

**Morphing the Crone: An Ethnography of Crone  
Culture, Consciousness and Communities, a feminist participatory  
action research project**

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## Abstract

The departure for this thesis was my own experience of metamorphosis or ‘morphing’ a Crone identity as I approached the menopause. Having discovered other women who shared my language and experience as well as a thick web of Crone connections in cyberspace, I undertook a critical ethnography of Crone culture, consciousness and communities to investigate the question, “What is the nature of Crone metamorphosis?”. The study was conducted from a feminist critical cultural studies framework meshing standpoint theory with the research strategies of participatory action research and traditional ethnographic methods. The results indicate that the morphing of Crones can be understood as a complex transformation in identity encompassing the social psychological, corporeal and cognitive dimensions of consciousness and lived experience. As an effect of second wave feminist movement, the Crone now surfaces in popular consciousness as an archetype, a cultural icon, a role model and feminist ideal type for women in later life. While Crone-identification by definition is the result of collective resistance to the pejorative constructions of old women framed in dominant culture, it also represents a transformation in the individual’s sense of self, their personal relationships, their life aspirations and the decisions they make regarding their life circumstances. Thus I found two separate yet intertwined meanings embedded in Crone identification and the concept of morphing the Crone. Feminists are morphing the Crone as a political project with the goal of socio-cultural transformation of a context that marginalizes girls and women across the lifespan; individual women as they encounter the challenges of aging are morphing the Crone as a project of self-definition and

personal empowerment. In order to make that interpretation, I established a research website, *The Crone Project*, and made connections with Crones in cyberspace and in actual space at Crone gatherings. Crone-identified women were invited to join in the participatory action research component of the study through a cyberspace forum, *webcrones@yorku.ca*, which I conceptualized as a cyberspace community drawing on the work of feminist philosopher, Hilda Lindemann Nelson regarding communities of choice, moral self-definition and the telling of counterstories. Data was analyzed using grounded theory methodology and the constant comparison of data. This study can be located within the fields of Sociology of the Body, Aging and Power as it examines the ways that the body becomes the bearer of cultural meanings and the way that social actors take up those meanings and live through them. In that regard, it reflects on the mesh between agency and structure, consciousness and communities and examines the way social actors are empowered to take up strategic identities, Crone, for example, as a means of negotiating the interaction order. My study suggests that Crone communities structured by relations of interdependence and an ethics of care provide the resources for Crone-identified women to become at long last self-defining.

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At the last, I must confess that in the wee hours of the morning when I was deeply in doubt, and asking “why me,” I could hear my mother’s voice echoing out of the star spangled abyss ... ‘because you can’ she whispered. So I dedicate this work to her, Sara Salkin Lewis.

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# **1. INTRODUCTION**

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*Coming to Crone Consciousness*

## *The Meaning of the Crone*

*Raging Gran, webcroner posting*

Excerpted from the *Parliament Hill Mob Songbook*  
Sung by the Raging Grannies to the tune of *Frère Jacques*

*Saving Money/Saving money  
is our aim, is our aim  
The future's bright and sunny  
for folks with lots of money.  
Some don't have.  
What a shame.*

*Health and homecare/health and homecare  
cut way back/ cut way back  
Those Saintly Older Women  
Will keep the system swimming  
We know this.  
For a fact.*

*Yoo hoo, all you, politicians  
You may find, the going rough:  
We Saintly Older Women  
Are planning revolution  
We're smart, we're mad.  
And we're tough.*

*And we say  
ENOUGH'S ENOUGH!*

## ENTER THE CRONE!

Not so many years ago, I began to call myself a Crone, usually when introducing myself to some new acquaintance. This declaration was made rather sheepishly with a little deprecating chuckle, as in “I’m Gail McCabe, a Crone, you see, heh, heh, heh . . . .” My concept of a Crone at that time was not at all flattering. A Crone was a wretched, old woman; a warty witch with wrinkles and toothless grin.<sup>1, 2</sup> Since I did not look or feel like that, my new introduction set me to wondering about the source of my new definition of self. What exactly did I mean when I called myself a Crone? How did this identity enter my consciousness and why should I describe myself in this ostensibly pejorative fashion?

At an opportune time in my graduate studies, I conducted a small pilot study to examine these questions. I began by surfing through cyberspace looking for Crone traces. This was my introduction to a thick web of Crone connections, websites, mailing lists, bulletin boards and chat rooms mounted by self-proclaimed technoCrones, cyberGrannies and Crone-identified women. Many sites had a page of well-travelled hyperlinks to other Crone sites.<sup>3</sup> A high end glossy magazine, *Crone Chronicles*, publishing quarterly with a circulation of >10,000 was “dedicated to re-activating the archetype of the Crone within contemporary western culture” acting as both catalyst and

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<sup>1</sup> Crone (krɔːn) *n.* An ugly, withered old woman; a hag. [Middle English, from Old North French *carogne*, carrion, cantankerous woman, from Vulgar Latin *\*carnia*, carrion, from Latin *car-*, *car-*, flesh...] The American Heritage Dictionary (3<sup>rd</sup> Edition, 1994)

<sup>2</sup> Crones. “The Great Hags of history, when their lives have not been prematurely terminated have lived to be Crones. . . . They are the Survivors of the perpetual witchcraze of patriarchy, the Survivors of The Burning Times” (Mary Daly, 1978, 16 in Kramer and Treichler, 1989:111)

<sup>3</sup> I assess the level of hyperlink travel from the census taking tools, which count visitors to a site and are a feature of many of these web pages as well as the many requests I had to add such links to my own page.

conduit for Crone networking (*Crone Chronicles*, Spring 2000:4).<sup>4</sup> Two national organizations in the U.S., the Crones Counsel and the International Association of Wise Women also known as International Council of Grandmothers and Crones, host annual conferences for Crones, and several older women's groups integrated aspects of Crone culture in their activities. A sampling of these includes the Amazing Greys, a Vancouver-based social group for older women; the Raging Grannies, a political action street theatre group; and the Crone of Puget Sound, a Seattle-based organization dedicated to deconstructing stereotypes of old women and supporting individual women to develop new more powerful identities (*Crone Connection*, 2002:2).

The findings of the pilot project indicated a vibrant if loosely connected network of aging women linked through the sign of the Crone sparking the doctoral project that culminates in this thesis. The metaphor of **morphing**, an abbreviated version of the term **metamorphosis** surfaced in many of the websites and discussions resonating with my own definitions of a transforming self.<sup>5</sup> Metamorphosis is an apt metaphor for the 'change' experienced by women around and about the menopause. The corporeal transitions of menopause are somewhat akin to the remarkable transformation in form and structure occurring in certain animal species as part of the developmental cycle. Unlike the metamorphosis of animals, however, the corporeal transformations of the

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<sup>4</sup> As of June 5, 2001, *Crone Chronicles* became an e-zine publishing only through the internet with objectives revised "to assist crone networking, strengthen and expand crone community." Back issues of the print version of *Crone Chronicles* are still available for purchase through their website.

<sup>5</sup> Just prior to conducting the pilot study, I had written a paper theorizing the aging experience as gender metamorphosis and so, I was delighted to discover the term used liberally by other women.

menopause have cognitive and social psychological implications as well as physiological ones. Those dual transformations became the substance for this investigation beginning with the defining question, “What is the nature of Crone metamorphosis?” As the ethnographic project that culminates in this thesis began to take shape and my understanding of Crone metamorphosis increased, I added the question “How do Crone-identified women make sense of Crone consciousness, culture and communities?”<sup>6</sup>

In this introductory chapter, I provide a general description of the research design and objectives grounding the study in feminist scholarship; a description of the Crone archetype and the contemporary Crone; an overview of the theoretical formulation and a discussion of the conceptual frameworks that ground it; a statement of the sociological problem informed by a review of literature; and a discussion of the theoretical objectives and relevance of the study for feminist theory and for a sociology of the body, power and aging. The second chapter sets out the theoretical formulation derived from grounded theory methodology and feminist scholarship. The third chapter examines methodological issues, political, philosophical and ethical considerations as well as the sample, methods, and limitations of the study. In the fourth and fifth chapters, I set out the findings and analysis drawing together the themes, patterns and elements that constitute Crone culture and communities and by extension, a Crone consciousness and identity in the world. In the concluding chapter, I revisit the research questions and discuss the significance of the study for feminist praxis and sociological scholarship.

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<sup>6</sup> Here I use the term communities to encompass a range of crone collectives including counsels; wisdom circles; consciousness-raising, conversation, educational groups and the like.

## A STUDY OF CONTEMPORARY CRONES

I begin by locating my inquiry within the broad range of feminist scholarship. The methods and objectives of the study are in keeping with feminist approaches to theory with the defining construct of feminist praxis, “thoughtful reflection and action [occurring] simultaneously” underpinning all (Kirby and McKenna, 1989:34). The point of departure for feminist research is the sexed body and “the social construction of gender in its effects in determining the social position of women” [Lovell in Turner, 1996:310]. Feminist standpoint theory, then, provides a useful way of thinking about the social position of Crones, and I take a Crone standpoint in my analysis of Crone metamorphosis, which I characterize through the constructs of **morphing**, **conscious aging** and **conscious aging activism** (Smith, 1990, 1987; Hartsock, 1996, 1983, 1983b). Morphing is a sensitizing construct used by Crone-identified women to characterize the process of a transforming identity.<sup>7</sup> Conscious aging is a sensitizing construct used by Crone-identified women to describe the process of coming to Crone consciousness and taking a Crone standpoint. Conscious aging activism is a concept derived from grounded theory analysis to reflect the forms of resistance and insubordination that Crone women engage in as an outcome of conscious aging.

My approach to conceptualizing Crone consciousness, culture and communities is informed by the perspectives of feminist critical cultural studies, a hybrid of feminist cultural analysis and critical cultural studies. The conscious aging of Crone-identified

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<sup>7</sup> Sensitizing concept is the term Blumer used for concepts that are conceived of by social analysts as they begin to generalize from data (Blumer, 1954:7 in van den Hoonaard, 1997:3). The identification and application of sensitizing concepts is a key strategy for analysis of my data and I expand more fully on it in the methods chapter.

women in Crone communities exemplifies an **interdependent** model of social relations expanding the scholarship of feminists relative to power and an ethics of care (Allen, 1999; Gatens, 1996; French, 1994; Hartsock, 1983;1996; Lorde, 1984;1988; Frye, 1983). I also draw on the work of feminist philosopher, Hilda Lindemann Nelson. Nelson's conceptual framework links the processes of moral self-definition in **communities of choice** structured by interdependence and an ethics of care with empowerment and resistance in **communities of place**, structured by relations of dominance and subordination and an ethics of rights and justice. Communities of place are structured on the basis of geography, most often defining membership by social status, shared values, beliefs, and experience. Communities of choice are constituted on the basis of shared vision and purpose while difference in experience is often valued as a source of wisdom, insight and expertise. I have applied Nelson's construct of the chosen community to conceptualize Crone meetings, gatherings and wisdom circles. Nelson's framework identifies the potential for Crone culture and communities to initiate personal and social transformation in communities of place (Nelson, 1995; 1999).

## **Research Design and Objectives**

This study can be characterized as **critical ethnography: ethnography** in the sense that I conducted field studies at Crone gatherings employing traditional ethnographic methods, participant observation, focus groups, interviews and content analyses to describe and make sense of Crone consciousness, culture and communities; **critical** in the sense that these elements evolve from feminist counterculture movement, particularly, the Women's Liberation Movement that surfaced in the 1960s. Given this insight, the study that began

as an ethnographic exploration was reframed to include a critical participatory activist dimension in which participants collaborated with me through a cyberspace community forum, *webcrones@yorku.ca* (*webcrones*) to address the objectives of the study, to explore and describe some of the constituent elements of Crone culture, and communities in order to understand how Crone-identified women make sense of Crone metamorphosis and conscious aging. Likewise workshops at Cronos Counsel, an organization hosting semi-annual gatherings of Crone-identified women were structured as focus groups within a participatory action framework.

## **FROM CRONE ARCHETYPE TO CONTEMPORARY CRONE**

The story of the contemporary Crone begins with the abjection or diminished status of old women within western patriarchal culture. For example, social historian, David Fischer, chronicles the process of diminishing the status of old women through “man-made language” (Spender, 1985):

virtually every term of abuse used for old women appears to be as old as the English language itself. *Hag* was a common term in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. It was used to describe a woman suspected of practicing witchcraft, and also any repulsive and ugly old woman. *Crone* is equally antique (Fischer, 1978:92).

In recognition of this abjection of old women, feminists of the second wave defined a need for cultural representations of old women that might counter the dominant discourse from western industrial capitalist patriarchal culture.<sup>8</sup> At the same time, many second wave feminists were rejecting institutionalized religion and a vibrant feminist spirituality

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<sup>8</sup> Second wave feminists also emphasized the marginal status of women in general across the lifespan as well as the social invisibility of older women.

movement was emerging. Much of that movement centred on reclaiming a valued female deity, the Goddess or Crone archetype.

## **The Crone Archetype**

Barbara Walker, who has made the archaeology of women's spirituality her scholarly pursuit, provides a vivid description of the Crone, the third aspect of the triple goddess:

Crone is ... the power, passion, and purpose of ancient female wisdom ... the crowning phase of the ancient Triple Goddess: Maiden/Mother/Crone ... The Crone's title was related to the word crown and she represented the power of the ancient tribal matriarch who made the moral and legal decisions for her subject and descendants (Walker in Crones Counsel FAQ, Crones Counsel website).

Walker expands on the three aspects of 'the goddess' in order to characterize the Crone as a powerful, independent entity advising feminists to seek a new world order:

not in the fear of God, but in the still unknown meanings of the old, grim Goddess who represented fear itself. She is the one we most need to understand: not the pretty Virgin; not the fecund Mother; but the wise, wilful, wolfish Crone (Walker, 1985:12-13).

Walker's book, *The Crone*, is by far the most definitive work on the Crone archetype, although there is a considerable body of work, both scholarly and popular in nature regarding feminist spirituality, the goddess and her three dimensions.

In her groundbreaking essay, "Why Women Need the Goddess: Phenomenological, Psychological and Political Reflections," Carol Christ explains the second wave feminist turn to goddess worship as an expression of women's need for spiritual inclusion in the face of Judaeo-Christian traditional readings of women's corporeality as "more carnal, fleshy, and earthy than the culture-creating males" (in Christ and Plaskow

1992:279).<sup>9</sup> She uses an evocative quote to convey the move from despair to joy experienced with the recognition of self as sacred:

At the close of Ntozake Shange's stupendously successful Broadway play "For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide when the Rainbow is Enuf," a tall beautiful black woman rises from despair to cry out, "I found God in myself and I loved her fiercely" (Christ in Christ and Plaskow, 1992:273).

Above all, feminist resurrections of the Goddess aim to ground "the process of naming and reclaiming the female body and its cycles and processes" (Ibid.:281). This process is accomplished symbolically through the configuration of the Goddess as a sacred trinity: "maiden, mother, and crone" reflecting the culturally defined roles for women at various stages of the lifespan, youth, maturity and later life (Ibid.:281). However, unlike the patriarchal abject old woman, the post-menopausal Crone, as an entity of feminist counterculture embodies the qualities of age, wisdom and power (Walker, 1985). From a sociological perspective, the Crone can be figured as a feminist ideal type old woman. From a political and social psychological perspective, the Crone has entered popular consciousness as an archetype, a cultural icon and a role model for women in later life.

## **The Contemporary Crone**

The following description of women who identify with or as a Crone was derived through participant observation, interviews and focus groups at Crone gatherings as well as content analyses of Crone publications and websites. The *webcrones* cyberspace community provides, by far, the richest source of data for this description since

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<sup>9</sup> There are innumerable eloquent interdisciplinary scholarly and popular articles, essays and books documenting the women's spirituality movement as well as the goddess worship, practice and ritual. I have limited my citations to Christ and Walker, since they have a particular relevance to my investigation of contemporary Crone culture, consciousness and communities.

participants were enjoined to introduce themselves, whenever a newcomer joined the community. Therefore, sandwiched between postings on a broad range of topics are many descriptions of self that taken together provide a distinct picture of the Crone. The process of generalizing a description of the group of women who constitute themselves as Croness is bound to efface the uniqueness of individuals. Nevertheless, for the purpose of characterizing women who might adopt a Crone standpoint, it is useful to consider the common ground that draws these women together. I discuss individual perspectives and points of divergence within the community of Croness at length in the findings and discussion chapters.

As to the question of how to qualify as a Crone, there is a lack of clarity and agreement. When I posed the question to *webcroness* and the Croness Counsel participants, I garnered a range of responses. If one were to use age as the determinant of Crone status, 57 years seemed to be a marker for some of the Croness Counsel participants. On that point, a *webcroness* posting quoted H.L. Mencken: “No matter how long he lives, no man ever becomes as wise as the average woman of forty-eight.” The quote is instructive since it incorporates the corporeal dimension of the perimenopause, “the hold[ing] of blood” as a determinant of wisdom, hence, Crone status (*webcroness* posting; CCVII group three). At the same time, Croness Counsel women identified young women to whom they would ascribe Crone status. For example, one woman’s granddaughter was characterized as “an old soul in a young body,” because she had wisdom of Crone dimensions (CCVII group three). Another woman confirmed this insight, “She’s a Crone for sure” (Ibid.). In that particular focus group, the participants

concluded that age was no determinant of Crone. Rather, with typical Crone whimsy, one of them recounted the logic in her Crone community:

... grey hair doesn't count because some people don't have grey hair. And wrinkles don't count because some people have more than others. And some of them have more than they deserve. I earned every grey hair on my head. But we decided that if you have to get up to go to the bathroom twice a night, then you can be a Crone!" (CCVII focus group one).

The following description reflects the contemporary vision of the Crone archetype as posted on the Crones Counsel website:

*A Crone may be a woman of any color, race, religion, sexual orientation, economic status, educational level, lifestyle, or political persuasion. She may be disabled or abled, introvert or extrovert, single, married, widowed, or partnered. She is like you and me. What does set the Crone apart, however, is her willingness to tell the truth about her life. (Crones Counsel website)*

While this description of Crone possibilities is characterized by diversity, reflecting the values and goals of contemporary feminist movement, I discovered a more socially homogeneous group. In general, the women I observed in focus groups and interviews, the women who subscribed to *webcrones*, the women who created Crone websites on the World Wide Web, tend to be white, middle class, well-educated women. Most have some post-secondary education, many with two and three degrees as well as professional designations. They are doctors, social workers, nurses, high school teachers, librarians, college teachers, published authors, Jungian therapists, addictions counsellors, engineers, ministers and the like. Most of them are mothers and grandmothers. Some of them are married or were married at some point in their life. Some of them have been married several times. Some of them live in same-sex partnerships.

Many of these women are retired while others are still working in their respective fields. Some of them are relatively affluent and able to live independently. A small

percentage define themselves as working class women while many others are living in reduced circumstances in supportive housing or retirement homes as an effect of widowhood, debility and the general lack of adequate pension benefits for women. The Cronos Counsel offers scholarships so that women living in reduced circumstances can more readily attend gatherings. However, the scholarships cover only the registration fees and the added costs of travel, food and accommodations are substantial. This limits the accessibility of the Counsel for many women, although local groups should be able to assemble a more diverse membership. Yet, local groups, the Crone of Puget Sound, Raging Grannies, and Amazing Greys seem to reflect the same economic, racial, and educational demographics and it is these same groups who organize the larger Counsels.

For example, the initial Cronos Counsel was organized by two academics, Ann Kreilkamp, founder and first editor of *Crone Chronicles* holds a PhD in the Philosophy of Science from Boston University while Shauna Adix was the Director of the Women's Center at the University of Utah for 20 years. Helen Redman, another contemporary Crone leader, feminist artist and activist, is also university educated, white and middle class. Redman organizes and conducts workshops and lectures on the Crone. Likewise, there are many Crone academics like myself who are doing graduate degrees, some of them focussing directly on the Crone and the Cronos Counsel. One of these academics is a Native Canadian woman working out of the University of Victoria who connected with me online to discuss Crone identifications. She has since completed a master's thesis with a focus on Cronos and rites of passage (Peekeekoot, 2001). There is also a small contingent of Native American women who are involved in local Crone groups in the

southwest United States and two Native women who are very active on the Crones Counsel board. Nevertheless, their participation is atypical.

In February 2000, concerned by the racial homogeneity in Crone circles, I invited a black woman of my acquaintance to visit *The Crone Project* website and if she was interested to subscribe to the *webcrones* mailing list. She was a woman in her mid-50s, a survivor of cancer looking for some low maintenance intellectual interaction. I cannot say if she ever visited the site. I can say of certainty that she did not subscribe to the mailing list. On *webcrones*, there has been little discussion relative to racial diversity. Economic disparity has surfaced more often as a source of tension exemplified in the following posting:

One thing I see missing in a lot of the literature on “Crones” is a focus on older women who live in ‘poverty status.’ Like me, for example! (Waylaid out of the workforce by disability ... and living on a very small disability income.) Then there are the many women who simply outlived their non-wealthy husbands and are living only on social security ... having to decide whether to buy medicine or groceries. Or women who have retired without savings ... for one reason or another. (Many like me, were single parents who simply could not save enough on our income for a decent retirement.). Our choices for our ‘conscious croning projects’ are much limited to things that do not cost money, which leaves out a return to college, etc. ... And MANY, MANY ... if not most of this group ... do not have, or cannot afford, this wonderful thing called the internet, which has made such a difference in my life! I’m wondering ... how we can reach out to bring more of these women in to the ‘fold of Crones’? (*webcrones* posting).

It seems to follow that Crone-identified women wield a measure of social power by virtue of their education, careers and access to material resources that effectively results in the exclusion of various constituencies of women, women with limited material resources, black women and women of colour. While their absence can be attributed to a cluster of factors, there is no doubt that these constituencies have been historically disempowered and the powerful Crone may hold little potential or appeal for them as a

strategic identity. Of certainty, the very nature of cultural diversity is such that these women may have little inclination to come out as Crones, a cultural icon that does not fit within their cultural framework or resonate with their lived experience. This is a challenge for Crone-identified women who espousing a feminist politic envision a more diverse community of Crones. The challenge goes to bridging the barriers and gaps among women in order to make the necessary connections and to develop solidarity despite difference. Framing the departure for Crone-identification as a willingness to speak the truth about your life is a beginning (*Crones Counsel* website). It must not be conceived of as an end in itself. This is a familiar dilemma for second wave feminists that remains as challenging to these women in their old age as it was in their youth.

The most substantial demographic departure amongst Crones goes to sexual orientation. There are many lesbians subscribed to the *webcrones* community; at least, equal if not greater numbers of lesbians than heterosexual women. In addition, many women have come out as lesbians on *webcrones*. It is a space that allows women the latitude to think about coming out tentatively in safe stages. Likewise, *Crones Counsel* is also a 'queer positive' space prompting this comment: "It's the first place I've ever been in where straight women and lesbian women seem to get on without the tensions that are often in that space and I've been in that space a lot" (CCVII group three). This is not to say that Crones are by definition lesbians or vice versa, but rather that the social invisibility experienced by lesbians across the lifespan is also experienced by heterosexual women around and about the menopause such that they are more likely to share common ground at this point in the life course. Feminist scholars have noted that

women as a recognizable group are less 'visible' than their male counterparts as a function of sexism. However, this invisibility is so exacerbated in the case of lesbians and older women that it bears analysis and figures in my understanding of Crone morphing. I expand further on the concept of social invisibility as well as the resonance between Cronos and lesbians where applicable in this thesis.

## **MORPHING THE CRONE: A THEORY OF PERSONAL AND SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION**

The theoretical formulation elaborated here was derived through grounded theory methodology (Charmaz, 2000; Rennie, 1998, 2000; van den Hoonaard, 1997; Babchuk, 1997; Strauss and Corbin, 1990, 1994; Glaser, 1992; Kirby and McKenna, 1989; Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Following the precepts of grounded theory, I began by investigating the social phenomenon of Crone identification. In keeping with feminist methodology, my interest was grounded in my own experience and that of other women. As the study unfolded, theoretical concepts were derived from the constant comparison of data collected with mixed methods across numerous sites. Grounded theory analysis located the study in the fields of body, power and aging and I drew upon feminist and sociological scholarship in these areas to develop a theory of Crone morphing.

My intention in elaborating this theory is not to preclude the possibility of other theories that might be developed from subsets of data collected for this study. There is scope for examining a number of issues relative to aging, grief and loss, widowhood, and social isolation, for example. That I put forward this particular theory goes to my research

questions and academic interests as well as the insights of the participants in the study. Since this is a participatory action research project, the theory has evolved from the constant comparison of data with concepts scrutinized by the participants in a dialogical process. No single reading, my own or that of any one participant, can possibly encompass the range of interpretations on any one theme. Therefore, while my goal has been to weave these interpretations together to put forward a fuller understanding of Crone morphing, I have also included readings against the grain to reflect a broader range of interpretations for the data. These I discuss in the findings and discussion chapters.

### **The Argument in Brief**

In this thesis, I argue that Crone metamorphosis is a complex transformation in identity experienced by some women around and about the menopause, from abject old woman to powerful Crone. This transformation of identity encompasses social psychological, corporeal and cognitive dimensions. As an effect of second wave feminist movement, the Crone now surfaces in popular consciousness as an archetype, a cultural icon, a role model and feminist ideal type for women in later life. While Crone-identification by definition is the result of collective resistance to the pejorative constructions of old women framed in dominant culture, it also represents a transformation in the individual's sense of self, their personal relationships, their life aspirations and the decisions they make regarding their life circumstances. Thus I find two separate yet intertwined meanings embedded in Crone identification and the concept of morphing the Crone. Feminists are morphing the Crone as a political project with the goal of socio-cultural

transformation; individual women as they encounter the challenges of aging are morphing the Crone as a project of self-definition and personal empowerment.

## **Crone Metamorphosis**

This study began with the question, “What is the nature of Crone metamorphosis?” While the corporeal transformations of the menopause are observable as wrinkles, graying hair and other signs on the body, the social implications of women’s aging are not so apparent. Nevertheless, aging women in the Crone population also experience a transformation in social status, which I have conceptualized as social invisibility and personified through the construct of the abject old woman.

The term abject is defined in Merriam Webster as “sunk to or existing in a low state or condition.” It goes almost without saying that the aging experience of individual women is mitigated by the confluence of many factors, temperament, class, ethnicity, race, ability, occupation, marital status and social networks for example. Therefore, my construct of the abject old woman personifies their status not as individuals but in a more general sense as a cultural group. By that I mean that abjection is a socially constructed condition that frames the experience of aging women as a group, as opposed to any individual perception of lived experience. Almost without exception, participants in this study reported the experience and effects of social invisibility in their lives. Their reports differ markedly in their perception of their experience. These I discuss at length in the findings and discussion chapters. The construct of the abject old woman as a cultural

representation is useful as a point of departure for Crone morphing. The powerful Crone is the antithesis of the abject old woman.

Underlying the metamorphosis to abject old woman is the cultural tradition that ascribes meaning and value to women on the basis of their reproductive capacities and casts them as obsolete at the menopause. The morphing of Crones is thus conceptualized as a further transformation, a strategic self-transformation with social psychological dimensions that moves the individual from abject old woman to powerful Crone, woman of age, wisdom and power. Underlying this second transformation is a dual intention: resistance to the dominant cultural traditions that define and reduce women's experience across the lifespan to reproductive roles and transformation of the cultural formation and structural relations of power that marginalize women's experience of the self and the social culminating in the social invisibility of old women. From a social psychological perspective, women morph the Crone in a process of self-definition locating the sacred 'self' lost to them around and about the menarche.

### **Coming to Critical Consciousness**

The process by which the transformation of identity is accomplished goes to my second question, "How do Crone women make sense of Crone consciousness, culture and communities?" Here, I argue that the emergence of Crone consciousness, culture and community is directly related to idea of feminist praxis, thoughtful reflection and practical action taken together, evolving from the second wave feminist counterculture movements of the 1960s. These movements were aimed at transforming the personal and

the political, the 'self' and the 'society' in which girls, women and Crones reside. The social system or sociocultural formation in question is Western culture framed by industrial capitalism and patriarchy. I also refer to this social system as dominant culture or dominant reality throughout this thesis. The self or identity at issue is that of woman as she is socially defined within dominant culture.

My findings and analysis suggest that the morphing of Crones, individual and collective is a strategic process by which the cohort of women who were influenced by second wave feminist counterculture now seek to resolve the symbolic and social contradictions experienced around and about the menopause at the same time as they engage in collective action for socio-cultural transformation. As such, the morphing of Crones is the core concept for making sense of Crone consciousness, culture and communities. The method by which the second wave feminist counterculture engendered transformation was feminist consciousness-raising conducted in groups or communities organized for that purpose. Radical feminist Catherine MacKinnon provides a definitive explanation of the method:

As Marxist method is dialectical materialism, feminist method is consciousness raising: the collective critical reconstitution of the meaning of women's social experience, as women live through it. ... (1989:83).

McKinnon characterizes the consciousness raising "... process [as] transformative as well as perceptive" and therefore, "the pursuit of consciousness becomes a form of political practice" since it seeks to get at the ideologies that underpin everyday life and to revalue those goods that have been constructed as spoiled (1989:84). While individual women who participate in Crone communities may differ in their definition of the situation, and

hold varying degrees of commitment to Crone conscious aging and conscious aging activism, they are nevertheless by their presence participating in the collective imagination of the Crone as a powerful cultural icon and by their individual actions they are representing old women as powerful beings in dominant reality. This meets the criteria for a feminist praxis: in the action of representing themselves powerfully, they expose the ideological meanings embedded in the (mis)representations or absent representations of old women in dominant culture.

### **Conscious Aging and Conscious Aging Activism**

I argue that social invisibility around and about the menopause motivates some women to participate in consciousness raising, leading to action and activism that results in transformation. Transformation occurs at the level of community through the symbiotic processes of conscious aging and conscious aging activism. Personal transformation is an effect of conscious aging, coming to Crone consciousness, and acquiring a Crone standpoint that enables the woman to be critical about her own situation, and the situation of women within the web of social relationships that encompass women's lives. Social transformation is an effect of conscious aging activism. Crone-identified women become engaged in practical action and activist agendas that propagate the structural relations of power and culture of Crone communities into the social structures of western industrial capitalist patriarchy.

Conscious aging evolves in communities akin to feminist consciousness-raising groups constituted by women at Crone gatherings, wisdom circles, clubs and counsels.

These are communities of choice, structured by interdependence and an ethics of care with the collective and individual empowerment of the community as an outcome. These structural and cultural conditions open a space for the telling of experiential stories, for moral self-definition and for critical reflection. Through critical reflection of their experiences Crones come to consciousness about the conditions that shape their everyday lives and now engage in the telling of **counterstories**, stories that overwrite the discourse of dominant culture that have mediated their lives in their communities of place. This is a process of self-definition, the naming and reclaiming of self that empowers Crones to redefine their roles and goals; to develop action plans that run counter to social expectations for older women and women in general and to participate in conscious aging activism through which they intend to transform cultural traditions and their social world.

Conscious aging activism occurs when women are empowered to strive for change in the communities of place in which they reside, work, and participate in communal life, in social and personal relationships. Communities of place reflect the structural relations of dominance and subordination and an ethics of rights and justice that are characteristic of dominant culture and result in differential access and opportunities to create the material and abstract social goods of the society. Crone-identified women seek transformation in these conditions through ongoing consciousness-raising activities and activism within political, social, and cultural spheres in these communities of place.

## **CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORKS**

It must be noted at the outset that culture is an exceedingly complex concept that resists definition in the face of its dynamic qualities, fragmentation and the multiplicity of ways that individuals perceive and situate themselves culturally and draw on their cultural perceptions to motivate and make sense of their experience and actions. Likewise, culture is defined differently relative to academic discipline or theoretical discourse. Since this thesis is positioned within feminist critical cultural studies, I set out the precepts relative to culture from that framework.

### **A Critical Cultural Studies Approach To Culture and Identities**

Stuart Hall at the vanguard of critical cultural studies, has argued that culture as a term of reference has lost its signifier (in Hall and DuGay,1996:2-3). This destabilization of the ground of culture can be seen as an effect not only of postcolonial, poststructural and post-modern deconstructions of historical grand narratives but also of globalization, “the massive global flows of people, capital, and ideas” that preclude the possibility of a culture insulated from external intrusions (Mathews, 2000:3-4; Brah, 1996:1-16; Hall in Hall and DuGay,1996:1-16). Indeed, the notion of culture as a “global supermarket” where individuals ‘shop’ the cultural shelves for artefacts and practices to be layered on or off at will, while it frames culture and identity in the language of capitalist production and consumption nevertheless lends itself to the notion of a culture of Cronos (Isajiw, 1999:202; Mathews, 2000:21). A space is opened for thinking about how individuals

might construct identities as a mesh between a field of potentials and the significations of place that are always already ascribed to particular bodies through culture (Goffman in Lemert and Branaman, 1997:95-96; Hall in Hall and DuGay, 1996:5; Brah, 1996:8-10).<sup>10</sup>

O’Sullivan et al. in the dictionary of *Key Concepts in Communication and Cultural Studies* now define culture as “the social production and reproduction of sense, meaning and consciousness,” conceptualizing culture as a malleable concept to be mobilized within particular discourses (1994, 68). This definition exemplifies the detachment of culture from communities of place and alludes to both the complexity and the political possibilities inherent in the construction of cultures and fashioning of identities. As a basis for introducing feminist approaches to culture here, I briefly trace the evolution of culture as a conceptual category and object of knowledge for academic interest and particularly, the interests of critical cultural studies.

### **The Struggle for the Sign**

Hebdige identifies two “trajectories” for cultural studies: one, an anthropological project that seeks to clarify “the meanings of values implicit and explicit in a particular way of life, a particular culture,” and two, the notion of “culture as a standard of aesthetic excellence,” a project for poets and scholars alike (1991:5-6). This last has traditionally been conceptualized as art and characterized as elite or high culture. The pairing of culture with elitism suggests the connections between culture and class and the role of politics in the construction of cultural meanings, values and practices. Thus critical

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<sup>10</sup> The notion of a global supermarket for cultural wares has its greatest purchase in developed countries where modes of communication and ideal culture promote commodity consumption or, at least, are subject to the commodification of what they perceive to be their ‘own’ culture.

theorists have juxtaposed the notions of popular culture, folk culture and mass culture as forms of popular or low culture against elite culture as the highest standard of “aesthetic excellence” to get at the historical and political possibilities bundled into traditional and contemporary readings of culture.

The distinctions between elite, folk, popular and mass culture are closely linked to theories of social organization and change, such that a full elaboration goes beyond the scope of this thesis (Strinati, 1995: 9). However, these distinctions are significant for balancing the constraints of structural systems against the potential of social actors to constitute culture through particular practices, tastes, styles, fashions and artefacts. So some cultural theorists have argued that mass or popular culture has democratizing potential since these cultural forms intervene in the class divisions and hierarchies that have traditionally determined what stands for ‘culture’ (Strinati, 1995:5-8). For example, Hebdige argues that “Style in subculture is ... pregnant with significance” because it allows for subversion of the dominant discourse or cultural consensus through control of the sign (1991:18). In the case of this thesis, the Crone is the contested sign and the site of struggle is the old woman’s body. At stake is the possibility for self-definition and empowerment through the subversion of dominant discourses that connect women to reproduction and by extension, devalue old women as obsolescent at the menopause.

### **Hegemonic Culture**

The critical cultural theory approach to culture builds on Marxist and neo-Marxist theories of ideology to integrate class as a key dimension of cultural analysis. Culture is conceived of as a hegemonic production that elicits the “acceptance of the ideas, values

and leadership of the dominant group” with little resort to coercion or physical force (Hebdige, 1991:6-7, 16; Strinati, 1995:166; Smith, 1987:19). In Gramscian terms, hegemony prevails when the interests of dominant classes are taken up spontaneously as the common sense wisdom of the masses. Hegemony is accomplished not so much by design as by position with dominant groups controlling institutional and mass mediated, image-based modes of cultural production, such that the ideological meanings encoded as a function of the relations of production come to saturate the everyday world.<sup>11</sup> Thus

French author, Roland Barthes, argued that modern society is

steeped in this anonymous ideology: our press, our films, our theatre, our pulp literature, our rituals, our Justice, our diplomacy, our conversations, our remarks about the weather, a murder trial, a touching wedding, the cooking we dream of, the garments we wear, everything in everyday life is dependent on the representation which the bourgeoisie has and makes us have of the relations between men and the world. (Barthes in Hebdige, 1991:9).

Applying the principles of semiology, Barthes’ cultural analysis of the everyday world exposes the ideological meanings captured in cultural representations, in both material and abstract culture, discourses, objects and practices such that we recognize that “ideology thrives beneath consciousness” (Hebdige, 1991:11). Cultural signs act upon us through a process that escapes us since at the level of consciousness we understand them to be *only* common sense (Ibid.:11). The argument from critical cultural theory, then, is that signs and sign systems are only decipherable through a conscientious critical interrogation, a sort of planned digging at the roots of surface matters (Hebdige, 1991:12). That

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<sup>11</sup> There has been extensive scholarship in media and cultural studies that demonstrates the key role of image-based culture in influencing and shaping cultural dimensions of the life world in developed nations. For example, Sut Jhally, Professor of Communication, University of Massachusetts, Amherst found that individuals in the West see on average approximately 3600 commercial images daily and this effectively results in the colonization of culture for commercial and corporate interests (Jhally, 1997).

argument is key to my thesis, since I argue that morphing the Crone is a process of coming to critical consciousness in order to take a Crone standpoint. This allows Crone-identified women to get at the roots of hegemonic cultural representations and take action to subvert dominant discourses given through patriarchal capitalist culture.

### **Feminist Cultural Analysis**

For the purposes of this thesis, culture is conceptualized within the discursive space of feminist scholarship and particularly, the feminist cultural analyses made by radical and socialist feminists in their critique of western industrial capitalist patriarchal culture. Culture is conceptualized as the “the site through which social relations are legitimated and mystified, the site through which the social order is constructed, categorized, experienced, regulated, and made meaningful and pleasurable” (Birrell and Cole, 1994:100 in McCabe, 1997:5). Through culture “the standpoint of men” is represented as universal and projected as women’s reality (Smith, 1987:17-22; Spender, 1985[1980]:1-6). This condition has been maintained by women’s exclusion “from the making of ideology, of knowledge, and of culture” in all but the most limited and individual cases and never as representative of female sex/gender (Smith, 1987:17-18). Rather culture has been accessible to women only through a “limited zone” of consumption such that “the ways in which we think about ourselves and one another and about our society -- our images of how we should look, our homes, our lives, even our inner worlds” are shaped by the ideological representations of a singularly patriarchal cultural formation emerging with the “development of a capitalist mode of production” (Ibid.:17-18).

## **Feminist Critical Cultural Studies**

Feminist critical cultural theorists now seek to redress the absence of sex/gender both in the making of culture and in critical analyses of culture by placing women at the centre of inquiry. At the same time, the recognition that sex/gender cannot be abstracted from the whole complex of socially signifying categories constitutes a serious analytical and political challenge to feminist theory that leads to the destabilization of the very bases of solidarity. Hill Collins suggests that it is analytically unsound to conceive of gender, race, class, age and other social markers as either biologically or culturally determined identities, mutually exclusive social categories or “distinctive social hierarchies” (Hill Collins, 1991:62). Rather they are better conceptualized as dynamic sets of intersecting social relations shaped and structured by cultural norms, conventions, values, and practices that mediate our everyday lives (Ibid.:62).

