



Queer Girls and Intergenerational Lesbian Sexuality in the 1970s

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Abstract • Drawing on letters and writings by teenage girls and oral history interviews, this article aims to open a scholarly conversation about the existence and significance of intergenerational sexual relationships between minor girls and adult women in the years leading up to and encompassing the lesbian feminist movement of the 1970s. Lesbian history and culture say very little about sexual connections between youth and adults, sweeping them under the rug in gender-inflected ways that differ from the suppression of speech in gay male history and culture about intergenerational sex between boys and men. Nonetheless, my research suggests that, despite lesbian feminists' caution and even negativity toward teen girls, erotic and sexual relationships with adult women provided girls access to support, pleasure, mentorship, and community.

Keywords • 1970s, intergenerational sex, lesbians, lesbian feminism, lesbian teenagers, lesbian youth, LGBTQ history, queer girls

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In 1979, Beth Kelly published a letter in Toronto's *Gay Community News* that began with the words: "It's time." Entitled "On 'Woman/Girl Love' or Lesbians Do 'Do It,'" Kelly's piece appeared in the midst of an explosive controversy that followed the arrests of ten men in Revere, Massachusetts, for their role in what authorities described as a "major child molestation ring" involving boys between the ages of nine and thirteen.¹ In the dozens of relevant letters printed in the "Speak Out" column of the periodical, several gay men advocated eradicating sexual age of consent laws as part of a gay liberation agenda, prompting several women to insist that lesbians wanted nothing to do with underage girls and that child-adult sex was not a valid political issue but, rather, a narrow and self-interested concern of those (minority of) gay men who desired to have sex with youth.²

Kelly begged to disagree, because her personal experience suggested otherwise. Appealing to the feminist claim that "the personal is political," she justified her decision to share the details of her own story. Between the ages of eight and eleven, she recounted, she had a consensual sexual relationship with her great-aunt Addie, who was over fifty years older than her. Kelly described the ways that her aunt encouraged and nurtured her and how they found "refuge" in each other. She wrote that over twenty years later she felt



that she could safely say: “I was never exploited physically, emotionally, or intellectually—in the least.” Criticizing polarizing, abstract approaches to the “delicate and difficult issue” of intergenerational sex, Kelly closed her long letter with this claim: “It’s time to stop selling out young people, and to begin being honest, with ourselves and with each other.”³ Women’s responses to Kelly’s letter expressed appreciation for her courage in sharing her perspective but also pointed out that Kelly offered no evidence that “lesbians do do it” beyond her own anecdotal experience, and letter writers like Cindy Stein of Boston continued to express skepticism about “whether such a phenomenon exists in the lesbian community.”⁴

This article aims to open a scholarly conversation about the existence and significance of intergenerational or age-differentiated sexual relationships between girls and women in lesbian history, specifically in the United States and Canada during the years leading up to and encompassing lesbian feminism. In the 1970s, lesbian feminism emerged in North America as a decentralized movement of women who objected to many feminist organizations’ rejection of sexuality as a category of political analysis. The ideological alliances of the movement were various and racialized; certain white-dominant strands pursued separatism and championed lesbians as the feminist political vanguard, while many black and other women-of-color feminists emphasized solidarity and understood sexuality as converging with race, class, and gender as forces of both oppression and liberation. Across the ideological spectrum, there was strong opposition to the sexual objectification of women and attentiveness to the ways that power relations shaped sexual dynamics. The feminist politicization of sexuality sometimes led lesbian feminists to downplay butch masculinity and to deemphasize lesbian sexual desire and practice. It should not be surprising, then, that explicit discussion of age-differentiated sexual relationships between women and girls felt risky and unwelcome in lesbian feminist communities.⁵

Historiographical interpretation of modern intergenerational same-sex relationships is quite limited, even with regard to boys, men, and/or assigned-male-at-birth queer and trans people, for whom there is considerably more documentation than for girls, women, and/or assigned-female-at-birth queer and trans people. Historians have speculated that reasons for this absence in the literature likely include the lasting impact of the myth of homosexual pedophilia; the exclusion of legal minors from LGBT commercial, cultural, and social spaces; and the politics of gay and lesbian respectability in the marriage equality era.⁶ In related subfields, such as the history of childhood and youth, sexual practice has remained largely (and implicitly) out of bounds for reasons that Rachel Hope Cleves, Nick Syrett, and others discuss elsewhere in this special issue.

