not sure.

In one statement she both credits herself and expresses doubt at her efficacy. Later on she stated that “I am not looking for a pat on the back or applause or even necessarily a thank you. Definitely not looking for gratitude.”

Barbara feels that she has “a lot to offer and I realize not so many people want it. So that is tough...because I see the needs and I see and understand.” This has pushed her to focus on listening. Lesley also mentioned that through activism she has been able to “learn to actively listen. And that is an incredibly hard thing to do.”

Marcia expressed that with regards to community activism “there are times when I think it’s better I not be there.” But then she shared that it is important to her to make sure

my family knows I’ve done stuff...I have two little grand nieces and nephews. It’s important to me that they know that people like them can make a difference...it’s important to leave the place better than when you got here.

The self-invisibilization that is apparent in the interviews is happening at a time when women need to be advocating for themselves and the issues they face as they age. Marjorie highlighted the juxtaposition of saying we respect the knowledge and experience of elders and then we isolate elders – ‘just go sit over there and be quiet now’, kind of thing...I know exactly what side of that divide I fall on. Right now is the time to start advocacy on that side too because it is important.

As noted in the previous section, one of the things that the participants wrestled with was their desire to extricate themselves from activism to make room for others. Yet at the same time, they now recognized, like Marjorie said, that they had to advocate for themselves on the issues impacting their lives.



When women age, they may experience multiple barriers that may impact their quality of life including access to healthcare, housing, food security, poverty, disability, isolation, societal views of aging, and personal fears about this stage of their lives. Carol Cox has spent her career studying gerontology and social policy and she says that “ageism remains the last form of discrimination that’s widely accepted in our culture.” (Verel, P. February 25, 2020). Joan Ditzion, author of the seminal feminist book *Our Bodies, Our Selves*, points out:

Ageism is as important as sexism, and our society hasn't even recognized it because, in all definitions of intersectionality, sexism and gender, racism and classism and all the inequities which are very prevalent, ageism is never even mentioned. It's an invisible kind of discrimination that people aren't even totally aware of. (Seegert, 2021).

At a time when women need to advocate for themselves and facing the intersectionalities of aging, the self-invisibilization of their own activism could become a barrier to their self-advocacy on issues that are of importance to their well-being.

While many of the women I spoke with have been advocates/activists for the better part of their lives, they all noted that it is only when you experience something that you question it. Marjorie said that her own medical conditions have

turned my mind to other things like well, how do people get treated here? And does your colour affect how you are treated? All these kind of things which before I blindly skipped through the daisies, didn't really notice. Well now I do because I've been here.

Marjorie added

I was very [physically] active...for me to age in such a way that I can't continue, that is shocking to me, because I still expected to play field hockey in a Masters' League now...and it's shocking that I would end up like this. It really is so unexpected.

Lesley shares this experience of her elder years being impacted by a decline in physical capacity. A former long-distance cyclist she now walks with a cane because

the whole aging process has resulted in pain and some disability...I still have this thing that the severe osteoarthritis in my knee is just going to go away with surgery and I will just barrel my way back to where I was.

Lesley's fears have informed the activism she does: "the homeless...they terrified me, not because of addictions or anything like that. It terrified me because I could become one of them. I knew how slippery the slope was and that terrified me." Lesley said that "as I've got older, I've got less energy to spread around but I think there would be a great void in what I'm doing in my life because it's something [housing] that I really do believe in."

The same can be said for Marjorie who shared that I will be on a fixed income. I will be somewhat disabled...how will I function? How will I manage? How will I pay the rent? How will I sustain myself." She does not want to burden her children (despite her personal history of intergenerational care with her grandmother) and wants to stay independent but "how do I afford it? Right now I will probably work until I die...but how will I be able to [work]?"

While all of the participants mentioned the changes in physical ability as they age, Marcia stressed the importance of staying mentally engaged even where there may be physical barriers to participating.

## Discussion

In the initial literature review, I found very little on what that engagement *means* to elder women as part of the aging experience and what role activism plays in their lives as they age. What I identified were two main streams of research and thought: (1) general research related to women's experiences of aging, with significant conversation about "successful aging" and (2) literature highlighting women activists and their visible protest.

The literature around successful aging posits community involvement as a way to keep elders connected, engaged, and perhaps most of all, productive. It is frequently seen through the lens of reducing the costs associated with healthcare and community services by encouraging individuals to stay independent and to rely on personal networks for care.

Yet, alongside the successful aging narrative sits ageism, which according to Cox (2015) remains the last form of discrimination that's widely accepted in our culture.

There is an idea that older people are burdens – no longer working but requiring increased care. According to Blanche-T. et al. (2022), their study participants said that widespread ageist beliefs "are inherently associated with retirement status and reasoned about the perceived uselessness of people in this role originating from their withdrawal from the productive labour market." (Blanche-T. and Fernández-Ardèvol, 2022).

All the participants I interviewed identified staying engaged as personally important to them, though for a variety of reasons. They were not driven by the concept of successful aging, success being something they felt was an internal measure. For some, they engaged because they saw a need but also saw no one else was stepping up. That meant they felt they had to, not because of social pressure, but because of their own expectations of themselves. For others, it

was part of a new commitment to do better, whereas for some it was forced upon them simply by life experiences of racism or sexism. These women believed that staying engaged in work on social issues was vital to themselves and to their communities. These feelings run counter to disengagement theory which states it is normal and natural for older people to withdraw from society.” (Douglas, 2020). Further research is required to examine whether elders exit voluntarily or are pushed out, research that I believe must be tied to the (self)invisibilization of elder women.

Though the women were clear that they felt a responsibility to their communities, to “do what you can as long as you can,” there was little agreement on how to define that engagement. Was it activism? Was it advocacy? Did it even matter?

These questions can only be answered if we understand how elder women identify and define activism, the role positionality may play in that understanding, and how self-invisibilization impacts elder women’s own understanding, and valuing, of their contributions.

### **Identifying and defining activism**

My own definition of activism reflects the one I used in the interview questions: daily acts of building change through relationships.

When I chose that definition of activism, I was thinking of relationships as being between people. However, as I started to think about how activism can be very personal, especially the quieter activisms that midlife and elder women practice, I realized that I forgot to include the possibility of a relationship being with the Earth. Once again, my indoctrination into white, western, colonial thought patterns excluded relationships with land, water, and non-human species, as well as relationships that precede us (ancestors) or those that follow us (the generations to come).

