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i go gray.com: A Photographic Celebration and Oral History of Gray-Haired Women

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I go gray.com: A Photographic Celebration
and Oral History of Gray-Haired Women

By Tabitha Deering

A culminating Capstone Project Report is submitted to the faculty of
Dominican University of California in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in Literature and Intercultural Studies

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This Capstone Project Paper, written under the direction of the candidate's thesis advisor and approved by the department chair, has been presented to and accepted by the department of Literature and Intercultural Studies in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts expected December 2019. The content and research methodologies presented in this work represent the work of the candidate alone.

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Abstract

This paper describes the creation of the igogray.com website which celebrates gray-haired women by featuring their oral histories and showcasing the aesthetic beauty of gray hair through fine art photography. The website is a platform to listen to what gray-haired women have to say on the subject of gray hair, and to encourage the audience to take a closer look at gray-haired women. When the author stopped dyeing her gray hair she experienced an ageist shift in society's perceptions toward her, and she wondered if other graying women were having the same types of experiences, so this project investigates the idea that gray-haired women experience ageism based on their hair color. The interviewed women did not report experiencing direct ageism as a result of their gray hair, but they did report feeling varying degrees of social pressure and stress regarding their appearance as it relates to their hair. The women's interviews led to further discussions about gray hair topics including the dominant beauty ideal, social pressure, ageism, beauty as a woman's burden, gendered products and the cost of beauty, beauty routines and mental illness, gray hair acceptance and gray hair as a tool for future stages of aging. The author concludes that because gray hair is outside of the dominant ideal that gray-haired women can experience a shift in social power. The author states that all people in society should examine their roles in the power dynamic and if in a dominant position, make room for other voices.

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The Project

This project is an investigation of women with gray hair and their place within American society that culminates in a website that I created, igogray.com, that documents the oral histories of eight gray-haired women. The purpose of the website is twofold. The first objective is to provide a platform where women can describe their gray hair experience in their own words, giving them an individual and collective voice. The second objective is to capture the aesthetic beauty of gray hair through fine art photography. The portraits honor the participants and encourage the audience to take a closer look at gray-haired women.

To begin the creation of the website I first approached multiple gray-haired women in a variety of settings and asked them to become a part of my study. Then, I set up sessions where I interviewed and photographed a justice promoter, a retired bank manager, a law enforcement officer, a caregiver, a minister and healer, a social media influencer, and an administrative assistant. I researched the history and development of a mainstream beauty ideal, the beauty industry, the psychology of body image, and ageism in American society using academic sources like the books: *Globalizing Beauty* by Hartmut Berghoff and Thomas Kühne, *Agewise* by Margaret Gullette, *Beauty and Misogyny* by Sheila Jeffreys, and sources from popular culture like the movie *Good Hair* with Chris Rock and the books *My Formerly Hot Life* by Stephanie Dolgoff and *Silver Hair: Say Goodbye to the Dye and Let Your Natural Light Shine: A Complete Handbook* by Lorraine Massey. On my website all the elements come together to show the gray hair journey of eight dynamic women.

The first project challenge was finding my subjects. I located women from within my own social circles, through word-of-mouth referrals, and by approaching strangers. Most of the women whom I asked agreed to participate in the project, but there were some obstacles with

recruiting the subjects. One potential model had her hair streaked with dye at the last minute, another woman agreed but was later embarrassed of her gray roots and changed her mind, and a stranger whom I had approached was initially suspect of my intentions, nonetheless I succeeded in completing the process with eight excellent subjects.

I originally wanted a broader spectrum of women, including more ethnic diversity, but Caucasian women go gray first at the median age of thirty-four, and other ethnicities go gray later making diverse models that much more difficult to find in Sonoma County, CA (Pandhi 644). Additionally, I wanted to include younger women in the project, but 75% of women in America dye their hair whether they are gray or not, so finding young models felt like a treasure hunt (Goldstein Research). I spoke to a few women in their twenties who followed the “granny hair” trend and bleached their hair in silver tones, and I considered interviewing a gray-haired man, but I decided to focus exclusively on naturally gray-haired women who chose to allow the gray because they are the marginalized group. Overall, I am pleased with the models and the unique perspective that each woman brings to the discussion.

For the interviews, I allowed the women to steer the conversations because oral history is personal and organic as opposed to data collection. I created a questionnaire that I used as a guide for each interview (see page 27). Thirty-one questions contain five parts: demographics, hair history and expenses, social aspects, attitudes on aging, and personal accomplishments and life celebrations. The questions prompted great conversations but tended to be a bit broad. The shortest interview was just under one hour and the longest interview was over three hours. I recorded the interviews and later transcribed and edited them for the website.

