Published in final edited form as:

J Aging Stud. 2012 January 1; 26(1): 102–108. doi:10.1016/j.jaging.2011.08.004.

Experiences from Pagan Women: A Closer Look at Croning Rituals

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Abstract

In this qualitative study I explore how Pagan women conceptualize aging, more specifically social aging, through the ritual process of being a Pagan and becoming a Crone. The central question of this research revolves around how older women who identify as *Pagan* experience, understand, and conceptualize their social aging and their role as aging women in American society. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data and explore the meaning of aging for women identifying as Pagan. Major emergent themes within the data demonstrate that the croning ritual, a central aspect of Paganism, affirms these women in their process of aging. These women, through the ritual of croning, are able to understand their aging as celebration, maintain a positive sense of self while aging, and reclaim visibility as aging women. These women were able to embed their experiences of aging within a unique and specific cultural framework, a spiritual and foundational framework cultivating a spiritual connection with nature.

Keywords

spirituality; feminine spirituality; goddess-worship; spirituality identity; ageism; crone; croning ritual

Growing older as a woman in American society increases the likelihood of living within the confines of a dominant patriarchal culture. Women experience a type of aging in mainstream American culture that is characterized and permeated with over-arching ageist attitudes and beliefs (Radina, Stelp, Lynch, & Manning, 2008). Few aspects of the predominate culture are targeted on older women in a manner that celebrates their aging. This reality suggests that our society is constructed based on an ethic of youth worship and assumes there is little place for aging women within society. Being an *old lady* in our culture is the last thing many women desire to become (Browne, 1998; Cruikshank, 2003; Radina, Stelp, Lynch, & Manning, 2008). It is important to recognize the specific sub-cultures where this dominant view of aging is not held in high regard; an example of this type of subculture can be found within the Contemporary Pagan spiritual framework. Paganism is often referred to as Contemporary or Neo-Paganism to emphasize the connections to and differences between pre-Christian religions and the myriad of spiritual practices within the larger context of Paganism. Paganism is a spiritual orientation; it is not atheism,

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agnosticism, or indifference to religion (Adler, 1986; Farrar, Farrar & Bone, 1995; Sage, 2009). Paganism is gaining popularity throughout the U.S. Individuals are attracted to the principles of freethinking, lack of dogma, and rejection of proselytizing. Essentially, Paganism is Nature-venerating, polytheistic, and recognizant of the Goddess (Harvey and Hardman, 1996). Inherent in Paganism is the conceptualization of a maiden, mother and crone trilogy. This qualitative study explores the experiences of aging Pagan women with regard to growing older in a way that promotes visibility, acceptance and celebration of aging, and challenges social expectations for an aging woman as absent from the predominate culture. Data included in-depth interviews with 10 women ranging in age from 48 to 62. An inductive approach to data analysis was used.

Paganism

Contemporary Paganism is gaining popularity throughout the U.S. Individuals are attracted to the principles of freethinking, lack of dogma, and rejection of proselytizing. Contemporary Paganism has its roots in the past. The spiritual authenticity of Paganism is legitimized by 19th and 20th century Romanticism and pays homage to pre-Christian deities, such as the Paleolithic “Eden” (Sage, 2009) or Eostre/Ostara, a Pagan goddess known for bestowing her name on the Christian Easter (Cusack, 2007). Contemporary Paganism or Paganism is experimental and improvisational, i.e., ritual is an essential attribute to Paganism and fundamentally important to Pagans (Kermani, 2009). For some, but not all practicing Pagans, a monotheistic approach to the Divine is taken; this is true for the women researched here. Harvey & Hardman describe Paganism as follows: “Paganism has three characteristics. It is polytheistic, recognizing a plurality of divine beings, which may or may not be One, Two, or Three, etc. It sees the material world and its laws as a theophany, a manifestation of divinity. Finally, Paganism recognizes the female face of divinity, referred to by modern Pagans as the Goddess: taken for granted in Her many manifestations by the Pagans of the ancient world” (1996, p. 34).