One of the examples that inspired this entire project and got me thinking about how we define activism and who is called an activist, was the quiet activism of my friend, S. Year-round, she hangs her laundry to dry in her basement rather than using a dryer. She told me it is a huge inconvenience but is determined to adjust her life and do her part to prevent or, failing that, adapt to the realities of climate change. Deeply concerned about the climate crisis, her faith inspires a feeling of responsibility to the planet and as such, she practices daily acts of building change *through her relationship with the Earth*, not in relationship with other people.

I also believe that activism can be a solitary practice done in solidarity with people you may not know but feel a kinship with based on our shared humanity.

All this is to say that relationship in this definition of activism must be assumed in the broadest of senses.

To be an activist is to act on behalf of solving social and political issues. It is to be at the forefront of a movement, often times compromising your own energy in order to seek justice and evoke change.

To be an advocate is to speak and learn about social and political issues. It is to bring attention to an injustice, subsequently aiding the activist in their fight against that same injustice. Although different, both are necessary in order to create systemic change.

Without one, the other cannot function.

Eva Lewis, co-founder of Youth for Black Lives (Adobe Corporate Communications, 2018)

I have always thought of activism as an umbrella term that includes advocacy, protest, and resistance. While my personal definition is broad, the literature – both gray and peer-reviewed – and the research participants consider advocacy and activism as separate things. However, as Lewis, quoted above, makes clear, both are essential for social justice movements.

When I reviewed the results and the themes of the research, the first thing that struck me was that, when I began this research, I never identified who I thought was the judge of what is activism and who is an activist. Who did I imagine could make the proclamation that X is activism and Y is not? And why did it matter to me?

It certainly didn't matter to most of the women I interviewed, who were content with their contributions. They didn't need anyone to assign labels to them or to their work. The interview participants did however draw distinctions between behaviour (what they do) and identity (who they are) but even those were full of contradictions about how women subsequently labelled themselves and their actions. Maleta (2012) reinforces this finding: “interdisciplinary studies have found that women resist labels associated with feminism, although they identify as activists and environmentalists, which reveals contradictions.” (p. 81).

In my research, one participant, Marcia, was content to identify as an advocate who does activism. Maedith referenced her actions becoming more visible after retirement, which she identified as activism. Marjorie was reluctant to take on the activist title but acknowledged that she moved among people who were activists in their own way. One reason for the varying definitions and identities may be that the two concepts have been “defined inconsistently and discussed almost interchangeably.” (McKeever et al., 2023, p. 3). McKeever et al. (2023) explain that

both advocacy and activism seek to involve multiple people and groups to draw attention to an issue...in doing so, both advocacy and activism aim to influence the decision-making process to initiate or support change...

Yet, the interviewees descriptions of advocacy and activism implied that the terms encompass different practices. McKeever et al. (2023) state that

Behaviors (sic) associated with activism may be viewed as more committed actions aimed at achieving large-scale change, while advocacy may be more focused on amplifying, supporting, influencing, or persuading others... advocacy focuses on persuasion, shifting attitudes and working to get others to support ideas, while activism often focuses on more direct or vigorous action, problematic conditions and challenging ideas. (p.5).

In agreement with many of the participants, McKeever et al. (2023) also stated

advocacy is often thought of as working inside a system, or in support of organizations, individuals, or policies that might help and issue or group. While activism is often thought of as working from the outside to influence a system which sometimes means working against organizations or individuals that have power. (pp. 4-5).

This is confirmed by Maedith's statements that when she was working, she practiced advocacy but upon retirement, activism.

Maedith perceived that activism could threaten her employment: activism was high stakes whereas advocacy came with less risk. Parsons (2016) wrote that "advocacy is still almost a 'dirty word'... In particular, the term 'activist' can almost be used as an insult (pers. obs.)" (pp 1-2). Duncan's (2010) research on feminist self-labelling shows that labels can be assumed or

rejected based on the stereotypes and perceptions connected to the label. (p. 500). The women were perhaps reluctant to use the label activist because of the negative connotations they believe are held, and they themselves hold, about activists.

The literature shows that the difference between advocacy and activism is the ‘cost’ and that can refer to time, effort, or actual cost (money). (McAdam, 1986; Poorisat et al, 2019). Corning and Myers (2002) state that in terms of behavioral hierarchy, activities can range from “low-risk, passive, and institutionalized acts to high-risk, active, and unconventional behaviors.” (p. 704).

Included in the types of high-cost engagement by McKeever et al. (2023) was “Oppositional Activism” which included acts where individuals run the risk of arrest; physically blocking access to buildings or public areas; and engaging in actions that could impact relationships with loved ones. (p. 17). This is the kind of activism most of the women distanced themselves from yet is exactly the kind of activism pursued by the Raging Grannies and KNAG. Reinforcing Duncan’s (2010) research, Bashir et al. point out “the behaviour of extreme activists...has been found to taint public opinion against activism in general, such that members of the public actually resist changing their behaviour when the proposal to do so comes from activists.” (2013). Marcia believes that “media has taken the word [activist] and made it sound like it’s bad...The activists are scary people, that they’re on a fringe that is not a good fringe...the word has lost some of its cachet.” Parsons echoes this when he states that “the stereotypical image of activists as angry, emotional, and illogical often leads to those opposed to conservation, portraying their opponents in this light.” (2013). These are all reasons why elder women, particularly elder women who are racialized, queer or marginalized, may not choose to



be on the front lines of activism or to identify as activists. I will address this below in Positionality.

In contrast, low-cost engagement included Symbolic Advocacy, Online Advocacy, and Dialogic Advocacy. (McKeever et al, 2023). However, I disagree with Corning and Myers inclusion of the word passive in the low risk/low-cost end of the activity range. Good engagement is not passive. It requires a certain level of knowledge on an issue and a willingness to engage, both of which require an active approach. When we only include extreme behaviours associated with activism, we

may underestimate the activist orientation of a highly committed individual who consistently engages in low-risk political behaviours and may overestimate the activist orientation of an individual who engages infrequently in highly disruptive, high-cost behaviors. (Corning & Myers, 2002, p. 704).

Presenting low-risk as passive and high risk as active, deepens the divide of what activism can be. It is also ableist and anti-feminist because it does not account for the pressures that many elder women have that limit their ability to engage in high-risk activism. This includes the need to continue to work, physical ability, and safety, a crucial factor for elder women who are racialized, queer, or marginalized.

Yet as seen in the literature review, the Raging Grannies use their very status as “old ladies” and the stereotypical performance of old age as a safeguard from violence:

Granny Vicki commented that ‘Nobody’s going to put a little old lady in handcuffs....