In my own research, here and elsewhere, I take a social-historical approach that centers the voices of girls, whom I define according to gender self-identification and legal minor designation (i.e., under the age of eighteen or twenty-one, depending on the jurisdiction). I ask what girls and

women have said and written about their romantic and erotic feelings for, and consensual sexual relationships with, adult women and what themes or categories we might use to begin to understand what those connections meant and how they shaped the lives and subjectivities of queer girls. Finally, I ask how the rise of lesbian feminist movements affected girls who sought community—and sexual intimacy—with adult lesbians. Based on preliminary research, I argue that girls in age-differentiated sexual relationships with adult women sought affective experiences of pleasure, belonging, and safety, and in many cases also sociosexual mentorship and access to resources, independence, and community. Their ability to achieve these outcomes depended largely on forces and dynamics beyond their control, including adult lesbians' preference for keeping youth at a distance.

Stories of girls developing "crushes" on adult women are ubiquitous in oral histories, autobiographies, and fiction. Gym teachers, school teachers, scout leaders, camp counselors, and nuns appear over and over again as the objects of girls' affections and obsessions, which were often romantic and sometimes sexual in nature. Sources from the 1970s suggest marked continuity from earlier decades in the affective experience of "schoolgirl crushes" as well as in the function of such recollections in "coming out" narratives that sought to document, track, and consolidate the emergence of lesbian identity.

In a typical oral history narrative, a woman interviewed by Ellen Lewin as part of a research project on lesbian motherhood in the late 1970s and early 1980s described growing up in Wheaton, Illinois. She recalled: "I was in love with my junior high PE teacher," for whom "I would have run through fire," and "also had this huge crush on my high school English teacher," for whom "I would have done anything." Despite the absence of any actual "connection" with either teacher, the intensity of her feelings motivated her to attend college at the PE teacher's alma mater, where she double majored in physical education and English. She described her desire for these women as "unconscious" at the time. "I didn't really get into being a lesbian until my 30s," when she was unhappily married to a man and fell in love with another married woman. When Lewin asked about her childhood and adolescence, however, she looked back to her strong feelings for these junior and high school teachers as evidence that there was something—lesbianism—that existed in a form and about which she was "unaware."⁷

In the 1970s, nationally known lesbian authors such as Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon joined teachers and others in the group of adult potential objects of adolescent girls' fantasies and desires. Founding the nation's first lesbian homophile organization, the Daughters of Bilitis, in the 1950s, Martin and Lyon published *Lesbian/Woman* in 1972 and devoted several pages to the problems facing lesbian teens. Girls from around the country got hold of the book and wrote to the authors, seeking advice and attention. In April of 1976, for instance, a seventeen-year-old named Paulette wrote from Zolfo Springs, Florida. Paulette mentioned early in her letter that she would turn

eighteen on 28 June. She wrote: "I know my age is very young, it is a label, I am somewhat more mature in ways than that of my age." She then raved about the book in emotional and erotic language:

I have your book in my lap right now and I am looking at the cover and just by looking at this cover just goes to show you can't tell a book by it's [sic] cover . . . it's what's inside that counts, *and boy* does this book have something inside!!! I wish I could give some of this back to you, (this- the overwhelming feeling I get, wow! it will turn you around. Really it's a pocketful full of energy, excitement so much, listen it's beyond words, what can I say I could go on and on and never really define what I feel exactly, ecstatic, turned on tremendously!) I really like you both very much, I like your hearts, I like *you*. Please write, I hope you do soon. Love be with you, with my love and happiness to you, Paulette.⁸

The letter conveys the young author's passion for the book and its adult lesbian authors. The book on Paulette's lap, her emphasis of all it held inside, the enormous excitement she felt for the book and its authors, her near begging of the authors to return her interest by writing back, her expression of admiration and love: romantic and erotic longing suffused Paulette's communication with Martin and Lyon, who held the power to respond to her need to be seen as a young lesbian. As these few sources begin to suggest, intense feelings of passion, eroticism, and attraction for adult women were not at all uncommon and warrant inclusion in analyses of youth sexual histories.

Many girls in the mid- to late twentieth century acted on their feelings for adult women and entered into romantic and sexual relationships, usually in their own neighborhoods and communities. A range of sources speak to girls' experiences in sexual relationships with adult women, who were often married with children and who did not typically identify as lesbians or engage in lesbian subcultures.⁹ For teen girls, these relationships served a range of purposes and met a variety of needs, including the opportunity to recognize or validate their romantic and/or sexual desire for women and to enjoy physical and emotional pleasure, connection, and satisfaction. Letters from adolescent girls seeking advice about their sexual relationships with older women in the 1970s suggest, however, that the interpersonal dynamics of age-differentiated couples could be quite complex and challenging, particularly in the absence of community support.