Adler (1986) further explains that Pagans rely on principles of polytheism, animism and pantheism and with spiritual leanings representative of aliveness and presence in nature. Harvey and Hardman (1996) outline the three basic principles of Paganism: 1. love for and kinship with nature, 2. a positive morality whereby pagans strive to do no harm, and 3. conceptualize deities as polytheists or recognize both a God and the Goddess. Paganism is an eclectic and expansive spiritual practice accompanying many forms of ritual practices (shamanism, polytheism, and magical religions). Paganism is characterized by a focus on nature-venerating spirituality; the honoring of pre-Christian deities; dynamic individual belief system; lack of institutionalization; concentration on the development and transformation of self; and acceptance or encouragement of diversity and equality (Pagan Education Network, 2007 – 2009). The majorities of those who practice Paganism are white, middle class, but also include many individuals comprising other racial, gender, and social economic status groups. Paganism is complex and there lacks a single definition to describe this spiritual orientation. While Paganism is complex and has different meanings and practices for those identifying as Pagan, it is useful to think of Pagans as having a love and respect for Nature and having a moral code of goodness. In addition, some Pagans recognize one or more deities in Goddess form – this is true for the women in this study. In this study, I explore Paganism, specifically the Crone ritual, with American women identifying as Contemporary Pagans who recognize a monotheistic expression of the Goddess. These participants liken their sense of self to the representation of the Goddess. In other words their sense of self is rooted in their spiritual identity – being Pagan and being or becoming a Crone.

Spiritual Identity

The overlap of spirituality and identity has received considerable attention in the last several decades and is rooted in much of Erikson's work on identity development (Kiesling, Sorell, Montgomery, & Colwell, 2006). In Erikson's pursuit of understanding how people know and understand themselves, he ascertained that as individuals mature, they transition through the lifecourse, while balancing their faith with doubt and nurturing their spiritual tendencies (Atchley, 2009; Erikson, 1980). Erikson (1980) suggested that although ego identity formation during adolescence and young adulthood provides an initial psychosocial structure for continuity in adult life, a person's sense of identity is revised and transformed through ongoing experience and shifting contextual and historical realities. These ongoing experiences are witnessed by the spiritual self and are important to consider when investigating the spiritual lives of individuals as they age.

Sinnott (2002, pg. 199) encourages scholars to more thoroughly examine spiritual development in late life asking, "How do the spiritual aspects of an individual's life relate to his or her development during maturity and old age?" This question is useful in guiding the research on spirituality, particularly the research offered here. Kiesling, Sorell, Montgomery, & Colwell (2006, p. 1276) encourage researchers to consider carefully how contextualized narratives, or the voices and experiences of older adults, "reveal how key aspects of adult development -- meaning making and personhood" can be aided by the exploration of one's spirituality or of one's spiritual sense of self. This research explores the way in which these women make sense of their aging and personhood. Although the women in this study are not "old" in gerontological terms, they are aging and are crafting a spiritual identity rooted in becoming an old woman or a Crone. Their experiences add the understanding of social and psychological aging outside the confines of mainstream aging and spirituality.

Ageism and The Invisible Older Woman

Negative representations of older women in mainstream American culture are pervasive (Cruikshank, 2003; Radina, et al., 2008). Ageism prevails Western society and its negative consequences impact older adults, particularly women, in the form of internalized ageism, being pushed to the margins of society, and becoming the targets of discriminatory practices. Aging women are without models of positive aging and positive images of older women in the media are scant. The "old woman" in our culture lacks visibility in various ways, for example the media and even in gerontological research. The messaging is clear – the last thing you should strive to be in an old woman in American society. Aging encompasses change, for example bodily change. Our youth-worshipping culture creates a place of contempt for the aging woman. These cultural attitudes and ideologies require aging women to find courage and strength to deal not only with certain challenges associated with aging, but also to embrace for an aging experience in a larger societal context in which they are devalued.