Who’s going to arrest or beat up a little grandmother?’ Granny Jane noted that arresting a

Granny would be a public relations nightmare for the police: ‘It would look very bad on

the national news to be dragging eccentric looking grannies off in handcuffs.’ (Sawchuk, 2009, p. 180).

The Raging Grannies are predominantly comprised of white women and the statements above demonstrate the privilege that these women hold in society – they have little or no safety concerns, especially regarding the police. I question whether Black or Indigenous women elders could say the same? Would the police be as tolerant of oppositional activism by Black and Indigenous elders?

Implying that advocacy, in contrast with activism, is passive also means that elder women who choose to engage on social media risk being lumped in with “slacktivists”, further invisibilizing them and their advocacy/activism. Slacktivism or armchair activism is an “activity that uses the internet to support political or social causes in a way that does not need much effort, for example creating or signing online petitions.” (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.). That term, often used in the media and in a derogatory way (again giving primacy to more visible manifestations of activism), ignores that online and social media engagement give “voice to underrepresented groups.” (M. Anderson et al., 2018). Social media engagement and other forms of low risk-advocacy can also be first steps, “a potential gateway to more substantive activism and advocacy.” (Parsons, 2016, p. 3.) Slacktivism hides those Lewis referred to as “silent advocates’, those who truly care and for whatever reasons (safety, location, ability, etc) cannot practice visible, high-cost activism.

This leads me to ask whether elder women opt for advocacy because of the perceived risks associated with the high-cost activism? Is this in part why elder women have a hard time identifying themselves as activists and their practices as activism? With age, are the risks of high-cost engagement either not of interest to elder women or do the women lack the social,

economic, and political security to take risks? If true, this may account for the appeal of social media-based activism, as mentioned by participants like Lesley and Marjorie.

Cheryl posed the question “what is activism?” the answer to which is crucial to understanding how elder women show up and whether what they do is acknowledged/appreciated. If someone considers themselves an advocate and has distaste or disinterest in activism, then what one identifies as activism may differ. Cheryl asked if washing dishes at a place that provides food to those in need count as activism? I would say it might if you consider volunteering a form of activism. It might not if you believe that, as per the definition used in the questions, activism means working for change. But, maybe it’s not always about changing the system. Maybe by washing dishes, *the volunteer changes*. They meet people they wouldn’t have met, develop friendships, and subsequently, empathy for others. The dishes are a conduit to personal change in the volunteer that results in them being a voice for systemic change.

Parsons states that to be effective advocates or activists, to create that system change, “a connection is needed to engage...The connection might arise, for example, via a convincing argument given by an advocate who speaks to the values held by the individual.” (Parsons, 2016, p. 4). Lesley, who identified as an advocate, shared the story of her conversation with a restaurant owner. She was dining and overheard him express his concern about staffing issues. Using a practice called the Five Whys that she learned during her time in the corporate world, she will ask why until she gets to the heart of someone’s concerns. This establishes connection and helps her understand their values, which is exactly what is needed to create change. By doing this she was able to have a meaningful conversation about the earning limits of folks receiving Ontario Disability Support Payments (ODSP) or OntarioWorks (OW) and educated the

restaurant owner. He previously only saw that people didn't want to work full-time hours and attributed it to laziness and government handouts. This is what McKeever et al. (2023) consider to Dialogic Advocacy which include the following types of activities:

1. Discussing the issue/organization with family, friends, or others
2. Expressing your opinion about the issue or organization when you are with friends
3. Actively seeking or collect information about the issue/organization
4. Paying attention to information in the news related to the issue/organization. (p. 17).

None of the women I interviewed did this social change work for recognition or gratitude; they mostly did it because of their beliefs about the kind of world they wanted to live in and leave for future generations. None of them cared what label was assigned to them or to their actions but at the same time, they did. This was the most interesting contradiction that appeared in the research and the one that I think warrants further investigation. What is behind elder women's feelings about and resistance to the word activist? Is it rooted in distaste for extreme activists? Does it come from not wanting to jeopardize their causes (or their own legitimacy) by being aligned with that style of activism? Does it come from notions of being polite and respectful, something that is expected of women, especially racialized women, within white supremacist, patriarchal systems? Or is it simply how they have come to understand the concepts of advocacy and activism through the media and/or personal experience?

### **Positionality**

Who you are impacts your understanding of the terms advocacy and activism. (Crawford et al, 2016, p. 364). bell hooks wrote extensively on the "overlapping identities uniquely

impacted by multiple systems of oppression.” (Smith, 2022). Kimberle Crenshaw is attributed with developing the accepted concept of intersectionality related to identities. The overlapping oppressions and intersectionalities that elder women experience can impact how they define and identify activism. I will touch on a few identities and positions that emerged in the literature and the research that may impact elder women’s understanding and practice of activism/advocacy.

### ***Grandmotherhood***

In the literature, there was a focus on looking at high-visibility identity-based activism and the role of mother or grandmother figured prominently. Interestingly, Sister Barbara speaks to how non-indigenous elders are being inspired by Indigenous elders to step into the role of grandmother and to claim that space. As Sister Barbara mentioned, she is only recently embodying this identity and she talked about her realization that people need grandmothers.

Peggy Edwards writing in *Unsettled Activisms* (Chazan et al., 2018) says

I do not believe you have to be a biological grandparent to take on the the grandmothering role. There is a community of older women – aunts, friends, stepparents, and others – who become surrogate grandmothers... “grandmothers” share a common bond – a love for the next generation and a desire to make the world a good place to grow up. (p. 47).

Yet the role described above is unlike the trope of the grandmother utilized by the Raging Grannies and Knitting Nanas. The positionality of ‘grandmother’ that Sister Barbara and Edwards referenced was not being used as performance, security, or humour but instead as a way to foster an intergenerational human connection.

### *Intersectional identities*

It should be noted that elder woman and grandmother were the dominant identities in the literature related to positionality and activism but that there was little about elder women grandmothers who are immigrants, racialized, disabled, or poor.

While it was unintentional to interview three white and three Black women, I decided early in this research process that I did not have the capacity to centre race in the analysis. That requires more space, time, and research than is possible within the scope of this project. However, race cannot be ignored as part of elder women's positionality when it comes to activism. Chazan (2018) writes that

much of the work in this area remains focused on a few well-known movements of 'grandmother activists' ...and the contributions of relatively privileged groups of older women. Scholarship with and of older Indigenous, racialized, LGBTQIA2S+ activists, the work of those living with disabilities...remain especially limited. (p. 6).