In order to make that critical analysis, feminist critical cultural theorists conceive of culture as both abstract and concrete in its manifestation through everyday practices, processes and discourses (McCabe, 1997:5). Through culture, our perceptions of the body are shaped, constrained and inscribed. Sex/gender is (re)produced, naturalized and confirmed through stereotypical and normative sexed or gendered practices and the reiteration of signifying discourses as a process of cultural negotiation (Ibid.:5).<sup>12</sup> By cultural negotiation, I mean that the sexing of the body is a dynamic process, a “lived relation” in which the embodied self participates by actively constructing the sexed self

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<sup>12</sup> Here discourse refers to the Foucauldian concept defined as “sets of ‘deep principles’ incorporating specific ‘grids of meaning’ which underpin, generate and establish relationships between all that can be seen, thought and said (Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1982 and Foucault, 1974 in Shilling, 1993:75).

through the consumption and reproduction of “identities, consciousness, and subjectivities,” that are represented to us through mass or popular culture (Althusser in Birrell and Cole, 1994:12 in McCabe, 1997:6).

### **Contesting the Sign: From Crone Archetype to Cultural Icon**

Since hegemony relies on the implicit consent of subordinate groups, Hall contends that it is maintained only so long as the dominant classes “succeed in framing all competing definitions within their range ... ” (Hall in Hebdige, 1991, 16). In that way, subordinate groups are not so much controlled as “contained within an ideological space which does not seem at all ‘ideological:’ which appears to be permanent and ‘natural,’ to lie outside history, to be beyond particular interests” (Hall in Hebdige, 1991:16). For example, the emergence of the ‘strong-woman-Amazon’ type in post-‘80s popular culture, Zena the Warrior Woman, Lara Croft, Tomb Raider, the Spice Girls and the like can be understood as the framing of feminist political desires and demands in a cultural product that still manages to produce the female body as a sexualized object that conforms to the dominant demands of capitalism and patriarchy (Rapping, Kuhn, Haskell in Hanson and Maxcy, 1996:273-295). Hegemony cannot be taken for granted but must be “won, reproduced, sustained” through a continuous process of cultural negotiation that Gramsci characterized as a “moving equilibrium” (Hall in Hebdige, 1991:16).

Culture and its products are always available for deconstruction and demystification through critical analyses. Moreover, cultural “commodities can be symbolically ‘repossessed’ ” and invested with new and oppositional meanings by those groups from which they originated (Ibid.:16). It is this process of repossession and reconstruction

that is at work in the feminist political project of morphing the Crone. The Crone as a contested sign can be understood as the strong woman of feminist demands emerging from outside of patriarchal hegemonic cultural representations, therefore positioned to destabilize the heterosexual hierarchies that structure dominant culture by overwriting the hegemonic narratives that contain and constrain women in the ideological space of reproduction and exclude or marginalize her on those bases.

## **THE SOCIOLOGICAL PROBLEM: WOMEN'S EXPERIENCE OF SOCIAL INVISIBILITY**

Around and about the menopause, many women find themselves facing a double passage, corporeal and social. The physical body is transformed through the period-menopause marked by a range of visible signs such as graying hair, wrinkled faces, eye bags, dry skin, liver spots and thickening bodies (Chrisler and Ghiz, 1993:69-72). The corporeal transformations of menopause have been pathologized in western industrial capitalist patriarchal traditions (Martin, 1992:173-177; Ussher, 1989:104-114; Fausto-Sterling, 1999 169-178; Gannon, 1998:105-104). The result is that post-menopausal women are constructed as unproductive, spoiled goods to be set aside like “a shameful secret that is unseemly to mention” (de Beauvoir, 1972b:1). Maguire’s research suggests that the construction of older women through “pejorative labels like “old bag,” “crone,” and “mutton dressed as lamb” tend to conflate the symbolic meaning of woman with youth, femininity, beauty and sexuality (Maguire, 1995:559). In consequence, images of older women in patriarchal culture are scarce and those we do see are mainly of a commercial

nature calling for women to resist the ‘scourge of age’ with the application of wrinkle creams, vigorous exercise and cosmetic surgeries (Abu Laban and McDaniel in Mandell, 1995:111-114; Arber and Ginn, 1991:41-43, 47; Gee and Kimball, 1987:106; Itzin, 1986:119). This effect compounds ageism with sexism and reflects the need for gendered analyses of aging (McDaniel, 1988:18; Arber and Ginn, 1991, 1995; Browne, 1998; Onyx et al, 1999). In commercial advertisements, the models representing old women belie any claim to old age, their youthful appearance supporting instead the claims of marketers regarding their products. McDaniel contends with an ironic tone that there are *few* “wise old women” in society if cultural representations are to be trusted [my emphasis] (1988:15). “ ‘Older but wiser’ these days on TV is limited to a 16-year-old girl advising a 14-year-old on sanitary protection!” (McDaniel, 1988:15). Thus I argue that even those representations that do exist exacerbate the condition of social invisibility described by participants in this study as well as feminist scholars.

The double passage is marked then by corporeal change as well as social change in status, material circumstances, relationships, and a host of other psychosocial factors. Pearlman’s notion of “late mid-life astonishment” evokes the sudden awareness that ‘the change’ has now become the dynamic condition of life and for women in particular, change is accompanied by “disruptions to self-esteem and identity” (1993:1). These disruptions surface in the literature through metaphors of contradiction and paradox between lived experience and cultural representations. It seems that men sink slowly into old age while women are hurtled there rather early on by the corporeal conditions that mark their lives. Men mature while women become “frail, dependent, manipulative,

feeble-minded, prone to disease and ‘over the hill’ ” (Cohen, 1984:26; Onyx et al, 1999:18). Cool and McCabe (1987:58) frame this disparity as the “paradox of age,” while other terms of reference include the double standard, double jeopardy, double whammy, double consciousness, my own double passage and so on (Sontag, 1972; Cohen, 1984:26,39; McDaniel, 1988:15; Condor in Ussher, 1989:11; Itzin, 1990:119; Arber and Ginn, 1991:41; Abu-Laban and McDaniel, 1997:80-82;).

In a *Harper’s Magazine* article, “Joie de Vivre,”<sup>13</sup> De Beauvoir characterizes “the feminine disadvantage” as follows: “a woman, then, continues in her state as erotic object right up to the end. Chastity is not imposed upon her by a physiological destiny but by her position as a relative being” (1972b:39). Here, de Beauvoir is referring to the process of social construction that invests objects or things with meaning. In the case of women, the menopause does not affect their capacity for sexual desire or their desire for full participation in social life. However, women are now constructed and inducted into a “cycle of self-fulfilling prophecies” that constructs them as socially and intellectually incompetent on the basis of groundless stereotypes (O’Beirne in Onyx et al. 1999:9; Martin, 1992:175). In contradiction to the institutional discourse and practices of medicine that construct menopause as a pathological condition with severe, debilitating effects, women report a “release of new energy and potentiality” at the menopause that enables them to take “new steps toward independence, strength, and power” (Martin, 1992:176-177). Indeed, McDaniel contends that the menopause frees older women from their ascribed roles as sexualized objects enabling them to engage in political activism or

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<sup>13</sup> Given the subject matter of the article, I interpret the term ‘joie de vivre’ to mean sexuality.

more personally rewarding activities (McDaniel, 1988:18-21). It is these activities of women around and about the menopause that I conceptualize as conscious aging activism.

In her landmark text, *Look Me in the Eye: Old Women, Aging and Ageism*, Barbara Macdonald provides a compelling description of the cultural devaluation and “invisibility of old women.” She was particularly irate that this social invisibility went beyond patriarchy to include feminist and lesbian feminist networks.

... take Plexus, for more than a dozen years the newspaper of the women’s movement in San Francisco and beyond advertised itself in the Women’s Yellow Pages: “The award-winning national newspaper that has been reaching 18-54-year-old women for eleven years.” I regret the recent demise of Plexus, but I have to recognize that it is a newspaper that took pride in announcing it was not for me or for you. (Macdonald with Rich, 1991 [1983] 148-49)

Macdonald rails against the feminist newspaper that not only excludes her age group from its target audience but also takes *pride* in declaring it to be so [my emphasis]. Old feminist that she is, she expresses her frustration and her indignation not only with her own social invisibility, but more especially for the cultural blindness practiced by a political group which ostensibly should know better. While Macdonald might explain her erasure from cultural representation as an effect of a patriarchal society, such explanations do not stand up so well in explaining the practices of her own power base.

One particular website provides insights on the ethos of Crone symbolism and culture. Web author and feminist artist Helen Redman frames her work in terms of bringing her “Wise Woman Crone” to life, “birthing it, so to speak, through [her] art” (*Birthing the Crone* website). As Redman tells it, the birthing project was precipitated at the menopause, an embodied experience that “shook mind, body and spirit” with the

website designed to confront “cultural phobias” about growing older (*Birthing the Crone* website). Her project begins “at home ... within our own bodies,” but her objectives extend beyond the personal (Ibid.). Redman characterizes the project as “a woman’s issue [and] a dialogue with others” that celebrates women’s aging while resisting the “interweave of ageism and sexism that affects our healthcare, self-esteem, work and relationships” (Ibid.).

I find it productive to link Macdonald’s complaint to Redman’s Crone project. *BirthingtheCrone.com* is Redman’s response to the fundamental dilemma for aging women in modern industrial societies. Firstly, they live a great deal longer than prior generations of women with a life expectancy that extends anywhere from 20 to 30 years beyond the menopause (McDaniel, 1986:64). Secondly, the physical signs and symptoms of aging that women experience around and about the menopause are deemed pathological by a patriarchal bio-medical hegemony (Fausto-Sterling, 1999:169-178; Gannon and Stevens, 1998:2,7,9,12-13; Mansfield and Voda, 1993:89,100-101). Thirdly, since women are no longer fertile at the menopause, their social status is profoundly diminished to the extent that they are virtually absent from cultural representations (McDonald with Rich, 1991[1983]; Walker, 1985:31; Itzin, 1986; Arber and Ginn, 1991:2,36). When women in later life are portrayed in cultural representations, they tend to be stereotyped as obsolescent, in mental and physical decline, as sweet little grannies or their opposite, domineering harridans (Arber and Ginn, 1991:46; Cool and McCabe, 1987; Ingrisch in Arber and Ginn, 1995:42; Itzin, 1986). Small wonder then, that the experience of menopause shakes the mind, spirit and body of women!

How aging women respond to and resist diminished socioeconomic status at the menopause is a question that has yet to be explored in its fullest dimensions. Likewise, the role of feminist praxis in the changing social context of women's lives as they age has yet to be fully considered. Macdonald wrote her landmark treatise on women, aging and ageism in 1983, with a second edition in 1991. According to her very little had changed in the eight years that separated the two editions. The question turns to how feminists have responded to her challenges and in particular, given the aging demographics of second wave feminist women, how might these women work through their own process of aging? It is arguable that making the personal political as a value of Crone culture links Crone networks to second wave radical feminist movements that took as their motto "the personal is political." Indeed, Rountree's research suggests that women are reclaiming the Crone as a consequence of the women's spirituality movement emerging from second wave feminism (1997:213). However, Crone networking may well have evolved the motto for a somewhat different project, exemplified in the Crone of Puget Sound statement of purpose:

Crone is an organization that encourages and supports the *personal* unfolding and passage of its members from past outgrown roles and stereotypes into powerful, passionate and satisfying old womanhood [my emphasis] (*Crone Connection*, 2002:2).

Given this Crone manifesto, the constructs of power, passion and the politics of the personal become salient to the morphing of Crones. Therefore, I integrate feminist scholarship relative to these concepts to develop my analysis of women's embodied experience of transformation, personal and political at the menopause as they surface in Crone consciousness, culture and communities.

## **TOWARDS A SOCIOLOGY OF THE BODY, POWER, AND AGING**

The departure for this dissertation lies at the nexus of a sociology of the body, power and aging. Until quite recently, the body has been conspicuously absent from classical social theory, such that Turner contends there has been a “theoretical prudery with respect to human corporeality ... which constitutes an analytical gap at the core of sociological enquiry” (Turner, 1996:60). Two points of interest emerge from Turner’s statement, the question of an ‘analytical gap’ and the question of ‘theoretical prudery.’ Turner locates the ‘analytical gap’ in the emergence of modern sociology as a “discipline which took the social meaning of human interaction as its principal object, claiming that the meaning of social actions can never be reduced to biology or physiology” (Ibid.:61). His position on aging, which likewise receives short shrift from sociology, goes to the same logic. Aging as a biological or physiological process has been consigned to the body where it has been deemed a pathological condition. Turner tends to redress this dislocation of the body from sociology by making a dual account of the body distinguishing between the “subjective experience of embodiment” and the objective “physicality of the body” (Ibid.:32-33).

In contrast, feminist philosopher, Elizabeth Grosz, locates the roots of sociology’s “conceptual blind spot” much earlier on in Western philosophy’s splitting of the human subject in the binary opposition of “mind and body, ... reason and passion, psychology and biology” (1994:3). The tendency to dichotomy is not in and of itself the source of the negation of the body. Rather, it is the hierarchical configuring of mind over body that

locates the corporeal body as the “suppressed, subordinated, negative counterpart” of the mind (Grosz, 1994:3). The tendency to privilege mind over body was deeply etched in European culture by the enlightenment scientific and philosophical knowledge projects informed to a great extent by the philosophy of Rene Descartes. His famous dictum, *cogito ergo sum*, provided the intellectual legitimation for mechanistic conceptions of the body and the deeply etched divisions between rationality and the passions or emotions, which are configured as unfortunate emanations from a necessary, but suspect human contraption (Grosz, 1994; Phillips, 2000). The configuring of aspects of the social world in hierarchical binary oppositions now resonates through multiple significant spheres: mind/body; male/female; culture/nature; dominance/subordination and so on.

Grosz contends that the “insidious” implications of hierarchical binary oppositions can be clarified by stringing them out in connective constituencies, the mind with its binary siblings male, reason, dominance, and culture as privileged characteristics relegate the absent body to the female sphere also long absent from classical social theory (1994:3). In the configuration of body with its connective constituencies of female, nature, passion, and object, we begin to understand the underlying constructions that move Turner to characterize the exclusion of the body as a function of some version of ‘prudery;’ whether it is sexual or theoretical is a moot point. The exclusion of the body arguably goes to its close relations with female sexuality and as Grosz emphasizes in her analysis, cultural definitions of “female sexuality and women’s powers of reproduction” are filtered through a patriarchal lens that connects women more closely to the body than men (Ibid.:13-14). As to the bodies of women, they have been opposed to the male body

and more closely linked to sexuality, death, illness, birth, and filth (Young, 1993:xix). At the same time, the female body has “undergone a transmutation from the grotesque to the ethereal, ... from the demonic to the romantic, the low to the high” (Ibid.:xix). Her analysis suggests that the body is always layered over with social meanings that are dynamic and open to transformation.

The construction of women as mentally defective leads directly to their subjugation and as Smith argues, their exclusion from the relations of ruling and the ideological production of culture (Smith, 1987). Given these circumstances, it is not surprising then, that the body has been central to the analyses of feminist scholars. Feminists of the second wave, Millet, Firestone, Dworkin, Griffin, Rubin, MacKinnon and others, have theorized the female body as a site of struggle and women as ‘victims’ or ‘survivors’ of patriarchal power and masculine hegemonies. Such analyses configure power as structural relations of dominance and subordination in the mold of exchange, rational choice or agonistic theories of power proposed by classical and contemporary social theorists, Marx, Weber, Parsons, Homans, Blau and Foucault among others (Hartsock in Hirschmann and Di Stefano, 1996; Hartsock,1983).

Hartsock argues that agonistic theories of power based on class analyses and market models do not adequately explain women’s relational practices (Hartsock in Hirschmann and Di Stefano, 1996; Hartsock, 1983; Smith 1987). Such theories are grounded in the same stereotypical dualistic assumptions and hierarchical binary oppositions that, in general, are inadequate for theorizing a variegated social world populated by a diversity of embodied human subjects. Further, they tend to extrapolate

social relations out of the ground of everyday lived experience as if the mundane details in which these relations take place are of no consequence (Smith, 1987). Such abstractions efface the experience of particular bodies, socially and culturally defined bodies, marked and signified as sexed and gendered, raced, and aged, able and otherwise (Grosz, 1994). Rather they generalize a theory informed by their authors' lived experience to all embodied subjects, an androcentric account framed as universal truth (Rowbotham, 1973:11; Smith, 1987:19-22; 1990:31; Spender, 1985:1).

The notion of power as relations of dominance and subordination has been effectively embedded in culture and naturalized through the signification of bodies within biologically determined categories (Yanigasko and Delaney, 1995:1). Sex, gender, race, sexual orientation, caste and ability by virtue of their biological essence are deemed inevitable and immutable and offer an explanation for the enduring oppression of certain groups of people and the privileging of others. Here, biology can be construed as a sort of originary narrative that takes on a sacred significance providing legitimacy for hierarchies of power that are the material outcome of relations of power figured as dominance and subordination (Yanigasko and Delaney, 1995:1-2). By the early '80s, many feminists were beginning to understand that conceptualizing power as relations of dominance and subordination did not adequately explain the range and diversity of women's lived experience or the ways in which women might be empowered as social actors in their own right (Cohen, 1982:230; Hartsock, 1983:3; Charles, 1996:13). Moreover, feminists were beginning to recognize the alienation produced by a feminist

politic with which many women did not identify (Cohen, 1982; Sommers, 1994; Douglas, 1994; Lehrman, 1997).

From a political perspective, the failure to develop alternative configurations of power earlier in the second wave has proved disastrous for feminist movement. Many women did not espouse feminism because of the perception that feminist rhetoric discounted their own sense of power; others found their experience and needs were marginalized by feminist discourse and feminist political agendas. Moreover, those committed to feminist movement are continually confronted with an energy-draining divisiveness, a politics of identity and difference that reproduces the politics of dominance and subordination (Patai and Koertge, 1994; Lehrman, 1997:160-61; Douglas, 1994:17-20). Consequently, we find that just as feminists are producing highly creative analyses of power, many women, young and old, eschew any ties to feminism; have little or no sense of feminist consciousness or feminist history and little awareness of the structural constraints imposed by the intersections of gender, race, class, ability, age and other signifying social categories. Instead they have bought into the notion of *grrl power*, a particularly contentious and ambiguous term, debated amongst feminist scholars.<sup>14</sup>

My intention here is not to disparage the praxis of second-wave feminists; I consider myself an active participant in those efforts. Nor do I wish to diminish the

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<sup>14</sup> Since a full discussion of the term exceeds the scope of this paper, I provide only my own analytical definition, derived from interactions with my students of mass media and popular culture. These women project a peculiar ignorance of feminism, in general and second-wave feminist political movement, in particular. All the more ironic, since it was second-wave politics opened the doors of academe to them. In my experience, their attitude is partially a function of “backlash” along with the promulgation of a general belief that women have now attained “equality.” The discourse of “grrl power” is an ideological construct that appeases these young women and obscures the global structural constraints to the agency, subjectivity, material and corporeal security of ‘women’ (Gamble, 2000, 45-54).

effects of the “backlash” against women in general and feminist movement in particular produced by a pervasive, hierarchical, hegemonic social system (Cohen, 1982:230; Faludi, 1992). As Gatens points out, the new feminist theories of power owe much to early second-wave feminist scholarship: “... if previous feminists had not attempted to use dominant theories to explicate women’s socio-political status, the difficulties inherent in that project would not have come to light” (Gatens, 1996:62-3). Rather, my interest is to contribute to the feminist project of conceptualizing a version of power that is a better fit for understanding how structural relations of power are contextualized within particular communities of interest through the agency and intention of social actors.

In order to add to the growing body of feminist scholarship conceptualizing power and to identify opportunities for feminist praxis, I explore alternative configurations of power that structure Crone communities. I contend that in the process of generating a Crone identity, the women I have studied are also writing new cultural narratives of the female body, aging and power. While they may be subject to the constraints of an oppressive social context, they also report “empowering moments” grounded in a sense of self-definition, competence, creativity and collective energy (Rutman, 1996:90). Their narratives suggest that power can also be configured as relations of interdependence and empowerment that might provide a more sustaining and representative model for theorizing relationships of power and the organization of social space (Hartsock in Hirschmann and Di Stefano, 1996:31-37). It is these alternative versions of power that underpin this project and particularly, the ways in which the sharing of the embodied experience of aging in Crone communities opens social space and cultural dynamics for

the empowerment of women in their communities of place both individually and as an identifiable cultural group. Ultimately, I argue that Crone counterstories when told in Crone communities characterized by an ethics of care overwrite dominant narratives about old women in communities of place and in the process the women are empowered to live exceptional or authentic lives. By that I mean that Crones are empowered to life experiences defined by self as opposed to the social expectations for old women put forth in dominant culture. In that way, Crones are engendering a subversive force for reconfiguring structural relations of power not only for the social landscape of old women but also for social group relations in general.

In her argument “for a sociology from the standpoint of women,” Smith charges the feminist sociologist “to make an account and analysis of society and social relations that are not only about women but that make it possible for us to look at any or all aspects of a society from where we are actually located, embodied, in the local historicity and particularities of our lived worlds” (1987:5; 1990:28). Smith’s charge is a call to bring the body however it is constituted and defined, in to sociology; moving beyond the sexed/gendered essentialism of binary oppositions or ideological constructions from within the relations of ruling to readings of the body as it unfolds through lived experience and social context. Likewise, Grosz also calls for an understanding of corporeality that goes beyond biological determinism to the historical and cultural specificities of particular historically located bodies (1994:19). Her reading of the body positions it as “a point of mediation between what is perceived as purely internal and accessible only to the subject and what is external and publicly observable, a point from

which to rethink the opposition between the inside and the outside, the private and the public, the self and the other, and all the binary pairs associated with the mind/body opposition (Grosz, 1994:20-21).

My investigations of Crone culture, consciousness and collectivity suggest that women's shared experience of embodiment around and about the menopause can provide a case-in-point for such a reading of the female body. For women who identify themselves as Crones, a term infused with extremely negative connotations of the aging female body, the body *is* the departure for a process of revaluing and revisioning their lived experience, a sort of phenomenology of Croning<sup>15</sup>. Such a process resists purely "biologistic or essentialist accounts," or purely constructionist accounts imposed and reified by a dominant culture (Grosz, 1994:22). In this way, my study conceptualizes the body as a dynamic "cultural" artifact, open to strategic "cultural intervention, transformation, or even production" through a dialectical relationship of individual and structural agencies (Grosz, 1994:23). So a critical ethnography of Crones can meet both Smith's appeal for historically located, embodied analyses of women's experience and Grosz's criteria for a corporeal feminism.

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<sup>15</sup> Here, I define phenomenology as a philosophical and sociological approach to human experience, which examines phenomena relying on the immediate perceptions of the social actor as the ground for making sense of experience with little regard for the epistemological preconceptions of positivism or constructivism (*The Encyclopedia of Sociology*, Duskin Publishing, 1974, 210; *The American Heritage Dictionary*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition, Version 3.5, 1994).

## **2. THEORY**

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### ***Conceptualizing Crone Morphing***

***Invisibility***

*Sassafras, webcrones posting*

*Welcome home old body*

*not damaged goods*

*as some may think*

*Welcome home body*

*no hips or lips*

*or other bits*

*open to male comment*

*I have joined the invisibles*

*old women with fleeting smiles*

*we save for each other*

*pleased not to be*

*on show*

*1994*

## **MAKING SENSE OF CRONE MORPHS**

In this chapter, I set out the conceptual framework I have devised to explain the identity transformation and political activities of Crones that I have characterized as morphing the Crone. My intention is to elucidate how women themselves make sense of the processes of conscious aging and conscious aging activism that they undertake in morphing the Crone and to locate that understanding in a broader sociological framework. I begin by conceptualizing social invisibility as an analytical concept, which I apply to the lived experience of girls and women across the lifespan. Then, I elaborate the post-modern concept of subjectivity and the concept of strategic identity from symbolic interaction as the basis for theorizing Crone morphing as identity transformation encompassing social psychological, corporeal and cognitive dimensions. Cognitively women morph the Crone from a feminist politic, psychologically women morph the Crone in a process of locating and defining the sacred 'self,' corporeally women morph the Crone as the physiological consequences of aging. As a basis for understanding the processes of conscious aging, and conscious aging activism, which are central to the morphing of crones, I draw on feminist theories of power, community, and care.

Ultimately, I argue that the conscious aging of women in Crone communities structured by relations of interdependence and an ethics of care results in a social and symbolic transformation of identity from abject old woman to powerful Crone. Women, who represent the Crone as a cultural icon, a strategic identity and an ideal type in their communities of place, now propagate alternative configurations of power through their conscious aging activism and by extension, alternative forms of social organization.

Whether these alternative forms of social organization proliferate or not, they still position the powerful Crone to 'queer' the heterosexual binary and hierarchical structures of western industrial capitalist patriarchy.

## **CONCEPTUALIZING SOCIAL INVISIBILITY**

In relation to 'female invisibility,' Jewish feminist author and activist, Letty Cotton Pogrebin provides a succinct description. "Invisibility results when a word is used to describe a class of people in which you count yourself – American, for example – but you discover that the person using that word doesn't mean you" (Pogrebin, 1992:xiii). In her essay, "Invisibility is an Unnatural Disaster: Reflections of an Asian American Woman," Mitsuye Yamada describes the experience of coming to awareness of her marginal status as a teacher in a liberal arts college, where cultural stereotypes of Asian women effectively erase her identity and interests (in Anzualda and Moraga, 1983:35-40). Unlike a natural disaster, social invisibility is the erasure of individual subjectivity by design, through the use of universalized masculine language and the masculine hegemony over cultural texts, which in general renders the lived experience of women socially and culturally invisible (Modleski in Strinati, 1995:190; Smith, 1987:17-19, 22-25; Spender, 1985:1-6).

### **Social Invisibility as Symbolic Annihilation**

In the mass-mediated image-based culture of Western industrial capitalist patriarchy in which the participants of my study are situated, status is conveyed through media representation and the absence of representations of older women qualifies as a sort of

**symbolic annihilation** of older women as a cultural group with both symbolic and material consequences. The concept of symbolic annihilation originated with George Gerbner, communications and cultural scholar. In Gerbner's cultivation theory, mass-mediated representations, particularly those on television produce "a common worldview, common roles, and common values" (Severin & Tankard, 1997: 299; Shanahan and Morgan, 1999:20-22). Gerbner argues that "television is, for all practical purposes, the common culture" (in Tuchman et al., 1978:47).<sup>16</sup> Mass-mediated image based representations act to signify or attach symbolic value to 'things,' and in the process, also convey a social existence to those 'things' for a mass audience. It follows that "things, which are condemned, trivialized or absent in mass media are subject to symbolic annihilation" (Tuchman et al., 1978:7-8). In the case of Crones, I argue that it is old women who experience symbolic annihilation through negative representations that minimize their experience and their prevalence in the aged population.

### **Social Invisibility Turned Inside Out**

Hill Collins provides an analysis of social invisibility relative to Black women, which is particularly salient to my thesis. In her formulation, social invisibility is an effect of the "uniformly negative" images of African-American women that subsume and efface the "fully human individual" in the objectified category 'Black women' (Hill Collins, 1991:94). "But, paradoxically, being treated as an invisible Other gives Black women a peculiar angle of vision, the outsider-within stance that has served so many African-

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<sup>16</sup> My own research gleaned from student assignments regarding media use confirms Gerbner's research. Students invariably report being bombarded by media products. On average, they spend an astounding 35 to 70 hours a week watching television and they do this in order to "stay in the loop."

American women intellectuals as a source of tremendous strength (Hill Collins, 1991:94). In effect, social invisibility results in resistance and becomes the ground of solidarity as Black women are forced to ‘jump outside’ the negative ‘controlling images’ in order to produce a ‘unique and authentic voice’ and define positive images of self (Murray in Hill Collins, 1991:94-5). The idea of being ‘forced’ to jump outside is not unlike the situation of Crones who are forced outside at the menopause and choose to listen to their own unique and authentic voice as opposed to conforming to socially expected marginal roles (Ingrisch in Arbour and Ginn, 1995:43).

### **Social Invisibility as Erasure**

Radical feminist, Marilyn Frye conceptualizes social invisibility as the erasure of lesbians from the dominant reality in her essay, “To Be and Be Seen: the Politics of Reality.” Frye contends that lesbians have no existence in patriarchal culture because they are never represented as being(s) in the world (1983:162). She differentiates between lesbians and women in general, on the basis of their social situations relative to men. The existence of a lesbian identity stands opposed to the dominant narratives of patriarchy; therefore, lesbians are completely erased from the history of humanity, “a history of the acts and organization of men” (Ibid.:162). Women in general experience a “complex and paradoxical” engagement with the dominant reality through the “seesaw of demand and neglect, of being romanced and assaulted, of being courted and ignored” (Ibid.:163). Here Frye conceptualizes a notion of multiple socially constructed realities and situates lesbian identity and history as polar opposite to the discourse of dominant ‘reality.’

Her formulation suggests an explanation for the slow devaluation and erasure of old women, since they, too, no longer fit within the paradoxical and fractured frames that dominant reality constructs for women. Further, Frye's arguments open a space for a new ontology of aging women, for new ways of being in the world in a body that like all bodies is continually aging. So just as lesbians must construct their own identities or risk the self-destructive effects of a spoiled identity,<sup>17</sup> so, too, must old women situated outside and in opposition to the dominant patriarchal reality create new cultural narratives and (re)construct new identities that can mesh with their definitions of self. This argument locates the project of morphing the Crone in the experience of social invisibility and the wake of second wave feminist counterculture movement.

## **THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF SOCIAL INVISIBILITY**

In recognition of women's relative social invisibility across the lifespan, it seems imperative to figure the corporeal and social psychological transitions of menopause in relation to their experiences at the menarche, which for women of my generation and earlier, went unmentioned and unmarked. Even as I make that claim, the lines from a pop song dance round and round in my head:

*Girl, you'll be a woman soon. Please, come take my hand.  
Girl, you'll be a woman soon. Soon, you'll need a man.*

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<sup>17</sup> The notion of a 'spoiled' identity was conceptualized by Erving Goffman as an aspect of the presentation of self in the social world (1973[1959]). A stigma or defect in physical, psychological or group presentation results in an enduring spoiled identity and requires that the individual develop strategies for managing their identity (Goffman, 1974[1963]).

Although there are no mainstream ritual observances in American culture to herald the menarche, the social meanings that adhere to the corporeal process are ritualized in cultural representations, and naturalized through cultural narratives and practices (Diorio and Munro, 2000:349-351; Shanahan and Morgan, 1999:21). The menarche was and remains synchronous with the objectification of the girl's body and its appropriation for reproduction (Blumberg, 1997:25,113; Pipher, 1995:19, 21; Diorio and Munro, 2000:349-351). The menarche is socially constructed through its reproductive function, which now defines the girl's sexuality. In effect, female gender is constructed through the embodied experience of the menarche situating girls within a heteronormative social order that subordinates their interests to those of the men on whom they are dependent (Skeggs in Diorio and Munro, 2000:351). Personal aspirations aside, girls internalize the socially expected roles of girlfriend, helpmate, cheerleader, domestic, wife and mother (de Beauvoir in Diorio and Munro, 2000:349-350).

Diorio and Munro have demonstrated that the ideological meanings invested in women's embodiment through culture are accessible to and read off by young girls both prior to the menarche and throughout adolescence (2000:350). In practical terms, then, the menarche becomes an unconsciously felt, out-of-body experience that alienates or robs the girl of her subjective self. Psychologist Dr. Mary Pipher describes the condition of girls at the menarche relative to their sense of self:

Something dramatic happens to girls in early adolescence. Just as planes and ships disappear mysteriously into the Bermuda Triangle, so do the selves of girls go down in droves. They crash and burn in a social and developmental Bermuda Triangle (1995:19).

She goes on to entertain Simone de Beauvoir's analysis of the issue. "Girls who were the subjects of their own lives become the objects of others' lives. 'Young girls slowly bury their childhood, put away their independent and imperious selves and submissively enter adult existence... Girls stop being and start seeming'" (de Beauvoir in Pipher, 1995:21-22). Here, De Beauvoir provides a poignant, yet definitive interpretation of social invisibility, a condition whereby individual subjectivity is subsumed in social roles defined by patriarchal culture. It's an analysis that suggests a partial account for the loss of esteem experienced by girls at puberty and provides some directions for thinking about the relative empowerment of individual women at the menopause and old women as a social group that might be derived from naming and reclaiming themselves as Crones.

## **MORPHING THE CRONE: FROM ABJECT OLD WOMAN TO POWERFUL CRONE**

Given my claim that women in later life are transforming identity as a response to corporeal change and social invisibility across the lifespan, recent debates on identity become salient to my argument, as do the connections between culture and identity. In this section, I want to open a space for theorizing the morphing of Crones as personal and collective transformation. I begin with a discussion of the post-structural/post-modern concept of subjectivity. The notion of subjectivities reflects a politics of identity that taken together with the symbolic interaction formulation of strategic identity provides a unified interpretation of the social psychological and political processes incorporated in the morphing of Crones from abject old woman to powerful Crone. The challenge of conceptualizing identity goes to the destabilization of culture as an analytic category and

the deconstruction of the very notion of identity, what might be framed as identity politics emerging from post-structural, post-colonial and post-modern critiques. Nevertheless, it is through this very process that a space is opened for considering how identities might be transformed through a critically conscious corporeal feminism<sup>18</sup> responding to social invisibility, the negation of identity from western industrial capitalist patriarchal culture.

## Post-modern Subjectivities

I begin with the classical definition of identity that has emerged in modernity: a singular, unified, and enduring essential aspect at the core of individual being (Hall in Hall and DuGay, 1996:2; Mathews, 2000:16). *If* the post-modern perspective conceives of identity at all, it is opposed to the modernist version and loosely conceived as a fluid aspect of human existence that is discursively<sup>19</sup> produced through an ongoing process of significations, constructions and reconstructions in texts, practices and representations (Fullmer et al., 1999:134; Hall in Hall and DuGay, 1996:1-17).<sup>20</sup> The “if” in this statement conceptualizes the difficulty of theorizing the social or the individual in postmodern terms since, in general, the grand narratives and the personal narrative,

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<sup>18</sup>A corporeal feminism is one that politicizes the symbolic and social constructions of the female body inscribed by a masculine hegemony (Grosz, 1994, 23).

<sup>19</sup> Here the term discursive refers to the Foucauldian notion of discourse as “sets of ‘deep principles’ incorporating specific ‘grids of meaning’ which underpin, generate and establish relations between all that can be seen, thought and said (Foucault, 1974 in Shilling, 1993: 75). This notion of discourse is central to Foucault’s understanding of the body as the link between everyday practices and the operations of large scale biopower. and the large scale organization of power on the other hand” (Shilling, 1993:75).

<sup>20</sup> This formulation is derived from the work of Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann regarding the social construction of reality and fits with the standpoint epistemology that informs this thesis when figured as representations of a particular dominant hegemony. Fullmer et al. cite Berger and Luckmann in making their argument that an “array of potential selves” populate the social world deriving their existence from the symbolic cultural order (Fullmer et al., 1999:134).

objective reality and the essential have been deconstructed. So too, the concept of identity has been deconstructed through the discursive reading of the term from cultural criticism, feminist psychoanalysis, queer theory, as well as post-colonial, anti-racist, and anti-essentialist movements that make a critique of the centre from the borderlands (Hall in Hall and DuGay, 1996:2). Hall's remedy is to consider the parameters of the self-construction project

using the resources of history, language and culture in the process of becoming rather than being: not 'who we are' or 'where we came from,' so much as what we might become, how we have been represented and how that bears on how we might represent ourselves. Identities are therefore constituted within, not outside representation ... They arise from the narrativization of the self, but the necessarily fictional nature of this process in no way undermines its discursive, material or political effectivity, even if the belongingness, the 'suturing into the story' through which identities arise, is partly, in the imaginary (as well as the symbolic) and therefore, always, partly constructed in fantasy, or at least within a fantasmatic field (Ibid.:4).

Thus a space is opened for morphing the Crone as a way and a why women in later life might represent themselves. For most surely, modernity has tended to shuffle old women backstage, hidden away with little room for play, let alone fantasy.

By exposing the post-Cartesian notion of a "self-sustaining subject" as an ideological construct, post-modern critiques articulate the politics of identity that universalizes the shared attributes of white European males to all 'others,' therefore such critiques are appealing to feminist critical culture theorists. Nevertheless, post-modern identities are messy affairs, disembodied and tenuous. For example, Hall now conceives of identities as identifications or "points of temporary attachment to the subject positions which discursive practices construct for" us (Hall in Hall and DuGay, 1996:6). This is the post-modern notion of **subjectivity** where identity is construed as a process of

subjectification or signification through which embodied subjects become attached, interpellated or defined within particular discourses and discursive practices<sup>21</sup> (Hall in Hall and DuGay,1996:6). While the notion of subjectivity is useful for understanding identity politics, the idea of ‘temporary attachments’ seems to reduce identity to the superficial elements of its commodified representations leaving out the deeper implications of lived experience and the social psychological conditions through which people negotiate and mediate the ‘presentation of self in everyday life’ (Goffman, 1973[1959]). Therefore, I draw on the symbolic interactionist concept of a strategically managed acting self for an understanding of the social psychological processes of identity formation, integrating the affective, cognitive and corporeal dimensions as well as for an analysis of the body’s centrality in the construction of meaning. Taken together, the acting self of symbolic interaction and the post-modern subject provide conceptual ground for the morphing of Cronos as a strategic identity that integrates both political interests and social psychological processes.

## **Strategic Identities**

George Herbert Mead conceived of the self as a work in progress that is continuously defined and redefined through social interaction (Charon, 1998:73). Here, the self is better understood as an ongoing social process rather than a stable essence (Ibid.:72). In

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<sup>21</sup> Here, once again, the term discursive refers to the Foucauldian notion of discourse as “sets of ‘deep principles’ incorporating specific ‘grids of meaning’ which underpin, generate and establish relations between all that can be seen, thought and said (Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1983; Foucault, 1974 in Shilling, 1993: 75). This notion of discourse is central to Foucault’s understanding of the body as the link between everyday practices and the operations of large scale biopower. and the large scale organization of power on the other hand” (Shilling, 1993: 75).

Mead's formulation, the self is entirely socially produced by social actors in concert with and through a conversation of gestures with others, which he sees arising developmentally through the play, game and generalized other stages of childhood (Mead in Rousseau, 2002:122). Ultimately, the human capacity to engage in self-reflection and to take the role of the other is deemed basic to negotiating the interaction order (Mead in Rousseau, 2002:122-125). Cooley's construct of the 'looking-glass self' exemplifies Mead's ideas relative to identity as well as the ongoing process of identity construction. The three elements deemed essential to the process are: "the imagination of our appearance to the other person; the imagination of his judgment of that appearance and some sort of self-feeling, such as pride or mortification" (Cooley in Strauss, 1956:296). Cooley's notion of mortification resonates with the abjection and social invisibility experienced by Crones that precipitates the process of morphing a Crone identity. Likewise, Goffman argues that self-regulation is central to all societies and that the "emotional attachment to projected selves and face is the most fundamental mechanism of social control leading us to regulate our conduct" (Charon, 1998:197). Both Cooley's 'looking-glass self' and Goffman's dramaturgical framework incorporate a notion of the self as a creative presentation through a continuous process of strategic self-management mediated by social regulation. Goffman emphasizes the significance of "interpersonal rituals" as "expressions of respect and regard for what we value most highly ... the individual's sacred' self" indicating the affective and social psychological dimensions that infuse the 'interaction order' and thus characterize the conscious aging processes in

Crone communities that results in the strategic identity of powerful Crone<sup>22</sup> (Shilling, 1993:85; Charon, 1998:200).