The participants in this research are women; they provide insight into new and interesting ways to conceive their social, and in addition physical aging. The findings of this research underscore the importance of exploring older women as subjects using the critical lens of gerontology; the findings also illustrate the importance of female connectivity and visibility. The women are able to embed their experiences of aging within a specific spiritual and social framework. This identity and spiritual practice enables them to accept their aging selves, combat ageism, and reclaim their strength and visibility as aging women. For the purpose of this study, I concentrate on the crowning ritual of aging Pagan women and seek to examine the impact this ritual has on the women in this study, paying particular attention to the notions of the celebrated and visible older woman. I explore how a specific spiritual

orientation of the women in this study shapes the meaning and process of their aging. My central question in this research is how aging women, ranging from 43 to 68 years of age, who identify as Pagan, conceptualize their aging in relation to their spiritual identity and practice, specifically regarding the ritual of croning. Semi-structured interviews are used to collect data reflecting issues of acceptance and identity regarding informants' formation and evolution of identity and practice as Pagans.

Methodology

Guided by the tenets of grounded theory and the feminist perspective, I explore in this study a specific spiritual orientation and the implications it has for these women who identify as Pagans. I employed a grounded theory approach, a type of qualitative methodology in which theory is generated from the data, because older women who identify as Pagan is considered an exploratory concept, particularly in the field of gerontology. A grounded theory approach was used to analyze the narrative data from the interviews because of the exploratory nature of the project. This approach investigates the contents of the data for the common themes or patterns, which emerge from the narrative (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Lincoln & Guba, 1985), in this case the experiences and perceptions of becoming a Crone for Pagan women. The primary objective of my research was to expand upon what is known regarding the ritual of Croning. I did this by identifying key elements of this phenomenon, and then categorizing the relationships of those elements to the social context out of which they are derived, using the systematic process of constructivism accordingly (LaRossa, 2005).

In an attempt to capture the rich experiences of women who many deem marginal and deviant, I used extreme "sampling" to select cases that are unusual and thus reside outside of mainstream society in terms of participants' spiritual identities and practices (Patton, 1980). My intentions were to explore the experiences of women at various stages in their spiritual journeys and at various degrees of commitment to Paganism. This interest emerges from personal experiences with older Pagan women while living in Vermont. I do not identify as Pagan, but am interested in the ways Crones defy certain stereotypes associated with mainstream aging.

I selected eight participants for this exploratory study, ranging in age from 43 to 68 years of age. The women were recruited using flyers placed in bookstores and coffee shops in three small Midwestern towns. All eight women identify as Pagan, that is, they hold to a belief system characterized by their focus on nature-centered spirituality, most honoring the pre-Christian deities, dynamic personal belief system, lack of institutionalization, a quest to develop the self, and acceptance or encouragement of diversity (Pagan Education Network, 2007 – 2009). All eight participants are white, middle-class women, reflecting the fact the majority of the ten thousand Pagans in the United States are white, middle-class, women (Pagan Education Network, 2007 – 2009). One is an ordained Wiccan Minister, and two are self-appointed high priestesses.

Five of the women have been practicing Paganism for over twenty-years, two have been practicing over ten years, and one has recently begun her spiritual journey into the world of Paganism. Five women are comfortable revealing their spiritual identity to their family; three fear lack of acceptance and familial tensions and therefore have not revealed their identity as Pagans. The women vary in when and to whom to disclose their spiritual identity, whether to "be out of the broom closet" (a phrase common in the Pagan community to describe a public identity as Pagan) at work and in other sectors of their lives.

Seven women are or have been married at one time, one has never married; of these, five remain married to their initial spouses. Seven women are mothers and wives, and three still

have children living at home. All of the participants have at one time been part of the labor force; one is currently unemployed, one is retired, and the other five are still working. Seven of the participants identify as a *Crone*, or as an “elderwise” woman reflecting the late-life aspect of the Goddess, and feel comfortable placing their aging experience into the context of the crone archetype. All of the participants have taken part in a croning ritual, either for themselves or others. Five have had an actual croning ritual to mark their passage into wise-woman elderhood. The eight participants in this study are not acquainted with one another, and have not jointly participated in one another’s croning rituals.