Relationships with adults sometimes helped teens figure out what forms of intimacy they wanted. Adult partners could draw on experience that youth did not have, not only sexual but also emotional, relational, and cultural. Lisa, a black lesbian whom I interviewed about her childhood on the South Side of Chicago, spoke at length about a sexual relationship she shared with a twenty-eight-year-old woman when she was still in high school and subject to her mother's rules and curfew. Lisa had prior sexual experience with age peers, but her experience with this older lover was quite differ-

ent. "She was a woman, like an adult woman, a real woman," Lisa recalled with a smile. "She was sensitive. She was gentle. She was open." Lisa also described her as "warm" and "nurturing." Lisa described herself as "large" and her lover as significantly larger than herself; her lover was comfortable in her own skin and with asking for what she wanted, and she was sexually responsive and enthusiastic. "It was fulfilling. It was. It was all of the things that I think I had imagined." Lisa's lover encouraged and supported her. Even through ups and downs and breaks in the relationship, Lisa credits it with helping her get into college and with helping her persist when she wanted to give up on formal education.¹⁰

At the same time, such relationships—and their endings—could impose distress and disorientation. In a letter to Martin and Lyon, a young woman named Jeanne wrote from suburban New Jersey about her first same-sex relationship in the late 1960s. "I am a 19 year old lesbian," she wrote. "My next door neighbor introduced me into the world of homosexuality when I was 14. She was 25, a wife, and a mother of 2 children." Jeanne said nothing specific about the "affair," which lasted for over two years and during which time Jeanne spent almost all of her time with her lover and consequently lost most of her friends. After the relationship ended, Jeanne started using drugs and blamed Paula for her so-called "delinquency," but Jeanne reported that Paula had helped her work through her feelings, stop using drugs, and come out to her friends, who reacted supportively. Three years after the breakup, Jeanne wrote: "She is one of my closest friends." Jeanne thanked Lyon and Martin for their courage in writing *Lesbian/Woman* and closed the letter in a jovial, positive tone. Despite apparent social and psychological strain, Jeanne looked back on the relationship as the beginning of her development into the lesbian she had become.¹¹

Another letter speaks to the theme of relationships with older women introducing a mix of insecurity and support. An eighteen-year-old from Daytona, Florida, wrote that after two suicide attempts and a brief stay in a psychiatric ward—she pointed out that it was brief only because she knew better than to admit that she was gay—she went to live with an older, married woman and mother of two who was studying to become a psychologist. Talking openly about her feelings helped her tremendously, she explained. She fell in love with the older woman but kept her feelings to herself and was therefore quite surprised to find that her feelings were reciprocated. The two had an affair that lasted for a few months and that the letter writer described as "beautiful," but after it ended, loneliness and suicidal thoughts were again taking hold and the letter writer begged Martin and Lyon to help her find other lesbians so that she would have a reason to keep going. She promised to wait for their reply before "doing anything stupid." The file includes a copy of Lyon and Martin's reply, in which they gave information about a local chapter of the National Organization for Women known to have several lesbian members and a chapter of the Daughters of Bilitis that was somewhat further away. They urged her to get rid of her gun and to use

their help to secure support in finding her way as a lesbian in the world, as so many others had.¹² Adult women—both her lover and the authors who responded to her cry for help—attempted to help this teenager find steady psychological footing on what was clearly quite unsteady ground.

Other letters reflect tension between younger and older partners' interests, roles, and resources. Writing from Minneapolis, eighteen-year-old Kym sought advice about her relationship with a twenty-seven-year-old "real ladie [sic]." "Now age really doesn't make a difference to me as long as the person doesn't let their body deteriorate," Kym explained. "But anyways she was/is alot more experienced than me, + wasn't willing to be patient with me. Also she felt that our relationship was more like mother to daughter than anything else."¹³ Although Kym claimed that the age difference was more significant to her girlfriend than it was to her, her description of her girlfriend's impatience and discomfort suggests that Kym may have been looking to her older partner for help learning social and sexual skills as a lesbian.¹⁴ An eighteen-year-old from Denton, Texas, wrote that the age difference between her and her thirty-six-year-old lover, Barbara, sometimes left Barbara feeling "guilty" and worried. She asked:

Do you know of any couples (homosexual) with a very large difference in ages that have had a long life together? I wish that you could let us know if you do—it would do nice to give Barbara a little extra encouragement. She worries about me more than she does herself and she is afraid something will happen to me because of our love. I hope I don't take too much of your time, but you are about the only ones I really have to talk to about Barbara and me. It's really great telling someone how much I love her—cause I do love her an awful lot.¹⁵

Despite the stress created by their eighteen-year gap in age, the letter writer relished the opportunity to name the love that the two women shared. She also mentioned that she and Barbara were looking to rent a house together, which raises the point that intergenerational relationships created not only emotional and sexual possibilities, but also material opportunities for teen girls. For young women under twenty-one who did not attend college, leaving the family home could be remarkably difficult. As historian Nicholas Syrett has documented, girls in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries often used heterosexual marriage as a way out of their parents' homes.¹⁶ This letter writer does not represent her relationship with Barbara in strategic terms, but the possibility of cohabitation (with at least some degree of privacy and independence) likely depended on the thirty-six-year-old's relative access to security and stability.

A final example of a teenager seeking and benefiting from a complex intergenerational relationship with a married woman comes from a different kind of source. In the early 1970s, the two founders and editors of the literary arts journal for lesbians, *Amazon Quarterly*, traveled across North America to interview subscribers and published excerpts of the interviews in a

book called *The New Lesbians*. The book offered a lesbian feminist framework that explicitly countered dominant messages about lesbians' family histories, psychological stability, reliance on gendered "roles," sex lives, and general health and well-being.

Within this collection is the story of Sylvia, a novelist and "university teacher" in her "early forties" living in British Columbia with her long-term partner, Margaret. Sylvia remembered being attracted to girls by the age of thirteen and recognizing the feelings as sexual at fifteen, when she became involved with a thirty-five-year-old woman who was married with young children. When an interviewer asked how Sylvia felt about the relationship, Sylvia responded: "Just marvelous, I was just awestruck, it was the most marvelous thing to discover and it was an odd relationship." She continued: "I suppose I really joined the family, there was no hassle, her husband knew what the relationship was and it didn't bother him." In fact, she explained, she was "devoted to him, too," to the point that when Sylvia was staying with the family to help with the children during their mother's illness, Sylvia became "sexually involved" with her lover's husband, because "it just seemed the right sort of comforting thing to do." The interviewer asked if Sylvia felt the need to tell other people in order to gain support, and Sylvia answered "no"; she "had a feeling of secrecy" to protect the relationship, because it was "so absolutely acceptable to all of us" but would almost certainly baffle her parents and grandmother. She then asked Sylvia whether she ever felt "at all negative" about being a lesbian, to which Sylvia answered "no," and whether Sylvia felt that she "always had a choice" about her lesbianism, to which Sylvia replied: "Oh yes, yes, yes." The overall impression of the interview is that Sylvia's adolescent sexual relationship with a woman twenty years older than her (and, at least occasionally, with her lover's husband) was a generally unremarkable beginning to her life as a lesbian, difficult only in the extent to which Sylvia felt the need to protect it from the scrutiny of her family.¹⁷

Though secrecy, interpersonal dynamics, and the absence of a clear sub-cultural framework in which to understand their relationships created tension and confusion at times, romantic and sexual relationships with older, married women allowed girls to express their feelings and desires and to take pleasure in physical and emotional intimacy. Older women could also provide access to housing and psychological support, and often offered what would ultimately become a stepping-stone on a path toward lesbian identity.

What married women could and did not provide, however, was lesbian community. Many teen girls in the mid- to late twentieth century enjoyed more than crushes on authority figures and isolated sexual relationships with adult women who offered them some sort of shelter; they also initiated sexual and romantic relationships with self-identified lesbians who were part of lesbian networks. Unlike in gay male subcultures, however, lesbian and lesbian feminist communities usually stigmatized relationships between adult lesbians and adolescents, who were seen as placing adults at risk of

persecution and even legal prosecution for “contributing to the delinquency of a minor.”¹⁸ In their search for connection and belonging, teen girls who initiated romantic and sexual relationships with adult lesbians risked rejection and further alienation.