Central to Goffman's notion of an acting self is an analysis of the body in relation to human agency. Goffman holds that individuals have the capacity to regulate and monitor their bodies in social interactions. In this, they rely on "shared vocabularies of bodily idiom," non-verbal conventions including dress, bearing, gestures and expressions, the meanings of which are conventional or consensual and outside of their immediate control (Shilling, 1993:82). Shared vocabularies of idiom are markers of classification and through them, the body becomes the bearer of meanings imposed through discourse and naturalized by culture (Ibid.:83). At the same time the body is also the maker of meanings through self-directed and highly managed performances (Ibid.:84-85). For women around and about the menopause, the signs of aging are difficult to manage and resistance to the aging process itself often results in a grotesque presentation of self. On the other hand, the powerful Crone seeks to transform the meanings of aging in women such that wrinkles and grey hair become signs of wisdom as opposed to decay.

The acting self thus becomes the mediating factor between self-identity and social identity (Ibid.:83). As such it incorporates a persuasive argument for the forms of agency available to individuals at the micro level through the strategic presentation of a self in encounters and face-to-face interactions (Goffman, 1973[1959]).<sup>23</sup> The strategically

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<sup>22</sup> Goffman describes the 'interaction order' as the underlying structure of forms that govern or shape face-to-face encounters at the micro level, but he dissociates the interaction order from phenomena operating at the macro structural level (Goffman in Lemert and Branaman, 1997:233-261).

<sup>23</sup> Historically, much of Goffman's work can be located at a point prior to the pervasive saturation of electronically-mediated image-based communication and culture. He characterized the interaction order as the autonomous domain in which individuals interact in close physical proximity while noting that "the

managed identity or acting self of symbolic interaction can negotiate the agency-structure divide to provide a more empowered subjectivity and a more insightful understanding of the process of morphing the Crone. Identity can then be construed as the symbolic meanings and dynamic interpretations we make and in Goffman's words, "give" and "give off" in the presentation of self (Goffman, 1973[1959]:2-3). It is through taking up particular social roles and aspirations, and in the performance that we bring forth these symbolic identities and in effect, we represent ourselves (Ibid.:16). In the case of Crones, the process of conscious aging in Crone communities provides a safe and sacred space and an interdependent cultural group that empowers women to define themselves as Crones and to engage in conscious aging activism in communities of place that reflect the moral self-definitions and symbolic qualities now vested in a Crone identity.

## **COMING TO CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS**

In this section, I want to consider the construct of critical consciousness as a mediating factor between notions of identity as a dynamic social psychological process eventuating in a personal, emotion laden self-consciousness and subjectivities as culturally derived positions signified through a politicized process of representations, constructions and reconstructions. For my thesis, the challenge is to integrate the politics of identity with the social psychological processes that already take account of the relations of the body, identity and meaning in cultural frameworks. Here I am suggesting that the powerful Crone identity is constituted through the reconfiguration of the aging female body from

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telephone or mails provide reduced versions of the primordial real thing" (Goffman in Lamert and Branaman, 1997:235).

biological obsolescence to phenomenal creativity on the ground of metamorphosis and that this metamorphosis occurs through a transformed consciousness of self and situation.

### **Consciousness in Symbolic Interaction**

Symbolic interactionist, Herbert Blumer fixed on consciousness as a key component in understanding human action as a response to individual interpretations arising from social interaction (Wallace and Wolf, 1991:254-5). Social psychologist William Gamson conceptualizes consciousness as “the mesh between cognition and culture – between individual beliefs about the social world and cultural belief systems and ideologies” (Gamson in Morris and Mueller, 1992:65). At the cognitive level, individuals are actively processing meaning as they negotiate socio-cultural contexts (Ibid.:65). While at the cultural level, meaning is always already organized into interpretive frames, so that “[a]ny change in consciousness involves an uphill symbolic struggle” in order to negotiate ideological and discursive spaces and “cut the umbilical cord of magic and myth which binds [the oppressed] to the world of oppression” (Freire in Gamson, 1992:65).

### **Consciousness-Raising As A Feminist Politic**

Catherine MacKinnon, radical feminist theorist and activist describes “feminist method [as] consciousness raising,” which she defines as the “collective critical reconstitution of the meaning of women’s social experience, as women live through it” (1989:83). On that ground, Hill Collins conceptualizes critical consciousness as a “sphere of freedom” that generates a culture of Black women from within their own terms of reference (1991:103).

In her formulation, consciousness itself is a powerful tool for self-definition and transformation of the “interlocking systems of race, gender and class oppression” (Hill Collins, 1991:105). Critical consciousness leads us to contest ‘controlling images’ and replace them with self-defined representations and “regardless of the actual content” of these definitions of self, the act of representing self validates and empowers individuals within dominant reality (Hill Collins, 1991:107).

### **Taking a Crone Standpoint**

The very notion of coming to Crone consciousness alludes to the potential for women in later life to become critically conscious of the ideological or hegemonic representations that structure dominant reality through their absence. That is to say, that the social invisibility of women in later life cues them to the distortions that must be accomplished in order to reflect that version of ‘reality’ that is central to male dominance within a hierarchical social structure. In that partial and perverse ‘reality,’ only women who fit the demands of heterosexuality, compliant, sexualized objects for men and potential mothers for men’s children, can be represented. In that way, the social invisibility of menopausal women can be explained as a perverse misrepresentation that maintains a masculine hegemony.

If women in later life come to Crone consciousness, they are well positioned to queer the binary oppositions that maintain the status quo. To be sure, in a former life as women, they were subject to masculine dominance and in actual terms, they still inhabit the same physical universe. However, in abstract terms, they now stand outside of the system, socially invisible in a sort of liminal space, that is, ‘barely perceptible’ to the

mainstream (Merriam-Webster). It's a particular 'reality' that while uncomfortable confirms Hartsock's emphasis on the generativity of women in her arguments for a feminist epistemology or women's standpoint (Benton and Craib, 2001:148). Although Cronos experience a sort of social death as abject old women in patriarchal-capitalist formations, they birth themselves anew as powerful Cronos, women of age, wisdom and power. An aspect of the Crone's power is their corporeal existence opposed to heterosexuality although, of course, many of them remain sexually active and heterosexual throughout their lives. Yet there is also evidence that some Cronos come out as lesbians at the menopause and that is a powerful statement of the ontological reality of women in their interdependence with each other, an interdependence that has been distorted as a structural effect of a patriarchal system that defines girls at the menarche for heterosexual relationships. Thus, it is through an engaged Crone standpoint, as insiders outside, that Crone communities structured by relations of interdependence and empowerment surface in the fissures and gaps of capitalist patriarchal culture as models of alternative social relations that suggest the potential for a deeper level of 'reality.'

### **The Negation of Identity**

Fullmer et al. provide an analysis of the negating effects of social invisibility on the self-identity of older lesbians (1999:131). Their approach integrates the concept of post-modern identities to explain the process by which the lesbian identity is erased from dominant discourse. Since older lesbians are socially invisible, there is a corresponding absence of subject positions on which to constitute a lesbian identity (Ibid.:134). This argument applies by extension to women in later life although it is arguably experienced

differently depending on the intersecting social significations that constitute a particular identity.<sup>24</sup> On the basis of that argument, the social invisibility of older women and older lesbians in both patriarchal and lesbian cultures, can be explained as the negation of subjective possibilities by virtue of McDaniel's "double whammy" of ageism and (hetero)sexism (Fullmer et al, 1999; McDaniel, 1988:15).

Fullmer et al. also draw attention to the politics of sexuality, a debate that construes lesbian sexuality as aberrant 'behaviour' in conservative circles as opposed to a complex 'identity' in more liberal circles (Fullmer et al, 1999:134-5). This debate is significant in conceptualizing the challenge to identity for women in later life, since they, too, are negated through the dominant discourse of normative sexuality. The question turns to how individuals who are operating under erasure or negation of identity might intervene in the iterative process of constituting discursive identities. How might they (re)create themselves and in the process overwrite the dominant discourse to accommodate their definitions of self? Indeed, Gergen has conceptualized the post-modern condition as a "plurality of voices vying for the right to reality," that is the right to create and recreate their own legitimate versions of self and being in the world (1991:7).

## **Crone Subjectivity**

The study of women who are morphing the Crone is thus a study of political intervention through the personal project of self-representation against the force of a negated identity

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<sup>24</sup> Patricia Hill Collins developed the concept of "intersectionality" to explain the effect of the various signifying categories that constitute individual identity, for example, race, class, sex/gender, sexuality, ability, age and so on. Elsewhere, I've argued that identity is constituted through these intersections in the mundane activities of everyday life (McCabe, 1999:5).

and the social invisibility in patriarchal capitalist cultural reality. By reclaiming the powerful Crone as a subject position, a transformed identity, the participants in my study are redefining and empowering themselves as an aspect of second wave feminist counterculture movement. Given that women politicized in the wake of the second wave feminist movement are getting older and given the rippling out effect of feminist movement, Crone morphing can be understood as a socio-political process for transforming the abject old woman of patriarchy into the powerful Crone, a woman of age, wisdom and power.

The morphing of Croness must take account of third wave feminist critiques of the second wave feminist agenda as a white, middle class women's political agenda that subsumed all of patriarchy's marginalized 'others' within it. Given Crone Counsel's definition of the contemporary Crone cited in the Introduction, this becomes all the more significant. One can argue that lip service to third wave and po-mo critiques can in no way propagate a transformed social context. Certainly the participants in my study are, for the most part, white, middle class, educated women. Therefore, the claim can be made that they were always already powerful along certain axes of their life experience although arguably their circumstances are considerably diminished through the aging process. This claim directs us to the role of demographics in understanding the sorts of transformations that are available to individuals that work in favour of their interests while marginalizing the interests of their significant 'others,' in this case, women of colour, immigrant women and so on.

Identities must always be understood as manifestations of politicized social relationships that are constituted on the ground of exclusion. So Crone, as a cultural identity, is available and of interest to certain women who fit within the boundaries in which such a choice emerges. This is evident in the social boundaries within the Crone population. It is understood then that the Crone is constituted against the abject old woman, but an abject old woman with a particular social history, race, class, education, and so on. The boundaries within which a Crone identity becomes a choice excludes not only the abject old woman of western philosophical traditions but also any traces of racial, ethnic and class difference. Hall argues that the identity only becomes possible through the exclusion of others (in Hall and DuGay, 1996:4-5).

The ‘unities’ which identities proclaim are, in fact, constructed within the play of power and exclusion, and are the result, not of a natural and inevitable or primordial totality but of the naturalized, overdetermined process of ‘closure’ ” (Babha in Hall and DuGay, 1996:5).

That a politics of identity must be factored into analyses of the social psychological dimensions of identity is apparent. However, a politics of identity in no way discounts the construction of identity as a social psychological departure for self-definition, personal empowerment and social transformation that reflects the respect we hold for our “individual ‘sacred’ self and its place in the interaction order” (Charon, 1998:200; Hill Collins, 1991:106).

## **CONSCIOUS AGING AND CONSCIOUS AGING ACTIVISM**

The notion of aging consciously has a rather long life in aging studies from sociology, social gerontology and social psychology albeit not necessarily in those exact terms.

Likewise, it has considerable purchase in popular culture relative to aging. For the purposes of this thesis, conscious aging is a sensitizing concept that emerges directly from the data. For example, the magazine *Crone Chronicles* conceptualizes its mandate as a ‘journal of conscious aging.’ The term refers to the idea of critical consciousness and as such is a good fit concept for the interactions and experiences of Crones as opposed to the sense of a generalized alertness or awareness of the condition of aging. The formulation of conscious aging that follows is my interpretation of the way women who identify with or as Crones make sense of their activities.

Conscious aging is the process through which these women engage in critical reflection regarding the corporeal and social transitions of later life in order to demystify the social, cultural and political consequences of aging. Conscious aging is a collaborative project in which the collective energy of women is focused on making sense of their experience and generating valued identities and social roles for women in later life. One of the participants describes it as finding a way “to pass on wisdom [to] a world that wants to hear us ... I’m wondering if there is some way that in our society we can find a place as true Elders, somewhere our experience and judgment will be respected and acknowledged” (Ragin’ Gran in Smyer Yu, 2002:7). So, conscious aging becomes a process of sharing the embodied experience of aging in Crone communities in order to open social space and cultural dynamics for empowering women as Elders.

An aspect of conscious aging is manifesting the powerful Crone, the woman of age, wisdom and power by bringing her to being symbolically and materially in their own lives and projecting Crone identity from the margins over and against western capitalist

patriarchal culture. Therefore, many of these women engage in conscious aging activism that allows them to negotiate spheres of activity and influence from which they may well have been excluded in their previous roles as wives, mothers, or patriarchal helpmates. While it is arguable that most of these women have already achieved some form of respected status in the society, it is nevertheless true that their status is substantially diminished as they age.<sup>25</sup> Through conscious aging, they hope to acquire a renewed social status, entitlement and authority. At the very least, many of them are able to fashion new identities through their attachment to Crone culture and to be more positive in their initiatives to define the direction of their lives. In this way, conscious aging activism, unfolding within social, political, creative, intellectual and spiritual domains, may be explained as the political reflections of the corporeal and socio-cultural transitions of menopause. It is through these forms of activism that a Crone subjective presence and Crone culture are produced in the social world.

There has been some scholarship on the sorts of social roles and identities available to women in later life embedded in dominant cultural narratives. For example, anthropologists Cool and McCabe characterize the ‘scheming hag’ and the ‘dear old thing’ as one of two stereotypical representations that is “as much a cultural myth and even a creation of the anthropologist’s expectations as it is a depiction of a ‘social reality’

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<sup>25</sup> The phenomenon of diminishing status is exemplified in the recent case brought by four women professors at the University of Toronto for increased pension benefits for retired faculty and librarians. “The retirees alleged that the university had been unjustly enriched by paying them less than men performing the same work” (Chair for Women in Science and Engineering. *Joint Statement from the University of Toronto and Ursula Franklin, Phyllis Grosskurth, Blanche Lemko van Ginkel and Cicely Watson*, April 2002). Apparently, the women were doing well enough until retirement, when their diminishing status caught up with them. The statement indicated that Granted that men also experience diminished income, however, they are far better remunerated across the lifespan and therefore, more likely to maintain their status. This case also underscores the need for a lifespan approach to aging, since social invisibility in varying degrees effects women across the lifespan.

(1987:56). These caricatures reflect polar opposites on a power? weakness continuum that Cool and McCabe characterize as the paradox for aging women (Ibid:56). Ingrisch conducted 30 life history interviews to get at the implications of “socially transmitted images of women’s roles and how these images were related to age and identity” (Ingrisch in Arber and Ginn, 1995:42). Ingrisch defined two categories of response to society’s expectations for women in later life. The first category was construed as ‘conforming’ and was opposed to the second category, ‘living authentically’ (Ibid.: 43). The motivation for conforming was characterized by participants as ‘doing the right thing.’ (Ibid.:43). The motivation for ‘living authentically’ was characterized by participants as attending to suppressed longings and personal aspirations (Ibid.:43). Authenticity comes out of two capacities, resistance and self-definition (Hill Collins, 1991:93-95). Likewise, Fullmer et al. contend that our identities are to some extent determined by the extent of choices, our own and those of others, that are available to us (1999:134). By extension, if women are able to identify or create choices that serve their own political interest through the conscious aging process, conscious aging becomes a point of transition, a locus of resistance, self-definition and empowerment.

I contend that conscious aging through interaction and dialogue within Crone networks, gatherings, wisdom circles, and collectivities inspires and facilitates some women to make choices outside the norm of societal expectations. Crones are empowered to take on conscious aging activism that is politically and personally self-interested, and at the same time constitute a visible presence for older women in the mainstream of society, renewed purpose and evidence of transformed identities. Accepting that

conscious aging and conscious aging activism have the potential to create socially and personally meaningful roles for older women that meet Ingrisch's criteria for 'living authentically,' consideration must be given to the dynamics and the dimensions by which such remarkable transformations ensue. After all, women have occasion to get together at Tupperware parties, horticultural meetings and religious events, but I would not claim that these venues necessarily result in conscious aging, which is not to exclude them entirely as sites for resistance and transformation.

## **THE DYNAMICS OF TRANSFORMATION: POWER, COMMUNITY AND CARE**

The literature and theories relative to the concepts of power, community and care are extensive and a full discussion of these goes well beyond the scope of this thesis. However, these constructs are of immediate concern to my thesis given my argument that the morphing of Crones is only made possible through the conscious aging activities that take place in Crone communities in which social relations are structured by interdependence and empowerment informed by an ethics of care. I argue that this particular configuration of power, community and care results in the empowerment of women who now project a transformed identity through conscious aging activism in their communities of place. Since this transformed identity is a powerful representation constructed outside of dominant discourse, women who take on a Crone identity are thus positioned to destabilize the status quo.

Traditional accounts of power from classical social theory define power as structural relations of dominance and subordination, an account that was taken up by

many second wave feminists in their analyses of women's lived experience of oppression. Nevertheless, even if we accept that classical account of power as fundamental to a capitalist patriarchal social system, that circumstances does not by definition preclude alternative relations of power within communities or subcultures embedded in dominant culture or society. That so much of feminist theory relies on the dominant account of power merely reflects the ideological construction of power as a universal set of social relations, dominance and subordination, put forward as a biological imperative, a transhistorical configuration prevailing through all cultures, communities and social formations. Lorde's words below identify the problem of appropriating the tools of dominant culture as a template for analytical projects or lived experience:

The future of our earth may depend upon the ability of all women to identify and develop new definitions of power and new patterns of relating across difference. The old definitions have not served us, nor the earth that supports us . . . . For we have, built into all of us, old blueprints of expectation and response, old structures of oppression, and these must be altered at the same time as we alter the living conditions, which are a result of those structures. For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house . . . the true focus of revolutionary change is never merely the oppressive situations which we seek to escape but that piece of the oppressor which is planted deep within each of us, and which knows only the oppressors' tactics, the oppressors' relationships (Lorde, 1984:123).

## **The Erotic as Power**

On power, Audre Lorde issues a challenge to feminists that we make "a rigorous and consistent evaluation of what kind of a future we wish to create, and a scrupulous examination of the expressions of power we choose to incorporate into all our relationships including our most private ones" (1988:11). She, herself, contributes to this exercise by freeing the concept of *eros* from its sexual bondage and reconfiguring it

as a more general concept for structuring social relations and empowering human activity. Lorde's configuration of the erotic is complex and not easily grasped for two reasons. Firstly, it lies outside our normative experience and in her words, within "a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling" (Lorde, 1984:53). It is difficult to take seriously, a concept of power that draws on the feminine or the affective, when these have been construed as signs of weakness and passivity by the masculine hegemony that dominates our cultural narratives. Secondly, and following directly from this rationale, the female, spiritual plane also lies beyond the pale of academic orthodoxy and the purview of the social sciences. Nevertheless, if we are to be serious in our search for innovative insights on power and praxis, we should not be deterred from breaking new ground by such arguments.

Simply put, *eros* is the fusion of emotions, perceptions, psyche and cognition brought to bear on all of our life experience and activities.

The erotic is a measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings. It is an internal sense of satisfaction to which, once we have experienced it, we know we can aspire ... the erotic is not a question only of what we do; it is a question of how acutely and fully we can feel in the doing ... When I speak of the erotic, then, I speak of it as an assertion of the life force of women; of that creative energy empowered, the knowledge and use of which we are now reclaiming in our language, our history, our dancing, our loving, our work, our lives (Lorde, 1984:54-55).

Feminist philosopher, Jacqueline Zita conceptualizes the erotic as a capacity arising from the "very core of our being, in the materiality of our bodies" (Kramarae and Treichler:1985). As such, it is our capacity for perceiving, interpreting and acting in the world from an affective, intuitive basis as well as a rational position. This is not to say

that the erotic is irrational, but only to open a much larger space in which the rational is only one aspect of our power to negotiate the world as opposed to the entirety of that negotiation. In her critique of Cartesian dualism, Lorde clarifies this distinction: “[t]he white father told us: I think, therefore I am. The Black mother within each of us – the poet – whispers in our dreams: I feel, therefore I can be free” (Lorde, 1984:38). Taking it one step further, one might claim from a phenomenological perspective: “I am, therefore I think and feel.” Acknowledging the power of the erotic entails acknowledging those aspects of the life world, which can only be known or derived through the senses and the emotions as well as the knowledge constructed through cognitive processes.

Hartsock, too, integrates Lorde’s concept of the erotic in her work on power. She, too, maintains that “theories of power are implicitly theories of community,” therefore, she argues that a study of power must examine the ways that such theories are implicated in structuring, legitimating and reproducing particular forms or relations of power in particular communities (Hartsock in Hirschmann and Di Stefano, 1996:27-28). Hartsock argues that in the process of historicizing power as structural relations in particular communities, we will identify alternative configurations of power and alternative community formations that might inform a freer society comprised of autonomous self-defining social actors (Ibid.:28). Moreover, alternative configurations of power must not be reduced to forms of mere resistance to patriarchal power, but must be conceptualized as transformative frameworks that exemplify practical action alternatives that can be adopted through conscious consideration (Ibid.:39).

Given the scholarship of feminists on power, community and care, my interest is to analyze the relations of power found in Crone communities with the analytical tools available from feminist scholarship to identify the processes and underlying structures that produce this alternative social formation that is clearly more conducive to the benefit of women's lives and particularly, old women's lives. Therefore, I elaborate two configurations relative to power, communities and care, the counterstory and an ethics of care that characterize the social interactions and structural relations of power in Crone communities. These formulations diverge substantially from dominant discourse about power, community and care and since they are exemplified through Crone conscious aging and conscious aging activism, they provide useful analytical constructs for understanding Crone consciousness, culture and communities.

### **Telling Counterstories as Feminist Praxis**

Hilde Lindemann Nelson, feminist philosopher and bioethicist, develops a conceptual framework that incorporates community structure, moral self-definition and the telling of counterstories to define practices for transforming community. She uses a hypothetical example, a group of nurses constituted as an interest group with shared goals and challenges in the workplace to illustrate her framework. They are not unlike the women who populate Crone communities who share interests and concerns with the communities in which they reside. In Nelson's framework, structural relations of interdependence and empowerment, and an ethics of care support the practice of collective and democratic storytelling producing the counterstory, a story that overwrites the constructions of dominant discourse.

## **Crone Communities**

Nelson characterizes two types of communities: communities of place (found communities) and communities of choice (chosen communities). In my analysis, I conceptualize the Crone community as a community of choice constituted from a Crone standpoint, whereas communities of place tend to be constituted from the dominant cultures standpoint. Communities of place include families, neighborhoods, and nations to which we belong as a function of geography, birth, or happenstance. Feminist wisdom tells us that these sorts of communities are not always nurturing to all of their members and to marginalized members or those excluded from membership, they can be exploitative and oppressive (Nelson, 1995:23). Ostensibly, communities of place are challenged by the “dilemma of difference” that inevitably infuses a large and diverse social group (Ibid.:23). In communities of place, the dominant story often comes to be the only story. This circumstance has the effect of marginalizing or homogenizing difference, rendering it invisible to the detriment of the repressed and excluded Other (Minow in Nelson, 1995:28-9).

Communities of choice, in contrast, are often constituted on the basis of shared difference where members come from differing circumstances but share a common purpose or vision. In coming together, members create a provisional space in order to do the necessary work to bring their shared vision to fruition. At the same time, Nelson concedes that all communities by their very nature must exert some degree of partiality and exclusivity. However, the chosen community is better able to acknowledge difference by virtue of the individual face that each member presents within a strongly

defined moral space constituted by the narrative process of its members (Ibid.:30). In this way, difference becomes personalized and self-evident, an enriching community resource. The notion of difference surfaces in my study of Crone communities and results in discussion and debate, forming connections across difference that provides the ground, a sort of openness and acceptance for self-reflection, collaboration and consciousness-raising.

As my Tupperware example above suggests, conscious aging requires a particular environment in which critical reflection and consciousness-raising are encouraged. In my case, the seeds of a Crone identity were planted in a Women's Studies class, which was arguably a feminist consciousness-raising group. Once the Crone took root in my psyche, I looked for other similar sources to cultivate my Crone persona. For Crone conscious aging to ensue, then, women must get together in communities of choice that are structured around mutually beneficial, shared objectives as opposed to communities of place in which we are increasingly marginalized. For this thesis, I refer to Crone communities as a useful way of encompassing the notion of a community of choice as Crone gatherings, wisdom circles, and collectivities including cyberspace networks in all of their many variations, e-mail lists, chat rooms, bulletin boards and the like.

### **Moral Self-definition**

Chosen communities are especially significant for their role in defining a moral space where members can “come together to discern, construct, correct, and celebrate the community's story” (Walker in Nelson, 1995:24). The notion of moral self-definition comes out of this process. Members define the community of choice and the definitions

of membership and they establish the precedents that will be morally binding within the community of choice through a coherent and democratic process. They do this by telling their own stories, making sense of past experience and future directions, and either “ratifying or repudiating” their experiences in the moral space of their chosen community (Walker in Nelson, 1995:27).<sup>26</sup>

This process enables “morally developed persons to install and observe precedents for themselves which are both distinctive of them and binding upon them morally” (Walker in Nelson, 1995:27). Thus, they become self-defining across communities and within communities and construct moral definitions to bring to their ‘communities of place.’ This is also an opportunity for these individuals, marginalized in their communities of place, to give voice to their experience and to be heard and valued in a morally-constituted space structured by relations of interdependence and empowerment.

## **Counterstories**

The community of choice opens a space for its members to explore their situation in the wider community (Nelson, 1995:27). Nelson defines the counterstory as

a story that contributes to the moral self-definition of its teller by undermining a dominant story, undoing it and retelling it in such a way as to invite new interpretations and conclusions. Counterstories can be told anywhere but particularly when told within chosen communities, they permit their tellers to reenter as full citizens, the communities of place whose goods have been only imperfectly available to its marginalized members” (Nelson, 1995:23).

This is a narrative process because “it orders a sequence of events for the purpose of revealing or creating meaning” (Nelson, 1995:27). Stories are counterstories when they

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<sup>26</sup> Nelson’s process of moral self-definition resonates with MacKinnon’s description of the feminist consciousness-raising group.

reveal a meaning that goes against the grain of communities of place and when they are told with the particular intention of undermining the dominant narratives of the found community. Moreover, since cultural narratives have a dynamic dimension, it is always possible to overwrite the dominant narratives in communities of place with the moral narratives of communities of choice.

Nelson argues that counterstories have subversive possibilities when they evoke powerful emotions, which motivate active resistance and ‘appropriate’ insubordination within the communities of place (Nelson, 1995:35). Appropriate insubordination resides in the veracity of the counterstories and Nelson sets out a tentative guide for assessing the moral worth of counterstories (Ibid.:36-8). Ultimately, for a counterstory to motivate action, there must be a “temporary stopping-point” when community members agree to take political action for change within the communities of place (Ibid.:37). I contend that in Crone communities, individual women tell their stories, reflect on them critically and come to consciousness about the hegemonic meanings embedded within them. When taken together as cultural practice, the result is a community counterstory that represents meaning for all members of the community. It is through this community counterstory that the potential to transform dominant reality evolves, since it takes power over the sign of the Crone for Crone-identified women and through their activities in their communities of place redefines it for others in dominant reality.

### **Rethinking an Ethics of Care for Crone Communities**

For the most part, I have found that my interactions with women as friends, colleagues, co-workers and research participants have been characterized by a commitment to caring

and nurturing relationships. I have argued that women take up caregiving not only as a socially defined role but also as a cultural practice and an ethical position that is empowering in its effects, a claim that is to critiques of gender essentialism, stereotyping, “reification of femininity,” ethnocentrism, and romanticism (Deveaux, 1995:116). Again there has been a great deal of scholarship relative to an ethics of care and its potential as a source of resistance and change, a full exploration of which goes beyond the scope of this thesis. Rather, my goal here is to conceptualize an ethics of care as both a moral standpoint and a set of practices that structures Crone communities such that all community members are empowered to participate in conscious aging and conscious aging activism as a way of resisting dominant cultural narratives about post-menopausal women.

### **Care as Moral Standpoint and Social Practice**

Care can be defined as the process through which the species seeks to maintain itself and its environment (Tronto, 1995:142). As such, care is basic to social relations through the shaping of humans as embodied agents. An ethics of care then implies a set of values or moral principles that apply to a set of life-sustaining practices. An ethics of care is gender neutral, and not biologically determined (Deveaux, 1995:115-6). The defining tenet of a perspective of care is that “persons are relational and interdependent” as opposed to the individual, autonomous agents that are central to western industrial capitalist patriarchal culture and/or to liberal democracies defined by individualism and an ethics of rights and justice (Held, 1995: 132). Underlying the notion of an ethics of

care is the belief that “civilization depends on a culture of sharing and caring; a culture of caring does not depend on civilization” (Adelman, 1996:17).

In framing the human world within an ethics of care, Gilligan characterizes the notion of individualism as a state of “disconnections and dissociations.” When figured as “foundational to conceptions of self and morality” it is a “careless and harmful” condition (1995:121). Gilligan answers the critiques of essentialism and romanticism by differentiating between a “feminist ethics of care” and a “feminine ethics of care” (1995:122). The former “begins with connection theorized as primary and fundamental” and pervading all spheres of human life. The latter is an ethic of “special obligations” and “self-sacrifice” acted out in the private, personal sphere perpetuating “the separation of the public world from the private world” (Ibid.:122). This dualism poses a paradox for women: “women find themselves giving up relationships in order to have a relationship” (Ibid.:123). The resolution is found through adopting an ethics of care as the “voice of resistance” that challenges the discourse of a public sphere of autonomous rights against a private sphere of nurturing relationships (Ibid.:123).

Critics contend that an ethics of care perpetuates stereotypical ideologies of women as nurturers and caregivers even as it universalizes and homogenizes women’s experiences (Mattessich and Hill in Baber and Allen, 1992:7). The effect is to reproduce oppressive gender relations (Baber and Allen, 1992:7). However, an ethics of care is gender neutral, and not biologically given (Deveaux: 1995:15-6). That caregiving has been historically construed as women’s work is insufficient grounds for precluding it as a moral basis for human interactions. In fact, since care is basic to human survival and

therefore, must be practiced, a failure to interrogate the gendered construction of care will, almost of certainty, maintain the status quo.

Deveaux suggests that opponents of an ethics of care are missing the point. Their en-gendered critiques reflect “a failure to recognize the *nature and scope of care as both an ethic and a set of practices*” Deveaux, 1995:117).<sup>27</sup> By overlooking the ethical dimensions of caregiving practice, “social and political inequalities” endemic to the polarization of care are reproduced (Ibid.:117). Moreover, there are strong arguments in favour of defining caregiving beyond the social reproductive work of women. For example, Adelman figures the Welfare State as the “insitutionalization of care” through the “common civic understanding” of “capital, government and labour” (1996:8). As such, it represents the integration of an ethics of care with an ethics of rights and justice. The Canada Health Act is one exemplar of an ethics of care enshrined in law with the universal condition of care superceding the notion of the individual’s ability to pay. Adelman describes the ongoing dismantling of the Welfare State as “a throw-back to primitivism” just because caregiving is radically devalued in the ensuing structural adjustments (Adelman, 1996:9).

### **An Ethics of Care as Power and Practice**

If we accept that communities of necessity imply relationships, and relationships are infused with power, attention must be given to the underlying relations of power that structure social relations in Crone communities in order to make the case that these communities exemplify a counter-culture formation relative to dominant culture. Here, I

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<sup>27</sup> My italics.

contend that the relations of power that structure Crone communities are relations of interdependence and empowerment. Such a formulation of power has been traditionally conceived of as 'power with' and 'power to' as opposed to 'power over' by feminists theorizing power (Allen, 1999). The 'power to' encompasses the qualities of capacity, energy, confidence, competence and effectiveness that empower (give power to) individuals for self-actualization (Merriam Webster Online; Charles, 1996; Hill Collins, 1991; Hartsock, 1983). Therefore, empowerment constitutes both the process and the objective outcome of structural relations of power in Crone communities.

Interdependence is the social condition of mutual dependence implicit in a relationship structured cooperatively around a common vision in which an ethics of care mediates the process. An ethics of care implies mutual respect, trust, acceptance and positive regard for all members of the community. Yet, it does not preclude the critical reflection that enables the community to do the work of discernment, construction, and correction that Nelson identifies as critical to validating the community's story.

Empowerment is the individual condition of moral self-definition that comes out of a sense of competence and confidence in telling your story, reflecting on it critically within a caring community of choice, so it can be retold from a new perspective and validated by the community of choice. Empowerment comes out of the interactions in Crone communities and is arguably the hallmark of Croness. Croness choose to live authentic lives that go against the grain of societal expectations as opposed to invisible lives conforming to expectations defined by dominant discourse.

Sensitizing concepts that surface in Crone communities to open space for living an 'authentic life' include 'coming out' and 'speaking the truth.' Coming out has multiple meanings in Crone discourse including coming out in some newly defined identity, coming out as a Crone, and sometimes coming out as a lesbian or bisexual. Coming out is a process encompassing the telling of stories in which choices can be expressed and analyzed and ultimately validated for the individual woman. Often women have been unable to speak their truth or to speak at all. The focus in Crone communities is on empowerment and self-definition in multiple spheres of human activity such that Crones are enabled to speak, think, feel and act against the grain, the Crone equivalent of Nelson's acts of insubordination.

The primary activity in Crone communities is consciousness-raising, although that will not be the exclusive interest. Since women and Crones are by nature sociable, and derive benefits from telling stories about their experiences, other issues and topics surface in discussions. It is in the listening and hearing of these stories without judgment that validation is expressed. Resistance is also a key dimension of conscious aging, whether it arises within the chosen community or propels women to join Crone communities is moot. Both individually and collectively, Crones are non-conformists who resist societal expectations for women in later life. Further, they have arrived at a particular point in life where they have a complex of life experience, knowledge, skills and abilities that positions them to take a leadership role as 'elders' in the society. Resistance comes out of the devaluation of their potential through the reduction of women's roles to reproduction narrowly defined as birthing babies.

## QUEERING THE HETEROSEXUAL BINARY

My first tentative investigation of the Crone was a participant observation at an *Imaging the Crone* workshop conducted by feminist artist, Helen Redman in her San Diego studio. The purpose and the activities of the workshop were focused on creating images of a Crone body in mixed media in a collaborative circle of women building on the findings on the studio walls from prior workshops. Some of the participants were self-consciously feminist or Crone, while others came out of curiosity, through friendly networks or as a birthday present. It seemed to me that through the collaborative process of creating an embodied image of their Crone persona, participants were taking back the body surrendered at menarche. In so doing, they were engaging in feminist praxis: conscious aging and conscious aging activism. Although they might not have espoused a feminist politic, they nevertheless came to some level of consciousness regarding the social invisibility of old women. They also engaged in the telling of counterstories by creating venerable images of old woman, rendering the Crone archetype corporeal, and investing her images with symbolic meaning in the group reflections that ensued before and after the creative sessions.

Within the workshop, it was apparent that the Crone collaborative circle was positioned to queer the binary oppositions that constitute and legitimize masculine hegemonies and patriarchal social structures (Walker, 1985:22; Arber and Ginn, 1991:48). Here, I'm arguing that the powerful Crone archetype embodied in the psyches and the images produced by post-menopausal women stands opposed to the heterosexual norm, the norm of dominant male and passive female. Contrary to patriarchal

stereotypes, the Crone archetype is not passive nor is she barren and apparently, she has a self-empowering agenda. Of course, this is true only if the Crone can be rendered visible through cultural images and corporeal through the praxis of women in later life (Rountree, 1997:226). In this regard, I draw on the notion of Crone conscious aging and the way that personal empowerment develops out of interaction and dialogue within Crone networks and inspires and facilitates the activities of Crones that I characterize as conscious aging activism. The *Imaging the Crone* workshop series facilitated by Helen Redman exemplifies this form of activism as does her website, *BirthingtheCrone.com*. Other comparable activities include the street theatre productions of the Raging Grannies, the spiritual activism of Croning rituals, the cultural artefacts of Crone poets and artists and the intellectual creativity of Crone scholarship on aging, family, sexuality, spirituality, gender, labour, politics, ecofeminism and a whole raft of other issues.

I conceptualize all of these activities as socio-cultural reflections of the corporeal transitions of menopause that arguably produce a Crone subjective presence and Crone counterculture. In consequence, I argue that contemporary Crones have a new story to tell, collectively crafted by second wave feminists and women of their cohort inspired by feminist consciousness-raising in Crone communities. It is a story that overwrites the dominant cultural narratives that define and reduce women to the condition of reproduction dispensing with old women who are finished as women at the menopause. When told in Crone gatherings, wisdom circles and communities, it provides an opportunity for women to redefine themselves as a powerful Crone, a woman of age,

wisdom and power. Such a story, when shared with others, has the potential to transform the social landscape of women by bringing a new dimension of female subjectivity into the world both in practice and in theory.

### **3. METHODS**

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#### *Seeking the Crone*

*Calling All Crones!*  
*The Crone Project website*

Welcome cyber-traveller to this infinitesimal virtual space near the centre of the web where minds converge to ponder the Crone. But first let me spin out my own story for you. I am a student Crone. That is, I am a Crone student and a student of Crones ...

I am exploring what I call Crone phenomena: crone networks, crone collectives, crone lifeworlds, crone stories, crone values, crone social and political movements and Crones.

I am hoping to engage with a number of Crones to collaborate in my research. Collaboration would involve subscribing to my listserv; engaging in the dialogue that goes on there; filling out a survey that I will be eventually mounting on my website and perhaps, providing a respectful interview about their Crone way of life, which is not the way, of course, but a way.

## **CRONE COLLABORATIONS**

As marxist method is dialectical materialism, feminist method is consciousness raising: the collective critical reconstitution of the meaning of women's social experience, as women live through it.<sup>?</sup>

Calling all Crones to collaborate in an ethnographic study of Crone culture, consciousness and communities has methodological implications as well as political ones. Firstly, the project is conducted from a feminist framework with the explicit goals of raising Crone consciousness and producing Crone knowledge as well as describing and making sense of Crone culture. On that account, I have employed the strategy of Participatory Action Research (PAR), working collaboratively with other women to conceptualize the Crone. I have invited them to engage in research “about Crone consciousness, Crone networks, Crone collectives, Crone life worlds, Crone stories, Crone values, Crone power and Crone social and political movements” through a dialogue about the Crone, who is characterized as a symbol of “age, wisdom and power” (McCabe, 1998). In this way, my research project contributes to the social construction of Crone consciousness, culture and communities. While this may seem problematic within a positivist or scientific tradition, the feminist framework and stand-point epistemology that underpins this project support the notion of ongoing active and critical construction of meaning that will effectively result in a transformed social reality.

Secondly, the primary research strategy, participatory action research (PAR), intends to engage participants in a consciousness raising process that will empower them

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<sup>?</sup> MacKinnon, Catherine A. (1989) *Toward A Feminist Theory of the State*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

to actively shape their social context (Bee in Kirby and McKenna, 1989, 16). An important goal and expectation of my study, then, is that women will develop Crone consciousness through the telling, hearing, and critical analysis of their experiential narratives in consciousness raising groups. The sharing of experience and analyses should result in a more robust Crone collectivity dynamically engaged in the process of evolving Crone culture and identity with individual women empowered through the iterative cycle of consciousness raising, resistance, interdependence, and self-definition.

Having thus acknowledged the potential implications of my study for the morphing of Crones, I turn to the methodological considerations and research methods implemented in conducting this study. These include the feminist politic and methodology that frame the project;<sup>28</sup> the strategies of participatory action research and ethnography that inform the design of the study; the data collection methods, analytical frameworks, and the role of the researcher in the design, development, implementation and writing up of the project. I will also discuss the issues of validity and the potential for generalizing theory and analytical outcomes when working from a qualitative paradigm as well as the ethical considerations and limitations of the study.