All eight incorporate the Goddess (the Divine Feminine) into some aspect of their belief system. To protect participants’ confidentiality, I omitted names throughout this report and refrained from using any information disclosing their true identities. It is important to note that the women in this study have specific cohort distinctions that set them apart from other older women. The participants have made it clear that the culture and historical events of the 1960s and 1970s, particularly in relation to the women’s movement, have had significant impact on their spiritual journeys and other aspects of their adult development.

Data Collection and Analysis

After the participants identified themselves to me and agreed to participate in the study, I contacted each woman by phone and asked her to briefly describe to me her spiritual orientation to ensure she was indeed a suitable participant. I interviewed seven participants in their homes and one in the back room of an alternative resource center for women. The interviews lasted from forty-five minutes to two and half hours, depending on the woman, her experience, and the amount of information she was willing to disclose. All women were comfortable with being Pagan and were quite comfortable discussing their spiritual identity with me. The grand tour question and over-arching intent of the study was to explore *how the experience of growing older for women is shaped by Paganism*. I wanted to capture the essence of the women’s connection to and experience with Paganism, their experiences as older women in this culture, and generally how they benefited, if at all, from this specific spiritual identity. In attempting to uncover the cultural context and experience of Paganism, I asked these conceptual questions: *What does being Pagan mean to/do for you? How has being Pagan affected your growing older? Is there a relation between being Pagan and how you deal with growing older?* From these questions I was able to collect profoundly rich, complex and detailed narratives from the participants, describing their spiritual orientations, experiences as Pagan women, and the impact these have had not only on their being older women, but also being women able to celebrate the Divine within and their identity as Crone.

The open-ended, semi-structured qualitative interview questionnaire consisted of questions probing for actual beliefs and identities, the development over time of women’s identities, biographical histories, important roles, essential qualifiers, and major changes the women experienced as a result of their spiritual life journey. I asked the women to describe for me what they were taught growing up, how this differed from their current belief system. I asked them about their experiences as older women in a culture characterized by overarching themes of ageism and sexism, how being Pagan arose from or affected that. I enquired about their rituals, specifically croning rituals, and what someone must know when thinking about older Pagan women. The responses to the interviews provided insights to spiritual realities and experiences of the women. Their responses were surprising in their richness, diversity, and intricacy in regard to the intention and initial plan for this study. What was initially a project designed to explore the spiritual lives of elder women identifying as Pagan evolved into accounts of enlightenment concerning empowerment and raising of the feminine consciousness.

After I collected the data on audio-tape, I transcribed each interview so as to capture the words of the participants verbatim. After completing transcriptions, interviews were analyzed to “determine the categories, relationships, and assumptions that inform the respondents’ views of the world in general and the topic in particular” (McCracken, 1990, p. 42). After performing an initial, manual open-code on the interviews, I identified salient themes, created codes that would allow me to move from the general to the particular, encouraging a deeper reflection and more engaged analysis of the text (McCracken, 1990).

After the initial open coding, the transcripts were transferred into ATLAS.ti, a computer program designed to manage qualitative data. I then coded the interviews again to identify sub-codes and continued to explore and discover by nature of emergent theory the meaning and interrelatedness of the collective experiences of the women. The use of this computer program enabled me to manage data, and extract words and word clusters that pertain to specific codes (McCracken, 1990). Grounded theory or emergent design is an essential part of qualitative research; the intent is, through inductive reasoning, to build a theory that is grounded in the observations (Schutt, 2001). The data analysis and coding with use of ATLAS.ti enabled me to inductively analyze my data, and encouraged me to engage in the reflexive process essential in “exhibiting the characteristics of good intellectual craftsmanship” (McCracken, 1990, p. 54).