A particularly illustrative example of how sex could facilitate teens’ emergence into lesbian community despite the cautious reticence of adults comes from an oral history with Carmen Vázquez, who was born in Puerto Rico in 1949 and grew up in New York City before moving to San Francisco and helping to found the San Francisco Women’s Building in the 1970s. At age sixteen, Vázquez had already had a sexual relationship with a girl her own age, but sexual encounters with an older family friend led to her initiation into postwar lesbian culture. In an interview with archivist and oral historian Kelly Anderson, Vázquez recalled the following:

There was this woman Toni, who’s a friend of the family, who was a closeted lesbian, whom I slept with and partied with for probably a year. I was this little butch thing. She was a femme. She would take me to these women’s houses who were, you know, lesbian-femme couples. We’d go to underground places. I was 16 years old, going on 17. And, yeah, I mean, that’s really where I understood that there was—so now, I’m understanding, this is lesbian. I’m butch and I like the femme women. . . . Toni was seven years older than me and the women that she was hanging out with were older than her. So I’m talking [with] women in their late twenties, early thirties, who absolutely knew that they were dead meat if they were caught with a minor, and they did it anyway. You know, they just did. They took care of me. They would let me have a beer now and then, but, you know, it’s mostly Coca-Cola. You don’t get the rum in the Coke until you’re older. But they also taught me how to dance, how to dress, how to flirt, and it was fabulous. It was completely fabulous. . . . So, that was sort of my sexual awakening, was with these older women.¹⁹

Although Toni may have hidden her sexuality from many people in her life, she was enmeshed in lesbian social worlds to which Vázquez gained entry through their gender-differentiated sexual relationship. As Alix Genter discusses in her article on butch-fem lesbian culture, young lesbians had to learn how to navigate the gendered landscape of postwar lesbianism, which included specific sexual practices, expectations, and norms.²⁰ In *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, Elizabeth Kennedy and Madeline Davis also mention the phenomenon of older femmes taking young butches under their wings, both socially and sexually.²¹ Lesbians (and gay men) in the postwar years often used the language of “bringing out” to describe a more experienced queer person’s introduction of same-sex sexual practice to a less experienced person. For instance, one of the narrators in *The New Lesbians*, Jeannette, discussed her intense crushes on nuns in her school days that became fully sexual when she was in college. “They really brought me out sexually,” she said. “They showed me what orgasm was and they taught me how to

make love.”²² Sexual mentorship was one dimension of the transmission of knowledge within lesbian communities.

In *Bad Girls: Young Women, Sex, and Rebellion before the Sixties*, I discuss young lesbians who found ways to sneak into bars and socialize with adult lesbians in the postwar era, but I do not emphasize the significance of intergenerational sexual relationships, specifically in how they facilitated some teens’ access not only to their own pleasure and exploration but also to lesbian and lesbian feminist community.²³ For Vázquez, it was older femme lesbians who initiated her into this gendered and sexualized subculture despite their awareness that socializing, having sex with, and getting underage lesbians into bars and parties could pose a risk to their own security.

The story of another young lesbian named Kate Day further illustrates the extraordinary resourcefulness of teens for whom sex formed one aspect of their efforts to survive, connect, and become who they wanted and needed to be. Born in 1958, Day grew up in a large, lower-middle-class Catholic family in Philadelphia and had the good fortune to attend Girls’ High, a well-regarded college preparatory public high school. While she was in high school in the mid-1970s, she managed to integrate herself into the local feminist, lesbian, and eventually lesbian feminist subcultures of the city, where she met and had sexual encounters and relationships with adult women in a range of settings. She first met radical feminist Victoria Brownworth when she was fifteen or sixteen, after Brownworth put up flyers at Girls’ High saying that she wanted to speak with high school feminists. Day called the number on the flyer and ended up taking the train downtown to be interviewed at Brownworth’s apartment, where she met other adult lesbians, including Brownworth’s lover. The couple began showing her the bars, helping her act tough enough to get in, and helping her learn the etiquette of working-class lesbian Philadelphia. Like Vázquez, Day said that the adults told her she was “jailbait” and that they had to be careful, but they mentored her anyway, including, ultimately, one time, in bed. They had a cot for the teen to sleep on during nights when she snuck out of her family home and joined them at the bar or house parties, and one night Brownworth’s butch lover came out of the bedroom saying that they were thinking that Kate might want to “learn the ropes” in bed. During my interview with Day, she responded to my raised eyebrows by confirming that there was, indeed, “no need to twist my arm.” She was definitely game. She had experimented sexually with peers in the past, but she welcomed the opportunity for sexual mentorship from an adult, butch lesbian. She said:

It was clear that it was their—both their idea—and . . . it was not an attempt to involve me in a threesome emotionally, or in any other way. It was like, you know, part of the boot camp. Lesbian boot camp, you know, baby dyke . . . that’s, you know, kind of how I . . . in that particular circle of people kind of—had that—played that role or fell into that position within their world.