The distinct experiences of racialized elder women and what that means for their activism is certainly of vital importance but as Chazan shared, it is a gap in the analysis and the broader literature. I do not want to be another white woman researcher who doesn't 'see' race and ignores it. In this project I was analyzing age and gender. However, it is impossible not to engage with race in the analysis because it plays a large role in shaping the lived experiences of the women and their approaches to activism. While race will not be a central part of the analysis, I would like to share some observations that stood out to me through reflection on the interview transcripts.

The first is that the white women were activists on issues (human trafficking, Indigenous right relations, and homelessness) that *they may not have experienced personally or had a personal connection to*. For example, Cheryl is not Indigenous but is very involved in issues related to the local Indigenous community. Lesley has no experience of homelessness. Sister Barbara has not experienced human trafficking. Their actions exemplify what Rebecca Traister (2018) wrote in *Good and Mad: The Revolutionary Power of Women's Anger*: that it is crucial and urgent for white women that the “opportunity is not to simply be angry on their own behalf, but also at the injustices faced by other women, women who experience those injustices in part thanks to the very mechanisms that protect and enrich those white women.” (p. 128). Women do not have to have experienced something personally to fight for change on an issue.

Meerai (personal communication, August 20, 2023) suggested that historical to present-day violences of anti-Black racism are pervasive and rampant and these experiences of anti-Black racism are felt and impacted deeply by the Black women who participated in this study. She also shared that,

the participants noted their direct, personal experiences of anti-Black racism as being intimately connected to their activisms. In particular, their activisms on eradicating anti-Black racism is connected to dismantling oppressive structures and practices among Black, Indigenous, and racialized communities who are marginalized by the system. (personal communication, August 20 2023).

Morris (2007) states that frequently “Black women have taken their perspective from experiencing multiple forms of oppression to develop multidimensional structures to promote the human and civil rights of all marginalized people.” (Harvell, 2010, p. 1060). Maedith confirms this when asked about what social justice meant to her:

we create the means by which everybody has the opportunity to be successful...My focus is equity and social justice...I believe we cannot champion equity of any form if we don't champion all forms of equity.

As mentioned above, researchers have found “positive correlations” (Ross et al., 2022, p. 430) between the lived experiences of “race related stress” and the activism of Black women which is “displayed in the tendency to speak out and organize around issues relevant to the survival of the community.” (Thomas, 2001). Additionally, some researchers have suggested “that there is a link between experiences of racism/discrimination and activism, such that activism is a response to racial oppression.” (Goodkind et al., 2020; Szymanski & Lewis, 2015). This reflects the experiences of the Black elder women I interviewed who saw injustices within their own families and communities and felt moved to act. Citing White (2001): “when it comes to collective action, Black women are also more likely to adopt an “I am because we are” mentality that takes into account the communal understanding of racism and its effects.” White’s reference to *Ubuntu* (“I am because we are.”) is significant because while for many Black women, the choice to act is often rooted in individual and community survival, it is also attached to deeply held attitudes around community care.

Despite finding themselves thrust into activism, the elder Black women I interviewed maintained identities as advocates and performed actions that are classified in what McKeever et al. (2023) referred to as symbolic, online, and dialogic advocacy. These findings are in line with research that shows that while participation rates are similar between younger and older Black women, the elder women tended to participate in schoolboards or write letters to newspapers; whereas the younger generations send emails or post on social media. (Love et al., 2015; Ross & Livingston, 2019; Ross, 2020). Additionally, older generations of Black activists typically



organized through the church or some form of spiritual or faith-based organization. (Livingston et al., 2017; Ross & Livingston, 2019)

The insistence on self-describing as advocates rather than activists also makes me question whether the elder Black women felt the need to participate in changemaking in more socially acceptable ways to avoid the ‘Angry Black Woman’ stereotype. The role of language is powerful in this study pertaining to the use of advocate and activist to describe actions and self. There may be varying influences that inform the decision making of which term to use, spanning from discriminatory stereotypes, and objectification as experienced by Black women. In contemporary society, the impacts of the use of advocate and activist is not detrimental for white women who may use these terms interchangeably to describe their activism. Cheryl’s comments about fear do illustrate that there may be a loss of safety for some white women who speak out, but it appears to be based on them speaking out **not** on who they are (for example their race, sexual orientation, gender), which is often the case for Black, Indigenous, racialized, queer or trans women.

In addition, the experiences of the Black participants showed that there was a need to work within colonial systems to gain credibility as advocates, credibility that would allow them to do the most possible for their communities and to ensure their voices were heard and valued when they were no longer part of those systems.

### *Immigration status*

Recently local Black activist and anti-racist educator Selam Debs shared an email she received from a white woman (see appendix 2). Debs summarized what the woman had ‘really’ said in her racist email:

She starts off by spelling my name wrong, then shares how disturbed and offended she is by my newsletter - where I shared with my subscribers on the harms of Assimilation in 'Canada'.

She then goes on to, in just a few sentences: tell me to go back to my country, describe my country as inferior, state how grateful I should be to live in a country that white people have allowed us to migrate to by choice and then, of course, positioned herself as a good, nice, hard-working white woman giving advice to the Angry Black Woman (ABW) who is also an ungrateful immigrant. (personal communication, August 15, 2023).

All three Black elders were immigrants to Canada and had different life experience where collective/communal care is central to everyday life. Maedith had remarked that she "didn't grow up in Canada, so [activism] didn't look like the Canadian version." I wondered if the women's tendency toward advocacy was influenced by the spoken and unspoken expectations that they be 'good immigrants' and as Debs says above, not rock the boat and just be grateful. There are so many questions about how the identity of immigrant impacted women's definition of activism and identity as activists (or not). When they were younger, did the need to appear polite and to fit into the system that had 'welcomed them' push Black women to advocacy instead of activism? Have the decades since and their experiences in Canada tipped them more towards activism?

### *Disability*

All interviewees mentioned both personal and societal issues facing them as elders such as illness, disability, and isolation (personal) and income insecurity, housing insecurity, and cuts to social programs and services(societal). Most prominent among those was disability and income security.

Several of the women discussed the impact of unexpected physical disability on their lives. As mentioned in the literature review, there is much attention given to women's bodies as they relate to procreation and childbirth but as Pohl and Boyd asked "what does control of one's body mean at age 75?" (2013, p. 200). Bodily autonomy is not an issue that ends when child-bearing years do. Yet while all participants openly addressed the realities of their aging bodies, "the body has been something of a proverbial elephant in the academic room – neither acknowledged nor truly seen." (Clarke, 2012, p. 24). This has been attributed to a focus on aging as a social construct, to fears of reducing elders to just a body, and to "gerontophobia". (Twigg, 2004, p. 60). This absence in the literature is an example of the way that elders, especially elder women, are unseen.