Findings

Two main themes emerging from the data are presented here: 1. The croning ritual is a ritual maker for celebration and entryway into elderwise womanhood and 2. The croning ritual serves as a way for women to gain visibility and validation as aging women in American society. These themes ran throughout each narrative. For the women in this study the croning ritual is paramount, a centralizing and defining identity. The women are reacting to their aging in relationship to this crone archetype; they are a crone or striving to become one. Rituals are comprised of fixed patterns of acts, ordered and sequential activities that involve a symbolic object, image, act or word (Bewley, 1995; Gomberg, 2001). Rituals are intended for demarcation and to assist people in the effort to undergo behavioral transformation (Gomberg, 2001). For the women in this study the croning ritual consists of fixed patterns and ordered activities organized around the transformation of Pagan women into the stage of crone, or an “elderwise” woman. For these women this means having moved into a place (post menarche) of divine old age and wisdom, where the women embrace their aging selves, in addition to their aging bodies. Furthermore, these women, through the ritual of croning, are able to understand their aging as celebration, maintain a positive sense of aging, and reclaim visibility as aging women.

Major themes have been identified within the data demonstrating the importance of the croning ritual and the concept of Crone in how these women understand their aging, make meaning of themselves as aging women, and reclaim visibility as aging women. These women were able to embed their experiences of aging within a certain spiritual framework that promotes the acceptance of their selves, i.e. their capacity to authentically be and know themselves as Crones.

The Crone and her Ritual

In the recent past, the word *crone* has been considered derogatory and used to accentuate the abhorrence of aging women. As societies and cultures change, so do our social constructions of important meaning-making events. Crone as a word and identity for older women is an example of this societal evolution. The participants in this study, whether they have had an actual croning ceremony or not, are all working to reclaim and redefine both the word *crone* and what it means to be a Crone. Bolen (2001, pg. 3) describes the Crone stage in a

woman's life as being "like the fresh green of spring, where she welcomes new growth and possibilities in herself and others... where there is something solid about her being an adult whose life has borne fruit through cultivation and pruning, as well as tempering and work." Additionally, women in the crone stage know from experience that it takes "commitment and love for budding possibilities in herself and others to grow into reality, where she has lived long enough to be deeply rooted in life" (Bolen, pg. 3). This study explores the ritual of croning and the importance it has for these women regarding their conceptualization of their aging selves and their experiences of aging in its entirety.

The Croning Ritual as a Celebration of Aging

Five of the participants are ritualized crones, meaning they had a croning ceremony to mark their passage into elderwise womanhood, or to demarcate their aging. For five of them women in study, this meant ritualizing their chronological age, in addition to becoming postmenopausal. Each of the rituals were different, there is no prescription for how to conduct rituals for women who identify as Pagan. The rituals described by the participants, as varied as they were, taken together entailed a sharing of life stories, gifts to the woman being croned, and recognizing and honoring of age, wisdom and the movement into this stage of the feminine life force. One woman reflects on the actual ritual and how it is made manifest in her personal philosophy, a philosophy characterized by the empowering nature of the croning ritual:

The way I look at the wisdom years really starts at the second Saturn cycle, so I figured out when that was and I had the ceremony at that time. I divided it up my life into eight phases, like the phases of Saturn and I saw the theme for each phase. What I did, I picked out the important things that happened at each phase and then saw what the overlying theme was. I actually made a booklet and people could look through that if they wanted, and I shared that when I talked about why I was having it. Most of the people at my Croning knew me already; most were Pagans a few that weren't. So, I talked about them to and how they made a difference in my life. I had them all bring some thoughts about what they thought wisdom was and how it was working in their lives. We talked about wisdom. There were people of different ages, from forty-five to seventy-five, that were there. Each one of them connected to the wisdom in their selves and by sharing what it meant to each of them that really we all went away enriched. Tapping into that wisdom is part of what it means to be a Crone.

