

***The Lives of Older Lesbians: Sexuality, Identity, and the Life Course***, by Jane Traies. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. Pp. 245. €83,19 (hardcover); €51,99 (paperback); €41,64 (electronic).

*Reviewed by Linda M. Hess, University of Frankfurt (linda.hess@em.uni-frankfurt.de)*

The straightforward title of Jane Traies's *The Lives of Older Lesbians* already captures a central strength of this timely and significant book. In presenting her research on the "hidden population" (5) of older lesbian women in the United Kingdom, Traies, a cultural historian with a focus on gender studies, successfully illustrates that the lives and life courses of "older lesbians are just as diverse as [those of] the rest of the population" (41). At the same time, she thoughtfully examines the factors that nevertheless move older lesbian women to see themselves as a distinct group. Traies's writing is accessible and compelling, and it reflects her respectful engagement with the participants' life narratives and experiences.

Traies bases her research on a survey (which includes a combination of questionnaires and personal interviews, as well as some written life narratives) of 375 older lesbian women living in the UK, who were born between 1919 and 1950 and were consequently between the ages of 60 and 90 when they participated in the study. All interviewees had the option to stay anonymous, and all received transcripts of their interviews and participated in the reviewing and editing process (20). The introduction is followed by eight thematic chapters and a conclusion. The chapters range from statistical and factual information on living arrangements, questions of being out and of being in the closet, family and relationships, lesbian communities, specific aspects of the women's life courses, such as spaces of liberation for them, the significance of storytelling in their lives, and their fears and hopes for the future as they grow older. Chapters two and three offer insights into statistics concerning factors such as class, home ownership, ethnicity, and education of Traies's participants. The later chapters then foreground individual narratives and experiences, integrating statistics to make clear how typical or unique a recounted experience was (21). The later chapters give ample space to the participants' stories and

remarks, recording also whether the interviewee gave her answer interspersed with laughter, or haltingly, or in tears. Whenever necessary to offer a complete picture of the conversation, Traies also includes her own questions, promptings, and remarks during the interview. Narrative moments cover a wide range from recalling acts of rejection by one's family, to remembering a crush on another girl at school, to reflections on gender identity and civil partnership celebrations. These chapters illustrate the significance of being able to tell one's own story as well as the crucial role of narratives in building and maintaining communities. Because of the thoughtful manner in which Traies presents her participants' stories, the book effectively carries out her aim of "making previously unheard women's voices heard" (16), and this includes her transparency about the research process. For example, she highlights that many women refused to take part in the research, even under a pseudonym, because they did not want this part of their identity to become public.

*The Lives of Older Lesbians* presents an important intervention into the continued invisibility of older lesbian women in the UK. As the author makes clear, intersections of ageism and homophobia produce a pronounced blind spot concerning older lesbian women's existence which forecloses their cultural and academic representation. Situating her own research in the context of existing research on aging and non-heterosexual persons, Traies points out that even as representations of younger lesbians are growing more diverse in the twenty-first century, negative stereotypes of older lesbian women remain "unrevised and remarkably persistent" (4). In academic research, the formula "old" + "woman" + "lesbian" produces a lacuna; Traies speaks of a "Bermuda Triangle . . . into which older lesbians disappear" (5). Academic research since the 1980s has rarely focused on older LGBTQ\* persons and existing studies focus largely on gay men. The author highlights the few exceptions, such as the crucial research carried out by Margaret Cruikshank, Monika Kehoe, and the auto-ethnographic writing of lesbian authors Adrienne Rich, Baba Copper, and Barbara MacDonald. But all these authors focus on the United States rather than the UK.

Published in 2016, *The Lives of Older Lesbians* thus takes long-necessary steps to remedy the lack of attention paid to the particular experiences and life courses of older lesbian women. But it does more than that: It succeeds in painting a perceptive and nuanced image of a specific generation of women, whose childhood took place before the social and cultural changes of the 1960s and 1970s and many of whom grew up without having any particular vocabulary to talk about, or even formulate for themselves, their attraction to women. Traies introduces her readers to a unique and distinct generation of older lesbians, while at the same time pursuing an intersectional approach that makes it clear that, for some participants, social categories such as “race, class, poverty, childlessness” may play a greater role in creating commonalities or differences with other women than sexual orientation. She delivers a study in which statistics and individual narratives are equally meaningful in teasing out “the ways in which older lesbians are ‘just like’ other older people and the ways in which their sexual orientation might make them ‘different’” (31).

One of the most impressive chapters of the book is chapter five, entitled “Finding a Place: Spaces of Liberation.” Traies, quoting Sara Ahmed on the necessity of paying attention to the “spatiality of the term ‘orientation’ (69 qtd. in Traies 126), turns to the physical and cultural spaces that her participants inhabited and that enabled their realization and/or expression of their sexual orientation. This chapter creates a sense of a group identity through shared experiences in a particular historical time period (roughly the 1950s to the 1980s), while simultaneously highlighting the complexity of lesbian life courses in the UK at this time. The two “locations” Traies considers most prominently here are the women’s Armed Forces and the spaces of second-wave feminism. Experiences in the Armed Forces range from finding an overwhelming new freedom in loving other women to being discharged as “medically unfit” and ending up homeless for a while after a sexual relationship with another woman was discovered. Again, the writing impresses specifically because the author reflects on the caveats of her findings, remarking for example how spaces can be “simultaneously repressive and liberating” (126), without losing the poignancy of the findings. The chapter also impressively illustrates how much

gender remains a factor that cannot be separated from sexual identity, which is why it is so significant to have research considering the lives of lesbian women in their own right, rather than subsuming it under the experience of gay men (as often happens in statistics about LGBTQ\* lives).

Traies's study deconstructs simplistic views and stereotypes of older lesbian women and emphasizes instead the enormous diversity in this group. Nevertheless, some commonalities stand out, such as most participants' perception of a bond based on their lesbian identity stemming from shared experiences of stigma and discrimination, as well as the prevailing fear of being exposed to homophobic discrimination in older age – for example in care homes or other care situations. Another, positive, commonality is the strength of networks among lesbian women, sometimes formal, but often informal, which create a sense of being collectively different from other women, despite the great diversity among older lesbian women.

*The Lives of Older Lesbians* provides a combination of knowledge and data about the experiences and histories of older lesbian women in the UK, making it a crucial contribution to both aging studies and lesbian studies (as well as feminist, gender, and queer studies). Traies's research opens up new perspectives, and the author rightfully emphasizes that this book is a first step towards future research. Such future research might represent the voices of older lesbian women of color, which are only marginally present in this study. This perspective would be highly valuable, especially since race and ethnicity rarely find representation when it comes to cultural age studies. Likewise, a further point that deserves more attention is the question of intergenerational relations outside of legal next of kin such as children and grandchildren. Traies's interviews bring to light that the older lesbian participants of the study, while born up to thirty years apart from each other, form a distinct generation in the history of the UK. By contrast, there seems to be a "break" between the generation of the participants and younger generations, who do find themselves increasingly represented in the media and who grew up in a very different atmosphere and legal situation. A discussion of this aspect would shed additional light on the question how older lesbian women are anchored in

communities. It would also add a further facet to the issue of visibility if such studies discussed what the personal acquaintance with older lesbian women might mean for younger lesbians.