In addition to the impacts of physical disability, there is considerable fear around mental disability, notably dementia and Alzheimer's. For intelligent, capable women, losing their ability to think and express themselves is of dire concern (Marjorie, Marcia, Maedith). I am left to wonder whether this is in part because they have seen how people with dementia and Alzheimer's are treated and the lack of autonomy that comes from losing the ability to make your own choices.

### **Self-invisibilization of elder women**

The research has led me to believe that the difficulty the women had with defining activism and their reluctance to identify as activists, contributes to the self-invisibilization of their actions.

As I discovered in the literature review, much of the research to date has focused on the visible, loud, prominent acts of resistance, rage, and action. (Chazan & Baldwin, 2018; McHugh,

2012). It bears noting that the research to date, that is peer reviewed sources, tends to favour those with social capital and connection to academic institutional settings/process. It is important to recognize that information about invisible, quiet, subtle acts of resistance, rage, and action have been suppressed as part of White supremacy and racism, but that does not mean they do not exist. There are individuals and groups outside of academia that are creating spaces to recognize, honour, and make visible the historical activist work of marginalized people, which includes group like the Archives for Black Lives (<https://archivesforblacklives.wordpress.com/>), the Black Women's Organizing Archive (<https://bwoaproject.org/>), Race Women ([https://www.instagram.com/race\\_women/](https://www.instagram.com/race_women/)) to name a only few.

The women I interviewed participated in a wide variety of actions and activities including provisioning care, a quieter activism that women often do not take or receive credit for performing. They may not even consider it activism. Examples that emerged in the research included direct aid, intergenerational caregiving, leadership/mentorship, and a commitment to dialogue (as evidenced by Lesley's story above).

Between the independence our society values deeply and the negativity around dependence, there is an ignored middle ground which is interdependence, especially as it relates to connection and care. In each interview, participants, unprompted, mentioned intergenerational caregiving – whether caring for grandparents, elder peers, or grandchildren or co-habitation with adult children or friends. The women care for elders because as Lesley put it “I think we as a society owe our elderly people a more robust quality of life as they age.” Neysmith & Reitsma-Street (2009) point out “it is not questioned that care is work.” (p. 237) but “who does what work affects its value.” (p. 237).

I am drawn to revisit what Netting (2011) wrote about the successful aging narrative:

buried in it are expectations and messages that tell a person without resources that they are not successful if they are not engaged in certain ways; that privilege formal activities, such as volunteering through established dominant channels; and that neglect to consider the invisibility of provisioning (the mutuality of care relationships) that weaves the social fabric. (p. 46).

While Netting points to how care relationships are not seen by the public, the self-invisibilization that emerged in the research makes me wonder whether it is society or the elder women who play a role in the lack of recognition for their social justice work, their quiet activisms. In other words, who is invisibilizing who?

It is perhaps a vicious circle: women self-invisibilize and their work goes unseen. As it is not seen, they do not get credit for it or status and the work is undervalued. As outsiders do not perceive the work as having value (even if the women do), the women continue to self-invisibilize. I suspect that this loop contributes to the difficulty in defining and identifying activism.

When the women discussed the barriers to their participation, none of them cited societal barriers but rather personal barriers such as energy, health, time, and willingness. This created a second question for me which is, are elder women not only self-invisibilizing but also self-limiting? Self-efficacy is a predictor of participating in collective activity. (Deaux et al, 2006). That raises the question of whether elder women, not feeling part of things, sidelined, or invisible, lack the self-efficacy to engage in activism? Are they siloed into advocacy because of other pressures that impact self-efficacy? Which came first?

## Closing thoughts

I did not expect to find that elder women need to shift away from the broader work of creating a just society to issues specific to themselves as aging women.

In the decades since the 1970s, there has been a shift away from *activism* on the part of older people and towards more *institutionalized advocacy* and political power as seen in organizations like the Canadian Association of Retired People (CARP). It is “almost difficult to recall a time when advocacy groups for older people pursued a broader vision of a just society.” (Douglas, 2020). But groups like CARP seem more geared to those who are “successfully aging” in the neoliberal capitalism sense.

Many participants mentioned wanting to extricate themselves from community activism only to find themselves in a position that they must advocate for themselves. There is speculation that self-advocacy and political involvement can benefit older adults “by providing the opportunity to develop or reinforce knowledge and skills, see themselves as capable and valuable members of their communities, and exchange knowledge about community or social issues with younger individuals.” (Hinterlong & Williamson, 2006, p. 12).

However, Blanche-T. et al. (2022) state that “old age has seldom configured a political identity capable of attracting and mobilizing potential participants to action.” (p. 1). It seems that elder adults identify more with the social movement or political organization than with their age group. In addition, Gilleard and Higgs (2000) argue that

the increasing wealth disparities and, consequently, consumer lifestyle among retirees have led to the individualization of retirement, conducive to a fragmentation rather than a coalescence of an old age-based identity. (p.2)

How does this fragmentation impact the need for and efficacy of advocacy and activism on issues facing elder women? If age is not a unifying factor, who will advocate for them? If, as Marjorie said, activists need to have lived experience of that which they are active about, then only elders can do this work. But at a time in their lives when they are invisible, when their voices are unheard, and when they are perceived as having little value, how does needed change happen?

I believe this speaks to the need for solidarity among women in their activism on women's issues, that older women need younger women to advocate with them and for them by using their voices, power, and most importantly perhaps, the visibility of youth. The fact is, if we live long enough, we will all get old which begs the question, do young people have a responsibility to their future selves to ensure that communities are inclusive of and accessible for elders?

One of the lightbulb moments I had during this research was coming to understand that elder women, just like any group, are not monolithic. How they approach aging, how they identify, how they act, and what they need varies. As Maedith said "the challenge our community has is moving away from a US centric definition of what a senior is and what a senior wants...I don't want to gather and play bridge or euchre!" Our current ideas of how to age are rooted in "successful aging" which as Marjorie points out is a model only for people who hold generational and family wealth:

If you don't have generational and family wealth, ["successful aging"] ain't going to happen. Most of us don't think about that kind of thing because you're still going to be hustling to try to find a way to make some money so you can live.