Another woman reflects on the process leading up to her ritual and expresses the intensity and intimidation she felt when she realized that with being a crone comes a responsibility to be a role model to other women who are aging and on the brink of becoming crones:

I asked my group for a croning ritual. I think on some level, I didn't tell them what I wanted except that I wanted a full production of it. It'll create change if it's done right. At the ritual I was wearing the cape and I had a knife that I had bought at a festival. They gave me a basket so I put the little knife in there and then off we went on this ritual. So we go out the door and the first person, first station to speak to me says, you're a crone. You know, that's what this is about. A crone is a leader, so lead us.

Another reflects on her own wisdom and value despite what society attempts to impose on her, and her understanding of being valued in a culture that devalues aging women:

I suspect that ritual and worship will take on new meaning as we face new challenges, living as crones in a culture that devalues us. Somehow, I remain optimistic. I like who I am and realize that I've been truly blessed; I especially like

acknowledging that as a crone I have wisdom to share. I've been a seeker for so long; it's quite astonishing to feel valued as a source of inspiration and sustenance to other seekers, especially living in a culture that devalues older women.

The youngest of the participants, who has yet to reach her self-proclaimed identity as crone, eagerly waits for her time to be a crone and to be respected and celebrated by her spiritual community. She and others Pagans conceptualize this waiting period in relation to an aging body, in this case menopause:

I'm very much looking forward to my croning ceremony... now; you got the people that believe "thou shall not be croned until you've gone through menopause..." what about women who have had hysterectomies or other women who don't go through menopause who for whatever reason who are taking estrogen and stuff. I'm not sure what I believe about when the actual croning ceremony should be, but I think it's it an acceptance, an acknowledgement, and a celebration of a woman's passage into that stage of her life. In the Pagan community the older woman is embraced and celebrated, her grey hair is her mantle. I don't fit that tradition yet, but we're getting there.

One woman explains the great satisfaction and affirmation she finds as a crone in her freedom to make major life change as she ages:

I think that what it has shown me, mostly the cyclical nature of life. And as such, it brings me to a special awareness that it's precious. I was turning fifty, my company was being laid-off, it me that I'm going to be a crone soon even though technically, I'm not a crone, it was coming and I felt empowered because of my set of beliefs to say "ok, as a crone this is what I want and I'm free at this point having lived and experience the other stages of the wheel, I'm free now to be the crone and to do it the way I want to do it. I have freedom that to reject things I don't believe are real to me, and part of that rejection is how society sees me as an aging woman. Again, it's that crone thing.

Reclaiming Visibility as a Crone

Seven of the participants identified with the crone archetype, the last of three developmental stages of women conceptualized by Paganism: maiden, mother, and crone, all involving imagery that recognizes the feminine life force, and allows women to see themselves in all stages of life. The maiden represents the virgin and sexual freedom of young women to be independent of their lovers, remaining on a solo soul journey. The mother represents the more nurturing aspects of adult women, and implies motherhood to all life forms. The crone represents the post-menopausal woman in her stage of wisdom, responsibility, and prophecy (Goldenberg, 1979). Identity as crones for these women is paramount to their understanding and accepting of themselves as aging and old women. This is illustrated by these reflections about what it means to them to be a crone:

When I turned fifty I asked my circle to do a croning for me. And I had never really asked them for much before... but I said, "Look this is a very special time and as it happens, my birthday always falls on the spring equinox"... so, they did... I said, "I don't want to plan anything... I want you guys to do it." They planned it, they did for me, they wrote things for me, they gave me gifts, they made a crown for me... it was really wonderful. I really felt affirmed and acknowledged as a woman moving into the wisdom stage of life, the crone stage of life. I felt there was a place for me.

The crone is a signifier of positive aging for the women in this study. It provides an avenue for these women to maintain the visibility as an aging woman in our culture. One woman reflects on the importance of the crone archetype for herself:

Well, it does help that we have Crone Goddesses. A human image that we can recognize as the divine and that other people around us in our groups recognize as divine. It's like we're not just invisible and non-represented in spiritual life, which older women are often neglected all together in other religions and society for that matter, there's just nothing for them to identify with. It helps to know as you change and age, you can identify with Divinity.