After this one-time sexual mentoring session, Kate felt more confident and entered into sexual encounters and relationships with other adult lesbians. She got into a lasting relationship with a woman, Chris, who was ten years older than her, and who worked as a nurse while living at home with her parents. Around this time, Kate's parents found out about and strongly discouraged the relationship, and Kate moved into Chris's family home. Chris' parents, however, became nervous that they or their daughter could face legal exposure because of Kate's underage status, so Kate took the extraordinary step of working with a feminist lawyer—with whom she was interning through her high school—to become an emancipated minor.²⁴

After a while, Chris and Kate moved into a women's collective in West Philadelphia, while Kate was still finishing up high school. In total, Kate spent about two years of her high school career involved in overlapping lesbian worlds in Philadelphia, including a feminist bookstore collective, a lesbian newspaper collective, and the radical lesbian feminist group, the Dyke-Tactics, who helped her organize a public protest to object to Girls' High's efforts to prevent lesbian alumnae from attending prom during Kate's senior year. Sexual encounters and relationships with peers and adults were central to Kate's emergence into lesbian identity, community, and activism in the early 1970s. As she noted in her interview, she was usually the only teenager in the spaces she inhabited; her experience of inclusion in adult lesbian culture likely represents more of an exception than it does the rule of teen lesbian experience at the time, though more research is needed in order to be confident about this interpretation.²⁵ What is clear is that for Vázquez and Day sexual encounters and relationships with adult lesbians not only provided enjoyment and access to independence but also supported their emergence into urban lesbian communities that ultimately became central to their lives.

As the 1970s proceeded, lesbian feminist circles seem to have tightened in ways that limited or complicated teen girls' access to lesbian spaces and networks. As I have written about elsewhere, teen girls published letters and essays in lesbian feminist newsletters in the 1970s protesting policies and practices that excluded minors from movement spaces and events.²⁶ Evidence suggests that they also observed and objected to adult lesbians' attitudes toward their sexuality and to the ways that older lovers treated them within sexual relationships.

As an undergraduate at the University of California, Santa Cruz, writing a senior thesis entitled "Out But Not Down: The Young Lesbian Experience," historian Susan Cahn interviewed twelve young lesbians between the ages of sixteen and twenty-two. She submitted the thesis in 1980, so the interviews referred to experiences in the mid- to late 1970s. Cahn astutely concluded that the proliferation of lesbian feminist organizations, spaces, and services met many needs of young lesbians but also served as "another source of ageist oppression." She explained that many older lesbians used condescending language to refer to the teen girls who sought their atten-

tion, referring to them as “baby dykes,” “diaper dykes,” and (once again) “jailbait.” Cahn pointed out that, although legal prosecution of women over twenty-one for having sex with legal minors “rarely occurs,” the possibility did exist and that parents of youth sometimes threatened legal action. The mother of Teresa, one of Cahn’s white narrators, “said she was going to call the cops and throw my lover in jail,” which ended the relationship. As a result, some adults insisted on keeping their relationships with minors completely secret, which, as Cahn pointed out, “puts a great deal of added pressure on both partners.” Cahn added that older partners sometimes treated younger lovers in “ageist” ways, criticizing them for their lack of experience or expressing frustration that they could not get into bars easily or at all.²⁷

Teens who attended lesbian feminist events, such as lesbian “rap groups” at women’s centers, complained that women in their thirties and forties treated them like their daughters. Liz, a self-identified Chicana lesbian, especially resented the patronizing attitude she received from women in whom she was interested sexually or romantically. Teresa complained that one of her lovers “played the mother role and I hated it. I don’t want a mother. I want a lover. I have a mother. One is enough.” Similarly, an interviewee named Babs told Cahn that when she was seventeen she had a relationship with a woman in her late thirties who tended to “mother” her, always “trying to get me to go to school before I was ready to go to college,” though she noted that, despite her lover’s “ageist trips,” she always respected Babs and her ability to do things.²⁸

Angelica, who was nineteen, felt that she was the one who “set up” the mother–child dynamic in her relationship at sixteen with a woman who was thirty. “I would keep using my age as an excuse” for not knowing things, “setting myself up as a baby needing to be mothered.” In a different relationship, however, the dynamic was reversed, and her older lover resisted other lesbians’ assumptions about the burden of dating someone so young. “I remember how if we would be in the bar and other women would come up and talk about how she’s a chicken hawk . . . and what’s she doing with a baby dyke and don’t you have to teach her everything. . . . She would say, ‘I don’t have to teach her anything. She’s teaching it all to me.’”²⁹ Angelica’s account reveals the multiple possibilities for age-differentiated relationships, whose internal dynamics were often more subtle or complex than the stereotypes would suggest.