Regarding the portraiture, I set up a portable photo studio for each session. I have a background in photography and previously owned my own portrait and wedding photography

business, so I had most of the equipment needed to create a portable studio. I arranged the sessions in a variety of locations. Three of the sessions were in the woman's homes, two in parks, one at a woman's office, one in a parking lot, and one was conducted online. All of the photography was done by me except for Amber's portrait. Amber and I had the online session, and because I photographed her through a computer screen, the quality of the image was too low to publish on the website, so Amber provided her own image.

For the location studio, I erected a four-by-six-foot portable backdrop stand and draped it with a large black velvet cloth to absorb ambient light. I chose the black background to make the subjects gray hair pop in contrast. I used a Canon EOS 6D Camera with a 17-40mm EF Series lens. I purchased a 16-inch LED ring-light and a small generator to power it. This was my first time using a LED ring-light, and I am pleased with the results. I especially like the way it soft-lit the model's faces and added circular catchlights in their eyes. I used Adobe Lightroom editing software to create consistent lighting and tone among the images, and for light facial editing in lieu of professional makeup.

To create the website, I secured the domain name igogray.com and purchased a year of hosting through a website creation company. I overhauled the design of the website three times, finally recruiting the help of my daughter, Adin Deering, who is currently studying graphic design. Adin was able to make my vision happen. Each woman has her own tab on the menu bar that can be accessed from the top of any page. The homepage features the women. The woman's individual pages include photographs from our sessions, selections from the interviews, and a word cloud with adjectives that describe them. I hope the women share the website with their friends and family as a record of this moment in their lives and their own intimate hair history. The website includes a guestbook where visitors can comment, hopefully triggering future

discussions. I have added my contact information with an invitation for gray-haired women to contact me if they are interested in being a part of the ongoing project. There are additional pages with source citations and a page of acknowledgements. I consider the website to be an evolving living format, and I am looking forward to the possibility of growing it further.

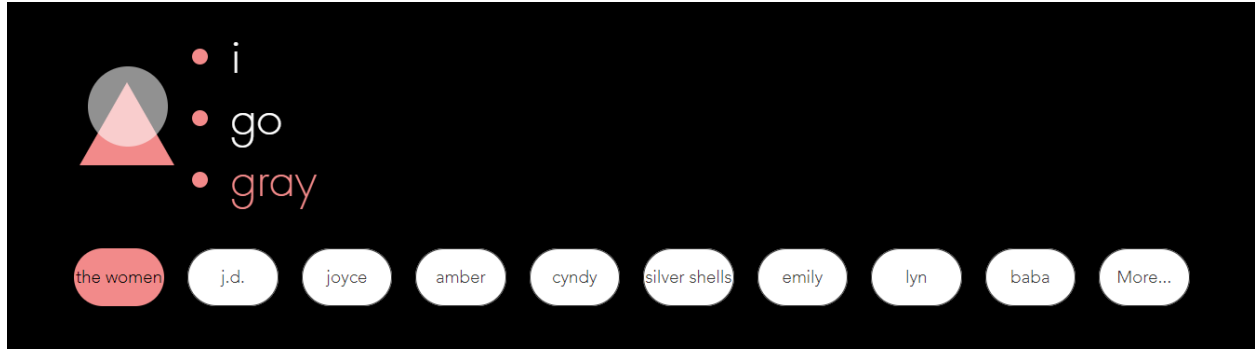


Figure 1 Image of igogray.com Home Page

Introduction

I created igogray.com because of my own experience growing out my gray hair. I was surprised at the immediate shift I felt in people's attitudes toward me. The first time I noticed the difference was about a month after I had stopped dyeing my hair black, and I had a two-inch white stripe of new growth at my crown. When I dropped off my son at school, one of the mothers noticed my "skunk stripe" and commented on it, saying that she too had tried to stop dyeing her hair, but people treated her like a "grandma," so she gave in and continued dyeing it. Her comment started a discussion among a group of women who were standing nearby. I felt the decision to grow out my hair was a personal one and these women did not have a right to discuss it, but I know now that hair functions as a social symbol that communicates intentional and unintentional messages to others (Cooper 92-119). As a result of being perceived differently because of my graying hair, I was afraid I was losing my voice and becoming invisible within my own society. I wondered if other graying women were having the same types of experiences, so my project investigates the idea that gray-haired women experience ageism based on their hair color.