## **FEMINISM AS A POLITIC OF RESEARCH**

In her comprehensive survey of feminist methods, Shulamit Reinharz identifies the challenge in mediating between competing feminisms and perspectives and politics among those who call themselves feminist. She deals with “the practical problem of a

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<sup>28</sup> Stanley differentiates methodology as a framework for research as opposed to methods, which are the techniques for conducting the investigation (1990, 13).

working definition” of feminist research by allowing the researcher to self-define (Reinharz, 1992, 6). In that regard, she may be fulfilling a feminist destiny – to derive abstractions from practice as opposed to the reverse configuration. In consequence, I define both my work and myself as feminist without recourse to the varying shades of feminism that it might support or oppose and set out three fundamental criteria by which I categorize this study as feminist.<sup>29</sup>

Firstly, my work seeks both to understand and to ameliorate the situation of women in later life who are both the participants and collaborators in the study. In that regard, it is informed by a politic of feminist praxis, the “dynamic interplay between theory and practice,” where theory is explained as thoughtful reflection and practice as political action (Maguire, 1987, 3, xv; MacKinnon, 1989, Kirby and McKenna, 1989, 34; Stanley, 1990, 15). Secondly, my work is feminist because it focuses on women and their lived experience and their own insights and interpretations of that experience. This criterion goes to what might best be termed “a sociology of women,” a knowledge project that demystifies experience, not only, for the researcher but also for the research participants (Spender, 1985, 1-2; Smith, 1987, 8; 1990, 21-24; Stanley, 1990, 15, 21).

Thirdly, both the departure for this study and the primary research method can be construed as feminist consciousness-raising. MacKinnon defines “consciousness raising [as] the process through which the contemporary radical feminist analysis of the situation of women has been shaped and shared” (1989:84). That analysis is best expressed

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<sup>29</sup> At the same time, I acknowledge the existence of multiple feminisms characterized by “political, ethical and epistemological differences” that have implications for any knowledge claims that I might ultimately propose as a result of my study (Stanley, 1990, 20).

through the maxim, ‘the personal is political,’ the theory that the private lives of women are informed by a small ‘p’ politics of dominance and subordination mystified and naturalized through the cultural texts of a patriarchal social system (MacKinnon, 1989:84; Yanigasko and Delaney, 1995). It follows that the “pursuit of consciousness becomes a form of political practice” (Ibid., 84; Rowbotham, 1973:27). The politicization of consciousness meshes critical analyses of the material conditions of women’s lives with practical action for change not only in the lives of the research participants but also in the socio-cultural formation through which those conditions are produced and legitimized. Thus, it is my contention that women who are morphing the Crone do so with the expectation of transforming self and the social system that defines them.

## **RESEARCH STRATEGIES**

### **Feminist Participatory Action Research**

This study, which I have characterized to its participants as *The Crone Project*, is ethnographic in its methods and perspectives, but it also fits within the second wave feminist consciousness-raising project. Therefore, it not only examines the morphing of Crone images, consciousness and identities, but by its very nature, which is participatory, collaborative and dialogic, it also engages in producing those self-same Crone images and identities. In so doing, it aspires to be a political project to raise the consciousness of women as to the prospect of aging as a Crone and to figure the implications for their lived experience at the intersections of ageism and sexism. In that regard, the project is located within the tradition of participatory action research (PAR).

PAR seeks to link three distinct yet interconnected social processes, “social investigation, education and action,” so that oppressed people are positioned to create social knowledge that is located in the actual concrete conditions of their lived experience (Maguire, 1987:3). Maguire characterizes PAR as a “systematic approach to personal and social transformation” (Ibid.:3). Since Crone were already engaged in this sort of transformative process, consideration must be given to the way that this study locates itself within that process. For example, the various activities of this study, website, cyberspace discussion list and focus groups, took place in Crone gatherings with the goal of sparking discussions about the Crone symbol, culture and collectivities from a critical perspective that might otherwise not have been raised directly. Therefore, the notion of morphing the Crone has been conceptualized both in the consciousness of women and the context of the academy. The writing of this thesis and by extension, the potential for presentations and publications contributes to the construction of social knowledge regarding the Crone and Crone culture. Finally, the activities and the networking that ensued from this project can be conceived of as activities that contribute to both critical education and political struggle.

### **Feminist Ethnography**

Since this project also aims to describe and make sense of Crone culture, it is also informed by the strategies of feminist ethnography. Neuman defines ethnography as “an approach to field research that emphasizes a very detailed description of a different culture from the viewpoint of an insider in that culture in order to permit a greater understanding of it” (2000, 509). For example, Franke [1983, 61] locates culture as an

object of description that “resides within the thinking of natives” (in Neuman, 2000:347, 509). So when I set off on my initial tentative cyberspace search for traces of Crone culture, I was, in a curious fashion, searching for self. Crone consciousness and identity were already aspects of my psyche and my body. Visweswaren (1994) contends that feminist ethnography by definition meshes the activities of traditional ethnography with autobiography in order to meet the requirements of self-reflexive feminist research. To some degree, then, how the ‘natives’ make sense of their culture is how I make sense of it, not through the imposition of meaning so much as the shared construction of meaning. My experience and social location thus constitute “another layer of data” for analysis (Kirby and McKenna, 1989, 32).

As Franke suggests, ethnography has traditionally been a practice of studying the culture of natives, the exotic other on some foreign shore or the alien other among us, as was the case with the Chicago School studies of immigrant populations. In this study, I purport to be studying the Crone, who I have claimed is native within me. The overarching objective of my study, then, is to discover the source of my thinking myself a Crone, and to elaborate the process by which a Crone cultural identity is fashioned and reproduced in social interaction with other like-minded natives. This objective suggests the possibility of cultural fragments embedded in a pluralistic society in which the notion of a post-modern subject with multiple identities arises. However, in considering the notion of pluralism, Visweswaran argues for careful analysis, since the concept of “trying on identities” eclipses the relations of power through which identities are constituted, no matter how strategically they are deployed by particular social actors or groups (1994:8).

By interrogating my self as a subject of my research, I also redress the power imbalance of traditional ethnographic research that positions social actors as objects of knowledge for expert researchers (Kirby and McKenna, 1989, 32). From a political perspective, this approach has been an expectation of feminist research that is not so readily accomplished in the field or reporting stages (Visweswaran. 1994:20-21; Reinharz, 1992:69; Abu-Lughod, 1990). Therefore, Visweswaran locates the potential for feminist ethnography in “locating the *self* in the experience of oppression in order to liberate it [emphasis mine]” (1994:19). Thus the departure for the study is my own lived experience of invisibility, ageism and sexism at the menopause. My actions in the field are aimed at conceptualizing social invisibility and ameliorating its effects in the lived experience of old women. My intentions are to open a space for women to reflect on Crone culture, to come to Crone consciousness, fashion Crone identities and ultimately to become empowered through the experience. This intention is addressed through collaboration and discussion in consciousness-raising groups and through the framing of broad research objectives that ostensibly are clarified within the collaborative process. These broad objectives were framed as follows:

1. to learn about Crone consciousness, networks, collectives, life worlds, stories, values, power and social and political movements;
2. to describe the lifeworlds and document the lived experience of Crone women in their own voices;
3. to bring the history of Crone women in from the margins, so that their wisdom can be acknowledged and integrated into the "legitimate" domain of academic knowledge.

## **Cyberspace Ethnography**

There is a rapidly proliferating literature regarding internet research and cyberspace ethnography with a ‘virtual’ cacophony of contentious issues relative to sampling, data management and analysis, validity, ethics and limitations arising and vying for space in the literature. In consequence of these challenges, my dissertation supervisor, Dr. Barbara Hanson shared the role of list owner for the *webcroner* mailing list, which allowed me as a graduate student to host the list on the York University web server. Given the emergent nature of cyberspace ethnography and questions relative to validity and authenticity, Dr. Hanson also subscribed to *webcroner* as a non-participant observer throughout the duration of the study. This allowed her to provide the requisite supervision relative to design, methodological and ethical issues. I address some of the research contingencies arising from this emergent site of research in the relevant sections below.

### **Conceptualizing the Virtual Community**

Given that I have conceptualized *webcroner@yorku.ca* along with other cyberspace entities as virtual communities, I want to set out the technical accommodations that allow such communal social formations to flourish, the challenges to making that definition and my rationale for doing so. Reciprocal communications are the hallmark of the cyberspace community. Discussion is ongoing and substantial. There are a number of software programs that facilitate reciprocal communication, for example, e-mail discussion and distribution lists generated through member subscriptions. Discussion forums also known

as bulletin boards or newsgroups provide features for posting to a discussion through a website via e-mail or on the host website. Members can also access the discussion in the same ways and discussions can be archived on the website, providing a historical record of the community for new members. Chat rooms simulate a meeting space, where individuals can congregate and hold real time discussions. Chat rooms can be accessible to all or only to select individuals and this sort of exclusivity is a vehicle for defining the boundaries of a community.

The challenge of defining communities in cyberspace goes to the nature of space itself. Contemporary scholarship relative to the internet tends to conceive of virtual and actual space as a dichotomy (McCabe, 1999; Rheingold, 1994; Benedikt, 1993; Tomas, 1993). Like all such oppositions, the focus tends to devolve on difference and uniqueness as opposed to similarities and commonality. For example, the virtual realm is often figured as a disembodied “utopian environment” where ‘netizens’ divest themselves of the signifying discourses of gender, age, disability, ethnicity, and race that result in forms of social exclusion and stratification (Ward, 1999:96). Further, there has been a tendency to romanticize the virtual as a site of divine potentials where disembodied humans can aspire to immortality (McCabe, 1999; Tomas, 1993).

Ward attributes these tendencies to a conceptual distortion: the failure to recognize the intersections of virtual and actual social space, which she now conceives of as a “hybrid space that is neither wholly physical nor virtual” (1999:95). From a sociological perspective, the notion of hybrid space might be better thought of in terms of social space in which the potential for social interaction straddles the intersections of

virtual and actual or physical space.<sup>30</sup> In the case of my study, I have drawn on the work of Nelson in conceptualizing communities of choice against communities of place.

Ward, too, proposes just such a definition for cyberspace communities as a remedy to the bifurcation of space and the sorts of communal ‘life’ that ensues from that distortion (1999:96). The nature of the community for cyber-ethnography is that participants “perceive it to be so, and experience the spirit of community” (Ibid.:96).

Nelson contends that people join communities of choice on the basis of shared difference; that which separates and excludes them in their actual or physical community is what draws them together in the chosen community. The members of *webcrones* share the experience of aging, social invisibility and glimmers of Crone consciousness or identity. The *webcrones* affiliations are of long duration with at least seven participants subscribing in the initial year and several more subscribing in the second and subsequent years. They share an interest in the objectives of *The Crone Project*. Many of them have also met in actual space at Crone Counsels and other Crone gatherings organized around the problem of sexism and ageism with the explicit goal of empowering women in later life. On the basis of shared interests, values, political and personal objectives they constitute a community of choice in both Nelson and Ward’s terms as well as a virtual community.

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<sup>30</sup> Like Ward, I contend that cyber-ethnography has the potential to deconstruct the notion of fully dichotomous space. Rather spatiality is better conceived of as a dynamic and stratified potential or relativity: physical, social, psychological, virtual, actual, and temporal space as shifting ground of human cognition. Given this understanding of space, virtuality, the absence of face-to-face communication and contact, in and of itself, does not preclude community. Therefore, it is possible to identify communities in cyberspace although every cyberspace network may not qualify.

## CRONE POPULATION AND PARTICULARS

Here I draw a very general picture of the population that constitutes the culture of Crones from which the women who participated with me in the study emerge. For the most part, these women are white, middle class, well-educated university women. Within the population, there are many lesbians who were already out or have come out and are now living lesbian lives in actual space or who are considering the prospect of coming out to family and friends. Most of these women are mothers with children and this role applies to straight and lesbian women alike. They are distinctive in that they enjoy the company of women independent of men. By that I mean that while many of them have male partners, they are less likely to discuss heterosexual relationships in their gatherings and they are less likely to defer to their partners. These are independent women. Many of them identify with second wave feminism counting themselves as feminists although not necessarily ‘card-carrying’ feminists. They are actively engaged in confronting the ‘double whammy’ of ageism and sexism both personally and collectively as an epistemology of aging and they share many values with ecofeminism.

As I conducted my research, I was often confronted with the question of how I had defined the Crone. Who were these women? What made them Crones? Men friends regularly responded by substituting a male counterpart: “Is that like a curmudgeon? A coot? An old croney?” To which, I would respond: “Not on your life!!” The Crone symbolic has a much older pedigree and commands our respect and fear. However, it is also true that some women who joined *webcrones* would also query the Crone, quite early on in their participation: “Why do you use the word Crone? Isn’t that a nasty term

for an old woman? Isn't that an ugly hag? Gives me the shivers. I don't want to be a hag." That was the cue for the netizens of *webcrones* to speak about the Crone as a symbol of age, wisdom and power and also of our purposes for joining together in a collective consciousness raising dialogue. No doubt at that point, some women left the group, since the politic of the discussions was not their interest; others left because it was not political enough! Many women would hang in there and come to Crone consciousness as I am defining it.

### **Sample Rationale and Demographics**

Recognizing that there were innumerable women constituting a population of Croness as I defined it, I began by surfing the internet in search of Crone traces. Having discovered many Crone websites, two national Crone organizations located in the USA, one claiming international status, and several e-mail lists of older women, some of whom identified as or with the Crone, I set up a website to call for Crone participants for my study. I also conducted participant observations, focus groups and interviews at two sites where such women were gathered specifically to discuss Crone concerns: Crone Counsel VII and an Imaging the Crone workshop. All of the women who participated in interviews, focus groups and *webcrones* are apparently white women, for the most part, middle or upper middle range as to socio-educational status. Many of them are living in reduced circumstances as a function of retirement or widowhood. They range in age from 45 to 85, although there were two participants of long duration on *webcrones*, both of them in their mid-30s. It is notable that after participating extensively for two or three years and

enriching the dialogues on Crone, both of these women, mothers with children, withdrew from *webcrones* citing family and work responsibilities.

## **Space and Time**

Space and time are of consequence to this study since the sites of research confront both the dynamic of cyberspace, a social space located in Franklin's *Real World of Technology* somewhere "between the bitsphere and the biosphere" as well as physical landscapes ranging from Ottawa to San Diego to Estes Park, Colorado to Egypt and Peru (Franklin, 1999[1990]:166). For the most part, the study focuses on Crone culture, communities and consciousness constituted by women in Canada and the United States. Nevertheless, given the potential for Crone activities elsewhere and for Croness to surf the net and connect through electronic communications, individual participants beyond the borders of Canada and the United States have also participated in the study. In referring to the locale of the study, I have opted for the designation America, a cultural concept that reflects the increasing harmonization of Canadian and American culture and policies as well as the harmonious demographic of the group.

The social space of *webcrones* has multidimensional potentials. I have characterized it as a space of choice, a safe space, the space of connection and solidarity that we think of as communal space. There is also the notion of sanctified or sacred space in which rituals are conducted as against profane space, the mundane space of the everyday world. Cyberspace has been conceptualized as a mystified, ethereal space that lends itself to the sacred. However, the multidimensional potentials of sacred space also surface

in the actual spaces where Crones gather constituted by them as sacred through the drawing in of the five elements, spirit, fire, air, water, earth, and fire; the casting of the eternal circle within the four directions; drumming up the circle and other such rituals.

## **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

The overarching questions that sparked this study and now inform its implementation are:

What is the nature of Crone metamorphosis and how do Crone-identified women make sense of Crone consciousness, culture and communities?

## **DATA COLLECTION METHODS**

This project employed multiple methods of data collection congruent with feminist ethnography, including participant observation at Crone gatherings and workshops, content analysis of Crone newsletters, magazines and websites, semi-structured focus groups and a cyberspace discussion forum. An in-depth discussion of the particulars for each method and initiative follows.

### **The Crone Project**

In order to facilitate access to Crone networks and to network with other women who might be interested in an interactive dialogue about the Crone, I designed and developed a website, *The Crone Project*, at <http://www.geocities.com/Wellesley/Garden/3371>. Robin Nelson, a webtender with Luckie Chance creations, provided technical expertise and coding. I made contact with her through the Mississauga Webgrrls organization. The

site is comprised of home page, research exegesis, project papers, ethical formulation regarding the doctoral dissertation, links to other crone sites, and a mailing list page. A print copy of web documents is included in Appendix I. The website has been the source of numerous inquiries from individuals interested in the Crone symbol as well as from potential subscribers to the *webcrones* forum. There were also queries from journalists and filmmakers and women who wanted to advertise books and other items that might be of interest to Croners. Several Crone academics studying the Crone from a range of perspectives made contact through the site. Consequently, there has been some discussion amongst Crone researchers regarding a formal research network for discussions, information sharing and research collaborations. Plans are in the works for a joint presentation of our work at Croners Counsel XI or XII.

## **Participant Observation**

I conducted participant observations at two Crone gatherings. Here I set out methodological considerations and ethical accommodations specific to each site. The observations, interactions, and analyses are described in greater detail in the findings and discussion chapters.

### **Imaging the Crone Collectively**

On August 15, 1998, I attended this workshop with 12 other women at the San Diego studio of Helen Redman, a Crone artist. The workshop focused on imaging the Crone body with mixed media and stressed the collaborative process. When first contacting Redman, I expressed my interest in attending the workshop as an aspect of my dual

interest as a Crone and a doctoral student conducting a study of Crones. Two issues were of most concern to me in this context: ethical considerations and documentation.

Redman welcomed my interest and we fleshed out the following process. As the first order of business at the workshop, I would introduce myself and explain my purposes there. I would also provide a brief information statement about the project that included purposes, and ethical considerations regarding my participation and observations. I include a copy of the statement in Appendix II, Ethical Provisions.

Informed consent would be addressed in the workshop with the participants, as would my proposal to take notes of the discussion and my observations. I would seek consensus as to the process to be followed and gain the assent of the women in attendance before proceeding further. This process was deemed sufficient for ethical purposes since participants at the workshop were aware of Redman's feminist politic and activist approach prior to joining the workshop. Since my interests meshed with Redman's, my presence was not so great a departure. I followed this procedure at the workshop concluding with a call for feedback and discussion. There were questions posed as my research provided another layer of interest in the Crone archetype, which was the focal point of the workshop. Ultimately, consensus was reached as to the procedure I had outlined such that I was comfortable proceeding with the methods outlined in this description. At the conclusion of the workshop, I reminded women who wanted to receive copies of any papers regarding *The Crone Project* to provide contact information. Of the twelve women present, nine of them provided this information.

Following the workshop, at Redman's invitation, I joined her and Mnimaka, a Crone spiritual leader in the San Diego area in Redman's kitchen for coffee and a discussion, which I recorded on tape but have not transcribed. I also met with Redman on August 17 to continue our discussions about the Crone, and how we could support each other with our mutual interest and shared objectives.

### **Crones Counsel VII**

From October 14-17, 1999, I attended Crones Counsel VII at Estes Park, Colorado, 8,000 feet above sea level, bounded on three sides by Rocky Mountain National Park.

Approximately 350 Crones attended the conference, which was a highly organized event that included morning sessions for the full contingent followed by daily wisdom circles comprised of 8 to 10 women facilitated by a volunteer Crone. Afternoons offered a range of topical workshops, drumming, painting, grief, spirituality and so on. Any Crone with an interest and expertise might propose a workshop and facilitate it. Since there were many such workshops and participation is ad hoc, there is good effort in conceiving, preparing and presenting the workshops. At the suggestion of the organizers, I proposed such a workshop and was among the Crone authors, academics and others who presented exploratory or information gathering workshops. These are well supported because they mesh with the Counsel's objectives for critical reflection on women's aging experiences.

### **CCVII Focus Groups**

Prior to attending the Crones Counsel, I facilitated discussions regarding the development of focus group workshops with the *webcrones* cyberspace forum. The *webcrones*

community had input on the title, the process and the content of the sessions. In that way, the workshops became a creation of the participatory action research segment of this study and they better accommodated the sensibilities of Crones. The title designated for the workshops was *Recording Crone Voices: A Collaborative Oral History Workshop*. Participants were invited to “talk” in groups of 5 or 6 women about various themes regarding Crones, community, spirituality, rituals, values and change over time (See Appendix II for documentation). There were three sessions in all with two conducted on Friday, October 15<sup>th</sup> and a third on the following day. A fourth session was attended by only one woman who decided to stay and be interviewed as opposed to participating in some other workshop offering. A total of ten women participated in the workshops; four in session one; three in session two, two in session three and the lone participant in session four. In reporting my findings, I have included the data from the semi-structured interview as part of the focus group dataset. Since a Crone entrepreneur in the business of publishing talking books piggybacked onto these workshops, the audiotape is of professional quality derived from a sophisticated sound system and two microphones placed strategically in the room.

The workshops used a semi-structured focus group interview format. Prior to proceeding, I provided an information statement and confidentiality agreement, which participants were asked to read and sign. I also provided a list of discussion themes and invited the participants to be creative in interpreting these, adding to them or revising them to meet the requirements of the discussion. A talking stick aptly known as ‘Talking Woman’ was fashioned by one of the *webcrones* specifically for the Crones Counsel

workshops. Participants sat in a circle and the stick was passed from hand-to-hand. Once having received the stick, the woman could choose to contribute to the discussion or choose not to by passing the stick to the next person. At the outset, we decided that each woman should hold the stick for about five minutes and this would allow for more participation. The injunction was very informally monitored. About ten minutes prior to the end of the session, I signaled to the group that the workshop was coming to a close and began a sort of debriefing session asking for comments about the process. Was there anything more they would like to add to the discussion? Would they have liked to structure the session differently and so on? Some of the sessions ended with the entire group reciting an affirmation that was posted to the *webcrones* forum for that purpose, *Claiming the Wise Woman Within*, (See Appendix II, Workshop Handout). In one session, I read the affirmation to the group before thanking them for their contributions.

Upon completion of the sessions, the Crone entrepreneur provided the audiotapes of the sessions and I had those transcribed in full by my Toronto transcription service. In addition to these transcriptions, I also made many notes during or immediately after the various events I attended. Given the ethical considerations involved in these activities, I provided 300 copies of my information statement to the organizers to be placed on the information table at the Conference center at the beginning of the conference. This was designed to inform the Conference attendees of my purpose and interests and to provide information to women prior to coming into my workshops. In addition, the Workshop Program Lists in the Conference Package and the Workshop title provided the information that the sessions would be taped. This allowed for a more fully informed

consent and participation process and it is hoped that this method avoided any unnecessary awkwardness for a person who did not wish to have their stories taped, since they would have the information needed to direct them to other workshop offerings.

### ***Webcrones@yorku.ca***

While I have conceptualized *webcrones* as a cyberspace community, the technical format supporting the community is an e-mail list hosted on the York University server and linked to *The Crone Project* web site. The list was established in August of 1998 with the first subscribers review list downloaded on August 5th. This initial list was comprised of seven women who responded to the Call for Croness posted to the Mississauga *Webgrlls* e-mail list. The call was posted by the webtender of *The Crone Project*, who informed me that the word Crone surfaced quite regularly in messages posted to the *Webgrlls* mailing list. Dialogues on the list are ongoing and continue to provide a rich source of data for analysis as well as opportunities for exploring the methodological dimensions of research on the internet, women's engagement with the new information technologies, and the potential of cyberspace to facilitate networks, community and empowerment.

Given the broad objectives for the study defined on *The Crone Project* website, many topics may enter the conversation. In addition, much of the discussion is expressed in narrative form. Questions may be asked, considered, reconsidered, answered or perhaps, go unanswered. This may be the nature of a cyberspace discussion list. Like an actual community, this virtual gathering has a life of its own and the discussion reflects a community of individuals. Some people open their mail daily; others are less observant. Life in actual space penetrates the fringes of cyberspace, so that employment, travel,

illness, relationships and busy work may get in the way of virtual conversations. By the same token, women often bring these issues to the list for discussion, advice, solace, brainstorming, planning and problem solving. Therefore, the discussion list provides a source of community, compassion, psychological and social support, wisdom, humour, entertainment and expressions of a deeply felt connection between like-minded women.

As of November 2003, there have been approximately 40,000 messages posted to *webcrones*, 60% of which are saved to files on zip disks. These disks will be stored at Calumet College, York University at the completion of the study. In addition to the disks, approximately 40% of the postings were downloaded to print copy in deference to Y2K. Since its inception in 1998, the subscriber's list has ranged between 30 and 45 members at any one time. Women have come to *webcrones* through chance encounters with the website during cyber-surfing expeditions or by word-of-mouth from women already subscribed. I have also netted subscribers through presentations at conferences, random discussions with women and postings to other cyberspace mailing lists. For example, a recent subscriber joined the list after attending a guest lecture I gave in a Web CT chat room for a York sociology course. Once women subscribe to the mailing list, they are directed to the website to read the information statement and ethical formulation (See Appendix II, Website Documents).

## **Content Analysis**

As part of the ethnography of Crone culture, I conduct regular internet search and surf for Crone websites. Given the proliferation of Crone websites in cyberspace, these explorations provide a way of observing Crone cyberculture in order to gain information,

insights and intersubjective understanding with regards to Crone social constructions of meaning. These websites exemplify the intellectual and creative artistry of Crones and on that account, I have conceptualized them as a form of conscious aging activism. I provide a brief description and URLs for a sampling of websites in Appendix I. I also hold subscriptions to *Crone Connection*, the newsletter of the Crone of Puget Sound and the *Crone Chronicles*, initially in hard copy version and now in its electronic version, which is accessible at no cost online. These cultural artefacts and texts have suggested new directions for research as well as contributing to the identification of folk concepts that have underpinned the development of sensitizing and supra-sensitizing concepts. Along with the miscellaneous Crone discussion lists, all of these activities provide a fuller immersion in Crone culture and collectivities.

## **ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORKS**

### **Unit of Analysis**

In ‘grounded theory’ methodology, the concepts derived from the raw data become the actual units of analysis (Pandit, 1996:1; Strauss and Corbin, 1990:7). The unit of analysis for this study then is the interactions and activities of Crones through which they produce Crone consciousness, culture and collectivities. The core concept is morphing the Crone, the notion of transforming identity from abject old woman to powerful Crone with secondary concepts, conscious aging and conscious aging activism, the processes by which morphing evolves. I clarify these contingencies here for their usefulness in conceptualizing my analytical interests as a prelude to the discussion of intersubjectivity,

which is a critical component of studies in Symbolic Interaction. As such the focus of analysis is the dynamic and emergent aspect of social and symbolic interaction that is examined through participant observations, discussion and cultural artefacts that convey symbolic meanings analyzed with a grounded theory approach (Prus, 1996:18).

## **Intersubjectivity**

Much has been written about the condition of intersubjectivity, which Prus characterizes as the ‘quest for intimate familiarity’ (Prus, 1996:18). Here, the ethnographer is enjoined to be “ ‘sensitive’ to the ‘double hermeneutic’ ” that characterizes the study of human “life-worlds” (Ibid.:18). This is the notion that making sense of Cronen consciousness, culture and communities encompasses making sense of how Cronen themselves make sense of these aspects of their lived experience. In other words, I must bear in mind that ‘symbolic interaction’ is the defining characteristic of social relations in human groups and I must strive for *verstehen*,<sup>31</sup> the practice of interpretive understanding in order to make sense of my study of the social world of Cronen.

Within a feminist politic, Kirby and McKenna now build on the practice of intersubjective understanding defining it as “an authentic dialogue between all participants in the research process in which all are respected as equally knowing subjects” (Ibid.:28). The goal then is for intersubjective understanding between the

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<sup>31</sup> Max Weber first elaborated the concept of *verstehen* as a practice for sociology building on the work of Wilhelm Dilthey, who can be considered the originator of the interpretive tradition in the social sciences since he the first extended hermeneutical conventions to human activity as well as texts (Prus, 1996:35). The interpretive turn was extended from Weber to Mead and his student, Blumer whose three premises now define the process of symbolic interaction. The work of Alfred Schutz in devising a phenomenological sociology based on the work of Weber and philosopher Edmund Husserl contributes substantially to the elaboration of the concept of intersubjectivity (Rousseau, 2002:143).

participants and I so that my interpretations remain true to their definitions of the situation (Glaser, 1992:4; Reinharz, 1992:46; Kirby and McKenna, 1989:129). In this way, there is some assurance that my conceptual analysis, and reporting of research will capture the perspectives and real conditions of the participants. This last idea is a fundamental premise of the grounded theory approach that goes to the validity of the analysis of data and the formulation of theory.

Kirby and McKenna define intersubjectivity as “an authentic dialogue between all participants in the research process in which all are respected as equally knowing subjects” (Ibid.:28). Thus, the premises of sociological interpretive research are married to the political project of feminist research. The expectation is always that the voices of women who have been silenced and erased will now be privileged and that feminist researchers will not compound the experience of oppression by eclipsing the sensibilities and experiences of participants as objectified academic knowledge. Given the strategy of participatory action research, the participants of this project have been active at all stages of the project from design to analysis to theory building. Nevertheless, there is no assumption that all participants share the same degree of commitment to the project, since research is not their primary interest nor did they initiate the project. Therefore, my commitment has been to a continuous and consistent, scrupulous scrutiny of my practice in order to ensure that participants voices, viewpoints, cognitions and sensibilities are the primary source of information and interpretation for the analysis. At the reporting stage, in particular, my work must mediate the requirements for academic rigor and sociological

erudition with the requirements of participants who are eager to read my memos, papers and reports only so long as they are written in clear language.

## **Grounded Theory Analysis**

Given the exploratory nature of this study, the multiple methods, duration and types of data collected, a grounded theory approach to data analysis was implemented meshing the analytical insights of symbolic interaction with aspects of the grounded theory methodology of Glaser and Strauss. The analytical process derived from the constant comparison of samples suggested strands of received theory, which were meshed with those derived through grounded theory.

### **The Morphing of Grounded Theory**

Initially, grounded theory was devised as an inductive approach to analysis as an alternative to the logico-deductive methods of quantitative analysis by sociologists, Glaser and Strauss (1967:2-6; Glaser, 1992:4). The intent was to develop a systematic methodology for conducting social research that would avoid the heavy reliance on hypothesis testing and statistical analyses, which they deemed inadequate for generating new theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967:10-12). They argued that the practice of forcing data to fit preconceived theories formulated on the basis of *a priori* assumptions provided at best, a partialized account of a narrowly construed social problem (Glaser and Strauss, 1967:3). As an alternative, grounded theory provided a broad general account of the social organization and the social psychological contingencies emerging dynamically from the field of study (Glaser and Strauss, 1967:235-250; Glaser, 1992:5).

The methodology took hold across a number of academic and professional spheres. One of its main attractions was the meshing of a positivist epistemology with a qualitative approach in a somewhat contrived marriage of qualitative values with scientific principles (Rennie, 2000:1; Charmaz, 2000:509).<sup>32</sup> Not surprising then that succeeding publications from both Glaser and Strauss indicate the morphing of grounded theory into two divergent formulations that are methodologically and epistemologically distinct (Babchuk, 1996:2; Strauss and Corbin, 1994; Glaser, 1993; Glaser, 1992; Strauss, 1987).<sup>33</sup> Charmaz locates Glaser's work within a positivist epistemology and Strauss and Corbin's work within a post-positivist (critical realist) epistemology (Charmaz, 2000:510). Despite a rancorous debate between them on subsequent developments, they are apparently still playing in the same epistemological ballpark! Nevertheless, the potential for grounded theory applications underpinned by constructivist and interpretivist epistemologies is informed by the many studies that have been conducted within those frameworks.

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<sup>32</sup> I say contrived because Glaser's (1992) application of grounded theory analyses to both quantitative and qualitative data glosses over the distinction between a qualitative research *paradigm* and qualitative *data* and doesn't adequately address the incommensurability of the quantitative and qualitative distinction at the paradigmatic level. In consequence, the dialectical tension between qualitative and quantitative research is not addressed, let alone resolved by Glaser and Strauss's 'grounded theory' methodology nor is it very often acknowledged in sociological discourse. Nevertheless, the initial popularity of grounded theory methodology may be attributed to its apparent resolution of that tension. On that account, it has some attraction to qualitative researchers who arguably want to gain the legitimacy and the access to funds of their quantitatively informed colleagues.

<sup>33</sup> In fact, a rancorous debate has played out in the pages of Glaser's 1992 publication, *Basics of Grounded Research*, in which he insists that Strauss has so far diverged from the methodology as conceived in the original text, *Discovery of Grounded Theory*, that he either didn't comprehend the original theory or was negligent in "study, scholarship and research" required to make connections to the original theory, or even worse, deliberately duplicitous: "You wrote a whole different method, so why call it 'grounded theory?'" (Glaser, 1992:2).

Psychologist David Rennie argues for grounded theory as methodical hermeneutics and Charmaz for grounded theory techniques as “flexible, heuristic strategies rather than as formulaic procedures” (Rennie, 2000:481-482; Charmaz, 2000:510). Given that my Crone standpoint<sup>34</sup> posits the potential for three tiers of reality my position is compatible with the “multiple social realities” posited in a constructivist epistemology (Charmaz, 2000:510). In consequence, I have applied the processes of grounded theory as heuristic strategies that were applicable for moving the study through the various stages of the research process. In the next section, I provide a description of the grounded theory techniques as I applied them to my study. These aspects of my research locate it within the broad range of grounded theory studies in sociology.

## **Grounded Theory Applied**

### ***Theoretical sensitivity***

Grounded theory analysis calls for theoretical sensitivity, which I conceive of as a complex of expert knowledge, skills, and understanding that inform the generation of concepts and the potential connections that produce social theories (Glaser, 1992:27-30). As a student of sociology and a professional social worker, I have acquired many of these skills and implemented them in my analysis and theory to meet the standard by which grounded theory methodology is assessed: “fit, work, relevance, and modifiability (Glaser, 1992:00-00; Charmaz, 2000:511). Further, it seems to me that the idea of

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<sup>34</sup> Feminist standpoint as a critical perspective holds to a historical realist ontology and a transactional-subjectivist epistemology in which reality is socially constructed and reified or crystallized over time.

theoretical sensitivity also encompasses the quality of intersubjectivity, which I have emphasized in my approach to the study and the analysis.

### ***Defining the research focus***

The grounded theory researcher does not begin with a problem, but rather “moves in with abstract wonderment of what is going on that is an issue and how it is handled” (Glaser, 1992:22). The objective is to locate the problem or the “core process that continually resolves the main concern of the subjects” (Glaser, 1992:22). Glaser’s formulation is congruent with my study. I began with the insight that I called myself a Crone as I entered mid-life. I wondered what the source of that identity was and I set out to discover how other women who identified with the Crone symbol or as Croness made sense of it. Extending the theme of wonderment and discovery, the standard literature review is put off in grounded theory until the theory is well in hand although reading for theoretical sensitivity is promoted (Glaser, 1978). I followed this practice in doing my literature reviews well after the analysis produced the core concept, morphing the Crone and the conceptual framework of conscious aging and conscious aging activism.

### ***Conceptualizing***

The suspension of the literature review goes to the process of conceptualizing in grounded theory. Grounded theorists do not “shop their disciplinary stores for preconceived concepts” (Glaser, 1978 in Charmaz, 2000:511). This would result in the distortion and forcing of data. Rather, concepts emerge from the data through a process of coding and constant comparison. I did not follow Glaser and Strauss’s method for

deriving and developing concepts, using instead the strategy of sensitizing concepts from Blumer, which were derived from folk concepts and evolved to supra-sensitizing concepts at the most abstract level. In this task, I used van den Hoonaard's (1997) monograph, *Working with Sensitizing Concepts* as my guide. My goal was to keep the analysis close to the data in order to meet the objectives of feminist participatory action research for a situated knowledge that would demystify the social context and the conditions of women's lived experience as opposed to generating abstractions that would have less relevance and purpose for the participants.

At the same time, sensitizing concepts, themes and patterns that emerged from the data over time suggested a number of theoretical applications for understanding the activities of Cronos. In essence, concepts from received theory had 'earned' a place in the analysis as a function of their fitness for making sense of the data (Charmaz, 2000:511). For example, the practice of story telling as a sort of feminist consciousness raising was prevalent, therefore, the work of philosopher, Hilda Lindemann Nelson (1995; 1999) relative to counterstories was a good fit. Nelson's notion of chosen communities and moral self-definition linked to the counterstory led to the integration of feminist scholarship on power and an ethics of care. These concepts were integrated at the demand of the data as opposed to the forcing of data into preconceived concepts.

### ***Constant Comparison***

Grounded theory methodology is a schema for analysis as opposed to a prescriptive for data collection. Since I have already set out the data collection methods, I will here locate the process of data collection in its entirety within the logic of constant

comparison, which is the heart of the methodology (Dick, 2000:2). Constant comparative analysis calls for simultaneous data collection and analysis informed by the concepts that emerge through each successive comparison (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 1978; Glaser, 1992; Strauss, 1987, Strauss and Corbin, 1998). The notion of theoretical samples drawn for comparison and for conceptual enhancement is comparable to the succession of data and analysis produced through multiple methods and sites. The *webcroner* cyberspace community meets the criteria for many diverse incidences for comparison since innumerable women have joined the list and provide a dense textual dataset for analysis. The dialogic nature of the e-mail list allowed for expanded investigation of concepts in an indirect fashion, so that I was not leading data or concepts where I might want them to go. Rather, the list had a mind of its own, so posing direct questions received little return. Nevertheless, sooner or later, a range of answers to my unasked questions would surface in the discussions.

### ***Generating theory***

I used the process of “hurricane thinking,” described by Kirby and McKenna in their version of grounded theory methodology (1989:147-154). Hurricane thinking is a visual method that suits my learning style. It is a form of concept mapping, where the research question is placed centrally on the page at the eye of the hurricane with concepts and categories fanning out in streams of relationships to the question (Ibid.:146-147).

Likewise, Kirby and McKenna’s notion of ‘living with the data’ and revising the analysis is congruent with Glaser and Strauss’s notion of taking distance from the data (1989:150). In my case, the data collection and analysis extended over a considerable

length of time, such that there is no doubt that I lived with the data. Of course, there would be periods of greater and lesser attention to Cronos and their stories, such that I was able to bring fresh eyes to the analysis.

## VERIFICATION OF INTERPRETATION

In feminist qualitative research, the verification of interpretation by participants and collaborators stands for the assessment of validity and reliability in quantitative research (Kirby and McKenna, 1989:35). In this study, the participants are comprised of the women who joined actively in the project and have the interest and experience relative to the Crone that is the focus of research. In addition, collaborators are individuals who have knowledge or experience relative to the research focus, but are not necessarily participants in the research. As knowledgeable confidants, they can keep us on track, moving forward systematically and “keep us honest in the face of amassing data” (Kirby and McKenna, 1989:31). For this project, I was fortunate to have such a collaborator. She participated initially in the *webcronos* dialogue, so she had some insider knowledge of the group. When she withdrew due to time constraints, she wished to maintain a connection with the project and took the role of sounding board, provocateur, and critic.

There is an expectation that my analyses, descriptions and theory fit with the participants’ sense of what is so; that they recognize within my reports the relevance of the analysis for their lived experience (Kirby and McKenna, 1989:36). In the case of my study, I have managed this aspect throughout the project, by reflecting back to participants my understanding of their postings, comments, poetry, activities and

contributions to the discussion. The reflection of meaning or paraphrasing is an active listening technique used in social work counseling. The periodic paraphrasing of statements and stories has proved a useful strategy for stimulating discussion, clarifying meaning and engendering a critical perspective in the group.

In addition, I also distributed my papers and presentations relative to the project to those participants with a mind to read them. The sharing of papers allows participants to validate the representations of their experience and to read and reflect on the analytic process and the conceptual framework. I have provided papers to those women who value the process and have a sense of satisfaction in participating in the analysis. They take pride in their work and scrutinize the writings carefully, which activity occasions many critical questions and comments. The process cues me to gaps and contradictions in my thinking; points for further explication and incorporation into the analysis.