A few of Cahn’s interviewees reflected on the reasons why adult lesbian feminists tended to stigmatize relationships with girls and young women under twenty-one, including internalized homophobia. The myth of pedophilia inaccurately stigmatized gay and lesbian people as child molesters seeking to “recruit” youth into homosexuality and clearly got into the heads of lesbians. Elliot, a seventeen-year-old white lesbian, told Cahn that “I’ve had a couple people just freak out” when they found out her age. “Just feeling like they robbed the cradle. . . . It’s like they can be relating to me just fine. But once they find out I’m 17, these huge stereotypes just come

down.”³⁰ Emily, one of Cahn’s white interviewees, explained that her current lover, who at thirty was ten years older than herself, “has the old image of the lecherous old woman who seduces the young woman into lesbianism.” Liz also explored the fears driving women’s reluctance to see young lesbians as potential sexual partners: “I think that some people are threatened . . . I know there’s that issue in women’s heads about statutory rape or something . . . and being cradle robbers and all that kind of stuff . . . Maybe they thought I was a little naïve or something, and I’d take chances to do this and that . . . violating them or something.” In Liz’s view, women interested in teen girls feared their own negative views of themselves and perhaps of one another, but her mention of potential violation signaled something deeper. Perhaps Liz sensed a fear that adolescents did not have the maturity or responsibility to earn adult women’s trust or that teens may not have understood the need for discretion. Her meaning here is ambiguous, but it is clear that she resented carrying the weight of the insecurities of women whom she admired and even desired.³¹

The sting of adult lesbians’ sexual rejection was especially frustrating to young lesbian feminists who embraced the movement’s political analysis of power and oppression. Like the young lesbian subjects about whom I write in “Your Young Lesbian Sisters,” Cahn’s interviewees understood ageism as limiting girls’ access to resources, community, and their own potential. They saw it as an oppressive structural force that intersected with sexism and homophobia, and sometimes also racism. For Kim, a black sixteen-year-old, the lesbian community “has showed me what I could have, if I was the right age and the right color and looked right. . . . It’s offered me some things; a sense that there are women here, that there are lesbians here. Whether they’re *here* for you is another thing.” Older white lesbians’ attitudes toward Kim’s blackness and youth left Kim feeling alone, even in the midst of lesbian community. “Y’know,” she concluded, “if you get through all the weird people . . . you meet a few really great people. So it’s worth it then.”³²

Another black teen, Lylace, had a more positive experience, finally finding in lesbian feminism “somewhere where I belong. I can rest. I can stop running. I can be myself.” At nineteen, Lylace’s slightly older age might have facilitated her greater level of comfort and acceptance. Neither Kim nor Lylace spoke with Cahn about intergenerational sexual relationships, but their comments raise questions about how racism within the movement converged with attitudes about age in intimate contexts that I hope to address in future research.³³

To return to the controversy in the *Gay Community News* in 1979 about whether lesbians participated in intergenerational sexual relationships, I hope that the evidence presented here shows that they did. Despite the need for considerable additional research on the subject, it appears that there was a marked contrast in the ways that gay male and lesbian subcultures regarded sex between adults and minors. Postwar lesbian and 1970s lesbian feminist cultures seem to have discouraged the eroticization of youth and

sex between adults and minors, emphasizing the significance of age-based differences in maturity and perspective to a point that young lesbians often found patronizing and disrespectful. Nonetheless, girls experienced feelings of romance and desire toward adult women that they identified as meaningful, and they entered into consensual sexual relationships with older women through which they accessed pleasure, self-understanding, and resources of various kinds. Sexual intimacy with self-identified lesbians who were part of lesbian communities provided even greater benefits, such as sexual and social mentorship and introduction to subcultural networks and shared vocabularies. Intergenerational eroticism was a factor in the lives of teen girls who, whether they lived in Denton, Texas, or Philadelphia, sought out connections to adult women through erotic letters to authors, relationships with neighboring housewives, and sexual instruction from a lesbian couple providing a place to crash on nights away from home. It is time to take the sexual agency of queer youth seriously, which means that many of us have a great deal more research to do.