Maedith, in response to the activities she sees offered for seniors exclaimed “Pickleball? Who plays pickleball? I don’t see any South Asian people...this is built on the principles of ‘active living’ but what is active living?” She identified that programming and services for seniors are often aimed at middle-class seniors with financial resources: “They don’t cater to seniors that still have to work, seniors who can’t even afford transit.” She doesn’t say it directly but the pickleball comment indicates that she also believes that racial and cultural diversity and the needs of racialized elder women are not being addressed.

In the end, as Maedith said, labels are colonial – do we need to label people as activists? Maybe not. Do we need people to broaden their understanding of what counts as an act to create change? Perhaps. But in the end – does it even matter? If people are doing things that they believe will make the world a better place, why do we need a label?

I do believe that identifying what counts as activism – individually and collectively – creates a critical mass and fights isolation in change-making. Luisa, one of the members of the *Iaioflautas*, an older adults’ social movement in Spain, shared that she wants “to be older and doing things like an older person. I do not want to pretend to be younger.” (Blanche-T. & Fernandez-Ardevol, 2022, pp 7-8). She wants to be an activist on her own terms, to customize her actions to her current stage of life, not be forced to act in the ways that younger people may demonstrate activism.

As we broaden our understanding of how elder women understand activism it will help to make space for them to continue as valued members of their communities.



## Conclusion

The purpose of this research was to explore the role age may play in grassroots activist spaces. My research question grew out of a very personal need to explore what activism can be outside of how we usually view Big A Activism. What I wanted to know was, can I be old and also be an activist? Would my contributions be valued? Would I be welcome in activist spaces? Would the ways in which I choose to or could show up be discounted as not enough?

Elders are often “not recruited or even welcome in organizations and groups that work for social change.” (McHugh, 2012, p.284). Aging activist friends share that there is sometimes a resentment towards older people. Youth view them as responsible for the political, environmental, economic, and societal problems young people are left to deal with.

As my inquiry progressed, I identified gaps in the research, namely who is written about and what is considered activism. As a result of these gaps, I focused on mid-life and older women (50-75 years old) and the “quieter activisms” that have to date not been given sufficient attention (McHugh, 2012).

I sought out women aged fifty plus who I saw as activists in my community because I wanted to understand what their experiences could mean for my own path. I also hoped to gain insight into what it was like to be an elder woman in social justice work as grassroots activist movements are typically a space for youth who have the time and capacity for visible protest that (Chazan et al, 2018).

In addition, women are dealing with the intersection of sexism and ageism and the invisibilization that is a hallmark of both. As Mahler points out

the lack of recognition of older women is then an issue of social justice that goes beyond whether one is seen and heard. It relates to whether older women matter; whether their thoughts, views, needs, and wishes are taken into account; and whether their perspectives are included in social policies relating to older people and to older women (2021).

I hoped that my research into quiet activism and non-typical activists could provide women with exactly this kind of recognition for their contributions and validate social justice activism through means *other than* highly visible practices. Being seen and valued is central to achieving social justice for themselves as well as others because recognition means access to resources and representation (Westwood, 2023). Recognition could also increase the engagement of women in grassroots activism throughout their lives.

The results of my research both confirmed and challenged existing thought and research on the issue of elder women and activism. I had come to this research hoping to validate to outsiders that the quiet activism of elder women qualify as activism and that they are activists. What I found instead wasn't whether the acts counted as activism to an outside gaze, but rather whether the women considered who they are and what they do to be within the framework of activism.

The overarching theme of identity included sub-themes that may inform how social justice activists and society view elder women and activism:

**Identifying and Defining** the concept of advocacy versus activism emerged early on in the data collection. So too did the interviewees' feelings about the public perception of activism and whether the participants considered themselves advocates or activists. How those terms are defined and what are identified as activist practices are central to making space for the way

women view and practice activism as they age. The participants made it clear that activism for them is not only about showing up for social justice and doing the right thing. Activism is also a part of who these women are and *want to be* as elders. However, they ultimately were conflicted on whether what they were doing was activism or not, whether they were activists or not.

In addition, **Positionality Matters** to the identity as an elder activist. The participants' social justice practices were shaped by their backgrounds and experiences, which differed notably by race. Despite these differences the women all spoke about how who they are shaped the kind of work they did, which exemplified quieter activism. These included care work and leadership/mentorship.

However, even when the women pursued louder forms of activism, they had a tendency towards **Self-invisibilization**. While expressing their thoughts on what is or is not activism throughout the interviews, participants were not necessarily identifying or valuing their own actions as activism. A clear theme of invisibilizing their social justice practices emerged, and one might wonder if this is a major factor to elder women's own recognition of their activism and its value. It may also impact the ability of elder women to self-advocate, a position many of the women find themselves doing out of necessity. There were multiple statements where the women placed themselves in the background or devalued or failed to identify their contributions.

As with any research project, I am left with more questions than when I started. The following are additional or tangential lines of inquiry that will improve our understanding of elder women and activism.

## **On Gender**

I had a very specific focus on elder women because of my own life stage. But I do wonder, is the experience different for elder men? Do they struggle to identify as activists and to define activism? Do they differentiate between advocacy and activism? How do their practices differ from women? Does the recognition they receive differ from that of women?

## **The Impact of Age**

What role does age play in the ability to define activism? Would younger women be able to more clearly define and identify activism? Would they be more able to “own” the title of activist? Why or why not?

## **Role of the Media**

Does the media’s way of communicating about activists and activism influence a desire to be advocates instead of activists? Does the media’s way of communicating about aging women influence the ability to identify as activists? When older women are mentioned, it is often in the context of frailty, dependency etc We know women’s issues have lower priority in the news cycle, particularly older women’s issues. Is the media even capturing the experience of women as they age? Are they missing the way elder women practice advocacy and activism?

## **Social Media**

Lesley was one of two women interviewed who was only recently moved to activism. She not really knowing where to go to get started. Nearly all the women mentioned doing work directly one on one. Perhaps this is why organizations like Raging Grannies were so successful – they gave women a gateway to activism rather than having to figure it out themselves. The Raging Grannies seem to have faded in prominence since the early 2000s – has the rise of social

media allowed people to connect directly with movements and needs, thereby limiting the need for group action? Have the internet and social media allowed elder women to get the information they need in the comfort of their own home and feel more empowered to enter activism? It would certainly be an interesting to investigate how women begin to act, not what inspires them but literally, how did they connect to start the work? Knowing this could help recruit more elder women into social justice movements.