The process of collaborative reflection with participants moves the analysis closer to a plausible and more representative theory grounded in the data. Participants are outspoken in their views and expect a cogent analysis. They are also able to transcend their personal stories to reflect on the group as an entity in and of itself and strive for a story that represents the group process. Once again, the potential for a 'truer' or closer representation of the lived experience of the participants coupled with an analysis that gets at the underlying politics of the situation goes to the potential for reliability. Reliability "refers to the trust or confidence we have when speaking about the description and analysis of our data" (Kirby and McKenna, 1989:35). When participants are able to

see their experience in my writing and the analysis makes sense to them, I can claim the study as a reliable or dependable formulation of the situation (Ibid.:35).

### **Triangulation**

The multiple methods and field sites that I have employed in the data collection process allow for the triangulation of findings and analysis as a test of consistency or veracity, given that the underlying constructivist epistemology remains constant (Blaikie, 1991:115). For my purposes, it was possible to compare the results of content analyses from a range of print and cyberspace publications in order to generalize aspects of Crone culture. Participant observations at Cronos Counsel VII and the Imaging the Crone Workshop also provide opportunities to compare across field sites on a number of variables. Focus groups and wisdom circles conducted at Cronos Counsel VII yield a richly textured discussion that is arguably comparable to the *webcronos* cyberspace discussions.

## **ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

The primary ethical considerations for this study go to informed consent, maintaining confidentiality and anonymity (privacy) of the participants. These elements have been managed in face-to-face data collection activities through informed consent statements and agreements with participants. At the Imaging the Crone Workshop and Cronos Counsel VII where participant observation, focus groups and interviews were the data collection methods, access was gained on the basis of disclosing my interests prior to going to the sites. I provided information statements and for focus group discussions and

interviews, I also presented informed consent agreements that I read with the participants explaining in detail the purposes of the research as well as the intended uses for data. Each participant received a signed copy of the agreements and the information statement. Informed consent statements included conditions of participation and stressed the opportunity for voluntary withdrawal at any time during the group or interview as well as withdrawal of any of record of their participation at any time after the interview. They were also informed of their right to refuse any questions that were not acceptable to them. Where focus groups were audiotaped, consent to the taping was also obtained as part of the initial orientation. I also integrated the term 'recording' into the title of the focus groups so participants would have prior awareness of that condition of participation.

Measures to ensure informed consent were complicated by the communication format of cyberspace. Communication is less formal and since it is not face-to-face the researcher must rely on the electronic assurances of subscribers that they understand the project and are comfortable participating in it. This complexity is offset by the entirely voluntary nature of subscription. Individuals subscribe to the list at their own volition and are also at liberty to unsubscribe at any point in time. In addition, many of them subscribe with pseudonyms or Crone names. Nevertheless, I have posted consistently to the list the informed consent statements and other ethical considerations including the description, and aims of the project and the uses that might be made of the discussions. In addition, I have invariably solicited statements of consent from participants by e-mail and when these were not forthcoming, I would make additional contact by e-mail to try and secure a letter of consent. Despite these precautions, I acknowledge that not all participants sent

forward those statements. Nevertheless, for the ethical consideration of informed consent, their continued participation signalled their assent. Further, all participants in the mailing list have subscribed through the website, *The Crone Project*, where the purpose of the project and the mailing list are described as well as the provisions for ensuring anonymity and confidentiality.

As a general rule, participants in the project have done so with a political interest in promoting critical Crone consciousness and it is notable that many of them insisted that I use their actual names as an aspect of their activities to promote the Crone and to increase the visibility of women in later life. This decision was usually accompanied by a comment such as, “We’ve been silenced long enough. It’s high time someone did know our names.” Despite this position, there are many participants who prefer to remain anonymous and their wishes extend to all documentation, presentations and reports that I draft regarding the project. In all cases, whether actual or virtual, I have consistently conveyed to participants that they are at liberty to withdraw from the list and have their postings withdrawn as well should they wish to do so at any time in the future. Likewise, in face-to-face interviews or focus groups, I have apprised participants of their right to refuse a question or to end the interview at any time they might wish to do so as well as their rights to request that their contributions to the study be withdrawn. To date, there have been no requests in that regard.

The other primary concern of research is to do no harm to participants. In the case of this study, the potential for harm was limited to inadvertent personal embarrassment or humiliation in the course of discussions and psychological harm that

goes to self-esteem as an effect of the discussions. The possibility that conscious aging might be psychologically painful must be offset by its potential to be generative and to resolve those experiences that surface as a result of the discussions. For the most part, the women who participated in the study have affirmed the benefits of their participation. The project has provided a forum for women to share their stories and in the telling to be validated. Many of them have indicated their pleasure at being so involved and substantiated the potential of the project for political change.

Participation on *webcrones* has varied over time, with individuals subscribing and unsubscribing. This would not be uncommon in actual space given the lengthy duration of the project. Sometimes, they would provide explanations, which included individual life circumstances and interests, obligations and time constraints. Some women left reluctantly at a point when they felt further growth through the community was no longer possible. For them, departure was difficult and somewhat drawn out. Some of them returned to the community years later with renewed interests. Still others and these were surprisingly few, left because of divisive relations with others in the community or because they took offence to a posting or because the discussion was not political enough or too political. Then, too, there were always transient subscribers who found little in common in the community.

## **LIMITATIONS**

One of the limits of ethnography in general is that culture is a dynamic and emergent aspect of human group life. Therefore, its representation must always be framed in

retrospect, since the immediacy of field studies have invariably morphed to some new incarnation. So in its demand to capture symbolic meaning, norms, values and practices of a particular cultural formation, ethnography is stymied at the outset. Further, it is difficult to attribute meanings and motives across the various situations that I define as aspects of Crone culture. Nor can I claim that the findings of this study represent the meanings that individuals have for their actions, since my focus has been on the social interactions and group life within the Crone orbit. Therefore, I was able to detect patterns of behaviour, unifying themes and shared meanings derived from group interactions. While it is conceivable that individuals may actually hold these meanings and values, the recognition that individuals represent themselves in particular ways depending on the social context mediates this possibility. Nevertheless, having recognized those constraints, there is still great value in exploring the activities of women in later life for what they will tell us about individual women and their activities in collective settings with each other.

Another key limitation goes to the nature of electronic communication itself. Communications scholars and practitioners claim that ninety per cent of communication is non-verbal. It follows that communication on the *webcrones* forum is somewhat suspect and not fully evolved. Likewise, from my perspective as a scholar of cyber-communication and cultures, it seems to me that the sort of messages that pass for interpersonal communication more closely resemble the inner and partially developed cognitions of individuals setting them free in cyberspace. Therefore, to constitute them as fully evolved dialogues is problematic. Nevertheless, they still provide meaningful

insights and experiences recounted by their authors and must be considered as illuminating the focus of study. Given the multiple methods and sites of research in actual space, the potential for comparisons in the different datasets offsets the cyberspace contingency.

In conducting cyberspace ethnography, the question of 'pseud' identities arises. How do I know that these subscribers are really who they say they are? There is some justification for questioning the identities of subscribers to *webcrones* or any virtual site since 'seeing is believing,' and wired women are after all women without substance. I generally counter with the point that there is little likelihood that too many people would want to eavesdrop on the conversations of old women or impersonate them. This is borne out in the general devaluation of women in later life and their virtual absence from cultural representations. However, this rationale may seem too facile to meet the requirements of academic rigour. On that account, I can attest to the credibility of virtually all participants since I have had face-to-face encounters with many of them at Croness Counsel or other Crone gatherings. Many of the women, whom I have not met personally, have had face-to-face connections with the women I have met. So for the most part, there is a substantial network of face-to-face relationships that underpin the virtual connections of *webcrones* such that I am fully satisfied that the women are, in fact, who they say they are. At any rate, that will be the standard for identifying and incorporating their ideas into the analysis.

## **4. DISCUSSION**

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### ***Crone Consciousness and Communities***

## ***A Cackle of Crones***

*The following visionary poem is the last in my performance series, 'The Crone Poems.' -- Lorna Drew, webcrones posting*

### **The Crones Are Flying**

The crones are flying  
 In/formation, cackling as they come  
 Absurd and true as nature,  
 Neither plane nor bird  
 I hear, I see the old crones come

"Take me," I cry  
 "Old women, elder mothers, daughters,  
 Teach me to fly  
 My wings are old, prehensile, broken things  
 Useless as the appendix  
 Or the base skull's blind eye"

But I have seen  
 The ancient organ wake  
 The bent appendage mend  
 Old elder bones revive  
 Seen the sky ALIVE with crones  
 Heard their old songs  
 Found comfort in those thin, compelling tones  
 Old blood songs, older runes,  
 Tuneless, moriah moans

## **EVOLVING CONSCIOUSNESS AND COMMUNITIES**

In this chapter, I discuss the origins, nature and evolution of Crone consciousness and the communities that are fundamental to the development of a Crone culture. The discussion begins with the forms of communication that reach out to Crone-identified women in their communities of place, sparking an interest in the Crone symbolic, drawing them into Crone communities and networks. This is followed by an examination of the way Crone communities are constituted and reinforced in Crone gatherings such that Crone-identified women remain actively engaged with the culture and process of conscious aging and conscious aging activism in their communities of place. In the following chapter, I examine the symbols, practices, narratives and beliefs and the counterstories that emerge through conscious aging in Crone communities. When taken together these elements constitute Crone culture and community and by extension, Crone identity and consciousness in the world. In the concluding chapter, I draw connections between Crone culture as I have described it and the theoretical concepts that constitute a theory of the Crone morphing. I revisit the research questions relative to these findings and analysis and conclude with a discussion of the implications of this study for feminist praxis and the sociology of the body, aging and power.

### **Communications and Networks**

Given the geographical diversity of the Crone population and the nature of communities of choice, voluntary communities premised on shared difference, Crone communication

is of primary importance to the evolution of Crone consciousness and the promotion and proliferation of Crone communities. A range of communication modalities are present including both hard copy and electronic newsletters, magazines, bulletins, as well as organizational and personal websites designed to accomplish those objectives.

Hard copy publications are distributed through the mails and on information tables at Crone gatherings. They are produced almost exclusively with volunteer labour and financed through advertising, subscription or membership fees. For the most part, they are published by a formal organization constituted to promote Crone consciousness, culture and community. Some examples of these are the *Crone Times*, published by the Crones Counsel; the *Crone Connection*, a quarterly newsletter of the Crone of Puget Sound, a Seattle-based organization; and the quarterly newsletter of the International Council of Wise Women. The pre-eminent hard copy magazine was *Crone Chronicles* now publishing as an e-zine. The founder, publisher and editor of the *Chronicles*, Ann Kreilkamp also co-founded the Crones Counsel reflecting the close connections between magazine and formal organization. *Buffalo Woman's Vision* is a bi-monthly black and white magazine published by the House of Sky Community and edited by two Native American women active in the evolution of Crones Counsel. Content includes many articles relevant to Crone culture. Another example of this same genre is *New Mature Woman*, also a bimonthly publication established in 1990. The publisher and editor, Win Findaca is also active in the Crones Counsel.

Most of these news media are published by formal organizations constituted specifically to promote their activities and events and distributed through the mail and on

conference tables, community racks in libraries and the like. The exception to that rule was the *Crone Chronicles*, a magazine of general interest to women in later life and nationally distributed in the United States to fine bookstores such as Barnes and Noble, thus, boasting a healthy circulation of >10,000. In addition to the local audience served by these publications, they are linked to the more centralized national organizing groups, such as Crones Counsel and the International Council of Wise Women (also known as International Council of Grandmothers and Crones). These links promote solidarity amongst Crone-identified women that goes beyond local communities to a sort of ‘imagined community’ of Crones that provides the bedrock on which Crone identity can evolve. Here, Benedict Anderson’s notion of an “imagined community” seems to fit with the nature of a geographically diverse group of individuals who constitute themselves as a community through shared vision, identity and purpose (Anderson, 1991).

### **Vision, Identity and Purpose**

As a body of representational work, Crone publications in virtual and actual space project a shared and consistent vision of older women as wise, energetic, creative, compassionate, connected, strong, spirited and powerful. The Crone of Puget Sound statement of purpose exemplifies this vision for older women in every issue of the *Crone Connection*, a quarterly newsletter published by them:

CRONE is an organization that encourages and supports the personal unfolding and passage of its members from past outgrown roles and stereotypes into powerful, passionate and satisfying old womanhood – *Statement of purpose originally adopted by the CRONE Board at the July 1990 Advance; reaffirmed at each succeeding Advance (Crone Connection, May 2002:2).*

Likewise, the vision of a Crone counterculture embedded in dominant reality premised on Crone identity and the potential for a ‘deeper reality’ also surfaces, articulated in the *Crone Chronicles* as follows:

... *Crone Chronicles* is an open forum for exploring the range and depth of what the Crone invokes within us.

In *Crone Chronicles* we pierce through our cultural conditioning to encounter a deeper reality. We share stories from experiences, which have taught us how to live – more fully, more freely with more feeling for ourselves and others. *Crone Chronicles* honors the wisdom, courage and compassion of the Crone within us all (*Crone Chronicles*, Winter 1998-99:4).

By investing the Crone symbolic with these qualities, Crone leaders and organizations reflect the belief that wherever women gather together as Crones they generate a dynamic collective energy that can be channeled towards achieving Crone purposes. Crone purposes are not so readily defined. While the mandates and mission statements of Crones are articulated clearly in these publications and resonate with each other, independent voices surface on the pages and the postings and inevitably reflect a diversity of viewpoints. For example, this quote from a member of the Crone of Puget Sound, who characterizes herself as “ten years a Crone,” identifies the competing issues regarding Crone purpose and vision. At 84 years of age, she is wondering if there is not a greater purpose than personal development:

“ ... looking ahead, I am among a number of Crones asking with increasing frequency, should Crone not have a mission related to serving needs other than just our own? I know that the Crone Statement of Purpose dedicates us to giving up past and outgrown roles, chiefly caregiving, that all too often were at the expense of our own well being. *However*, in growing old (and growing up?) we may find that we enhance rather than diminish our own lives when we concern ourselves with needs beyond our own. And yes, I know that a founding premise of Crone of Puget Sound is that we are neither a fund-raising, nor a political action group. But, does that preclude turning our much-vaunted Crone wisdom and experience, power and purpose to nonpolitical issues? (*Crone Connection*, May 2002:15).

## Crone Spinsters and Web Weavers

While there has been much discussion regarding the technophobia of people in later life, and there are indeed issues surrounding accessibility to the internet and skills development relative to computer information technology, Crone-identified women have established a vibrant presence on the World Wide Web.<sup>35</sup> There are innumerable personal websites created by women who take the Crone archetype, images, mythology, folklore, and symbols as their focus. Often these sites provide a canvas for Crone art or a site where Crone Spinsters can publish and represent their individual scholarship, autobiographies, stories and poetry or reflect on their philosophical, spiritual, social or political perspectives. By design, these sites inculcate Crone values, ethos and politics and by the very nature of the medium, they facilitate web surfing to other Crone sites via the hyperlinks embedded in sidebars and web links pages. Thus, they facilitate a thick web of Crone connections and networks. Here, I discuss three personal websites that are representative of a nebula if not a galaxy of Crone sites in cyberspace. In Appendix I, I have included a more comprehensive list of websites and URLs generated through web surfing conducted throughout the study and ongoing.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> The lack of education and training in computer information technology is a serious concern in general particularly in relation to large bureaucracies. I had occasion to give a Brown Bag seminar on Crones in Cyberspace. Three women of Cronely years attended thinking this might be an opportunity to develop skills in accessing and surfing the internet. After the talk, I did arrange to provide them with a workshop on web searching at a later date.

<sup>36</sup> Given the vastness and ephemeral qualities of cyberspace, the examples I cite here and in the Appendix are unlikely to represent the entirety or complexity of Crone colonies linked to the World Wide Web. Some of the sites that I visited may now be defunct; while others may have eluded my web searches because they are insufficiently linked to the World Wide Web. Still other sites may have surfaced in the interim between my searches and this write-up.

## **Birthing the Contemporary Crone**

*Birthing the Crone: Menopause and Aging Through an Artist's Eyes* is the creation of feminist artist, Helen Redman (*Birthing the Crone* website). While the site showcases and markets Redman's art, it goes well beyond self-promotion by depicting "the journey into old age" in a positive fashion. Redman's objective is to transform the social meanings ascribed to older women through her website, her artistry, her exhibitions and her workshops (Redman promo material). In this fashion, she is conceptualizing old women as "wise and generative Crone[s]" in opposition to the abject, infertile old woman. Her lectures and slide presentations focus on themes of "Beauty and Aging," thus filling the void with representations that actively deconstruct the pejorative meanings layered on the old woman's body in dominant discourse.

Redman's website is technologically superb and easy to negotiate. So much so that the site was featured in the April, 1996 issue of *Wired Magazine*, a prestigious publication for the technophile audience meeting Redman's objective of "reaching a broader audience" for her work and her political goals of generating positive images for older woman to espouse. A central focus of her art is her own rebirth as a Crone and the birthing of Crone images. Indeed, bones and skeletons figure extensively in Redman's paintings as does a sense of whimsy. For example, in *Birth of the Crone*, we see Redman giving birth to herself, her stern and wrinkled face complete with spectacles emerging to face the world anew. In her words, she is "welcome[ing] my crone, and as I try to push her out I feel a sense of excitement about getting to know her ... and as serious as the face coming out of the vagina is, she's wearing a labia bonnet and the whole thing is

comical” (*Birthing the Crone* website). Redman’s description provides some insight into the experience of morphing the Crone as an exciting and whimsical departure on a journey of self-discovery, an alternative to the slow, depressing decline and ultimate disappearance of images of old women in dominant culture. Redman’s Workshops on Creativity & Aging are featured prominently on the site. These are half- to full-day sessions facilitated by Redman in her San Diego studio and garden. Women come together to “create art about their lives from menopause through old age” individually and in groups (*Birthing the Crone* website). A sampling of workshop themes include: “What is Going on Inside Our Bodies,” “The Beauty of the Old,” “Inner/Outer Crone Work” and “Creativity + Aging = Menopause” (Ibid.). It was through her website that I first learned about the “Imaging the Crone” workshop described throughout this thesis.

## **A Crone’s Credo**

Windchime Walker also known as Patricia Lay-Dorsey defines her website as a “woman artist/ activist’s creative responses to disability, world events and life” (*Windchime Walker’s* website). With that she invites the surfer to share her creative art and writings. A sampling of these includes *My Journal* (updated daily), *Creative Disability*, *Meditation Mandelas*, *Sacred Stones*, and a *Crone’s Credo*. A well-maintained Links page organized in sections leads to *Women’s Worlds*, *Women’s Creativity*, *Granny D*, *Birthing the Crone*, *The Crone Project* and *Ruth Ellis at 100* (Ibid.). Many of the references on the site promote Crone consciousness and culture and conscious aging activism. For example, there are hyperlinks to *Crone Wisdom* and *Cultural Transformation* and pages

for the *Raging Grannies Without Borders* and *Storytelling My Life* (Windchime Walker's website).

In her daily journal, Walker introduces her *Crones Credo* by explaining how it evolved:

In April 1993, I traveled by train to a WomenChurch gathering of 3000 in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Returning home to Detroit, my childhood religion was left on the tracks beside desert scrub brush and the flooded Mississippi River. Having experienced the communal power of women to embody the divine, I shed outgrown beliefs and structure like a snake discarding its skin. Over four years later, at the Winter Solstice, the following credo appeared within a lengthy journal entry. Here was a winter crop ready for harvest without conscious remembrance of its having been planted. Once tasted, I recognized the tang of my lived truth (Ibid).

That she calls it a Crone's credo with reference to a metamorphosis of ideas and form reflects her experience of a transformed identity and a coming to Crone consciousness. Each of the fifteen articles of the Credo begins with the statement, "I believe ..." and follows with Walker's conception of her transformed self in connection with the social and the natural world. Despite her experience of multiple sclerosis, Walker's website and her many activities bespeak her commitment to conscious aging activism. One example is her role as a founding member of the Detroit-Windsor chapter of the Raging Grannies without Borders, a group whose protests take the form of street theatre performances of political songs set to familiar tunes.

### **The Crone's Cottage**

*The Crone's Cottage* was created by Marj Franke as a medium for displaying her Crone sculptures, as well as a tutorial that set out the method for Sculpting a Crone in polymer

clay. The sculptures are virtually life size and placed in natural settings around Franke's country home. She described them in this way:

Each of these crones has a distinct personality. Study them and see what message they bring to you. There is no slick fortune telling computer gimmick here. I am simply suggesting you look within yourself to that inner source of wisdom these Crones represent (*Crone Cottage* website).



BOULDERCRONE



ANACORTESBAYBUNS\*

When I connected with Franke for copyright permissions for a poster presentation, she shared her experience of morphing with me, describing how she had resolved the corporeal changes of menopause and birthed herself as a Crone through her artistry.

She began with the intention of fashioning a ceremonial rattle by covering a plastic egg filled with seeds. This task evolved over time and trial to the Crone sculptures depicted above, which she explains as follows:

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\* Pictures reproduced with permission of the artist, Marj Franke.

All the Crones I made still have seed inside. Not just because I wanted a rattle. It became a symbolic thing, the Crones, menopausal women, no longer bleed, they hold their seed inside. It is said that is where the wisdom comes from. After I'd made several of the Crones, I realized that this process was about me turning 50 ... and getting comfortable with my body. I can't tell you how many times I went to the mirror and peeked at how or where a fold of flesh was draped on myself. Then in sculpting it, I was judging it from an entirely different point of view. From the Creators point of view all bodies are works of art. It changed the way I felt about my own body (M. Franke e-mail correspondance).

Her words seem to define the process of morphing the Crone, as a corporeal, psychological and symbolic transformation that renewed her appreciation and confidence in her own body. Her consciousness raised, she developed the website to showcase her artwork and to tell her story as a sort of conscious aging activism.

## **CRONE COMMUNITIES IN VIRTUAL AND ACTUAL SPACE**

Cyberspace is a primary source for stimulating and nurturing Crone consciousness. There are numerous organizational or group websites developed with the express purpose of publicizing and propagating Crone philosophy and culture in order to increase the ranks of Crone-identified women. These sites are replete with Crone symbolism, principles and practices reflecting the values and belief systems of Crones. Some of these sites are designed to publicize a real-time organization, promote member interest through distribution lists and develop real-time conferences and gatherings of women under the sign of Crone. Others act as portals for a cyberspace community that meets or interacts through any of the potential modes of interaction available through computer information technology. These include electronic mailing lists, newsgroups or bulletin boards and chat rooms. Examples of organizational websites include the Crones Counsel and the

International Council of Wise Women (also known as International Council of Grandmothers and Crones). Here I provide a brief description of the Crones Counsel website and expand on the organization below where I discuss participant observation at a Crones Counsel gathering.

### **Gathering the Crones in Cyberspace**

The Crones Counsel seeks to “reclaim the Crone archetype” by creating gatherings of women who will act as roles models representing “older women’s wisdom and accomplishments” (*Crones Counsel* website). Crones counsel values include promoting equality, encouraging diversity and supporting personal empowerment of older women so that their value to society will become self-evident (Ibid.). The Crones Counsel website is a primary source for laying out the vision, values and activities of the Counsel and promoting Crone consciousness through the features available on the site. For example, the site provides an extensive description of the Counsel Gatherings including *Upcoming Gatherings* and *Past Gatherings*. A *Registration* page with an online form linked to a secure server for payment facilitates participation.

There is also a comprehensive description of the Crone including the contemporary Crone of *Crones Today* and *The Ancient Crone*. All issues of the Counsel newsletter, *Crone Times* are archived on the site. Taken together these features allow visitors to learn about the ancient history and current events regarding the Crone. This educational function on the site facilitates an evolving Crone consciousness in women who have surfed the web to locate websites of relevance to their interests. A list of *Contacts* provides an easy way for visitors to make connections and ask questions. The

FAQs (frequently asked questions) link is comprehensive and keyed to the concerns of older women. One of the first questions addressed was “*Isn’t a crone a disease or a withered old woman?*” (*Crones Counsel* website); the response from Walker’s book redefines the term Crone, “Crone is .. the power, passion, and purpose of ancient female wisdom ... the crowning triple phase of the ancient Triple Goddess: Maiden/Mother/Crone.”

The question “*Why did you choose the name crone in the organization title?*” opens a space for reflecting on the nature of the Crone symbolic, and the political objectives of Crone-identified women:

We are beginning to realize that this third and crowning stage of female life (the one our culture throws away) is more authentic, creative, outrageous, powerful, funny, healing and profound than we ever imagined. Aging is natural process, but it is also very much a woman’s issue. Resisting the cultural phobias about growing older begins right at home – within our own bodies. How each of us sees our own aging process can in turn influence how the culture sees it. The term “Crones Counsel” was a deliberate choice as the title to signify the intent of the gathering as a place where older women could share their histories and counsel with each other ... (*Crones Counsel* website).

The interdependent model of Crone communities is elaborated in response to the question of why *Crones Counsel* is called a gathering as opposed to a convention or meeting.

From the beginning, the word “gathering” was used to invite older women to come together to share their stories and counsel with each other. The idea from the outset was to have a gathering with no stars, no keynoters, and no hierarchy of organization (*Crones Counsel* website).

## **Cyberspace Communities**

Cyberspace communities are distinguishable from personal, organizational and e-zine formations by their objectives, structure and technical features. Cyberspace communities promote social cohesion, shared values, interests and interaction between and among a core group of members that meet predominantly in cyberspace. The core group define

themselves as a community as do the silent members. Even the lurkers or transients, who surf through the community website and move on with little interaction if any, define the community as an entity to which they have no common ground. I have encountered a number of these Crone communities in cyberspace engaged in discussions and reflecting practices that constitute conscious aging and conscious aging activism. These include networking, communication, consciousness raising, social support, information sharing, social and political activism, and the promotion of Crones, their culture, symbolism, politic, aesthetics, and bodily images. Here I describe two such communities.

### **Webcrones@yorku.ca**

*Webcrones* is a cyberspace discussion forum, a Crone collaborative circle, established as the outcome of my initial pilot study on Crones. Having discovered that older women were embracing crone lives, and developing networks of solidarity, support, information and communication, I wanted to open a space where I could learn more about this new identity. I began by creating a website, *The Crone Project*. The site included a research summary, ethical statement, ground rules and process for joining the *webcrones* forum (See Appendix II). Since its inception in September 1998, there have been over 4000 visitors to the website. Over time, approximately 200 women located throughout Canada and the United States have subscribed to the list and I have had a prolific correspondence with other visitors to my site. As a rule, at any point in time after its initial inception, the *webcrones* subscriber list has numbered between 35 and 50 community members. I characterize them as community members on three accounts. Their affiliation is relatively longstanding. They have posted to the list consistently and in those postings,

they define themselves as members of the *webcroners* community. The following postings exemplify the feeling of belonging to the community shared by many

*webcroners*:

I am a very new and deeply grateful member of Webcroners . . . . Since going online 9 months ago, I've kept my virtual eyes peeled for just such online gathering places for crones. But, as they say, when the pupil is ready, the teacher will appear. Thank goddess, I was ready when The Crone Project URL was listed on the Crone~Wise Woman~Elder website that I was linking to my own site. It has been like coming home (*webcroners* posting).

Always a political activist, I envisioned a feminist project: a network for reinventing the Crone. Certainly, a key aspect of *webcroners* has been the collaborative project to reinvent the Crone, to rescue her from the margins and elevate her to a position of respect and social power. However, I quickly discovered that *webcroners* has a mind of its own, sharing Crone humour, silly jokes, some quite frivolous and politically incorrect; writing and celebrating Crone rituals; publishing Crone poetry of stellar quality; hosting Crone parties complete with lemonade and home-made virtual cookies; and planning Crone conferences, virtual and actual. I have come to understand that the lighthearted humour, the sociability and the broad range of topics are the essential threads that bind us together as a community. What has been described somewhat dismissively as women's "nattering on the net" is in fact the ground for evolving relationships through the mundane and familiar aspects shared by women in dominant culture (Spender, 1995).<sup>37</sup> It is this knowing each other as the reflection of self that opens a space for sharing stories and getting at the deeper meanings of experience.

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<sup>37</sup> My online thesaurus lists the following synonyms for nattering: blather, drivel, nonsense and chatter.

Sharing and caring in the context of the chosen community becomes a political act of “creeping boldness” as one of the *webcrones* frames it:

I have been listening to the tape recorder in my brain. Tonight it is saying extraordinary things to me; that I have been waiting all my life to be able to exchange ideas in the way that we are able to do on WEBCRONES. I wish it had happened earlier for me because so many times in my life, I know now, I have yearned for conversation with older women, or even women of my own age. Just to have them take me seriously. Maybe just to be listened to and confirmed.

Do we spend the first third or more of our lives (or maybe for some women – all of their lives) trying to please everybody, and not even knowing what we are really like? ... Thank goodness for WEBCRONES, ... and for the creeping boldness of the group in sharing their stories, at a time when the world needs Women’s stories more than ever. Thanks everyone (*webcrones* posting).

Likewise, the following quote demonstrates the process of consciousness raising that unfolds within the community thus meeting my own vision for a political space:

Thank you for trusting us with your story. How often we keep such things under wraps, as they would put people off. But every time, I or a friend actually opens up these ‘secret places,’ it seems to give others the courage to share as well. That is a gift we give one another in allowing ourselves to be open and vulnerable. May this community continue to be a place where each of us can dig deep and bring up stories of all that has made us into who we are today. How grateful I feel to be part of Webcrones! (*webcrones* posting)

*Webcrones* stories encompass a broad range of topics assembled through a lifetime of experience from social justice to personal relationships, from disability to sexual orientation, from personal interests to relationships and family situations, from childhood abuse to the loneliness of the unattached senior. In the telling of the stories, narrators and listeners do attend to each other’s words, respond, reclaim and reinvent their experiences, individual and familiar in a conscious aging process. There is agreement and disagreement; and there is difference that cuts across class, ethnic origin and religious affiliations, sexual orientation, age, ability, temperament, and values. There is also shared emotion, joy, grief, pain and misunderstanding as well as personal, spiritual

and intellectual growth that meet the criteria for a community structured by relations of interdependence and an ethics of care.

*Webcrones* women are always ready to ‘speak their truth,’ and care and respect are common values and practices that structure the social space made sacred by Crone symbolism and ritual. Crone stories serve many purposes, from tension release to practical advice; have multiple meanings not always crystal clear and in the context of virtual space, are strangely disembodied narratives about the aging body. There have been disagreements and divergent viewpoints, which have led to the departure of a Crone or two. Others have left citing time constraints or personal reasons. Often the leave taking has been a slow, protracted and even painful process of withdrawal shared through the weighing up of pros and cons on the list or backlist. Some women who have left have also returned demonstrating the significance of the community as a renewable source of support for them. Then, too, since, many *webcrones* are acquainted through other Crone affiliations, extended relationships make sense.

### **Crone, Wise Women, Elder**

*Crone, Wise Women, Elder* (CWWE) is an international online community “dedicated to promoting equality, encouraging diversity, supporting and empowering each other and honouring the older woman's wisdom and achievements” (CWWE website). Features on the CWWE site that project and promote a Crone culture include links to *About Us*, *Alternate Therapies*, *a Crone Charter and Bylaws* including *A Mission Statement*. There is also a chat room that offers the potential for reciprocal communication and links to

*E-mail Us* and *Join CWWE*. I was pleased to see my own website, *The Crone Project*, cited on the *Links of Interest*. An interesting feature of the community is that it actively promotes the linking of the CWWE site on members' personal websites although there are no reciprocal links on the CWWE site. This is a techno-savvy and ingenious way of promoting the organization. I encountered several member sites and describe just one that includes a Dedication Page with the CWWE mission statement along with a link to CWWE and a personal expression as follows:

I am honoured to be accepted into this wonderful group of women who have found the third stage in a woman's life can be the best stage. Their Mission Statement says it all ([www.strawberrylady.com/memberships/cwwe.htm](http://www.strawberrylady.com/memberships/cwwe.htm)).

I first encountered CWWE in my initial web surfing and made e-mail contact in 1999 providing an information statement and seeking permission to join their discussion group as part of my research. I was denied access on the grounds that such research would be invasive and impede the free flow of communication and comfort level of community members who were working through the challenges of menopause.

We treasure the privacy we have to share our similarities and differences with one another ... I can appreciate your interest in us, for our Sisterhood epitomizes your search. Unfortunately for you, Crone 2000 shall be as Private [sic] as our web site (CWWE e-mail correspondance).

This response differs substantially from all other contacts I have made with Crone communities, which were more welcoming of my research initiatives since they saw them as evidence of their success in propagating Crone culture. "It's about time someone wrote us up" was a common response (CCVII focus group).

The CWWE mission statement is remarkably similar to that of Crones Counsel in its promotion of empowerment and honouring of old women. Where it differs substantially is in the goals of “teach[ing] family values” to a broad group and fostering discussions among “women and men” regarding “issues of concern relating to sons, husbands, fathers and significant others” (CWWE website). While Crones Counsel has a global vision of peace and harmony amongst all inhabitants of the biosphere, their mission does not make reference to men, sons, husbands and fathers. Rather they emphasize the lineage of women in their rituals and artefacts. While it is tempting to speculate on CWWE’s commitment to ‘family values’ as evidence of a more conservative, liberal feminist or even a R.E.A.L. women’s perspective as opposed to the radical or socialist feminist perspective of *webcrones* and the Crones Counsel, this would be speculative rather than evidence-based analysis. What is possible to conclude from this divergence in focus is the presence of variegated cultures, communities of interest, sensibilities and diversity in formal organizations and women gathering under the sign of the Crone.

### **Crone Communities in Actual Space**

There are numerous organizations, groups and wisdom circles that demonstrate aspects of Crone consciousness, culture and community. Here, I describe one of them to exemplify the potential of local groups to develop highly complex Crone colonies. The Crone of Puget Sound is a cohesive network nestled around the Puget Sound near the Seattle, Washington area.

## **Crone of Puget Sound**

My first introduction to Crone of Puget Sound was at Crones Counsel VII. I shared a bus trip to and from Denver Airport to Estes Park with a number of group members. Still others took part in the focus groups held as part of the participatory action research segment of this study. When I bid farewell to them at Denver Airport, they invited me to visit them in Seattle, which I agreed to do on completion of this thesis. I also subscribed to the *Crone Connection*, the organization newsletter discussed above. The following description of the organization is drawn from my ongoing subscription to the newsletter; observations of group members at the gathering as well as random conversations with group members during the event and in the more formal focus groups. In addition, there are a number of Crones from British Columbia who have ties to the organization.

Crone of Puget Sound is a very large, robust group established in 1989 with 205 paid-up members as well as a number of informal participants who attend the various events organized by the group (*Crone Connection*, May 2002:4). Events include workshops, seminars, study circles, potlucks and picnics as well as smaller conversation groups that meet in local neighbourhoods. For example, the Edmonds/Shoreline meets on the second and fourth Wednesday afternoon of the month (*Crone Connection*, May 2002:3). Other such groups include the West Seattle Bag Ladies, the North Seattle Crones on the Go. From the names of the groups, it is apparent that wit is valued along with wisdom by the Crone of Puget Sound. Special interest groups include the Crone Thunder, a drumming group, the Rolling Crones, a choral group and Writing Groups for Poetry and Memoirs. New groups are always forming, thus the organization offers

diversity and welcomes innovation and promotes growth and development through smaller affinity groups.

Special events for Summer 2002 included a full morning program on “Dying is a Family Affair,” with a speaker from Compassion in Dying. Such monthly educational program events are a norm. There were also three potluck picnics that were slated to go on, rain or shine. A Croning ritual was planned for mid-June and described as an

experience made memorable with flowers, candles, champagne and song [as well as] the inspiring words of sister Crones inviting you to grow old with a lively sense of the wisdom and power of Crone Woman (*Crone Connection*, May 2002:3; 17).

Special events have a draw of about 50 to 85 people, which may be attributed to a sense of community solidarity along with excellent publicity through the quarterly newsletter.

The newsletter is a source of information and builds community with a subscriber’s list that goes well beyond the paid membership of the group. As well as publicizing events, the newsletter includes the stories, memoirs, poetry, humour, artwork and a range of other offerings. There are many stories that recount the experiences of the members at the organization’s events and how welcome the company of Crones is to the members. As well as the newsletter, the Crone of Puget Sound has a raft of useful publicity materials, an organizational brochure and various event flyers and inserts to the newsletter. For example, “What you might want to know about Crone of Puget Sound.” Topping the list in this four-page insert is the purpose of the group, its history, organizational structure, financial matters and other vital information for members and

prospective members. The Crone of Puget Sound seeks “to reclaim the Crone as a symbol of women creating their own vision of how to grow old” (*Crone Connection* insert).

## **CRONE GATHERINGS AND WISDOM CIRCLES**

As part of the study, I attended a number of Crone gatherings in cyberspace and actual space. For example, I participated in a cyberspace Croning ritual and a Crone party, orchestrated by the Croness of *webcroness*. In actual space, I attended a Raging Grannies Potluck Dinner, a Summer Solstice Spiral Dance, and a number of gatherings for the Goddess, all of which were imbued with elements of Crone consciousness and culture.

Here I report on two participant observations in which the propagation of Crone consciousness, culture and community solidarity was central to the gathering.

### **Imaging the Crone Collectively**

In the summer of 1998, I attended a half-day workshop with 12 other women at the San Diego home of Helen Redman, a feminist artist whose practical action agenda contributes to the proliferation of Crone consciousness and culture. Redman’s motives for facilitating the workshops were twofold: critical consciousness-raising regarding the social invisibility of women in later life, providing opportunities for women to create valued images for themselves as they age in collaboration with other women. My interest in participating was also two-fold. I wanted to learn more about women’s interest in the Crone symbolic through participant observation and I wanted to steep myself in valued images of old women.

The workshop was held in Redman's spacious and sunny studio, a large one-room building with approximate dimensions of 40 x 30 feet nestled into the landscaping of her back garden. There were several large windows that let in the light and a number of working spaces around the room as well as an area for clean up equipped with a sink. As we walked in, we picked up some literature from a counter beside the door including the information statement I had prepared. We then stood relatively silent drinking in the surroundings. Redman had placed a variety of materials around the room characterizing them as "mixed media." These ranged from paints and markers to crayons and chalk. There were swathes of material, felt, costume jewellery and any number of found items, buttons, sequins, feathers, seed pods, branches, braids, well-worn clothing and cotton batten, tinsel and foil and tin pieces, yarn and ribbon, twigs and cotton scraps. Everywhere we looked on every surface, there was a profusion of stuff as well as the remnants of former workshops – a large figure cut out of brown wrapping paper and tacked to the wall; a Styrofoam head attached to a wire dress form, a large cardboard box with a brown papier maché head stuck on top.

Redman convened the workshop by inviting us to form a circle for introductions and orientation to the workshop. Some of us leaned comfortably against the wall or tables; others pulled up some chairs that were placed around the studio in an informal fashion. We began first with introductions, where we come from, what we do, who we are, why we are here. As agreed with Redman, I went first, summarizing the contents of my information statement, and clarifying the ethical principles and the use of analyses, discussions and research relative to reports and publication. There were questions posed

in response to my request for feedback and some discussion with the general consensus being that any research that sought to address the stereotypes and ageism relative to women was valuable and should be supported by the group. These comments were greeted with nods in the affirmative such that I proceeded to take notes of the process.

The group ranged in age from 43 to 80 with the median age being 60. With the exception of me, the entire group resided in the San Diego area. They were all white and apparently, middle class. The older women in the group were retired. Introductions included names and a snippet of information about the person and their interest in the workshop. These varied from “I just moved from Orange County” to “the workshop is a birthday gift from my friend here” shared by a 48-year-old. The friend who was 46 confessed that she had no idea what a Crone was. With her background in art, her main interest was working with Redman. A psychotherapist, 43 years old, was planning a Croning ceremony while a performance artist, 57 years old was doing the workshop as a prelude to creating a performance piece encompassing the three stages of woman, Maiden, Mother and Crone. Whether computer artist, performance artist, writer, or sociologist, what surfaced in this introductory phase was the group’s zest for creation and the interest in women’s aging.