As a Humanities student, I chose gray-haired women as the text which I studied. I included the women's interviews and my academic research, as filtered through the lens of my own perspective and gray-haired journey. My research drew me to the fields of anthropology, history, psychology, gender studies, cultural studies, geriatrics, social and behavioral sciences, as well as mainstream media publications. I found that systemic ageism exists and is deeply rooted within American culture. However, the women I interviewed did not feel that they were being directly discriminated against due to their hair color. The women had concerns that ranged from mild to anxious about going gray and being perceived as less important in society.

The fear around going gray is prevalent because of a dominant beauty ideal, but the actual experience of going gray varies depending on the individual woman. The book *Globalizing Beauty* allowed me to follow the development of an American beauty image which originated in Europe and migrated to the United States and reflects its own dominant cultural traits by favoring light eyes, skin, and hair, but gray hair does not fit inside that ideal. Industrialization and globalization caused standardized ideals to become more widespread, but the combination of mass marketing and product manufacturing created its own supply and demand, further perpetuating the standard. The creation of branding commodified beauty ideals and promoted opportunity and representation for the already dominant culture in America (Berghoff & Kuhne 25). *The Penguin Atlas of Women in the World* confirms, “There are now few places in the world untouched by the commerce of beauty” (Seager 52).

In the next section of this paper I briefly introduce the women and discuss some of the gray hair issues that arose through the interview process. For the full interviews please visit the website www.igogray.com.

The Eight Women & Gray Hair Topics

My first model, Lyn, spent most of her life in service to others as a teacher, missionary, Dominican Sister, and currently the co-promoter of justice, peace, and the care of creation for the Dominican Sisters of San Rafael and of San Jose. Lyn gets arrested regularly for engaging in peaceful protests against the creation of nuclear weapons at Livermore Labs in California.



Figure 2 Portrait of Lyn by Tabitha Deering 2018

Lyn refuses to be defined by her hair. During our time together, Lyn continually turned the conversation to high-minded global thoughts. Lyn told me when she did not like one of my questions, and she gently redirected me when I used limiting language. Lyn's passion gives me something to aspire to. Her statement, "Once you know, you can't go back," still sticks with me. When I asked Lyn if she faced discrimination because of her gray hair she said, "No," but her mother always recommended that she cover her gray hair. After Lyn's mother passed away, her sister continues to suggest that Lyn might want to cover those grays. Lyn said she never understood why they were so concerned with her looks, because she feels there are more important things to spend her energy on.

In the essay "Why Mothers and Daughters Tangle Over Hair," Deborah Tannen writes that their daughters' hair is one of the main things that mothers criticize (105). It is natural for mothers to teach their daughters the way that they were taught by their mothers. I remember my mother telling me to keep my hair out of my eyes, and treating me to a new look at the hair salon for important events, and I did the same for my daughter. Mothers have good intentions when they encourage their daughters to conform. I believe we participate in this cycle of enculturation, so that when we send our girls out into the world they can have every advantage for success. Beauty can be a source of temporary power for women and open doors for some who might otherwise be ignored (Engeln 124). In *Agewise*, Margaret Gullette discusses income insecurity among older woman, "Even if age is not the cause of a job loss, midlife discrimination can be a problem when looking for the next position" (153). Gray hair is a sign of aging that is quickly judged, and it can cause women to be discounted. When I asked the interviewed women if appearance influences opportunity, most of them answered, "Yes."



Figure 3 Portrait of Emily by Tabitha Deering 2018

Emily is my mother-in-law, who has been growing out her gray hair for over a year. Throughout our interview, Emily revealed deep inner strength, gratitude, beauty and grace. We had many laughs, and I enjoyed sitting on her couch exchanging stories about something we have in common that we never really discussed before. When I asked Emily if she faced

discrimination due to her gray hair, she said, “No,” but she did have two primary concerns regarding going gray.

The first was her husband not wanting her to go gray because he thought it would make him look older. Ironically, her husband is older than she is and has gray hair which he has never dyed. This reaction is a common one for those who are not ready to face their own aging, and sees signs of aging in others. Ageist comments and actions are an attempt to push aging as far away from oneself as possible (McDonald 54). Reading about ageism helps me understand that the negative reactions toward my gray hair have little to do with me personally but reveals more about the concerns of the person who is reacting.

The second reason Emily hesitated to stop dyeing her hair was because of her job as a bank manager. She was unsure how people would perceive an “older looking” woman in a management position, so she waited until she retired from her job before she stopped coloring her hair. Emily felt she had a professional image to maintain and her hair was a part of it. Debora Spar in *Sex, Power, and the Quest for Perfection* says she noticed that her husband was ready to leave for work long before she was because of her comprehensive beauty routine, so she decided to track her daily practice and how much money it was costing her. If Spar and her husband made the same income over a forty-year career, she would have to work five years longer than her husband to pay for her beauty products (98). Like Emily, Spar also considered her appearance to be a part of her work uniform.