Ultimately, understanding how women see and value their contributions will allow for more inclusive activist spaces as well as opportunities to support the self-advocacy of elder women. For younger women getting involved alongside their elders is both solidarity and self-interest. In supporting the elder women of today, younger women are in fact building a better world for themselves, one that will perhaps be tainted with less 'sexageism' and where they will be recognized for who they are and what they can offer to their communities. Their youth will make them visible and, hopefully, loud too.

## Epilogue

And over the last ten or twenty years, I have been dealing with changes in my body and my place in the generational hierarchy, this new stage of life and having less time.

I also have had to deal with ageist responses to me as an aging woman. I was immersed in the aging field for many years and I understood it well, but began to really integrate it personally as I aged myself.

Joan Ditzion (Seegert, 2021)

I started this project from a place of frustration, feeling sidelined in grassroots groups, in part because of my age. I wanted to look at ageism, at how I thought older women might be excluded from activist spaces and movements and how their contributions may not have been seen or valued. Then I decided I would rather look at how older women were doing activism and if they considered themselves activists. I am so glad I did. As I told Marjorie when I finished our interview, “this has been good for my heart.”

This project has brought me peace on a topic that I have wrestled with for many years. Hearing Maedith and Marcia talk about how activism requires that there are people that take on different strategies and tactics confirmed for me that the work I have done and continue to do has value.

It has affirmed that activism does not have to be big or visible. It can be intensely personal, like the one-on-one support that many of the women touched on.

It has reinforced that all contributions matter, not just those on the frontlines, that there is space for older women to do, in the words of Sister Barbara, what they can as long as they can.

It has heartened me to know that showing up how I can show up is just as important as

the work done by big A activists, the people that Marjorie described this way: “it’s almost like this is their job, okay? This is their thing. This is what they do.”

As Jane Birkin said “you can always do something. You can say ‘I am not okay with that.’” (Associate Press, 2023). For some women that means marching in the street. For others, it might mean asking for donations to a cause you believe in when you die, like 84-year-old Kathleen Dyer recently did when she directed people to give to the Nova Scotia Women’s Choice Clinic. “My mom was definitely a proponent for women’s rights *in her own way*,” Kathleen’s son, Steve Dyer, stated. “She’s not an advocate or ...anything like that. But in her own way, when she sees something she supports, then she’ll let everyone else know, myself included.” Despite stating she is not an advocate, later in the article he calls her an advocate when speaking about MAID and her belief that “women [choose] their own destiny.” (Stechyson, 2023).

He also did not attach the term “feminist” to his mother yet he remembers her telling him her position on abortion when he was a teen: “My mom was quite clear with me that her position was – and one she wanted me to consider... that it was a woman’s choice. It was her body. End of story.” (Stechyson, 2023). Yet, her own son, who has obviously heard his mother speak about things she cared about, did not consider her an advocate, never mind an activist. If our definition of activism includes quieter activism like education and awareness building, then Kathleen was very much an advocate, making even her death an opportunity for activism.

Rereading the prologue, I am struck by my desire to do more when by my own admission I was doing what I could, when I could, how I could. I was practising diverse tactics, both visible and invisible. So why did I feel like I wasn’t doing enough? After interviewing these women, I concluded that I too was self-invisibilizing. I too had assumed that the ways in which I was

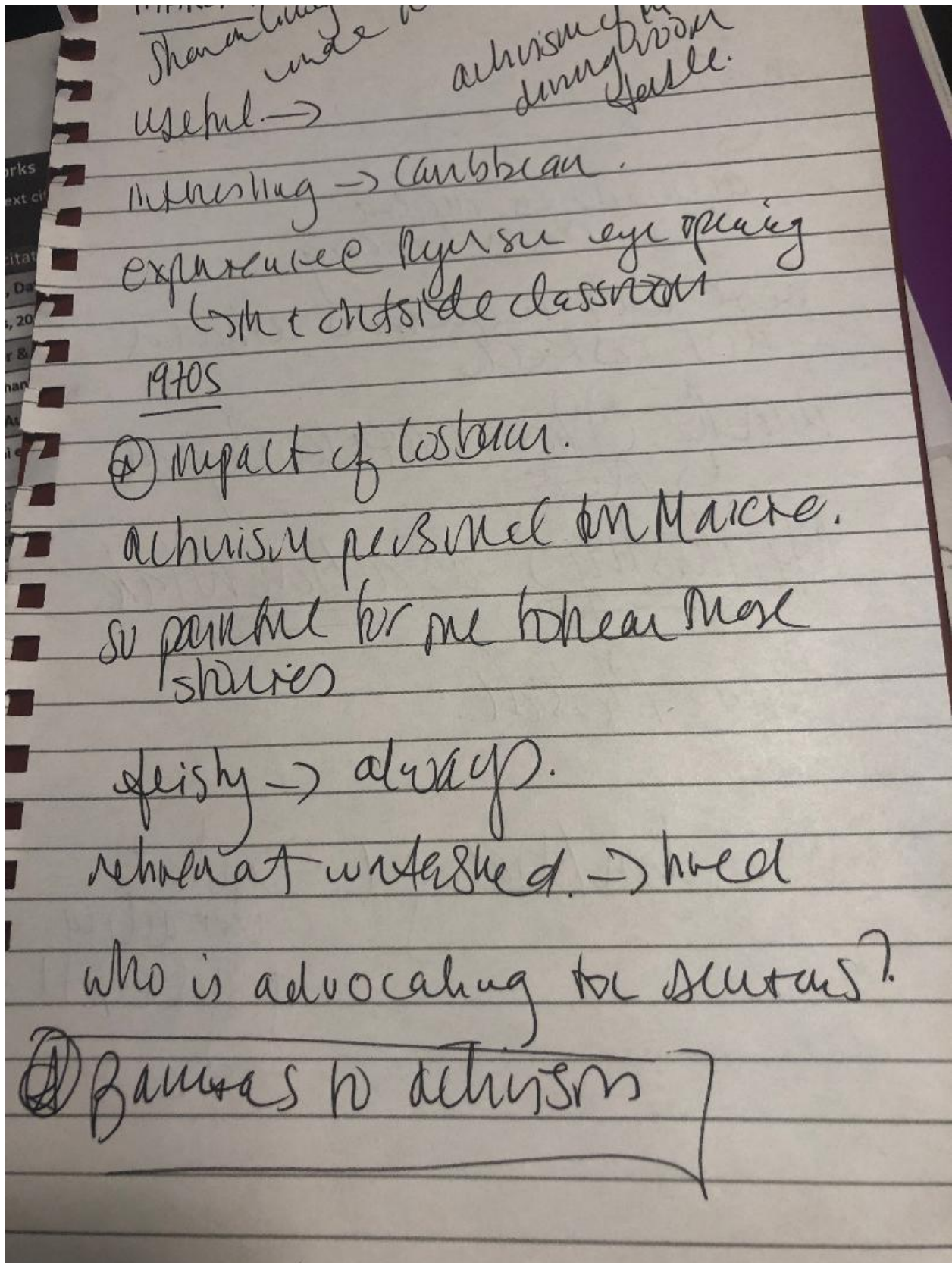
showing up weren't enough, that only by having activism as a job or my entire life could I effect the kind of change that I wanted to see in the world.