### **Birthing the Crone Body and Spirit**

Redman explained that she was “birthing the Crone” through her art and then discussed the Crone archetype and the symbolism of the triple goddess. This signaled another round of comments from the circle about the meaning of the Crone. The writer, whose mother had recently died, indicated that she felt the Crone emerging in her with the

passing of her mother. Another woman, age 51, described the experience of integrating all her parts, wild woman, wise woman, archetype and Hekate in the process of morphing. She related the term morphing to a popular music video that used computer graphics to produce a chameleon-like transformation in the central performer. Other meanings for the Crone included the “marriage of masculine and feminine traits” reflecting calmness and strength of purpose and the notion of “women who run with the wolves” from the title of Clarissa Pinkola Estes popular treatise on women. The spiritual leader mourned the “absence of the Crone” in her personal experience of aging and expressed her purpose as getting in contact with her Crone body.

Redman brought the discussion to a close by explaining the underlying philosophy of the workshops, which was a collaborative approach to creativity. Women would work in pairs and groups and finally as a whole group to share in the experience of creating valued images of aging women. The collaboration extended beyond our own workshop group to the larger circle of all the women who had participated in workshops at the studio. So the remnants of their Crone creations were all around us on the walls and working spaces. Redman’s words drew connections between all of the women who had participated in her workshops forging us into a seamless entity through our art.

I now found myself with a partner working at the walls on a very large humanoid figure roughly cut from brown kraft paper looking somewhat like a child’s vision of a giant space creature. Splayed around the head of the figure, there was an array of gold foil flowers with blue centres looking somewhat like the crown of New York City’s Statue of Liberty, the colours emanating a sort of electrical energy. The sense of it was

## THE GREAT HAG OF THE WEST



that we were part of a continuum of women charged with representing women elders in larger than life terms. Other women also formed connections, with a group of four, one of three and another twosome filtering out to the various work sites in the studio. We all worked busily on our creations using glue guns, paint brushes, paste and pins to fasten feathers and seeds, twigs and sequins onto the ground of our Crone images. There was much discussion and sharing of self as we worked and a free flow within and between groups with visits to and fro. After working steadily for about two hours, the circle was reformed and we discussed our creations.

Turn by turn, the groups interpreted their creations with each woman expressing the meanings, feelings and learning she had experienced through the process. Many of the participants expressed some sense of bonding with their group and the significance of the experience for their own personal development and growth as women. There was a recognition that mutual trust and respect defined the context of the process. This was surprising to them, since it was not a goal or thought at the outset. Some words, images, and ideas that described the process: a “journey,” a “source of regrowth,” “changing priorities,” “transforming,” and “finding a voice.” More direct descriptions of the Crone

archetype included: “temple,” “energy,” “sphinx-like,” “earthy” and “the Crone’s crown,” “power beginning to find its voice,” “Crone mother,” “woman as temple” and “ancient guardian.” The younger woman who at the outset had little sense of a Crone



MYSTICAL CRONE QUEEN



AGING GRACE-FULLY CRONE

symbolic, now described her dawning awareness not only of the archetype, but also of the challenges of ageism and sexism that confront women as they age. Her experience meets the objectives that Redman sets out for the workshops and can be seen as a positive result of conscious aging activism.

Following the workshop, at Redman's invitation, I joined her for coffee and a discussion with Mnimaka, the San Diego Crone spiritual leader who had also attended the Imaging Workshop. With their permission, I taped the discussion, but have never transcribed it. Rather, its purpose was to acquire some background on the various Crone organizations that were in existence at that time and to get a sense of the modern history of Crones. The interview provided a glimpse into the lives of the two Crone activists as well as some history on the evolution of Crones Counsel. Both women seemed to concur on their perceptions of the divisions within the Counsel that precipitated the formation of a splinter group, the International Organization of Grandmothers and Crones (IOGC) now known as the International Organization of Wise Women. The point of dissension between the two groups went to the organizational structure between the central organizing group and the various local groups. Crones Counsel is structured as a loose network with the participation of local, autonomous groups occurring on an ad hoc basis. The IOGC is structured with a central organizing group with local groups formed into less autonomous chapters. Both of these entities host gatherings of Crone-identified women in the east and the west and it seemed to me that the leadership of IOGC continues to be active in the Crones Counsel.

### **Crones Counsel VII: Honouring the Storyteller**

From October 14-17, 1999, I attended Crones Counsel VII at the YMCA of the Rockies, 10,000 miles above sea level in Estes Park, Colorado. Historically, the Crones Counsel has been held in locations where natural settings predominate reflecting a sacred

connection with the earth that fits with the reverence in which the Crone archetype as the third aspect of the Goddess is held. The YMCA facility included a long central lodge of log construction with large furniture, huge fireplaces and rustic appointments along with many outbuildings well appointed to host conferences and conventions. Approximately 350 Crones attended the conference. The vast majority of them were post-menopausal, white, middle class professional women, the majority of them retired. The demographics of the group were congruent with the sample and population description set out in the introductory and methods chapters. I saw no black women, Asian or south Asian women in the large or small gatherings. However, the women were diverse in ethnic origin, Latina, Lithuanian, Italian, Nordic, Anglo-Saxon and so on and there may well have been women who had roots in other ethnicities or cultures that were not readily apparent. The two native women, who are active on the Crones Counsel board of directors, were recognizable because they wore native dress and I understand that there are many native women in the southwestern United States who are active in Crone groups.<sup>38</sup>

In the public and formal events, full counsel, workshops and wisdom circles, women defined themselves first by their Crone status and lineage, beginning with their (great) grandmothers, mothers and daughters. Some women also defined themselves by sexual orientation (lesbian). Since the Counsels are organized by local autonomous groups of women in the region where the Counsel is convened, in this case, Denver, Colorado, there was also a strong element of civic, state and national identity. So, for example, we were encouraged to put any of our questions to a Colorado Crone,

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<sup>38</sup> While it is possible that there are Crone groups in the west that have been established by and for Native women in the main, further investigation would be required before such a claim could be justified.

identifiable by “the Colorado state flag on [their] name tag” (CCVII Newsletter, Thursday:4). There are numerous Crone groups in the state, so the designation of Colorado Crone encompassed a wide group of delegates. There was also a small, but lively contingent of Canadians and I was able to connect with them at some of the events.

My first introduction to the Crone participants was sitting on a bench outside the Denver Airport waiting for the shuttle that would take us to Estes Park. Three women apparently in their 60s were debating whether pre-menopausal women should attend the Counsel. Apparently, in previous years, Croners had attended with their daughters and daughter-in-laws and one of these women was querying the legitimacy of the intergenerational connections at this gathering, convened so that Croners could “tell their stories and counsel with each other” (*Croners Counsel* website). This put me, a perimenopausal woman, who already self-defined as a Crone, a bit on edge. The next day, over dinner in the Croners café, the discussion again turned to the small contingent of younger women attending the counsel with one woman suggesting “age cutoffs” as a way of dealing with the issue. Again I encountered this topic in the focus groups and it is apparent that chronological and developmental age is a pivotal point for both defining who is a Crone and defining Crone objectives. On these points, there is no consensus and I discuss these debates in following chapters.

On the shuttle, I met a Seattle Crone with whom I shared my research question, what is the meaning of the Crone? She introduced me to the Crone of Puget Sound (CPS), an organization of Croners with many chapters. For her, CPS was a source of “companionship, social support, validation and representation” for older women. One of

the ‘airport Crones’ chimed in that the Crone meant wisdom,” while another explained that a Crone “was holding blood” and that was a source of wisdom. This was to be my experience throughout the Counsel. Crones were interested in my research and happy to share their insights about life as a Crone and the meaning that the Crone held for them. Nevertheless, I have a note to myself that “I must be careful about my researcher role. While Crones seem to appreciate my work, they see this coming together as a spiritual and social experience and want respect for the telling of stories and sharing of feelings” (Crones Counsel field notes).

I was able to connect with two members of the *webcrones* community at the Crones Café. That was an exciting moment and we all laughed and hugged each other as the old friends and comrades we had become through our cyberspace network. I had a similar experience when meeting the two local conference organizers and the workshop co-ordinator with whom I had corresponded regarding the instrumental and ethical details of my participation as a researcher in the workshops. Upon first meeting, we exchanged huge smiles and hearty hugs as if we were indeed old friends. Upon reflection, it seemed to me that this sense of comradeship enfolded all of the Crone participants and was a defining feature of the gathering. We were not a disparate group of strangers hailing from hither and yon. We were Crone comrades-in-arms, energized by sharing our stories and honouring our experiences. Thus it was a joyous and welcoming atmosphere and a rare experience to observe the hillsides dotted with 70, 80 and even 90-year-old women negotiating the hilly terrain like agile, young mountain goats. All the more remarkable given that the atmosphere made exercise and breathing so laborious.

## Counsel Programming

The main theme of the Counsel was “Honouring the Storyteller” and storytelling was a highly organized event given primacy at the morning and evening sessions with the entire gathering, at the smaller Wisdom Circles after the morning sessions and featured as a topic or process in some of the workshops. For example, my focus groups were organized as oral history workshops where Crones would share their stories and collaborate on the community story. Other workshop topics included: *Sharing Our Stories Through the Ancient Call of Movement* and an *Exploratory Session – Stories of Leaving Home*. Further, I also attended the Board Meeting convened at the Counsel and storytelling was an agenda item. It seemed that many of the participants and organizers wished to extend the whole group storytelling sessions in frequency and length for future Counsels. This incident signaled that the telling of stories was of primary significance to Crone culture and consciousness and must be prioritized in my inquiry.

Storytelling was highly structured and steeped in ritual. For example, in the Morning Sessions, sacred space was declared through a ritual lighting of candles, calling of the four directions and the three aspects of the goddess. At my own sessions, I used a ceremonial talking stick as a ritual practice of inclusion and concluded the workshops with group and individual affirmations. In the Wisdom Circles, storytelling was defined by the ten constants of the Wisdom Circle (CCVII, Conference Package, *Wisdom Circles*). These constants or norms provided a process for conducting the Wisdom Circles framing them as highly ritualized and spiritual events. For example, Constant One

enjoined us to “[h]onor the circle as sacred time and space by doing simple rituals to mark the circle’s opening and closing.”

At the whole group morning sessions, women who wished to tell their story were invited to gather at the side of the stage. Each woman had about five minutes to tell a story which allowed for a large number of women to participate by telling their stories. The women began by citing their lineage and then shared stories, which varied in content and in the performance. There were tales of joy, delight, pain and suffering. These stories were greeted with laughter and tears and always rapt attention. There was no side talk, whispers, questions or commentary from the audience. Sometimes, a storyteller would simply request a “standing ovation,” a ritual offered to anyone who asks to “receive and experience the appreciation and adulation of sister Cronos” (CCVII Newsletter, Thursday:2). Standing ovations were energetic and raucous demonstrating the unconditional love that many of these women might not receive elsewhere and recognizing their courage in coming forward to voice their experience.

Wisdom Circles built on the broad themes of the gathering, the events in the morning sessions and the various symbols, such as the stones we were given in our pouch or the stones we were enjoined to bring with us to the gathering. The Circles were held each day and lasted about two hours. Each day my own circle began with a ritual breathing exercise and round of thoughts and closed with a guided meditation. This facilitated a sort of immediacy that paved the way for “full participation and deep truth-telling” (CCVII Conference Package, *Wisdom Circles*). In such an emotion laden and trusting environment, participants were able to tell their stories, share their deepest

feelings and accept the truth of their experience “without self-judgement and without blaming others” (Ibid.). While listening to the stories, we were enjoined to listen “from the heart and serve as compassionate witness[es],” resisting the temptation to rescue the narrator. Thus the process was designed to provide opportunities for intellectual, emotional and spiritual growth for both the tellers and the listeners.

### **Speaking of Crones: Oral History Workshops**

The oral history workshops were structured as informal focus groups within a participatory action research framework. Participants were invited to reflect on the topics, to add to them and discuss them in view of the research questions developed for this thesis. The goal was to integrate the direct experiences and insights of these Crone-identified women into the record on Crones. Each session began with introductions, ethics and discussion of themes and then discussion unfolded somewhat like Wisdom Circles with participants seated in a circle passing the talking stick, sharing stories with the view to clarifying and elaborating themes. Each group was unique with no group covering every theme.

Below, I provide an overview of the themes as they were elaborated in the focus groups.

#### ***First Encounters with the Crone***

For most women, the first encounter with the Crone was made through word of mouth.

They were invited to a Crone event by a friend: Crones Counsel; Crones of Puget Sound; San Diego Crones; a Crone meeting on sexuality; a drumming circle; a Croning ritual.

Other points of discovery included *Crone Chronicles*; a women’s studies course, a course on aging, the internet. The first response to these encounters was wild enthusiasm. As

one woman said of her first Crones Counsel, “it was absolutely unbelievable. It was just things that I had never thought of before (CCVII group one). The women expressed the sheer joy of “just being with all of these wonderful women” (CCVII group one). For another woman, the attraction was the “vitality” of Crones. Her experience with so “many older women” was that they “seemed to [lose] their vitality the minute they finished menopause and frankly, bored me to tears” (CCVII group one). For this woman, the rituals of drumming, singing, dancing and storytelling with so many old women together creates a “kind of mystery ... about who we are that is one thing I love about the Crone” (CCVII group one).

Another Crone expressed her attraction to the Crone values of collaboration and interdependence. It became her vision, a vocation and a calling “to create Crone circles in every community in the world” (CCVII group three). Then, she reflected on her discovery of a whole community of Crones with the same mission, so that ten years later “what is wonderful about [the vision] is I don’t have to do it on my own ... because apparently it was a collective vision” (Ibid.). Her story reflects the beginnings of Crone consciousness and the proliferation of Crone connections, collectives and communities. It also identifies the significance of the Circle as a Crone symbol and practice reflecting the Crone value for interdependence over hierarchy.

### ***Connecting with “my tribe”***

Most of the women strengthened their Crone connections through affiliation with some sort of Crone community or formal group. The Crone community was a source of support, friendship, entertainment, stimulation, belonging, personal identity and

ultimately empowerment for a group of women who as non-conformists through most of their lives had not fit in easily. As one woman put it, “for the first time in my life, I recognized my tribe, I recognized my people. I’d never felt like I fit anywhere, but I fit with the Crones” (CCVII group two). This exact sentiment was echoed by several others and resonates with the experience of *webcrones* women who have also been reluctant joiners and non-conformists. “Most of my life and even sometimes now I feel like an alien from somewhere else. I just don't fit in.” (*webcrones* posting). In response, another *webcrones* posts, “if we see ourselves and call ourselves Crones, we sure as hell have not chosen the "accepted" way. Look at the ads. Look at the proliferation of "anti-aging" products!” Yet, in spite of their histories, they stay and that is apparently an aspect of Crone community and Crone identity, at long last, encountering “my family, my group, my gang” (CCVII group two).

This same woman repeats a mantra from a friend, who died at age 107 that offers a clue to the desire for intimate relationships in later life: “You cannot make it alone. I will go a little ways with you” (Ibid.). The Crone community provides a sense of companionship, and a network of supportive relationships for a group of women who did not ‘fit in,’ a group of individualists. As such, it is a source of empowerment that will take them through the transitions of aging. Thus, the Crone connection “has been one of the key things in my life, probably in some ways has kept me sane because I’m not growing old gently. I’m growing old very awkwardly” (CCVII group one). Likewise, the Crone community was “powerfully helpful in my moving into Cronehood” (CCVII group

one). This was most vividly reflected in the stories about their support networks for the sick, disabled and very elderly women and of course, for a dying Crone:

... we surround her and support her and take care of her if she doesn't have family. There was one specifically that did not have family, and we made sure that she never went to the hospital. She wanted to be right there at home, so she had to have the care. And, of course, hospice was called in. But still. You need your spiritual sisters to be with you (CCVII group three).

Yes. And now, one has just been diagnosed with cancer and she's going to have surgery. And so we told her 'You can't do it. We're all going to Crone Counsel. You have to wait till we get back.' So that we can support her (CCVII group three).

Likewise, the *webcrones* have shared similar needs and experience:

A little story I would like to share. One of our older Croness, Helen, that was 92 this year, died by choice last week. We each went to her when she made this decision after a very bad fall. She had become very frail. We gave her our love and respect. She stopped eating and her family cared for her with great love. She was buried next to her home (*webcrones* posting).

It is apparent that independent women of free spirit and great age must connect with a circle of like-minded women to manage the instrumental details of their living and their dying.

### ***The Power of the Crone in Everyday Life***

The groups could readily describe the ways in which the Crone symbolic infused their everyday lives.

she's [the crone] real integrated. I don't feel like when I come here I'm doing Crone things and when I go home I have to consider how to integrate and include ... every client that I have knows that I love the Crone, I honour the Crone, I started Crone Talk and a Crone Circle and that I come here and that it's my favourite thing to do every year. I think that maybe the way I do it the most concrete for me may be that I really, really want to do my aging consciously (CCVII group two).

One woman defined her “croneness and conscious aging” as a process of honouring her wish to “experience who [she] was” (CCVII group two). She was able to fulfill her wish to leave her marriage and to live as a “wonderfully singular woman” (Ibid.). Conscious aging, for which there is much Crone support is about living an independent life with the support of a network of strong, women-loving and Crone-identified women, so she explains, “When I came out in the world, I had a lot of support from women I knew in Crone” (Ibid.).

Another Sedona Crone characterized her town as a “wide-open heart place” where “it’s very easy to be in your truth and to continue living your truth ... Sedona really provides that space and women come specifically to Sedona to do vision quests and explore their truth and also it’s a safe place for women alone” (CCVII, group three). One woman felt empowered by the respect and honour that saying the Crone lineage brings to women: “I think it’s important that you can place yourself in a line with other strong women.” (CCVII group one).

Honouring and loving women, accepting them as they are without “trying to fix them,” acknowledging their beauty in stories, rituals and songs in Crone communities and gatherings produces a deep, intimate connection to the Crone symbolic and a wellspring of self-esteem that energizes and empowers Crone-identified women in their daily lives. The Crone values expressed in speaking one’s truth, telling one’s story and choosing to live an authentic life, in all your transactions seemed to me to be the benchmarks of Crone conscious aging and conscious aging activism.

## THE MEANING OF THE CRONE

I came away from Crones Counsel with two disparate versions of the Crone symbolic both of which have potential as ideal types for aging women. Both of these versions of the Crone depart from the mainstream expectations for old women. There is the Crone who “can do anything you want and say anything you want and be who you want to be, or explore and process life as you will it” (CCVII group three). This meaning of the Crone goes to the notion of independence, spirituality and self-actualization; of naming and claiming self. Then there is the Crone “wise woman of age” who can “mentor the young about life’s passages” and advocate for a more peaceful and harmonious world (CCVII group three; CCVII group two).

These distinctions have surfaced in the *webcrones* community as well. The crone-wisewoman-elder is exemplified as:

a woman with life experience who has the ability to preserve civilization. She does on a larger scale, the kinds of things a younger woman would do inside the family unit. So she expands cleaning the home to cleaning the environment. Putting on bandages grows into being a health care advocate. Telling stories becomes remembering and teaching the lessons of history. When the world concentrates on the modern, she remembers the old ways - the old traditions and cultures and methods and the reasons they were developed and she creates new traditions and new rituals to give meaning to day to day existence. And she insists that people value not only themselves but each other (*webcrones* posting).

The Crone, woman of independent spirit and politics surfaces in this posting from one webcrone headed “A Crone is ...:

A Crone is ...

- a woman old enough not to be an eternal sex object;
- a woman old enough to have left the land of patriarchy where women are often required to fit into a box called 'Sexy, beautiful, pleasing to men or an eternal mother!' When one doesn't fit all those boxes one becomes nothing to men, or positively invisible (which is an interesting place to be);
- a person who is self assured on the inside, and therefore beautiful on the inside and knows it;
- a person who is most probably a feminist; who can listen;
- who may or may not be a mentor;
- who is not terrified by culture's fear of fat;
- who can love difficult people for the good in them;
- a person who has an empathy for people and animals;
- a person who can sense when they are needed;
- in fact, a person who has been aged by life.

It seems to me then that the social and personal goals espoused by individual Crones, Crone communities and formal organizations and Crone doctrine in general do not reflect one seamless understanding of Crone meaning. There does seem to be space to accommodate the diverse and disparate visions of the Crone and incorporate Crone morphing into political and personal plans. I discuss these apparent contradictions and possibilities in the following chapters of this thesis.

## **5. DISCUSSION**

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### ***Crone Culture, Conscious Aging and Activism***

## ***Sticking Your Neck Out***

*Starlight, Crone of Puget Sound, webcronos posting*

A crone is a woman who takes risks  
 A woman who lives life fully  
 A woman who celebrates aging

Just think of two Cronos we know  
 Who hiked the trail to Machu Picchu  
 An adventurous pair  
 With courage galore

Then there's the Cronos who sing and drum  
 Many of them for the first time  
 Our meetings they grace  
 With fun and delight

In Canada and the USA  
 Other Cronos called  
 The Raging Grannies  
 Take risks at demonstrations

How about that Crone at Counsel  
 Who learned to ski  
 At 80  
 Or a Crone near home  
 Who first exercised at a gym  
 At 74

I cannot forget  
 Those cronos I know  
 Who come out as lesbians  
 At 60 and 70 or more.

Inspiration abounds  
 In every crone circle around  
 So don't you hang back  
 Stick your neck out

And be fully Crone

## STICKING YOUR NECK OUT

The Crone poem that introduces this chapter recommends ‘sticking your neck out’ as a Crone practice. A Crone is defined as “a woman who takes risks, a woman who lives life fully, a woman who celebrates aging” (*webcroner* posting). In this chapter, the process of conscious aging as it evolves in Crone communities informed by Crone culture is elaborated along with the processes through which conscious aging becomes a source of empowerment for women to act out as powerful Croners in their communities of place. Conscious aging activism requires taking risks, confronting old wounds, defining self against the grain of social expectations thus providing a template for social transformation. It is a process defined by the poem ‘Sticking Your Neck Out.’ Therefore, no clear-cut boundary can be drawn between conscious aging in a Crone community and conscious aging activism in communities of place. The two processes are symbiotic and engender each other in an evolving process of psychological and cognitive development that manifests in a Crone identity. Therefore, I have chosen in this chapter to focus on the ways that culture and counterstories emerge in Crone communities and gatherings to empower Crone-identified women in their conscious aging and conscious aging activism. The following and final chapter of this thesis draws connections between the conceptual framework derived through this analysis and the initial research questions that framed this study.

## SOCIAL INVISIBILITY

I begin with the experience of social invisibility, which is a precipitating factor that motivates women to engage in conscious aging and conscious activism, the symbiotic processes of transforming identity and morphing the Crone. I have found that scholarly theories of social invisibility as a defining condition for old women in dominant culture are reiterated in the stories of Crone-identified women. There has been much discussion of social invisibility on the *webcrones* cyberspace community. In a posting defining the meaning of the Crone, a *webcrone* makes the following observation:

I once had a beautiful, tall blond ask me what I meant by 'invisible'? I could only say 'You will know when you get there!' (*webcrones* posting)

Her words express the isolation felt by old women whose standpoint is incomprehensible from other social locations within dominant culture. One posting provides a particularly rich description of the multiple ways that invisibility can be experienced:

I have talked to hundreds of older women with gray hair, who are also experiencing what I am about to describe, so I know it's not just me!

a) Being "overlooked" by clerks, who walk on by to wait on someone else; b) Having what I say ignored by groups of younger folks, as if I hadn't spoken; c) Being "brushed off" by doctors who seem bored by us; d) Being "brushed off" period! (*webcrones* posting)

Another *webcrone* responds in kind:

It is not that you are "almost" invisible - you are invisible! No young person can see anyone over 50 being of any use or interest to them - so they ignore us because they can't see us! (*webcrones* posting).

This exclusion extends to the market place for popular culture and commodities:

The first time I felt I was close to the top of the hill was, like several of you, when the cloak of invisibility seemed to surround me, especially when I was in some of the more, trendy, youth-oriented stores (*webcroner* posting).

In the Croner Counsel VII focus groups, the women also acknowledged the occurrence of social invisibility, reflecting on attitudes towards ‘older people’:

I definitely have experienced it and actually take notice when I do it. And I remember someone, I think it might have been Ann Kreilkamp in a group once said that she just would get really upset with herself because she noticed that she would be walking right past older people, not just women but men too, and realizing that those were the invisible people that the rest of society would [not] look at them. And she’d have to stop herself. And I’ve noticed the same thing. What is really easy about Crone Counsel is that that never even comes up here (CCVII group three).

It is apparent from this woman’s comments that she had previously participated in a dialogue about social invisibility in a Crone circle. As a result, she had a somewhat more critical perspective on social invisibility. Her sensibilities precipitated a process of critical reflection on invisibility in the focus group that exemplifies the process of conscious aging in a Crone circle. Another woman was prompted to reflect tentatively on the meaning of social invisibility with a dawning recognition that it is a sort of cultural blindness that obstructs the vision even at Croner Counsel:

Now it’s funny that you mention that because when I think of our wisdom circle, we have one older woman of over 80. She came the first evening. She obviously had problems. We had problems with the meeting space the second time. She finally found us when there was about 10 minutes left or something. And she never came back. So I don’t know why, and I don’t even know if anybody ever thought about it after that, and to me that is the invisibility of old age, of the older, older person. It’s just come to me now (CCVII group three).

Another woman commented that “someone should seek her out and find out what the problem was if there was one. Could be that she was tired and decided that she was going to take that time to rest’ (CCVII group three). To which the first woman replied

“she had a really hard time getting around. You know, I never even thought about it till we had this discussion” (CCVII group three).

In focus group one, a woman described her experience of being ignored by ‘young people that don’t look at me.’ Her response since getting “involved with Crone” is to “act different about other old women in stores and restaurants.” This suggests that she too has shared in the process of conscious aging in a Crone community. Her new approach to “older people” exemplifies the process of conscious aging activism:

I think with people in the store, I have some funny thing or joke to say to them and they’re trudging along trying to get the groceries and everything, and I think you can bring joy into somebody’s life. I mean I dress up in a clown outfit and go into grocery stores and people are really weird when they see me. And that’s just wonderful fun. It’s just wonderful fun” (CCVII group one).

While most *webcrones* agreed that at some point in their lives, they had experienced the effects of social invisibility, their responses to that condition varied considerably. Some of them resented the condition, as indicated by this comment:

Next time you go to a bookstore to look for a book or magazine on women’s issues, aging, croning, don’t expect to find a large selection. We, [older] women are the most neglected group in these United States of America ... (*webcrones* posting).

Others welcomed their invisibility as a release from the stereotypical roles ascribed to young women:

I do [accept invisibility]. I welcome it. In the social perception, I’ve switched from being a woman to being a person. I don’t get stared at and whistled at and groped, I don’t get put down and patronized and stereotyped. I’m no longer tempted to live up to those social perceptions. The outspokenness that generally increases with age is heard more now because the social perception isn’t hearing us through the filter of gender stereotypes (*webcrones* posting).

Still others refocused their perceptions with a Crone standpoint. So one woman describes taking hold of the experience and bending it to her will: “I, for a while, was

bemoaning the invisibility of the old. I then firmly decided that the invisibility was of my making. I am not invisible, and never will be” (*webcroner* posting). This particular woman, now 85 years old, seems to be expressing her determination to live life on her own terms. She is an educated woman, a former teacher, a well-known social activist, a weight lifter and a poet. Yet, there is no denying that at some point in her life she too felt the effects of social invisibility. In a later posting, she explains that her renewed visibility rested in morphing the Crone:

On the subject of becoming a Crone: Each in her own good time, I'd say. Being a Crone is a way out of the invisibility of old age. You only have to say 'yes' when you really feel ready to celebrate a Crone status! To me it acknowledges my collection of years, which I am now proud of (*webcroner* posting).

Here two Crone-identified women reframe their experience of invisibility as an opportunity for Crone ‘confrontation’ or conscious aging activism:

... I make myself visible. All my mother’s teachings on sparing people's feelings have gone out the window. If I get the ‘invisible’ treatment – I become visible – they cannot ignore me, because I am right there, in their face demanding their attention! (*webcroner* posting)

I like bringing the word OLD to the forefront. "Excuse me, have you been ignoring me because you think I'm an old woman who (appropriate phrases here 'isn't going to spend much', 'isn't important?' 'has nothing else to do,' etc., etc.) (*webcroner* posting)

## **CONSTITUTING CRONE CULTURE AND COMMUNITIES**

In this thesis, I have defined Crone culture as a counterculture constituted in resistance to the dominant hegemonic culture of western patriarchal capitalism. This section elaborates on some of the significant elements of Crone culture –symbols, artefacts, narratives,

rituals and practices that shape Crone communities. The description also captures insofar as possible the process of conscious aging as it ensues in Crone communities through the cultural practice of storytelling. Many of these stories are ‘just so’ stories recounted for human interest, entertainment and sociability. Just as many are counterstories, narratives that contribute to the moral self-definition of the ‘teller’ by deconstructing the stories of dominant culture, retelling them to promote different objectives and outcomes. Taken together these stories generate a community counterstory establishing Crone culture as a radical, transformative counterculture and birthing the Crone as a powerful entity in the social world (Nelson, 1995:23).

Sparked by second wave feminism and particularly, the feminist spirituality movement, Crone culture has evolved with a rich symbolic system, a material culture, a set of ritual practices and a well defined core narrative or community counterstory derived from disparate sources including the women’s liberation movement, second wave feminism, feminist and New Age spirituality, and the goddess lore of folk cultures across the globe. These cultural elements provide a frame of reference and a logic through which women can actively constitute a Crone identity and cultivate a Crone standpoint that deconstructs the hegemonic meanings layered over the female body in dominant culture. This is the process and objective of Crone conscious aging.

## Crones and Archetypes

In the introductory chapter of this thesis, I suggested that the Crone archetype provides a cultural icon,<sup>39</sup> an ideal type and role model that women in later life can draw on to create and project a strategic identity. In that regard, the Crone must meet the contradictory demands of an intellectually diverse group of women who gather under her sign. Here, I discuss some of the competing dimensions of the Crone and set out the process of evolving a counterstory about her. The Crone as the third aspect of the triple Goddess, “maiden, mother, and crone” is perhaps the original source of contemporary Crone symbolism, ritual practices and mythology. Thus a *webcrones* woman completing a Masters degree in Women’s Spirituality links the Crone phenomenon to the Goddess and spirituality:

I believe that women who identify themselves as Crones seem to have a connection to spirituality. The Crone is part of the Goddess, and that is how the Crone became an archetype, which is what we who identify as Crones are tapping into (*webcrones* posting).

Moreover, Crone-identified women are symbolically invested with the qualities represented by the Crone Goddess. Through Crone rituals and gatherings, Crone-identified women share in the “positive, joyful affirmation of the female body and its cycles and acceptance of aging and death as well as life” (Christ and Plaskow, 1992: 282). The following *webcrones* posting exemplifies this dimension linking the Crone to Gaia, the earth goddess, drawing on the traditional female roles as arbiter of nature and nurture.

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<sup>39</sup> Here the term cultural icon reflects the definition of ‘subjectivities’ given in Chapter II, culturally derived positions signified through a politicized process of representations, constructions and reconstructions.

A Crone is the fully realized daughter of Gaia. Her ecological niches are filled, generating a self sustaining system. She doesn't give a hoot about what anyone else thinks of her. She is confident in her own wisdom. She is self-nurturing. She holds life with reverence (*webcroner*s posting).

A second dimension of the Crone is drawn from Jungian psychotherapy. Both the *Crones Counsel* and *Crone Chronicles* along with many Crone publications draw connections between the contemporary Crone-identified woman and a Crone archetype. For example, both the *Crones Counsel* and the *Crone Chronicles* espouse the goal of “reclaiming the Crone archetype” (*Crone Times*, 2002:2; *Crone Chronicles* masthead). The term archetype has a life as a conceptual category in Jungian psychotherapy. Davis characterizes the Jungian archetype as “preconscious psychic dispositions” that provide a template for humans to create themselves and “react in a human manner.” (Jung in Davis, 2000). At the level of the unconscious, there are a limited number of archetypes, but at the conscious level there are an “infinite variety of specific images that point back to these few basic patterns” (Ibid.).<sup>40</sup> The rendering of archetypal motifs as images occurs through “dreams, myths and symbols,” exemplified by Crone narratives and mythologies of the Crone (Jung, 1964:58). Since many Crone-identified women and second wave feminists subscribe to Jungian theory their affiliation with the Crone reflects a conscientious process of rendering a Jungian archetype into social consciousness.<sup>41</sup> For them, the process of Croning the archetype involves elaborating or imaging the ‘old

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<sup>40</sup> Given the notion that humans render an infinite variety of symbolic images pointing back to a few basic patterns, I have privileged the Crone as the primary symbolic image for the ‘old woman’ archetype, but I have also included such terms as Hag and Raging Granny as variations on the Crone.

<sup>41</sup> Perhaps Jung’s formulation of the ‘animus’ and ‘anima’ archetypes as instinctual traces that cohabit within all humans regardless of sex/gender is an appealing idea for feminists because it provides some purchase for destabilizing hierarchical bifurcations of human being.

woman' as a wise and powerful being (Mantecon, 1993:79). The following posting to *webcrones* illustrates this point:

I are Crone ... learned about the Wise Old Woman from Jung and learned it was Crone when I took the Cakes for the Queen of Heaven course for the first time ... figured I wasn't really wise at all, but might get that way if I talked to other Croners (*webcrones* posting).

In my investigation, I found there were many Crone-identified women who worship the triple goddess with a seemingly equal number of women whose connections to Crone are not so sacrosanct. For example, one woman proclaimed that

I didn't even know about goddess when I came into Crone. I mean I knew that Crone was the wise woman of age and that there was a triple goddess, but that didn't mean anything to me really. It was the aspect of the older women that really interested me. (CCVII group three).

Another woman proudly passed a business card with the designation, "Goddess Extraordinaire" around her Croners Counsel focus group. Having attended this Croners Counsel, her first, she was now planning to change the designation to "Crone Extraordinaire" and celebrate her rite of passage with a formal Croning Ceremony (CCVII group one). This somewhat irreverent approach to the Goddess seems to more closely fit Goffman's notion of an 'interpersonal ritual' in recognition of her "sacred self" than any expression of reverence to a sacred deity (Shilling, 1993:85). It also fits with the concept of rendering the archetype of the old woman as a living goddess.

In Croners Counsel focus group three, while some women spoke about the spiritual connections of Crone community, "the difference between Crone groups and other circles of women is the spirituality," spirituality transcended traditional forms of worship (CCVII group three). Thus another woman recounted the story of her friends,

devout Christians, who came to Crone a couple of times, but did not continue because the “goddess influence ... was like you’re worshipping a goddess or something screwy like that” (CCVII group three). Nevertheless, this same woman agreed that ‘spirituality’ was fundamental to Crone gatherings. Another woman described the experience of “discover[ing] that I, along with all women are goddesses, [as] a very pivotal changing time in my life.” (CCVII group one). A third woman defined the Crone as an “identity that you grow into and you know that all old women, whether they call themselves crones or not, are crones” (CCVII group three).

These comments distinguish between a Crone deity, the third aspect of the Goddess and a Crone living goddess, a generic symbol of the divine in everywoman. So while there are many women for whom the Crone is worshipped religiously as a deity, for just as many others, the Crone is a strategic identity that stakes a claim to wisdom, spirituality and metaphysical propensities for all women. That is the spirit of one *webcrone* posting:

Just the presence of a Crone opens my mind spiritually. What fun it would be to have a Crone convention! I would be willing to go bankrupt just to stand in a room full of Croness (webcrone posting).

Yet another *webcrone* attests to connections between Crone-identified women, whatever the source of their inspiration:

I am a Goddess woman, so I attribute my insight to the Goddess letting me know, beyond a shadow of doubt, that all will be well. Others might attribute that knowing to a different source, and whatever source you know, you will understand my feelings (webcrone posting).

## Conscious Aging: Coming to Crone Consciousness

The notion of coming to Crone consciousness is a phrase that reflects my sense of the emergent nature of Crone identity. Crone consciousness is in the process of becoming; an ongoing strategic and creative effort to get at meanings that have been naturalized in dominant culture, therefore, taken for granted without question. The range of meanings and qualities ascribed to the Crone by Crone-identified women suggests the potential for a radical, transformative identity for old women and becomes a focal point for telling and retelling the community counterstory, which is the defining story of the powerful Crone. For example, the notion of the Crone Goddess, qualifies as a counterstory in Nelson's terms because it permits the "tellers to reenter as full citizens, the communities of place whose goods have been only imperfectly available to its marginalized members" (Nelson, 1995, 23). The Crone Goddess legitimates the claims to bodily integrity and spirituality.

Nevertheless, on *webcrones*, a vigorous dialogue was raised regarding the idea of rites of passage that deify the fertile mother or the venerable Crone. One woman challenged the notion of a biological frame of reference as a defining credo,

I look at my aging process as the increasing polish on my badge of experience and knowledge rather than loss of fertility (that is a strange idea to me, who spent my entire reproductive life suppressing this capacity) (*webcrones* posting).

Another *webcrone* also shared her deep discomfort with the "Maiden, Mother, Crone" configuration relating it to her lived experience. Unable to have children after a hysterectomy in her teens, she pointed out that there were many, many women who were not mothers, concluding that the Crone as a symbol for aging women must be more inclusive (*webcrones* posting).

In response, the suggestion that “women’s mothering roles should transcend the birthing and nurturing of children encompassing women’s creativity and nurturing of the planet and all of life thereon” came forward (*webcrones* posting). This approach reflects a more general Crone mythology of women as nurturers, and sources of spiritual connection with the biosphere and its diverse inhabitants. *The Crone Manifesto* describes this characterization of women as “a lifetime of commitment to caring and listening and connecting” (*webcrones* posting). Certainly, these objectives shared by many Crone-identified women open a space for revaluing women’s traditional roles.

Despite this rationale, feminist resurrections of the triple Goddess that aim to sanctify the female body also reinforce dominant definitions of femaleness relative to fertility and nurturing. Likewise, the eco-Crone discourses that claim a special affinity for women and nature share a similar critique. However, since they also reflect and resonate with the lived experience of many Crone-identified women, it is politically counterproductive to discount these frames of reference, since it is through them that the counterculture emerges. Theoretically, it is these very traditions of women’s experience that inform the claim to a woman’s standpoint and ethics of care that are fundamental to my interpretation of Crone morphing. This is not a new dilemma for feminist praxis nor is it easily resolved. Since women have been symbolically ‘naturalized’ and ‘embodied’ in dominant discourse, these elements must be politicized and critically resolved. However, it is the underlying tendency to hierarchical, dualistic constructions that devalue women’s ‘nature’ that must be resolved as opposed to any inherently female capacities claimed by individual women. The morphing process within Crone

communities provides a non-hierarchical model of social relations while the practice of ‘telling stories’ and the concept of the counterstory provide a collaborative approach to resolving dualisms and broadening the possibilities self-definition.

On *webcrones*, this dilemma has been confronted with the view to finding alternative dimensions of the Crone that do not replicate traditional hierarchies or reinforce biological essentialism. For example: “I’ve been thinking once again about the meaning of the Crone. I have difficulty seeing myself as a Crone, despite my age (78), because I’m still trying to explain Crone to myself.” A response to this posting identifies the problem of Crone symbolism for feminist praxis:

I share some of your discomfort with the crone title, and am not fully clear on all the reasons. The way I hear it generally defined, one thing I can say is that the ‘hierarchical’ flavour bothers me...like a ‘Crone’ is somehow ‘wiser than and more than’ non- cronos ... in a different category, whatever. Even if it’s true it still bothers me! (*webcrones* posting).

