

## **If the Face Didn't Give Me Away: A Woman's Experience of Aging**

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**Context:** Research suggests that visibly aging women's bodies are antithetical to accepted US beauty norms. Visible signs of aging reduce women's (sense of) power and social capital. The aging woman is uniquely situated as at-once vulnerable to a unique sense of loss of worth *and* experiencing the loss she always feared would come.

**Research paradigm:** This project grows from the intersection of autoethnography and arts-based methods. Poetry allows for the visceral to immediately coexist with the explanatory. The poem at the center of this work not only describes but performs one author's ambivalence around aging using the voices of family and friends to tighten a growing sense of loss and despair while also incisively pushing against neoliberal narratives that center individual behavior and efforts as central to shifting the meaning of aging among women.

**Methods of data collection:** This work uses autoethnographic data that reflects one of the author's experiences as a woman who is aging.

**Data analysis:** One woman's experience of aging, represented within a poetic piece that reflects lived-experience over the life-course (so far), offers both a personal and political understanding of how US socio-cultural patriarchal norms around women's bodies both affect and are illuminated by a sense of the physical signs of aging.

**Quality of data and analysis:** While this current project represents the specific experience of one author, the way the autoethnographic poem is situated within a wider discussion of (the perceived worth of) women's bodies is the result of rich, thick collaboration between both authors. We note here that both authors are white, middle class, cis-gender women. Our work is rooted within and reflective of our social locations and is not designed to "speak for" or (re)present all women.

**Findings:** Many scholars have discussed the connection between beauty norms and patriarchal violence. In addition, standards of beauty are also implicated in experiences of and recovery from trauma. In this piece, the author's perception of her aging face brings with it a renewed sense of trauma by illuminating the ways that signs of aging defy conventional US beauty norms for women.

**Application of critical thinking to analysis:** The poem demands the space for rage and grief around a biological process made socially fraught while also deepening our engagement with aging and woman's experience, in her own words.

**Transferability:** While not transferable, the work is designed to resonate among women who are experiencing aging and within wider, evolving scholarly conversations about aging women's bodies as signifiers of value (or lack of value) in US culture.