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Notes

1. "12 Arrested as Child Molesters in a Boston Area Ring," *New York Times*, 9 December 1977, A-18, <https://www.nytimes.com/1977/12/09/archives/12-arrested-as-child-molesters-in-a-boston-area-ring.html>.
2. *Gay Community News*, January–April 1979.
3. Beth Kelly, "On 'Woman/Girl Love' or Lesbians Do 'Do It,'" *Gay Community News*, 3 March 1979, 5.
4. Cindy Stein, "Do They Do It?," *Gay Community News*, 17 March 1979.
5. Alice Echols, *Daring to Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, 1967–1975* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989); Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, *How We Get Free: Black Feminism and the Combahee River Collective* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2017), 15–27.
6. This speculation has thus far occurred primarily at academic conferences, particularly the 2019 Organization of American Historians Conference and the Queer History Conference 2019 at San Francisco State University. Thanks go out especially to Nikita Shepard.
7. Ellen Lewin Papers, 1977–1981, Collection # 1992-03, Box 1, Folder 112, GLBT Historical Society of Northern California, San Francisco, CA. For an interview

- that discusses falling in love with a camp counselor, see Folder 116. For interviews about intense crushes on high school teachers, see Box 4, Folder 410 and Box 6, Folder 612.
8. Paulette to Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon, 28 April 1976, Correspondence Teenage Lesbians, November 1972 – August 1985, Phyllis Lyon, Del Martin and the Daughters of Bilitis papers, Box 24, Folder 4. GLBT Historical Society, Archives of Sexuality & Gender, <http://tinyurl.galegroup.com/tinyurl/6gXKK0>.
 9. Lauren Jae Gutterman, "The House on the Borderland": Lesbian Desire, Marriage, and the Household, 1950–1979," *Journal of Social History* 46, no. 1 (2012): 1–22, <https://academic.oup.com/jsh/issue/46/1>.
 10. Interview with Lisa, conducted by Amanda H. Littauer on 22 March 2018.
 11. Jeanne to Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon, 19 February 1974, Correspondence Teenage Lesbians.
 12. Anonymous to Martin and Lyon, 12 November 1973, Correspondence Teenage Lesbians.
 13. Amy to Martin and Lyon, 2 January 1975, Correspondence Teenage Lesbians.
 14. Kym to Martin and Lyon, 2 January 1975, Correspondence Teenage Lesbians.
 15. Anonymous to Martin and Lyon, 23 April 1974, Correspondence Teenage Lesbians.
 16. Nicholas Syrett, *American Child Bride: A History of Minors and Marriage in the United States* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016).
 17. Laurel Galana and Gina Covina, *The New Lesbians: Interviews with Women Across the U.S. and Canada* (Berkeley, CA: Moon Books, 1977), 94–97.
 18. Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon, *Lesbian/Woman* (New York: Bantam, 1972), 177.
 19. Carmen Vazquez interview, Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, MA.
 20. On the central significance of butch and fem gender identity in postwar lesbian social worlds, see Alix Genter, "Appearances Can Be Deceiving: Butch-Femme Fashion and Queer Legibility in New York City, 1945–1969," *Feminist Studies* 42, no. 3 (2016): 604–631. doi:10.15767/feministstudies.42.3.0604.
 21. Elizabeth Kennedy and Madeline Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community* (New York: Penguin, 1993).
 22. Galana and Covina, *The New Lesbians*, 188–189.
 23. Amanda H. Littauer, *Bad Girls: Young Women, Sex, and Rebellion before the Sixties* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015).
 24. Interview with Kate Day by Amanda H. Littauer, 31 July 2018.
 25. Ibid.
 26. Amanda H. Littauer, "'Your Young Lesbian Sisters': Queer Girls' Voices in the Liberation Era," *Girlhood Studies* 12, no. 1 (2019): 17–32, doi:10.3167/ghs.2019.120104.
 27. Susan Cahn, "Out, But Not Down: The Young Lesbian Experience" (Unpublished undergraduate thesis: University of California at Santa Cruz, 1980), 77, 78.
 28. Ibid., 80, 86.
 29. Ibid, 87.
 30. Ibid, 80, 83, 86.
 31. Ibid, 86, 84.
 32. Ibid, 88.
 33. Ibid, 8.