This discomfort with the Crone is reflected in the reluctance some *webcrones* have in committing to Crone whole cloth. This ambivalence extends to the *webcrones* community, and is often expressed as “not fitting in,” “it’s time for me to leave this circle” and “I rarely contribute because this is not meaningful to me.” Yet, by their presence over extended periods of time, as well as their comings and goings, these same women are Crone-identified and derive some meaning or benefit from belonging to a Crone community and engaging in the process of evolving a more critical Crone identity for self and society in general.

For example, the construct of a Crone Elder or Wise Woman Crone, prevalent in Crone lore, offers other dimensions for consideration. The notion of the Crone Elder is

attractive since it suggests a resolution to dualistic definitions: “I prefer “elder” for the species, and “crone” to designate women of that species. What do you like?” (*webcrones* posting) This brings forward the response:

Elder, I think, is preferable, since in [many] societies, the elders are revered and ancestors worshipped, rather than seen as old and a burden. Perhaps, friends, we could come up with an enhanced Crone term. Any ideas? (*webcrones* posting).

These questions inspire a flood of postings fleshing out the qualities of Croness and the symbolic roles that Croness might fulfill. ‘Crone-ish’ qualities include wisdom, depth, patience, spirituality, single-mindedness, autonomy, and so on (*webcrones* postings; CCVII focus groups). The role of the Crone is seen as one of mentorship and guidance:

I do consider myself a crone, if a crone is a woman of the third age who believes she must serve as a mentor and as an example. As one of a very few croness who are technically proficient as well as being an artist, I provide computer and design mentoring free for all who ask; I especially try to help other older women become computer literate and Internet proficient (*webcrones* cybergrannie posting).

For the most part, *webcrones* discussions focus on identifying valued Crone characteristics in order to evolve a Crone identity, and there is some reluctance to define oneself in opposition to other women although occasionally a posting draws such boundaries:

The women in women’s studies programs don’t know they are croness and not all older women are crone. If you want to look younger, e.g. have a face-lift, etc., you are not crone (*webcrones* posting).

This sort of posting raises the response from others that ‘those women’ are “not yet Croness” alluding to the potential of conscious aging and conscious aging activism to morph the Crone.

Ultimately, not every Crone-identified woman takes on a Crone identity. Their stories reflect ambivalence with respect to their own ‘croneliness,’ while still respecting the Crone in others. They espouse Crone values and value their connections within Crone communities. Their participation evokes Hall’s notion of strategic ‘identifications,’ temporary subject positions that serve personal and political purposes (Hall in Hall and DuGay, 1996:6). For example, in a lengthy posting, which I excerpt here, a *webcrone* woman posts that after a long process of reflection, and despite having a Croning ceremony at age 60, she is now “giving back the Crown”:

I think the reason I cannot fully fit myself into the Crone identity, or feel full “sisterhood” is because I’m not purely or exclusively “female,” genderwise. Nor do I fit in the male world, for the same reason. In fact, I no longer believe there are only two genders at all. . . . So, (is this a first on the list?) I now lay down before you my “Crone” crown, once and for all. I don’t know what to call myself . . . but I am really not a “Crone,” and now I know it. There are so many other beautiful heads that can wear that crown more comfortably than I can. (I never could stand anything on my head anyway!) [‘Smileys’ were included in the original message] (*webcrones* posting)

To which, another woman, a self-proclaimed Crone responds: “Wow! How did that make you feel to let all that out? I feel that it clarified things for you. Is that right?” (*webcrones* posting).

Her response was insightful: “I’ve pretty well come to inner peace (and yes, celebration) with it all, but it did feel good to write it out like that! The fact is that I really like not belonging neatly into any ‘categories’!!” (*webcrones* posting). The woman has been a *webcrones* community member for five years. In that time, she has joined and left and rejoined again. She is drawn to the *webcrones* community by the nature of its social relations, interdependence and an ethics of care, and in her words, for the

“appreciation and validation” that she draws from the community (*webcronos* posting). She has told her stories, reflected on them critically informed by the insights of the community and this has empowered her to come to terms with herself within the moral space that the community of Crones provides. Despite that reality, she still likes a little space, a sort of disconnect. This is the lived experience and perhaps, the learned experience of a lifetime. Her story is one small slice of the counterstory of the Crone body, which I set out in detail in the last section of this chapter.

## SYMBOLS, RITUALS AND PASSAGES

### The Circle

A predominant feature of Crone gatherings is the circle, a symbolic and social configuration. For example, the Imaging the Crone Workshop began and ended with a conversation circle and a *webcronos* posting reflects the symbolic meaning invested in the circle as well as its empowering potential as a social configuration:

A favourite quote of mine: We are a circle within a circle, with no beginning and no end spiralling in with life and with love out and back again.

As it is described, the circle seems never-ending in its structure and defines a collective ‘we’ establishing both the boundaries and the substance of the community. It is often cast in a ritual fashion by calling up the four directions or performing a native smudging ceremony. Should a person have to leave the circle, there is often some ritual practice for opening the circle and ritual practices attend the closing of the circle at the time as well as at the conclusion of the gathering.

At Crones Counsel VII, daily Wisdom Circles were structured by “Ten Constants of the Wisdom Circle” summarized from a book entitled *Wisdom Circles*. The book is a recognizable standard reflecting the values and norms of the circle formation. Constant One bid us “Honour the circle as sacred time and space” and provided some suggestions for rituals for casting the circle. The experience of sharing stories, speaking one’s truth, in the circle formation is intimate and emotion-laden. Most certainly, an aspect of creating a ‘powerful’ space and spiritual connection can be attributed to the rituals that structure the experience. However, the very formation itself is a source of empowerment since it espouses a non-hierarchical consensual model of governance by its very structure.

The Crone of Puget Sound claims to “[b]uild community” through conversation groups structured in circles (*Crone Connection*, August 2000:12). They begin by holding hands in the circle, lighting a candle, and taking a couple of minutes to share two or three good things that have happened since they last met (*Crone Connection*, August 2000:12). They close by holding hands and complimenting the woman on the left, then in unison, wishing the entire circle “good health till we meet again” (Ibid.). One of the constants of their circles is respecting the choice of each woman to contribute or not. Another is to “[d]evelop a circle of trust by keeping confidential the interactions in the circle (Ibid.) Other constants value growth, respect, relationships and support through adversity (Ibid.). At Crones Counsel, a woman described the inclusiveness of the decision making circle in her San Diego Crone group, a community with a five-year history:

They put the altar in the middle of the circle. They have the talking stick. They have drumming before every meeting for five or ten minutes. And then the most interesting thing for me is that every January we sit around and decide what the topics for every month are going to be and who is going to lead them. Now, 45

women trying to decide this! I thought this was not going to happen, but we've done it ... (CCVII group two).

She went on to discuss the topics, which included sexuality, memory, grieving and she concluded: "We've had, you know, just a lot of very powerful meetings" (CCVII focus group two). At the same time, she alluded to the challenges of working with 45 women in one circle such that the group would divide into two smaller circles on occasion.

### **Talking Sticks and Broomsticks**

The talking stick is an artefact used in some Native American cultures to maintain order in a counsel where consensus was the rule. The stick was passed hand-to-hand around the circle and acted as the arbiter of the discussion. By passing the 'talking stick' to each member of the circle, each member is equally respected, their contributions valued and should they decide to pass the talking stick without speaking, they have still participated actively in the circle dynamics. Since each person must hold and pass the talking stick, it is through this sacred, yet inanimate artefact that the circle becomes a fully interdependent, interconnected and inclusive social formation.

On the advice of the *webcrones*, I had acquired a talking stick for the CCVII focus groups, Talking Woman, a short stick topped by a grey haired Crone's head fashioned from papier maché, by one of the *webcrones* specifically for the workshops. Her presence delighted the participants and I was accepted as one of them. One woman immediately shared a story about the children's brooms used as talking sticks at CCVI. As the oldest Crone in her Wisdom Circle, she was awarded the broom at the end of Counsel. Since she also needed a cane for support, she had difficulty packing the broom into the overhead

compartment on her plane trip home. She asked a man in the next seat if he would help her. Whereupon, he replied with a twinkle in his eye, “Of course, I’ll be happy to help you, but I don’t see why you bothered taking a plane.” Being a Crone, she was delighted with the exchange. The inference that she could fly home on her ‘witch’s broomstick’ brought forth peals of laughter. Although tongue-in-cheek, the story reflects the blend of whimsy and mysticism that is the spice of Crone communities and interactions borne out by the following description:

And that kind of mystery that gets transferred about who we are is one of the things that I love above Crone. You can’t explain what we do or who we are. You have to feel it and experience it, and then you live it automatically (CCVII focus group one).

## **Drumming Rituals**

Crone Thunder is a drumming group affiliated with the Crone of Puget Sound. I believe that the group’s name provides a clue to the prevalence of Crone drumming groups and drumming rituals. Drumming makes a goodly noise and is a way for Crone-identified women to bond with each other, such that one woman identified the “intimacy involved” in her drumming circle and the “connection that builds” between them as reasons why she drums (CCVII group three). So, drumming is also a ritual practice that energizes Crone activities and gatherings. For example, one woman described being “Mother drummed ...for two hours ... [then] crowned as a crone at a Crone Counsel” (CCVII group one). Drumming is apparently a source of empowerment as it connects the women with natural elements and events. For example, one woman described “drumming the sun down” and “drumming the moon up” at outdoor gatherings of her Crone circle (CCVII

group three). This description resonated with me because I had observed this practice at a goddess ritual marking the summer solstice. Each woman was asked to bring a percussion instrument with her or take one from the large basket provided at the gathering in a country home. At the appropriate time, just as the sun was setting, we all took hold of our instruments and snaked out in a long line in the farmer's field behind the house. We beat, whacked, rattled and pounded our instruments until the sun was only a rosy glow in the sky. At that point, we drew together in a circle and the rituals of the Spiral Dance began in the light of the moon.

We were apparently celebrating a natural event by meshing our human sounds and rhythms with the rhythms of natural forces. Thus, one woman explained the practice of drumming as “touch[ing] a real primal part of us” tracing the history of drumming through Native American traditions with male drummers back to “Celtic times, when the women drummed ... And so drumming became really important in their rituals” (CCVII group three). She went on to explain the different sorts of drums that her group used and then she described the process followed by her drumming circle, a group of 30 women who meet monthly in the “earth ship which is a large building made of spare tires that a crone, who is here at Crone's Counsel owns” (CCVII group three).

we might drum for about 15 minutes and it sort of winds down by itself. There's no clock. And when it ends (we call that a round), and so in our two hours we might end up doing several rounds. And what we started doing is putting intention to the rounds. So someone might have somebody that's sick that's close to them and we say, okay, this will be a healing round. Or this next round is for mother earth ... We light candles. We have an altar where people put their sacred objects. They throw out names into the circle. Someone who they've lost. It's a wonderful way I think to help the grieving process. (CCVII group three).

She described the challenges of having “women from all over the world” come to their drumming circle, since it “changes the energy” and diminishes the “intimacy” of the group. After ‘sitting on it’ for a time, the group decided to maintain an open circle because “the women who were coming were walking away with so much. They were going to all parts of the world and doing the work that we said that we wanted to do” (CCVII group three). A woman in focus group one recounted a similar story, one of her “favourite stories”:

in San Diego, there were a group of German tourists, and we had a great huge bonfire the very first night on the beach, and we threw all the things we wanted to get rid of into the bonfire and burned them up. And this woman was there with her drums and everybody else had drums and so we started a big ring going around this fire pit. Dancing and dancing and dancing and whooping it up and hollering and everything. And I couldn’t get down in there because of my cane, so I happened to be back and I heard one of the German visitors say to another ‘I’m going to get my camera.’ He said ‘I want to show the women in Germany what American women are like.’ And I thought oh how I’d love to be a fly on the wall during that conversation (CCVII group one).

These descriptions exemplify not only the power of ritual drumming but also the way that Crone culture is distilled beyond Crone communities.

## **Naming and Claiming**

The naming of self and the claiming of female lineage are empowering practices and rituals of empowerment. These practices go beyond respecting any single woman, since the substance of the rituals conveys status and moral authority to women as a group. At the same time, individual women who now participate in the construction of meaning by proclaiming their name and female lineage become self-defining in the process, a further source of empowerment.

## Naming the Self

The practice of taking a ‘spirit’ or ‘Crone’ name as a rite of passage is prevalent in Crone culture. For example, one woman described a ritual drumming round for the “many women [who] are changing their names and so every month, we’ll have a naming round” (CCVII group three). When a woman changes her name, she will announce her new name to the drumming circle, saying ‘I am now ‘Crone name.’ Then the circle drums a “whole round chanting the Crone name” over and over and over (CCVII group three). Likewise, on *webcrones*, *Treecrone* describes her naming ceremony, which was accompanied by a poetry reading in honour of the occasion. “I also changed my last name to *Treecrone* in honour of myself as a crone, and in honour of the trees which I love and honour.” Tree’s pride in naming herself is apparent in her affirmation that the taking of the name has symbolic meaning for her; signals her transition to Crone; and is an event steeped in honour. Yet, another *webcrone* explains the significance of choosing her ‘Crone name’:

I loved the quote from Anais Nin: ‘and the day came when the risk to remain tight in the bud was more painful than the risk it took to blossom.’ At first, I was Rosebud Blossoming, then I had an online Croning ceremony, so you see, the wise women of *webcrones* have set me along a path and I am coming into my fullness. I chose the name RoseCrone Blooming as part of the ceremony and I took the name of the rose because it is a very special flower of great beauty and fullness and I felt that it was my aim to be a beautiful person (inner person, that is) just like the beautiful rose of nature. (*webcrones* posting).

This story exemplifies the evolution or metamorphosis experienced by Croness in Crone communities, marked by rites of passage and symbolic gestures.

## A Naming Counterstory

Many *webcrones* women have described similar ceremonies of self-naming, highly ritualized events, or more personal affirmations and on occasion, a legal name change. It seems that the ritual of naming extends beyond the actual ceremony to the telling of stories about the naming of self. Recounting the story of choosing and changing names qualifies as a counterstory because the chosen community provides critical insight and moral authority that both sanctifies and supports the process of self-definition. The naming story below reflects this process of an evolving identity as an aspect of coming to great age:

As some of you know, I have difficulty seeing myself as a Crone – yet. So my chosen name isn't a Crone name for me, but one, which indicates where I am on my path. I had in fact decided not to choose a name since it didn't feel right, and then one day – for no specific reason – the name Changing Woman came into my mind. Changing Woman: a wise woman and guide among the Navajo...a name with spiritual significance. I don't consider myself a wisewoman, (sic) though considering that I've lived a long time, I can certainly be a guide for some people from time to time.

Here the teller tells the story of choosing a 'Crone' name, exchanging her story with other *webcrones* who have told their naming stories. However, this is also a counterstory that allows for reflection on the process and meaning of the path she finds herself on, which is the path of aging. She tells the story not only for herself, but also for the community of Croness who hear her, reflect on her story and respond to it.

So she continues:

And I was most reluctant to use a name, which has spiritual significance for a people whose spiritual traditions, I don't share. It seemed arrogant and presumptuous. I mentioned my hesitation in this group and found the responses helped me to clarify both my reasons for wanting the name, and my hesitation to use it. Increasingly, the name seems right to me, for my reasons: I am, always, a Changing Woman; I hope ... and try ... to change the world in which I live so as

to make it a more just and compassionate place for us all. I try to do this with a mind and heart open to spiritual direction. So, perhaps I am not too far removed from the original Changing Woman, though she had goddess-like powers, I do not possess. I use the name rarely ... only when I feel that what I'm saying is in keeping with the spirit of the name (*webcroner* posting).

In recognizing that the name is “right” for her for her own reasons, this woman moves slowly and critically down a ‘path’ that empowers her to moral self-definition and the recognition of her wisdom and spiritual capacities.

### **Claiming a Women’s Lineage**

As the storytelling got underway in the first morning program at Croner Counsel VII, I was astonished to hear the first speaker begin with her maternal lineage, “I am Nadia, mother of Geneva, daughter of Partha, granddaughter of Ella, great-granddaughter of Geneva” and so it went for every speaker<sup>42</sup>. So I asked the participants of the focus groups to reflect on the meaning of this ritual or practice. One woman described how empowering it was to “place yourself in a line with other strong women” (CCVII focus group one) while another described her personal experience:

At my first women’s retreat weekend ... I learned to say: ‘I am Joan, daughter of Nancy, granddaughter of Elizabeth and Karen, great-granddaughter of Matilda.’<sup>43</sup> And it just touched my heart and my soul. I never knew my grandmothers and I never thought about them because my folks never talked about their mothers much. But that night around the campfire drumming, and I connected with my grandmothers. And they’ve stayed with me ever since ... . It’s like when I look at my veins, they’re part of me. They’re part of my makeup. It’s like I can see their blood running along with mine through my veins. And it’s just a wonderful, wonderful feeling (CCVII group one).

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<sup>42</sup> In order to maintain the anonymity of participants in this study, I have avoided the use of names entirely. However, in this case, omitting names detracted from the description, therefore, I have used pseudonyms to more closely reflect the process of the ritual in this and one other similar description below.

One of the women exclaimed: “It’s good that you brought those women to our group” (CCVII focus group one). This response provides much insight into the ritual. It seems as if in saying the names of female ancestors along with their children, the women are placing themselves within a line of women and asserting the significance of women’s lives. This assertion goes beyond the act of birthing the human species to other qualities that women own, which are perceived as significant to the extending of the human species: endurance, strength, nurturing, and wisdom. The experience of locating women in a cultural frame extending over many generations is a powerful one as one woman’s experience attests. She recalled the ritual of telling the lineage at Cronos Counsel VI, where it was repeated each time a woman spoke in a group setting:

I love it. I love it. It’s honouring women. It’s honouring women and I think we need to honour women” (Ibid.).

## **Croning Rituals**

The passage from midlife to later life, from mother to Crone is often observed formally with a Croning ceremony or ritual. These rituals vary in form and are celebrated by individual women with selected friends or family and by organized groups, for example, the Crone of Puget Sound and the Amazing Greys. In Crone lore, a common definition for the word Crone is ‘crown,’ so not surprisingly, crowning is often a feature of the Croning ceremony. A woman describes other features:

the way we would do any ceremony, the solstice, the equinox, special occasions by calling in the directions, so that’s always setting the sacred circle. We had music. We had flowers. There was a give away and I think candles. We each made our own [crown] out of flowers ... fresh flowers with ribbons and everything and then what we did is we crowned each other, and we said a few

words ... If I can remember what the words were ... I would put your crown on your head and I think I said 'Go forth now and shine our light' (CCVII group three).

The encouragement to “shine *our* light” reflects the communal nature of the ritual and the symbolism. An invitation to a Croning ceremony conducted by the Crone of Puget Sound for members who “have never been Croned” promised “the inspiring words of sister Crones inviting you to grow old with a lively sense of the wisdom and power of Crone Woman” [editor’s emphasis] (*Crone Connection*, May 2002:17).

The meaning of the Croning ceremony for this group is the “recognition of positive aging” (Ibid.). A posting to *webcrones* by a Crone member describes this sociable ceremony:

I have found it interesting that many women I meet are anxious to become Crones when they see how much fun we are having. Our group (consisting of women of all ages) has a Crone ceremony once a year for all the women who have requested to be honored during that year. We have an altar where photos chosen by the women, of themselves, are placed. We make flower garlands to crown them with. Gifts are given to each of them by the women in attendance and they give gifts to each other. The gifts are heartfelt, personal, and bring a message with them. We sing and dance and drum to celebrate them. They are asked to tell a story about themselves. There are other wonderful spontaneous things that happen. The celebration is brought to a close after a great potluck is served (*webcrones posting*).

For women, who find it difficult to recognize their unique and special qualities, the Croning ceremony provides recognition and honour at the same time as it empowers them to assume the status, roles and title of Crone.

### **A Croning Counterstory**

The following dialogue in Crones Counsel focus group three about Croning celebrations and rituals exemplifies the process through which women come together, share their

experiences, and derive insights into their own experience. This is a collaborative process of critical reflection through which they gain a sense of authority and empowerment that allows them to make choices about their future and through which they are able to empower each other and other women. The dialogue begins with one woman recounting the story of her Croning:

I had my Croning ceremony when I was 51. I personally felt that when I turned 50 and I felt that transition that I wanted to celebrate that passage with a Croning Ceremony. ... and we encourage the Croners to have a Croning ceremony, some sort of passage. It's the most empowering thing you can do for yourself and most of us, if not all of us, didn't get to do the passage work when we became adolescent, when we started menstruating. And wouldn't it have been wonderful if we could have done that?

To which a second woman responded: "Just the opposite. It wasn't anything to celebrate.

It was something to hide and be ashamed of ... ." A third woman chimed in:

That's right and then when you become a mother. Again, the same thing, you're caught up in the birth of this child. And you might christen the child, but who does the passage work for the mother, who has now become a mother?

The second woman again responded: "I've never thought of that, but you're so right.

There is no passage work there either." The third woman agreed: "That's really important" and then the second woman said: "Or if you lose a child." To which the first woman replied: "Yes. Absolutely! Yes. So I think the Croning ceremony is important."

Then a fourth woman who had been listening intently exclaimed:

Just what you said made me think about it right now. I'm definitely going to have a Croning ceremony. There's no Crone circle, but I think I'll invite all the special women in my life to come to my Croning ceremony.

Another woman said, "Yes. And your family." To which the woman responded:

"Yes. I'll invite my daughters. Absolutely! I'm not inviting my husband, just the women

in my life.” A response came from a woman who had invited her husband to her

Croning to do the videotaping:

Yes. Just the women ... and what I think was the most important thing about my Croning ceremony was the declaration. And every woman does her declaration in her own way. So, for instance, one of the women who liked to write poetry and sing, she sang her declaration. She wrote a song and it was called “I Fly Like An Eagle.” Then she sang “I am a Crone.” And it was really beautiful and that takes a lot of courage in front of a lot of people, singing solo ... in my declaration, I paid tribute to my son and my husband who was there to support me through the menopausal process, which was really difficult for me. And I claimed my place as Crone. And with that comes responsibility to the community.

This discussion locates Crone morphing against the absent rituals of that might mark the significant passages of women’s lives. The very meaning of the term “passage work” was informed by the mention of the deeply emotional, embodied experiences that these women had experienced the menarche, childbirth, miscarriage and stillbirth, menopause. Here was recognition of the absence of rituals to mark those significant passages as well as the intention to now address this neglect with declarations and celebrations.

### **Honouring the Storyteller**

The morning sessions of Crones Counsel VII began with seven or eight stories told by individual women of about 5-7 minutes in duration. Likewise, the process of Wisdom Circles and many of the workshops begins and ends with storytelling. While the theme of the Counsel was “Honouring the Storyteller,” it seemed to me that the telling of stories extends well beyond this particular gathering as a ritual practice of Crone culture and communities. What differentiates a Crone from other older women “is her willingness to tell the truth about her life” (*Crones Today*, *Crones Counsel* website). I found that at Crones Counsel VII, the morning ritual of storytelling, the wisdom circles and the

workshops provided the space for Crone-identified women to speak their truth and beyond that, to discover their truth in the living histories of other women. The essence of the theme, “Honouring the Storyteller” and the rituals and practices of storytelling was to inspire the women not only to speak their truth, but also to make sense of it; to become critically conscious regarding their lived experience and to move forward from there on a self-directed path. In order to form conclusions, I have drawn on the discussions in the Crone Counsel focus groups initiated with the question: “What is the meaning of storytelling for you?”

Insights of a first-time participant at the Counsel resonate with my own observations:

This morning was my first time to see that, and although we tell stories in our Crone circle in San Diego, we don’t do it with the ritual and the large group and the acceptance and the humour. I like the gong. You know. I mean and I thought it was terribly powerful and terribly intimate (CCVII group two).

It seemed that storytelling steeped in ritual told in sacred space is a process that encourages the women to speak their truth. By its nature, the sacred space of Crones Counsel encompasses the values of confidentiality, and acceptance. The provisional guarantee of confidentiality, anonymity, and security encourages self-disclosure:

I consider it sacred space, so I don’t tell any of the stories. But sometimes I tell what I felt or what I learned. You know, somebody told a story at Crone Counsel and what I learned or what I felt or what I discovered about me, I share that. But I never tell the stories. I sometimes journal some of them for me (CCVII group two).

The general acceptance of a woman’s story without the norms of judgment or rescue is also an encouragement to speak one’s truth, as is the unconditional positive regard with which Crone stories are heard:

There's a general acceptance. No matter what the story is, everybody accepts the person. There's no judgments .... nobody is here to fix anybody. And that's another reason you go home fulfilled. Nobody tried to fix you. There's always the big hugs. There's the tears. We share our emotions. You see a lot of emotions going on and I don't know of a group I've ever been in where ... even with your best friends you hold back your emotions. Here you get up, you tell your story, you get emotional; they get emotional with you. But it's a healthy emotional, and everybody told you, you were great and towards the end we'll even sing songs acknowledging our beauty. And I don't know, I've never felt my beauty acknowledged in that way. So with me it's just the whole intimate experience (CCVII group two).

Speaking one's truth through storytelling is thus, an emotion-laden, empowering experience. It is a way of sharing the wisdom gleaned through lived experience that encourages self-reflection and the reinterpretation of one's own living history through a collaborative or symbiotic process:

You really hit a place in me with that question, and I want to acknowledge that for myself. Um, I just never thought about it quite in those terms and I'm an unmothered crone. Um, and I think the stories I hear create a mothering, an intimacy, an understanding about women that I was never, I was my mother's mother as far as the relationship and um, my extended family is very tiny. ... I never just spontaneously intimately heard who they were, and so I can hear my ancestors' stories in these stories. I can hear my own story in these stories, parts of my story that maybe I've never told myself or never had the words for. It's the most intimate experience I've ever had in my life and I'm pretty good at intimacy because it goes to a place that had never been for me before (CCVII group two).

In this reflection, the woman identifies the process of connection between the storyteller speaking her truth and the woman hearing the story as well as her own truth within it.

In focus group three, this discussion was elaborated more fully. Storytelling "opens your heart," said one woman, "the tears flow everywhere. ... somebody who is just telling a story about something and all of a sudden the person sitting next to you will burst into tears. It touches us" (CCVII group three). For this women, "opening the heart" means "being open to emotion or expression of emotion and taking down that

barrier” (Ibid.). The expression of emotion is both a “spiritual experience” and a way to “get rid of pain” (CCVII group three):

the person who tells the story then is open emotionally and reaches deep to tell her truth and be authentic, and then the person who receives [it] and say that story particularly touches her, then it touches her in an emotional way, and she perhaps again or maybe for the first time, hears a truth, her truth (CCVII group three).

This same woman explains that “opening the heart” and “getting in touch with the emotions” is a way “to reach truth” and this is the notion of reflecting on personal experience, dealing with pain, and then identifying a more authentic or self-defined life path. The storytelling process allows the hearers to confront their experience “by helping it come up, whatever ‘it’ is ...” and deal with the unresolved emotions around the experience (CCVII group three). Thus, “by stirring anger or sorrow or some emotion, just the process of getting it up and out will help get rid of it. Bringing it right there in front of you” (CCVII group three).

Ultimately, this process provides women with a sense of self-worth gained in the knowledge that their lives and experiences while unique in the details were not exceptional in the emotional costs and the available responses. As one woman tells it,

“I’m still learning and I’m still growing and I’m finding that listening to the stories and participating in the wisdom circles and sharing our stories that we’re all very different but yet we’re all very much alike. And we’ve been through a lot of the same struggles and ups and downs ... (CCVII group one).

Another woman is even more explicit:

One of the things listening to the stories does for me is it helps me to retrace some of the steps that I’ve been on and to find they weren’t that unusual, that other people have walked the same path that I have. And sometimes I am reminded of things that I thought I had totally forgotten, and I realize there’s still some unfinished work to do around that. And sometimes I listen in awe and wonder how in the world people have found the courage to keep moving. But

always, there is such affection sent out from the audience to the person talking that it's a very easy group to talk to because whatever you say is being held in loving, loving hands (CCVII group one).

The meaning of stories becomes all the more clear when meshed with an understanding of the sense of communion or community these women apparently derive through their Crone connections. One woman described how “for the first time in my life I recognized my tribe, I recognized my people, I'd never felt like I fit anywhere, but I fit with the Croness.” Another woman described Croness Counsel as finding “my family, my group, my gang.” Two participants in separate workshops used similar words, for Crone community, “it's like being at the right place at the right time” and for Croness Counsel “it's the right place.” Many of these women along with the women of *webcroness* characterized themselves as non-conformists. As one woman of *webcroness* puts it eloquently:

In the ensuing years, I remained uniquely myself, but I always felt inwardly different that my years on this wheel's turning allowed that I was. I was never dancing to the same drum as the majority of my female peer group.

They were never joiners, nor did they ever feel comfortably connected. Given the abjection and isolation of women of age, it seems to follow that at this point in their lives, they recognize that aging is not a journey to be made solo and they seek out kindred spirits in the Crone community for a support network.

## **Webcroness Stories**

Since I have relied for the most part on postings from the *webcroness* cyberspace community to evolve the theory of Crone morphing, I want to describe the context and process through which these postings emerge. The themes that informed Croness Counsel

VII, 'Honouring the Storyteller' and the telling of stories resonate with the substance and practice of *webcrones*. While the community was founded as a participatory action research project to describe and make sense of Crone morphing, the purposes of such a project are fully congruent with the values and interests of any Crone community. I also note that many of the *webcrones* are also members of other Crone communities in actual space, so threads of the story must be seen to emerge from those communities as well. In fact, I contend that all of the stories recounted in Crone communities when taken together constitute a community counterstory derived for the purpose of transforming not only individual community members but also the dominant reality in communities of place.

Over the life of the *webcrones* cyberspace community, there have been many, many stories spun out and woven together in a dialogic process. The gist of the stories has varied from spirituality to relationships, from senior moments to mourning, from rituals to visualizations, from sports to disability, from greywater to cooking, from bonding and joy to separation, loss and grieving. There have been many, many introductions. Whenever a person has joined the community, the old hands open their hearts and tell the details of their lives, their geography, their biographies, how they came by their Crone or spirit names, the topography of their lives – aspirations, occupations, adaptations, friends, lovers, husbands, children, and pets. *Webcrones* women are poets, essayists, journalists, musicians and artists. They are Rolling Crones and Raging Grannies, grad students and farmers, ministers' wives and ministers with husbands. So many original and wonderful poems and stories have been posted to *webcrones*, an entire

anthology of Crone poetry, an ecocrones guidebook, a Raging Grannies sourcebook, a veritable handbook on ritual, an arthritic's cookbook and a geriatric's encyclopedia.

One recent posting epitomizes the freedom and humour with which we introduce topics on *webcrones*. This was an essay on the migration of a pubic hair to the author's lip!! Granted that was a light-hearted offering, but it gave rise to a vigorous exchange about the state of our aging bodies and provided much validation for the author, who is looking to publish her work. Another *webcrones* writes a long posting about her anger and distress with her marital situation concluding with an apology "So that's a little report on how things are going. I do hope that all of you *webcrones*, do not feel burdened by my sad story" (*webcrones* posting). Among the responses to her posting, one seems to capture the sense of connection and care in the community:

... I consider it an honour that you choose to share this challenge here. I "Imagine" you...standing with a whole bunch of us in a semi-circle behind you ... that is "saying" ... "We've got your back"... and ... "It's ok to lean back on us when you need to ... there is much strength and caring here, for you to draw from ... anytime you wish ..." [ellipses in the original] (*webcrones* posting).

Not every story recounted on *webcrones* is a counterstory. However, every story, whether sociable, supportive, empathetic or instructive, contributes to the connections that join the members together in a Crone community. This in spite of the fact that more than one community member eschews a Crone identity. However, it should be emphasized that while they reject the Crone identity for self, they respect it as an ideal type or for others who they judge to more closely fit the Crone mold. This is evident in the posting on "giving back the crown," where the 'storyteller' reflects that "there are so many other beautiful heads that can wear that crown more comfortably than I can'

(*webcroner* posting). This is the crux of the community counterstory, a story told about old women, that contributes to both the “moral self-definition” of the teller and the entire community of Croners by undermining the dominant discourse that frames and constrains women’s lives.

## **THE COMMUNITY COUNTERSTORY: LOVING THE CRONE BODY**

In the introduction to this thesis, I contended that for “women who identify themselves as *Crone*, a term infused with extremely negative connotations of the aging female body, the body *is* the departure for a process of revaluing and revisioning their lived experience, a sort of phenomenology of Croning”<sup>44</sup> (McCabe, 2004:39). From that perspective, the morphing of Croners can be understood as a transformative process that resists purely essentialist or constructionist accounts of the female body by meshing the social, psychological and corporeal dimensions of lived experience. It is a process for redefining dominant culture to encompass new definitions of what it means to be fully human and for staking a claim to being fully human. The question turns to how such a process of transformation might be accomplished?

For the answer, I draw on the counterstories of the Crone body and the conscious aging activism that evolves in Crone communities and particularly, the *webcroner*

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<sup>44</sup> Here, I define phenomenology as a philosophical and sociological approach to human experience, which examines phenomena relying on the immediate perceptions of the social actor as the ground for making sense of experience with little regard for the epistemological preconceptions of positivism or constructivism (*The Encyclopedia of Sociology*, Duskin Publishing, 1974, 210; *The American Heritage Dictionary*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition, Version 3.5, 1994).

cyberspace community. Counterstories of the Crone body concern bodily integrity, sexuality, and reproduction as well as the human need to be loved and valued for what we perceive as our sacred selves. These are stories that reflect and reject the discourses of dominant culture that denigrate female intelligence and the female body. They also reject the heterosexual bias of dominant culture and the polarization of gender, accepting other possible social and sexual arrangements. So at Crones Counsel VII, one woman remarks on sexual difference in a Crone context:

It's the first place I've ever been in where straight women and lesbian women seem to get on without the tensions that often are in that space. And I've been in that space a lot. And there's usually political tensions and all sorts of other tensions. So I think that's one of the most exciting things at this Crone Counsel that I never would have known if I hadn't come ... was to see the sort of total acceptance of women (CCVII group two).

Another woman agreed: "Yes. And they really sort of meld in. You know, you don't know who is lesbian and who is not unless they tell you. And it doesn't matter. It's not something that [makes a difference] (CCVII group two)." The meaning of "it doesn't matter" in this comment refers to the non-judgmental acceptance of women at Crones Counsel. This is a remarkable transformation for women, growing up in the 1930s and 40s, many of them in small town America, where access to information about sexuality was limited:

The word "gay or lesbian" was never heard in my home. Ever. Nor anywhere else in my small mid-west, ultra-conservative, super religious small town. I do remember some whispering about the two strange ladies down the street who lived there alone, and I was told to stay away from there, but not a thing about why. I know if you wore yellow or green on a Thursday, you'd get teased about being "queer," but I really didn't know what "queer" was except that it was apparently a bad thing to be!

By the time I did know what it all meant, I'd been programmed very well to think of it as something worse than having a raging case of leprosy! When I

discovered my striking lack of enthusiasm for heterosexual encounters, I simply assumed and believed for many years that I was asexual, period. Parts missing. Live with it. So, for me anyway, I didn't see it as a viable option at all. At 41, when I finally did sober up long enough to discover myself....well...flat out astonishment is the only way I can describe my reaction! :) (*webcrones* posting).

As this posting indicates, the experience, sharing and acceptance of individual difference have also defined the *webcrones* cyberspace community. As one Crone, ostensibly a straight woman put it: “To each her own. It is just another part of this big, diverse world we live on.” (*webcrones* posting). Human diversity contextualizes much of the substance of *webcrones* postings and is the source of vigorous discussion and debate. A prerequisite of conscious aging is an engaged and passionate dialogue with other Crone-identified women for what we can learn from each other and for the wisdom we can gather together through our interactions. Over the five years of the community’s existence, multiple dimensions of coming out have been discussed, defined and debated. In one round, a member of long-standing, a lesbian pointed out “women have ‘come out’ in this Crone circle in many ways” (*webcrones* posting). Much later, the same woman posts with “tongue-in-cheek”: “since many of the group members seem to be coming out in one way or another, I admit to being a recovering psychotherapist. The 12-step programs have many applications. LOL [laugh-out-loud]” (*webcrones* posting). Beyond the humour of her comments, there is a deeper meaning that she hopes to introduce in the discussion. Her comment begs the question, what does the act of coming out signify to the *webcrones* women and how does it inform the community counterstory?

## **‘Coming Out’ Counterstories and Conscious Aging Activism**

Indeed, the *webcrones* women have come out in all their diversity as Crone, lesbian, pro-choice, anti-choice, goddess, childless, recovering addict, incest survivor, atheist, beaten, abandoned, fundamentalist in stories that describe their lived experience. These then are the experiences that have informed the discussions, so in some sense coming out is a defining practice and a value of the *webcrones* community. The Crone poem, *Sticking Your Neck Out*, provides some insight as to the significance of coming out to *webcrones*. The poet honours the “women who [came out] as lesbians at 60 or 70 or more” (*webcrones* posting). So, coming out as lesbian can be seen as sticking your neck out, taking a risk, an act of insubordination that goes against the grain of dominant culture. By its nature, coming out as lesbian is a political act, but it must not be *reduced* to a political act alone.

Coming out as lesbian in the *webcrones* community has been an act of loving women, loving women’s bodies, loving the self, and sharing the wisdom and joy derived from loving and intimate relationships with a woman. For example, this posting begins with regrets that the writer has been away and has missed a discussion on the meaning of such terms as gay, lesbian, girl, woman, lady, and so on. This is “too bad” because she has a different perspective to add to the discussion.

“my partner and I do not consider ourselves lesbians at all, we just love each other ... Further, just to stir the pot, not only are we “still doing it” but for some of us it keeps getting better and better. My partner never even had an orgasm with her ex-husband of many years. She constantly has orgasms now and this seems to be more about mutual loving acceptance on the deepest levels rather than ‘technique.’ While I had a deeply satisfying sexual relationship with my ex-husband of 34 years, I NEVER experienced real acceptance like I have with this woman whom I loved since we met 24 years ago. In my experience, loving

another woman does amazingly wonderful things towards loving and accepting oneself as a woman. Just saying this makes me smile. I am not angry at my ex-husband and I love with all my soul my two sons, but I see now how much work I needed to do on loving ME” (*webcroner* posting)

There have been many other postings to *webcroner* that substantiate this woman’s experience of finding and loving her self through a lesbian relationship. It seems that heterosexual relationships do not allow for the experience of ‘self’ and it bears repeating that the status of women in dominant culture has most often been defined on the basis of their attachment ‘their’ man, father, brother, husband as exemplified by the following posting:

Here’s how far we’ve come. My husband died in 1970 after a long illness. I’d supported us and two kids by myself for the last five years of his life. After he died, I could not get a credit card because I “had no credit history.” (However, I WAS held responsible for 33,000.00 in medical bills he left!) The library refused to issue me a card in my name. They insisted on knowing my husband’s first name, even though the man was dead! (Apparently dead men still had more credibility than women back there where I was!) We’d had a Sears card for many years, with me making the payments of course, all on time. They also refused to put the card in my name, and closed our account once they were notified of his death. Yeah. I no longer existed once he died, in many eyes! (*webcroner* posting).

While this litany reflects the times, it also represents the context in which Crone-identified women have been defined as this response to a coming out message attests:

it seems to me that women have had to compromise their souls and self in order to fit into a patriarchal society that expects us to fulfill the role of sex partner, wife and mother. We must deny our love of each other, our talents and our individuality, in order to fit the mould and to get children for ourselves. It seems that yours is such an experience, but we all of us have much in common and I feel so grateful that you have been able to come out of hiding after so many years of denial. I wish you joy and serenity with your friend and lover (*webcroner* posting).