This project has shown me that what I was doing qualifies as activism, and perhaps most importantly, is a vital part of activism precisely because it encompasses the kinds of actions that others can emulate more easily than the “activism as life” model which we hold up as the gold standard for changemaking. For social justice to succeed we need as many people as possible engaged in the movement for a more just world and for that to happen there needs to be welcoming space for people of all ages to practice activism in the way they can. As Baumgardner and Richards (2005) said “The real portrait of an activist, after all, is just a mirror.” (p. xxv).

Frederick Douglass wrote that “we should all see the folly and madness of attempting to accomplish with a part what could only be done with the united strength of the whole.” (Coates, 2011). Elder women are vital parts of social justice activism both for themselves and for their communities. We, and here I speak of women, owe it to ourselves and our quest for justice to ensure that we embrace, value, and honour what elder women while uplifting the many ways that elder women can and do make change. This research has demonstrated that intergenerational care is of fundamental importance and that we, as women, as feminists, we need to continue. Advocating on social justice issues that impact elder women and being activists alongside elder women continues a long tradition of intergenerational care. What we do now for our elders not only honours them but builds a more just world for our future selves and the generations of women to come.



## Appendix 1: Reflective Journal Entry



## Appendix 2: Selam Debs Email (August 16, 2023)

I received the following email from a white woman:

"Dearest Salem,

I am disturbed by your words. If you feel that strongly about oppression, then my question is. "Why did you not fight it in your own country?" Why did you run?" Canada is a safe country that has gone out of her way to welcome so many from other places. All immigr-ants, all chose this country. You are welcomed with jobs, healthcare and much more. All we ask is that you do not bring your wars here. Leave them in the country you fled.

I am one of those whites, and a woman, you refer to, and as such I am offended that you are aiming you reverse racism at us. As a woman and white I had to fight battles in the workplace to get ahead and it was very difficult.

I am sending this message with patience, understanding and peace and ask that you do the same. Racism is what happens when you aim your hate at one race and I don't think anyone wants that, do we?

I pray that God speaks to your heart in peace and not anger.

Warmest Regards,

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_, Ontario CA"

This is not unique- please spare me your shock, gasping and clutching of pearls.

This is everyday, regular, normal, nothing new. There are many days where I swallow it, cry it out, sweat it out or talk with a loved one.

White men can be wildly harmful but there's a particular type of violence white women perpetuate that is incredibly manipulative and plays on their false identity of "niceness, politeness, innocence and goodness."

She starts off by spelling my name wrong, then shares how disturbed and offended she is by my newsletter - where I shared with my subscribers on the harms of Assimilation in 'Canada'.

She then goes on to, in just a few sentences: tell me to go back to my country, describe my country as inferior, state how grateful I should be to live in a country that white people have allowed us to migrate to by choice and then, of course, positioned herself as a good, nice, hard-working white woman giving advice to the Angry Black Woman (ABW) who is also an ungrateful immigrant.

And THE most common theme by all these white women are the twisted ways they spout some type of "love, light, peace and rainbows". 🌈💀

This is why we don't call this behaviour 'white fragility'. There is nothing fragile about these interactions. It is white manipulation and violence. Or what Rachel Ricketts calls White Wildness.

I implore white women and femmes to REALLY take the time to investigate, reflect on and excavate your racism aka white supremacy.

Our experiences as women and femmes are not equal. Our life outcomes are not even on the same hemisphere.

I started to really take intentional notice recently of how I was being described in interactions. Here are some of words that were used to describe me:

- unsafe
- dangerous
- hostile
- angry
- controlling
- uncomfortable presence
- too much
- too confident
- intimidating, and
- racist

Remind me of a time in history where Black women and people have subjugated white people for hundreds of years. 🙄

OH Right, it doesn't exist. Reverse racism does NOT exist.

Dismantle white feminism and talk to your siblings.

with revolutionary gratitude,

Selam Debs

### **Appendix 3: Interview Questions**

#### **A. Personal background**

- Introduction by guest – name, pronouns if they wish, age, how we know one another
- What does social justice mean to you?
- Do you have a family history of activism?
- Tell me about the first time you were moved to act on an issue of injustice, unfairness, etc
- What moved you to act and what did you do?

#### **B. Aging**

- What are 5 adjectives you would use to describe yourself at this time in your life?
- When you hear the word aging, what comes to mind for you?
- Is there a difference between how you imagined aging when you were younger and how you are experiencing it?
- Do you spend a lot of time thinking about aging? What aspects do you think about most frequently?
- Have you been impacted by ideas of “successful ageing” or “positive ageing”? What in particular? And if not, how would you define successful aging for yourself?

#### **C. Defining activism**

- We are chatting today because you are making a difference in the community/world.
- Activism has been defined as “daily acts of building change through relationships.”  
Do you agree with that? How has activism impacted your relationships?

- What does activism mean to you? Do you feel you move/work/operate in activist spaces (if yes, how so, provide an example). if no, why not? why do you see yourself outside of these spaces?
- How do you believe your community understands the term ‘activism’ - and please indicate the community you are referring to. Follow-up - does this understanding of activism match your own ideas about activism?
- What are the kinds of activities you have engaged in as an activist? Have those changed over time?
- Do you feel you have a choice to be engaged in activism? What would happen or not happen if you don’t do this work?

#### D. **Perspective/Meaning Making**

- What kind of an activist do you aspire to be? Or actions you want to take?
- How do you **feel** when you are engaged in work you believe is important?
- If you have been engaged in one cause for a very long time, what is it like to be an “elder” in a movement?
- Does your age influence the causes you support, the way you show up, the feelings you have about social justice
- What changes have you seen in the world during your life that have meant the most to you? (Follow-up: And in your immediate community?)
- What is the activism that you are most proud of?
- What do you still want to change in your community?
- Activism is hard. Change can be slow. What keeps your optimism and energy sustained?

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