Another important aspect of being a Crone is how this identity and ritual assist the women in the study in their process of self-acceptance as aging women, particularly regarding the body. One woman relates being a crone to her acceptance of self and the process of aging:

Becoming a crone has been a pathway that has helped me with who and what I am being comfortable with who and what I am accepting the changes of life and definitely with my body. That's a big thing; accepting change is not just all this or all that, it's a process. The longer I'm a crone the more comfortable aging feels.

Discussion

The concept of *Crone* is an important aspect of this study, and has implications for all aging women, not just those who identify as Pagan. In an anti-aging culture that offers little sanctity or celebration for the old woman, women are living in fear and avoidance of their social and physical signs of aging. Women are searching for ways to remedy the struggles associated with aging in American society. Patricia Reilly (1995, p. 268) suggests that being an old woman means embracing an identity shaped by "the culmination of all she has experienced since childhood" and embracing a sense of self seated in a less than ideal social role. Older women have their work cut out for them if they attempt to find a comfortable and celebrated place to age within mainstream society. The research presented here offers a closer look at a different way to age. The women in this study cultivate a spiritual practice and identity that affords them opportunity come terms with an aging self. In addition, this work serves as an exemplar of how the spiritual self is a needed place of exploration and understanding. The Crones in this study provide an example of how for some women, a strong spiritual identity in conjunction with a celebrated sense of aging serves as a source of strength and spirit. For the Crones in this study aging is a marker of honor and achievement. The research and representations of voice presented here also are exemplars of gerontological and feminist scholarship that directly opposes ageism and sexism, and challenges the negative depictions and stereotypes of old age. It is important to note that the women here are not merely objects of study, but are present and have been included in the research process (Ray, 2004; Twigg, 2004; Weil, 2008).

The women in this study have not only found a comfortable place to age, but a place that accepts, embraces and celebrates them as Crones, and as women in the journey into later life. The women recognize themselves as divine aging women, serving as role models who help us all to see and celebrate the divine within. Their experiences provide glimpses into an alternative view of elder women; antithetical to the images of the invisible and disempowered older woman we are inundated with in the worlds of gerontology, even of feminism, and society as a whole. There is much to be learned by gerontologists from the women in this study about the power and beauty of self-acceptance, and the positive impact it has on the experience of aging. Additionally, the women in this study busy reclaiming their visibility as older women, and provide a model for an alternative way to age within the confines of our patriarchal society (Manning, 2010; Radina, et al., 2008). The women in this study are open about how their spiritual orientation and the croning ritual provide them with an arsenal of tools to combat what mainstream society tells them about becoming an older woman - that they should remain invisible and quietly surrender as old subjects. With their personal truths and stories, they demonstrate how they have re- conceptualized their aging,

turning it from an experience of dread to one of celebration, excitement and connection. The research presented here opens a space for the women in this study to be heard, and to share how their spirituality and identities as Crones bolster their experiences of aging - more work giving women this opportunity in gerontology is greatly needed.

Finally, I should note the limitations regarding sample population and methods for this study. As a solo researcher for this project, I collected and analyzed my data without the added benefits of inter-coder reliability, or having the data analyzed by a team of researchers. The participants were consulted, hence a member-checking technique was employed, regarding the nature of the findings and the representations of their voices to ensure contextual validity; the findings may have been enhanced using a team-based approach for analysis. Another limitation in this study is the convenience sample. Ideally, Pagan women would have been interviewed from various other regions and maximum-variation would have been the sampling technique used to recruit participants. Given the nature and scope of this project, I as the researcher find this sample population to be appropriate.

Acknowledgments

Funding: Partial support for this research was provided by NIH grant 5T32 AG00029-35.

This article is a result of my master's thesis. I would like to thank Dr. Lisa Groger at Miami University, Oxford, OH for her guidance, mentorship, and willingness to read countless drafts.

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