This posting captures the sense of self-denial that has been experienced by some Crone-identified women engaged in stereotypical gender roles defined by dominant culture.

Women's sexuality has often been subsumed as just another aspect of their gender role as indicated above and in numerous reflections on *webcrones*:

I had four husbands, one for 40 years and the other three, short, for good reasons. At this point I don't want anyone, man or woman living with me, because it would be too easy for me to fall back into mother/wife responsibilities. Since I have quit driving at night I wouldn't mind someone to do things with – dinner, concerts, etc, and even maybe sex but I am not sure about that need. I would like them within walking distance. But with the energy of 84, and all the other things I have set myself to do this is not a burning need in my life (*webcrones* posting).

In the *webcrones* community, coming out is a process of metamorphosis that inspires or requires wisdom and courage. It is often a prelude to coming out in communities of place as if 'trying on' a new identity to get comfortable before going out in public.

For many of the *webcrones* women, the community provides a caring circle in which they can speak of the pain, anger and grief suffered at the loss of self. And, they are able to express their joy at the discovery of self and the outrageous act of defining self:

I felt fully at home in the world yesterday: fully at home in my body and soul, at last. And the world responded. There is a small part of me raging away at having to wait till my life was so much behind me, to learn about who I truly am, and to be able to accept it and live it. It is shouted, however, by the rest of me that is rejoicing that I have discovered me at all!! Will I ever know the joy of a full partnership that matches who I am? Maybe I will someday. There is a little lady a long ways from here with whom I've shared this coming out journey, via written word and phone, for almost a year now. She is also discovering her own femme identity, after a life of trying to be who she was not. I admire and love her. Who knows? Maybe someday.

I am not at all sure why I am sharing all of this on a predominantly hetero list, but there it is. I have long since stopped trying to figure out why I am here with you all. I am because I am. Period! And, because I have gained SO much from being here, in spite of any differences between us. Maybe this is how it works; how bridges are built among women. And, maybe, this is a part of my coming out, to my "straight world" friends (*webcrones* posting).

Coming out is not so much a critique of males or masculinity as it is an act of defining the self. It is a critique of the ideal construction of women as heterosexual and monogamous beings that is fundamental to social relations in western capitalist patriarchal culture, with its hierarchical dualist constructions of sex/gender that constrain, polarize and homogenize individuals. In the hierarchy of compulsory heterosexuality, women are subordinate and many of their parts, cognition, rationality, subjectivity and bodily integrity are devalued. It is that schism of 'being' that is at issue and might be best addressed analytically through Lorde's concept of the 'erotic,' which defines the social through 'fusion' as opposed to 'schism.'

In the posting above, the woman defines the *webcrones* cyberspace community as a 'hetero' community. She derives her definitions from the substance of the postings to the community. In fact, I'm not entirely sure of the statistical breakdown on sexuality. What is emerging from the community is a more critical perspective on sex/gender.

As for crone age women "coming out" sexually as lesbians....we are sexual beings. I mostly feel that it is near impossible to have a sense of healthy sexuality given our culture. Perhaps I project my own woundedness, but I sense that in this area we all feel hurt, confused, and frequently guilty. ... I don't identify as heterosexual although I am married and have two children. I don't identify as bi or homosexual either. I suppose I identify myself as a sexual being - period. I have fallen in love with people of both sexes. I think I am talking about androgeny. I'm interested in hearing from others.... (*webcrones* posting).

Her interest in hearing alternative viewpoints reflects the inquiring mind and the open heart of a Crone. She accepts sexuality as an integral aspect of being human without judgment regarding any particular orientation. Her attitude and interest was also reflected at Croness Counsel:

at other Crone Counsels we had someone who would speak to sexuality in one form or another. And I used to take those workshops because it's always been an interest of mine. I guess if I was going to do a study, it would probably be on sexuality. And we haven't had that the past couple of times and I kind of miss that because going through the different passages, the ageing, the widow, and having a new friend, and I was wondering where I was going to take my sexuality when it was all over with and sensuality. And I feel that ... I don't know, I'd like to know how other women feel about their sexuality and their sensuality as they get older. Do they lose some of it? Do they replace it? But that hasn't come up at all, and that's kind of an area I guess, like I say, I'm very interested in if I were going to do some studies (CCVII group two).

### **Choosing an Authentic Life**

A significant aspect of telling Crone stories is the process of choosing an authentic life. Authenticity requires a Crone to 'speak the truth' about her life in order to resolve the suppressed emotions, broken relationships, unfulfilled aspirations and buried hopes that were the markers of life for them in dominant culture. Often a Crone will tell her story, which is always met with encouragement and compassion, sometimes with critical reflection. There is a slow process of working through the experience and then perhaps, she may create a ritual that will sanctify the wisdom, which she has derived from the process. The ritual is performed as a way of investing meaning and resolving past experiences, the death of loved ones, old relationships and painful memories. The following *webcrones* posting exemplifies this process for a childless woman:

We women are so fortunate to have each other. Can you imagine men having issues to deal with, and no one to turn to? My husband and I are the same age, but I have Pleiades and now, WEBCRONES; he has his hobbies! (Well, so do I, and of course we have each other, but you know what I mean. Women have other women.)

Now about rituals: I agree that if none exist we should create our own. But ritual for me is not a private affair; it needs a supportive group, and, ideally to my thinking, it should be a shared creation. One of the practical difficulties I face in terms of ritual creation for childlessness is that I don't know any women in my community who've had my experience. When an experience is deeply

personal and deeply wounding, it should be exorcised, for me, in a shared releasing. I don't know whether all women feel this way (of course not! when have we ever known \*all\* women to have a common reaction, attitude and need???) but I hope my meaning is clear (*webcroner* posting).

As the writer says, sharing the experience and the pain with other women who've shared this experience resolves emotional pain. Sharing the experience with *webcroner*, a consciously aging community invites critical reflection and unique interpretations of the experience in the context of care and compassion. So, the writer shares her new understanding at the end of her posting:

I realize as I write this that there's another way to phrase this thought: when you've felt alienated from a group for some reason (in this case unwelcome childlessness), the experience and the pain must be worked through with women who've shared this experience. Only they know your truth (*webcroner* posting).

Although no one else had shared the experience of childlessness and some *webcroner* women had chosen to be childless by design, nevertheless, this woman found *webcroner* to be the empathetic, compassionate and caring community of women where she could speak her truth.

### **From Conscious Aging to Conscious Aging Activism**

A couple of years after she had shared her experience of childlessness with us, I sent her a call for papers for a conference on "Mothers without Children" organized by the Association for Research on Mothering (ARM). I thought this might be an opportunity for her to speak her truth in a forum with other mothers who had experienced life without children. This might be a ritual passage of sorts should she choose to participate. She submitted an abstract and a few months later, at the age of 80, she took the train to Toronto and made her presentation to an audience of about 50 women at the conference.

Much later she wrote to me, backlist: “I often think with pleasure and gratitude of my opportunity to speak at the Conference at York a few years ago. It was a breakthrough for me in many ways to speak publicly about a very traumatic experience.” (*webcrones* backlist). Her presentation at ARM, a feminist scholarly association, exemplifies the concept of conscious aging activism. In sharing her experience, and speaking her truth, she has not only dealt with some of her pain, she has also come out as a wise woman Crone. In her post, she went on to say that she has “looked for other ways to ‘detoxify’ that memory.” The idea that she is compelled to ‘detoxify’ her memory bears examination. It seemed to me that she had suffered a double wound, first and foremost, a hysterectomy at age 18 which frustrated her desire to have children, and second, the toxic effects of childlessness in a culture that defines mother and woman as synonymous terms. Her suffering becomes all the more apparent in the construction of the triple goddess as ‘maiden, mother, crone,’ exemplifying the limits of man-made language for defining women even in their resistance to dominant culture.

### **‘Coming Out’ Counterstories**

Speaking the truth in a Crone community, telling counterstories, opens a space for reflecting critically on the circumstances that have defined and shaped the lived experience of Crone-identified women and for making sense of perceptions, beliefs, behaviour patterns and emotions that adhere as a result. Therefore, I contend that counterstories of the Crone body are revolutionary in their departure from dominant culture and transformative in their potential to resolve the loss of self, experienced at the

menarche.<sup>45</sup> They empower individual Crone-identified women to reclaim and redefine the meaning of their sacred self. As a community counterstory, they are transformative in overwriting the dominant discourses of the female body, and defining new directions and possibilities for Crone-identified women and those they seek to mentor. Coming out in communities of place can be conceived of as a sort of conscious aging activism through which a person becomes self-defining by their actions and the identity they project. Coming out in dominant culture is transformative because it provides a template for alternative forms of social relations, both at the micro level between individuals and groups and at the macro level as a structural form.

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<sup>45</sup> For many women, the loss of self is experienced much earlier through the sexual abuse and incest that is an enduring feature of dominant culture.

## **6. MORPHING THE CRONE**

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*Transforming the Self and the Social*

## ***A Crone Manifesto***

*Peggy Cummings, Crone of Puget Sound, webcroner posting*

The title "Crone" hasn't always been derogatory. In pre-Christian times, very old women were particularly important members of communities. They were leaders, artists, healers, midwives, and counsellors. They were seen as the fulfillment of female life experience and wisdom. From the unrestrained youthfulness of the maiden, through the life-sustaining importance of the mother to the calm, evolved and confident wisdom and compassion of the old woman, lie in a lifetime of commitment to caring and listening and connecting. Without these fierce and ancient commitments, human life could literally not have continued.

Those who choose the name of Crone do so deliberately, with full awareness of its current negative connotations. It is chosen to confront the issues facing aging women and to raise important questions about attitudes and feelings toward those issues. So, by bringing the term "Crone" out of the shadows and into the light, the values can be revealed, strengths acknowledged, with learning coming from the insights and experience honoured.

Old Women are discovering the strength that comes with knowing who they are. They are freeing themselves from having to be something for someone else; freeing themselves to see one another just the way they are, not through the filter of other's expectations. They are sharing feelings, fears, and insights, accepting each other's changes and encouraging each other's growth. In addition to these changes they are accepting that "old" is not a four-letter word; that "old" is not a statement of a decline but one of time.

Old is not good or bad, it is just a measurement, without judgment. Croners are learning to grow and grow old together. By using the name of Crone and accepting their ages they are restoring the image of strong wise Old Women to their rightful place of honor and respect.

## **MORPHING THE CRONE**

This inquiry was informed by two research questions, ‘What is the nature of Crone metamorphosis?’ and ‘How do Crone-identified women make sense of Crone consciousness, culture and communities?’ In this chapter, I want to revisit those questions, drawing on the conceptual framework derived through grounded theory methodology to amplify my interpretations. In the concluding section, I discuss the significance of the study for feminist praxis and sociological scholarship.

### **Crone Metamorphosis: From Abject Old Woman to Powerful Crone**

As to the nature of Crone metamorphosis, I have conceptualized it as the morphing of Crones, a complex transformation in identity experienced by some women around and about the menopause, from abject old woman to powerful Crone. The transformation of identity encompasses social psychological, corporeal and cognitive dimensions. So, while Crone-identification reflects a form of resistance to the pejorative constructions of old women framed in dominant culture, it also represents a transformation in the individual’s sense of self, their personal relationships, their life aspirations and the decisions they make regarding their life circumstances. These elements are reflected in the sensitizing constructs of speaking the truth and living an authentic life. It is through affiliation with a Crone community informed by Crone culture and structured by relations of interdependence and an ethics of care that individual women are empowered to take a

Crone identity and to live through it. This is an effect of coming to Crone consciousness and conceiving of the self through a cultural group identity.

The theory of Crone morphing begins with the abject old woman, a conceptual category that represents the diminishing status of women as they age and their cultural devaluation in dominant hegemonic culture. Dominant culture has put forth many pejorative terms that might be bundled into the concept of abject old woman, Crone for one. Yet, the *Crone Manifesto* above charges women around and about the menopause to take the Crone as a strategic identity, a deliberate act of confrontation (*webcrone*s posting). In consequence, many old women now represent themselves as Crones with the goal of dispelling the negative stereotypes of dominant culture and transforming the hierarchical social system that has oppressed them. Thus the *Crone Manifesto* is a document that charts out directions for personal and political action with the goal of social as well as individual transformation.

There are multiple dimensions to the abjection of old women, for example, the diminished material circumstances of old women, the pathological constructions of the post-menopausal body and the relative social invisibility of old women in cultural representations. Since this thesis has focused in the main on culture and cultural representation, I have elaborated the concept of social invisibility as opposed to other aspects of abjection arguing that social invisibility is a precipitating factor in the morphing process. However, it is not solely the social invisibility of old women that is at issue. Social invisibility as the erasure of subjectivity is experienced by girls and women across the lifespan, so I have conceptualized the morphing of Crones, as a response to

present conditions in the old woman's life in relation to the loss of sacred self experienced by girls at the menarche. These two milestones in the life of a woman are mirror images. At the menarche, girls are defined by their fertility and subsumed in the cultural scripts for women in dominant culture. At the menopause, they are defined as obsolescent and marginalized through pejorative characterizations that are the antithesis of the ideal woman of hegemonic culture. The question turns to how old women with the wisdom and experience of a lifetime will respond to the selfsame 'erasure' of subjectivity that they experienced at the menarche.

Many of the women in my study described this loss of self experienced as young girls and women in a patriarchal capitalist culture. They never fit in; they never belonged. They described coming out in their Crone years as an act of naming, claiming and loving the self. Whether they came out as lesbians, scholars, artists, or athletes, they now define themselves according to their own dictates. Yes, they extol and practice an ethics of care, but with a difference. They have extended the notion of care to self-care transforming self-sacrifice to an equitable caring for all. This means surrendering the control that caring invests in the caregiver and accepting the ministrations of others for self and there has been much discussion on *webcrones* on the challenges of making and living with that decision.

The rediscovery of self through the conscious aging process in Crone communities constitutes the social psychological dimensions of morphing the Crone. It is an act of redemption, emancipating the long lost self from the grip of societal expectations. Crone-identified women are now encouraged to resurrect long held

aspirations and old hurts; to mourn and grieve for lost opportunities and to reach for their dreams insofar as possible. That many women make a conscious or strategic decision to identify as a powerful Crone is an effect of the imprint of radical feminist counterculture and the attractions of cultural alternatives to abjection. That they might conceive of themselves as Crones in the absence of a feminist politic is an effect of the corporeal changes of menopause, the social psychological dimensions of living through the body socially defined in a hierarchical, patriarchal culture and the presence of the Crone symbolic in popular culture.

Regardless of their motivations, the conscious aging activism of Crone-identified women now manifests the powerful Crone as a cultural icon, an ideal type and a role model for girls and women in dominant culture with the potential for producing a hybrid culture. Therefore, I have argued that they are well positioned to queer the binary oppositions of dominant culture since the powerful Crone apparently transcends the ideological space of hegemonic culture. Whether or how that sort of radical transformation of the dominant social system can manifest itself in fact is a speculative project, which I address in response to the second research question, ‘How do Crone-identified women make sense of Crone consciousness, culture and communities?’

### **Making Sense of Crone Culture, Consciousness and Communities**

As to how Crone-identified women make sense of Crone culture, consciousness and communities, there is no definitive answer. Certainly, the founders of Crones Counsel and many of the Crone-identified participants bring a feminist standpoint to Crone

activities. They are the second wave radical feminists grown older proposing a transformation in the hierarchical social system of dominant culture through an interdependent empowerment model of social relations. Likewise, many of the *webcrones* also espouse a feminist politic. In that regard, they come to The Crone Project already conscious of the feminist critique of dominant culture. At the same time, many *webcrones* are women who eschewed a feminist politic because it defined them as powerless or oppressed or a 'ball-breaking bitch.' They may have rejected the radical feminist politic that discounted their experience, rejected their sons and lovers or claimed a marginal 'sisterhood' with them for political gains.

It is ironic then that these women find themselves engaged in a culture that is overtly feminist at this juncture of their lives. For the most part, their affiliation with Crone culture is not initially a critical engagement. These women may have connected with Crone culture and communities as a function of their 'friendly' networks. For example, several of the women in the Croness Counsel focus groups were introduced to a Crone collective on the invitation of a friend. They are the sisters, aunts, colleagues, and girlfriends of Crone-identified, feminist women. They came along to a Crone gathering looking for entertaining companionship or lively age-mates with whom to share the challenges of aging. They may have little awareness of a feminist perspective. Likewise, the *webcrones* women came to the community through word of mouth or the electronic grapevine. Still others found '*webcrones*,' or some other cyberspace Crone community or conscious aging website by surfing the net with the search string, 'old women.' Through their affiliations with a Crone community informed by Crone culture, they may come to

critical consciousness and acquire a Crone standpoint. This has certainly been the case for some members of '*webcrones*.' For others, the feminist politic may be seen as too radical or too apolitical in the context of the political order of hegemonic culture. Many of them lurk and leave or continue to participate in the community from the margins.

Ultimately, for old women and any woman, for that matter, engaging with Crone culture, consciousness and community requires a critical leap from the dominant hegemonic representations of the abject old woman to feminist representations of the powerful Crone, from mainstream culture to a feminist culture. That some women are making that leap is clear from the findings of my study. Nevertheless, there is little evidence of an organized, radical social movement that seeks to bridge that gap in a militant fashion. Nor are the plans and strategies of Croness highly organized to promote counterculture movement. This goes, in part, to the general disarray of the feminist counterculture movement on all but the most immediate issues, reproductive rights, for example. While many women attribute this decline to the backlash against feminism described by Susan Faludi (1992), others and I count myself among them, believe that radical feminists simply got tired or retired having won some battles and left the war.

On this account, women's studies scholar and cultural historian, Jerry Rodnitzky concurs, attributing the "rise and fall of the feminist counterculture," to the failure of feminists to maintain the 'zeitgeist' of the movement, to bridge the generation gap between old feminists and the young women who have "bought into the great American myth that they can have it all if they want it" (Rodnitzky, 1999:187). Old feminists, he suggests have become more settled in women's studies departments or other disciplines

and feminist issues and consciousness raising have become largely academic (Ibid.:187). Since not every woman comes into a feminist classroom, the expectation that young women will become conscious is mere lip service to counterculture movement without a strategic plan to accomplish that goal. Yet, in their mission to mentor younger women and to share their wisdom as Crone Elders, the seeds of renewal are apparent and their use of computer information technology is expeditious. For example, one of the *webcrones* described the efforts of her group to bridge the generations:

A year or so ago, I launched a thing I called Salon after Mme Recamier. I tried to mix up some sparkling elders with the busy 50 year olds. We only had two or three meetings, but they were extremely successful. At the last meeting, every one was so excited. The 50 year olds were all set to bring their teenaged daughters, and then we were planning to have the three generations talk about being teenagers. But the upshot of it all was that the busy fifty year olds could not spare the time for just friendships. So while all of us agreed it was a lovely, exciting idea, we regretfully decided that it couldn't go on. We had plans to come dressed in the most outrageous costumes we could find. But we had to regretfully shut it down (*webcrones* posting).

To which came the response

isn't blaming the 50-year-olds a bit like blaming your mother ... it's true they are busy ... they are the sandwich generation ... . However, it may be that they need the tweaking or insistence of 'old Croners' to get them going on the truly important stuff ... getting past organized hockey and figure skating or putting food on the table and a roof over their heads ... We need more salons! (*webcrones* posting).

Likewise, there was much discussion of mentoring as a role for Croners both in Crone Communities and in communities of place.

Maybe there's a possibility to have, it's a four-day conference and you have two days strictly for croners and then two days where the younger people could come along. And that may be one way of, you know, like the mentoring session. (CCVII group one).

In their communities of place, mentoring the young constitutes both conscious aging and conscious aging activism. So, a woman describes the mentorship that old Crones provide for ‘Cronettes,’ women at the menopause and for young girls at the menarche:

“Very important. Mentoring the young ones. And that’s a difficult one. Some communities find that very easy and they just get right out there and then our community has been a little bit difficult so what we’ve done about that has been encouraged the Cronettes, if you will, maybe the 40 year olds, to form their own perhaps menopause groups and then maybe perhaps start, and they have done this by the way in Sedona, have passage rituals for the young, the 13 year olds, the young girls that are coming into their menstruation. And we’re there if they need us. I keep hearing this a lot in larger groups. For instance if we have a huge ceremony that includes the entire community, and then maybe one of the younger girls will come down and they’ll say, ‘you’re our grandmothers and you’re really important to us and we really need you.’ And so then we’ll get together in our Crone circle and we’ll say ‘Well what are we doing to help them? And we need to do more.’ So mentoring the young I guess. (CCVII group three)

That Crone culture is engaging with women who gave short shrift to feminism in earlier days is evidence of a vital movement. It suggests that there is potential for future growth and substantial change in the dominant social system through the conscious aging and conscious aging activism of Crone-identified women. Since they are indeed, for the most part, mothers, grandmothers and aunties, they have a broad social network for propagating the beliefs and values of Crone culture and the interdependent empowerment model of social relations.

### **Conscious Aging and Conscious Aging Activism**

The following message posted to *webcrones* exemplifies the process of critical reflection and consciousness raising that characterizes the concept of conscious aging in a Crone community. At the same time, it captures the connection between social invisibility and the actions of Crone-identified women and articulates the pressing issues for Crone

conscious aging activism. I include only a brief excerpt from a lengthy, insightful analysis that is the culmination of five years of dialogue with *webcrones*:

We've all experienced the “invisibility” of older women and the stereotypes about us. Most of us in this group have challenged both of those and are largely successful in living as dynamic, exciting, interesting - very visible (and audible) older women ... That's all to the good, but what seems to me to be missing is a recognized place for Elder Women in our society... Is there a place or a way in our society to incorporate Elders as Elders, not as terrific “Old but Wow” people...I'm not suggesting we stop being dynamic and active; I'm by no means suggesting that we go back to being the traditional Old Grannie who knew when it was time to sit in the rocking chair and retire from active life. The Raging Grannies will continue to rage, the Amazing Greys to amaze, the Grey Panthers to pounce - and so we should. But there seems to be a missing link between the active women we are (however we show this) and the wise women we also are. I'm wondering if there is some way in our society where we can find a place as true Elders? (*webcrones* posting)

This posting describes the morphing of identity from the social invisibility of the traditional old Grannie, one version of the abject old woman to the outrageous, amazing, pouncing dynamic activism of the Crone Elder. It identifies the relative success of transforming the self and the difficulty of transforming the social and it grasps the connection between the two, the “missing link” between Croness being active and Croness being wise Elder. The “missing link” here reflects this *webcrone's* discomfort with what she perceives to be a break between the politics of a Crone feminist counterculture and what counts for praxis to individual Crone-identified women. In that regard, her polemic is like a caveat regards the contradictory purposes of Crone mission and Crone action.

In the Introduction to this thesis, I identified the ambiguity in the Crone mission that encourages and supports “the personal unfolding and passage of its members from past outgrown roles and stereotypes into powerful, passionate and satisfying old womanhood” (Crone of Puget Sound). I suggested that while Crone culture grounds itself

in the second wave radical feminist counterculture that took as its motto “the personal is political,” the Crone counterculture may serve a more hedonistic purpose redefining that call to action as a self-interested justification for acting out rather than a politics of cultural transformation, social justice and collective interests. While such a mission might liberate some old women from stereotypical social expectations, it would seem to do little to transform the social world or to address the effects of dominant culture on the lives of girls and women across the lifespan.

Yet, the *Crone Manifesto* claims that through the accumulation of years, and “a lifetime of commitment to caring and listening and connecting,” old women are like a wellspring of wisdom that could ameliorate the complex problems that challenge the society (*The Crone Manifesto*, *webcrones* posting). Implicit in the statement is that Crone culture offers alternative forms of social organization and configurations of power that would result in a more harmonious world. Likewise, I have argued that the powerful Crone as a cultural icon, a strategic identity and an ideal type is well-positioned to queer the heterosexual binary and hierarchical structures of western industrial capitalist patriarchy through the conscious aging activism of Crone-identified women in their communities of place. The Crone communities that I have studied provide a model for these alternative forms of social organization. However, the potential for Crones to renegotiate the structures of power in dominant culture must wrestle first with the ambiguity and ambivalence of the *Crone Manifesto*. By that I mean that old Crones and old feminists must also resist the seductions of dominant culture in order to transform the

structures of power that perpetuate it. So the *webcrone's* polemic, articulates the potential for conscious aging activism and revising the Crone manifesto:

Does an Elder place have to come from us? Must we create it and demand it? Will it happen if we don't? And how would we go about creating such a space? It's not part of our western culture. I see it as almost "sacred space" ... In fact, as I write this a question looms: are we so busy doing and showing that the Old have vigour and zest that we too have lost our way? Are we so proud of not "living OLD" and indeed living YOUNG that we too are in danger of uprooting ourselves, in this case, pulling up the deep tap root that ties us to our beginnings - 60 or 70 or 80 years ago, because it hold us back. Those ads showing vigorous old people on motorbikes or playing tennis or skiing are great. But are we losing something else - a sense of time and with it a sense of timelessness: As Elders isn't that what we have to share: a realization that Time was before us, is now and will continue, that we see and experience things differently at different stages of time (*webcrones* posting).

This exchange emphasizes the possibilities and problems with Crone morphing.

If the Crone is merely an “old but wow” version of the sexualized strong woman type contained in the hegemonic space of dominant culture then the notion of the powerful Crone is an illusion. Crone-identified women will have surrendered the struggle for the sign. She will not fulfil her potential as the Wise Woman Crone, the Crone Elder, at the leading edge of a rejuvenated counterculture movement or as Rodnitzky characterizes it, “a feminist phoenix – rising out of its own ashes” (1999:188).

## **SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY FOR SOCIOLOGY AND FEMINIST PRACTICE**

This study adds significantly to the breadth of knowledge in Sociology of the Body, Aging, Women's Studies, Culture and Power with implications for the lived experience of girls and women as follows: a] substantively, on the topic of Croness, the embodied experience of gender and aging; b] theoretically, on the complex process through which

identity evolves as a social psychological, corporeal and cognitive process informed by culture and communities; c] theoretically and politically, in identifying the existence of alternative models of power and social relations in communities and counterculture formations embedded within dominant culture; d] politically and psychologically, in identifying the empowering potential of developing social ritual for girls and women; e] substantively, on the potential of cyberspace communities to facilitate social empowerment in actual space; and f] methodologically, relative to research on the internet.

This study also provides insights on some lingering myths and questions that are significant for feminist praxis:

1. I've heard that many women come out as lesbians at the menopause. Is it true and if so what's happening?
2. Many girls lose their self-esteem at puberty. Why should that be so and how could we counteract it?
3. Where did feminism go, who stole feminism and why do so many girls buy into dominant culture?

Given that the research implements the paradigms of participatory action research and feminist ethnography, there are outcomes in the social world as well. Of primary importance, participants in the study have reported substantial change in their lived experience as an outcome of the Crone collaborations on *webcronos*. Some of them have come to critical consciousness about their situation as older women situated in an industrial capitalist patriarchal hegemonic system. They have been inspired, nurtured and

empowered through the community of Crones to come out as themselves however they define that action, to write and construct rituals for women, old and young, and to do consciousness-raising with younger girls and women and to resolve the grief at the loss of their sacred selves at the menarche.

Beyond those most significant outcomes, *The Crone Project* website along with my lectures, focus groups, conference, and poster presentations like the work of other Crone academics manifests an additional Crone presence in virtual and actual space that promotes Crone consciousness and culture. In my own relationships with my children, my partner, my extended family and communities, my students and friends, a new personal and cultural identity has indeed been born and raised in the world. So at one recent birthday, my children presented me with an original art card that depicted an older woman seated in a clearing in the forest surrounded by an unexpected assortment of creatures, a school of brightly colored fish. The campfire is sending forth its light at the centre and the stars shine overhead. The colours are like jewels and there is a sense of brightness, warmth and security that pervades the night scene. All attention is on the woman who is speaking to the group, her arms stretched out as if to draw them all into her story. I take it that this is the new world bathed in the wisdom of the Wise Woman Crone. Inside the card my 'adult' children had written a brief message, "This card reminds us of you," they wrote, "the old Crone, telling her stories and sharing her wisdom with all." Apparently, they too now conceive of the Crone, as a woman of age, wisdom and power.

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## Appendix I

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### **METHODOLOGICAL PARTICULARS**

#### **The Crone Project Web Documents**

?? Crone Project Outreach

?? Crone Links Page

#### **Crone Website Addresses (URLS)**

## THE CRONE PROJECT OUTREACH

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### *Calling All Crones!*

Welcome cyber-traveller to this infinitesimal virtual space near the centre of the web where minds converge to ponder the Crone. But first let me spin out my own story for you. I am a student Crone. That is, I am a Crone student and a student of Crones. I am a PhD candidate in Sociology at York University, Toronto, Canada. The topic of my research is the Crone: woman of age, wisdom and power; woman of independent spirit. I am exploring what I call Crone phenomena: crone networks, crone collectives, crone lifeworlds, crone stories, crone values, crone social and political movements and Crones. At the top of my list is Crone consciousness because it is the conscious choice to live as a Crone that I believe is at the heart of the phenomena.

I am hoping to engage a number of Crones to collaborate in my research. Collaboration would involve subscribing to my listserv; engaging in the dialogue that goes on there; filling out a survey that I will be eventually mounting on my website and perhaps, providing a respectful interview about their Crone way of life, which is not the way, of course, but a way.

I have three objectives for my research project:

First, there is no doubt that all Crones conceive of themselves as women of age, wisdom and power and I think it is time that we, Crones, write our name in the history books, in this case, it will be the social history books. I have chosen to do this project in academia so that Crone wisdom will be acknowledged and integrated into the "legitimate" domain of academic knowledge.

Second, Crones can negotiate meaningful change in the social structure of this planet through their wisdom, ethics, values and practices, but we need to publicize them to a wider audience than ourselves alone.

Third, Crones can be role models for younger women. We must be more than mothers for our daughters, if we want them to experience their fullest potential. We need to model our creativity, spirituality, rationality, intuitiveness, wisdom, and emotion in order to define and create a more holistic, positive framework for the lives not only of women but of all creatures on this planet.

If you are a Crone or an incipient Crone, I hope you will join in the project and the listserv. I look forward to hearing from you. Please do send your comments, your queries, your critiques and your suggestions to me through e-mail at [mccabe@yorku.ca](mailto:mccabe@yorku.ca) or by snail mail to the address below.

### CRONE WEBSITES AND URLS

WEBSITE TITLE	URL	DATE RETRIEVED
Almita's Online Gallery	<a href="http://www.vashonisland.com/almitasgallery/">www.vashonisland.com/almitasgallery/</a>	5/07/1998
Birthing the Crone	<a href="http://www.birthingthecrone.com/">www.birthingthecrone.com/</a>	12/06/1998
A Cup of Wisdom	<a href="http://www.conniespittler.com/">http://www.conniespittler.com/</a>	2/07/2004
Crone	<a href="http://www.tanglewave.com/crone.html">www.tanglewave.com/crone.html</a>	18/12/2003
Crone Art Dolls	<a href="http://stubbornlights.org/gallery/crone">http://stubbornlights.org/gallery/crone</a>	17/12/2003
Crone Ceremony	<a href="http://www.designsbywillow.com/site/20-CroneCeremony.html">www.designsbywillow.com/site/20-CroneCeremony.html</a>	17/12/2003
Crone Chronicles	<a href="http://www.cronechronicles.com">www.cronechronicles.com</a>	27/5/1999
Crone Chronicles	<a href="http://www.cronechronicles.com">www.cronechronicles.com</a>	24/5/2004
Crone Cottage	<a href="http://www.nwlink.com/~ffranke/contents.html">www.nwlink.com/~ffranke/contents.html</a>	09/04/1998
Crones Counsel I	<a href="http://www.cronescounsel.net">www.cronescounsel.net</a>	24/06/2004
Crones Counsel II	<a href="http://www.fau.edu/womenstd/students/studentactivity.htm">www.fau.edu/womenstd/students/studentactivity.htm</a>	25/05/2003
Crone Moon	<a href="http://www.spiralgoddess.com/CroneMoon.html">www.spiralgoddess.com/CroneMoon.html</a>	2/06/2004
Crone's Nest	<a href="http://www.fortunecity.com/victorian/hurst/321/crone.html">www.fortunecity.com/victorian/hurst/321/crone.html</a>	16/04/1998
Crone's Parlor of Witchcraft	<a href="http://secretcircle.nightworld.net/crones/">http://secretcircle.nightworld.net/crones/</a>	2/06/2004
Crone Poetry	<a href="http://www.pathcom.com/~timex/poems.htm">www.pathcom.com/~timex/poems.htm</a>	19/03/1999
Croneways	<a href="http://www.croneways.com/">www.croneways.com/</a>	15/04/2004
Crone~Wise Woman~Elder I	<a href="http://www.runningdeer.com/crone/crone.html">www.runningdeer.com/crone/crone.html</a>	10/04/1998
Crone~Wise Woman~Elder II	<a href="http://www.cwwe.org/">www.cwwe.org/</a>	2/06/2004
Crone~Wise Woman~Elder III	<a href="http://www.yoni.com/crone.shtml">www.yoni.com/crone.shtml</a>	22/05/2004
Croning Resources for Wise Women of All Ages	<a href="http://www.croning.org/pages/534083/index.htm">www.croning.org/pages/534083/index.htm</a>	
Eco-Crones	<a href="http://www.eco-crones.org/pages/551970/index.htm">http://www.eco-crones.org/pages/551970/index.htm</a>	22/05/2004
Goddess Images~Crone Art at Bell Pine Art Farm	<a href="http://www.bellpineartfarm.com/home/bp1/page/6/11">www.bellpineartfarm.com/home/bp1/page/6/11</a>	19/06/2003
Joanna Powell~Crone Art	<a href="http://222.nas.com/jpcolbertart/PrintsPg/ArtPrints/VirginCrnCopy/hecate.html">http://222.nas.com/jpcolbertart/PrintsPg/ArtPrints/VirginCrnCopy/hecate.html</a>	10/04/1998
Maid~Mother~Crone	<a href="http://member.aol.com/ATOYA/crone.html">http://member.aol.com/ATOYA/crone.html</a>	12/04/1998
Me and the Cat	<a href="http://www.meandthecat.com/">www.meandthecat.com/</a>	
Mystic Eye	<a href="http://www.escalix.com/freepage/mysticeye/">www.escalix.com/freepage/mysticeye/</a>	10/04/1998
Pleiades Passages	<a href="http://www.pleiades-net.com/voices/age/age.html">www.pleiades-net.com/voices/age/age.html</a>	4/2/1999
Rites of Passage	<a href="http://www.tryskelion.com/crone1.htm">www.tryskelion.com/crone1.htm</a>	4/06/2004
Swampy's Spirituality	<a href="http://www.pinn.net/~swampy/spiritindex.html">www.pinn.net/~swampy/spiritindex.html</a>	25/04/2004
Technocrone	<a href="http://www.geocities.com/Wellesley/Garden/3741">www.geocities.com/Wellesley/Garden/3741</a>	11/03/1998
The Crone's Cauldron	<a href="http://boondock.com/crone/">http://boondock.com/crone/</a>	27/5/1999
The Crone Pages	<a href="http://www.geocities.com/kerrdelune/crone_pages.html">www.geocities.com/kerrdelune/crone_pages.html</a>	
The Crone's Poetry Pages	<a href="http://members.tripod.com/~magique_/index.html">members.tripod.com/~magique_/index.html</a>	15/06/2003

The Crone Project	<a href="http://www.geocities.com/Wellesley/Garden/3371/">www.geocities.com/Wellesley/Garden/3371/</a>	14/06/1998
Three Crones Poetry Workshop	<a href="http://www.geocities.com/threecrones/">www.geocities.com/threecrones/</a>	21/09/2003
Tucson Crones	<a href="http://www.desertcronesoftucson.net/groups.html">http://www.desertcronesoftucson.net/groups.html</a>	24/06/2004
WEBSITE TITLE	URL	RETRIEVED
Crone at White Moon Gallery	<a href="http://www.thewhitemoon.com/gallery/Crone.html">http://www.thewhitemoon.com/gallery/Crone.html</a>	3/06/2004
West Coast Crones	<a href="http://www.gayweb.com/wolfevideo/west.html">www.gayweb.com/wolfevideo/west.html</a>	16/05/1998
Windchime Walker's Site	<a href="http://members.aol.com/wndchmwks/index.html">http://members.aol.com/wndchmwks/index.html</a>	21/03/2001
Wise Old Crone	<a href="http://snakeandsnake.com/woc.htm">http://snakeandsnake.com/woc.htm</a>	16/05/1998

## Appendix II

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### **ETHICAL DOCUMENTATION**

#### **Imaging the Crone Workshop**

☞ Information Statement

#### **Crone Counsel VII Focus Groups**

☞ Workshop Handout

? Overview

? Recording Crone Voices Information Statement  
and Authorization Form

? Recording Crone Voices Discussion Themes

#### **The Crone Project and *webcrones@yorku.ca***

☞ Research Summary

☞ Webcrones Mailing List Guidelines and Ground Rules

## Imaging the Crone Collectively

### INFORMATION STATEMENT

Gail McCabe, SSW MA  
 Doctoral Candidate, Graduate Program in Sociology  
 York University 4700 Keele Street Toronto, ON Canada M3J 1P3

I am a doctoral candidate in Sociology working towards a PhD degree. I have two reasons for attending this workshop. The first reason is that I began to identify as a Crone a couple of years ago and I want to find out why? I discovered Helen's website and decided to attend the workshop as a way to do that. Second, I have to do research on some social phenomenon of interest for my doctoral dissertation, and I think I might want to adopt the Crone as the focus for my study. Therefore, my participation in the workshop counts as a sort of tentative research using the participant observation method. I am not only a participant in the workshop. I am also an observer in order to learn more about the Crone archetype and the women who are interested in her. My goal as a participant observer is to become more informed and to describe the interactions of the workshop and the participants as a group as opposed to describing personal details of any one particular individual.

As a sociologist, I am required to provide an information statement to those I observe about my interests as well as a statement concerning the ethical principles of Sociology prior to doing the observation. The key ethical issues here are informed consent, anonymity, confidentiality and information sharing.

#### **Informed Consent**

With Helen's consent, I am providing this information statement to you. We will discuss the statement at the beginning of the workshop and I will answer any questions you have. Following the discussion session, we will know whether there is consensus for me to continue as a participant observer. If there is no consensus, then I will continue solely as a participant.

If I continue as participant observer and at some point, during the session a sensitive issue arises and you do not wish to continue in this way, if you let me know, I will undertake to discontinue my observer role. Likewise, if at some point at a later date, you have some misgivings about the session, if you inform me I will report my findings as if you were not present and nothing will indicate that you were.

#### **Anonymity**

I will undertake not to include any personal or sensitive information that might be discussed in this workshop in any of my papers or publications relative to my study. I will ensure that no details are included in any of my papers that would enable any reader to identify you.

#### **Confidentiality**

I will hold any statements made in this workshop that are not directly related to the Crone archetype and the interests I have outlined in this statement in confidence and will not include them in any write-ups, publications, discussions or presentations relative to my study.

#### **Information Sharing**

I will undertake to share any papers written about this workshop with you. Should you have an interest in receiving those papers, please provide your contact information on the sheet at the door to enable me to do so.

Thank you for reading this statement and participating in the process outlined above with me.  
 Gail McCabe, SSW MA  
 August 17, 1998

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**If you have any questions in the future or simply want further information, please contact me: Gail McCabe, Sociology, York University, (416) 736-2100; residence (905) 858-9063; e-mail: mccabe@yorku.c**