If appearance is part of a woman’s work uniform, and she spends a significant amount of money to maintain it, then women’s wages are even more unequal than currently acknowledged. The cost of constantly covering new gray hair is expensive. For example, Emily went to the salon every 6-8 weeks for 17 years, where she spent an average of \$125 a visit for an estimated

cost of over \$15,000. Following a woman's financial investment in hair dye led me to understand how hair dye is a gendered product. Hair color is the top financial growth producer for the mega company, L'Oréal (L'Oréal Financial). In 2016, nearly 1.43 billion units of hair color products were sold in the United States (Goldstein Research.), and analysts forecast the global hair color market to reach \$29.14 billion by 2019 (Business Wire). L'Oréal markets to the beauty ideal when it targets campaigns towards gray-haired women. One example of hair dye that L'Oréal markets to gray-haired women is called "Age Perfect," a name that implies that it is imperfect to have gray hair. "Age Perfect" comes in twelve natural colors to cover gray hair, or what L'Oréal calls, "mature hair." (L'Oréal Age Perfect). Women purchase the gendered products, and the high cost of marketing is rolled into the price. Consequently, gray-haired women pay for their own anti-aging marketing campaigns which feeds the cycle of supply and demand and promotes gray hair insecurity among women.



Figure 4 Portrait of JD by Tabitha Deering 2018

JD is warm, down to earth and funny. She has the best laugh, and our interview time was engaging and witty. JD is a social and community leader who taught me that standing up for myself is a way to stand up for others as well. When I asked JD if she faced discrimination due to her gray hair, she said, “No,” but she experienced discrimination as a woman in law enforcement, and as a lesbian, but not due to gray hair. JD dyed her hair for 17 years and was concerned about going gray because she didn’t want to be perceived as old. JD said, “For

women, gray hair has an older image attached to it, and I am a kid at heart. Gray hair didn't fit who I was, but now I realize I can still play, and be who I am, and have gray hair.”

With 75% of women dyeing their hair as opposed to 12% of men hair dye is primarily a woman's burden (Goldstein Research). I like the way that Deborah Tannen, a professor of linguistics, describes the hair differences between women and men. Tannen developed the “Genderlect theory” which states that in the English language male words are neutral or unmarked words, and the speaker must add to the word to change its meaning to female. An example is the masculine word “male,” to the feminine word “fe-male.” Tannen says that men's hair starts in the unmarked position while women's hair is in the marked position. Meaning a man can remain neutral and easily fit into society, or he can choose to change his hair, but women are always judged on the appearance of their hair and have less choice. Even if a woman does nothing to color or style her hair, it can be perceived as a social statement of not caring (108). The social attitude toward gender differences in hair allow men to be seen as distinguished as they naturally age, while gray-haired women are perceived as old, or as letting themselves go. JD wears her gray hair in a style that mirrors the male norm, and subsequently people in her sphere are treating her like a “Silver Fox.” After years of covering her hair, JD is pleasantly surprised, and is enjoying the positive social acceptance, of her gray hair.



Figure 5 Portrait of Baba by Tabitha Deering 2018

Baba and I became fast friends. She is warm and bubbly, and we were able to connect based on the similarities of our spiritual paths. Baba tells me that family is the most important thing to her, and she celebrates any and all achievements because of the effort that it takes to make positive changes. God is at her center and she finds joy and love wherever she is. Going gray for Baba has been an organic and spiritual experience and watching her hair change reminds her of the Divine. Baba tried coloring her gray hair once, but the chemicals in the dye ruined her hair's soft texture. Baba's family is from Fiji and she said, that similar to American culture, many of the Fijian women dye their gray hair, but the men do not. Baba remembers liking the look of her father and uncle's gray streaks, so she wasn't surprised when her own hair started to "pop out with gray." Some of the family members and friends who initially cautioned her against going gray, now compliment her natural hair.

Baba's view of aging reminds me of author Joan Borysenko's view of women aging as a natural metamorphosis from one stage of life to the next. Borysenko holds a doctorate in medical sciences from Harvard Medical School and is a licensed clinical psychologist who feels that most women dread the later stages of life because it signals the end of their reproductive value. She writes: "The idea that our [women's] major value resides in childbearing is still very much alive in the collective unconscious" (146). Anthropologists suggest that the sexual value of a woman is the original basis for man's attraction to her. Sexual value represents both erotic and reproductive opportunity (Cooper 68). Today's beauty ideals are based on ancient biological attraction, including a woman's ability to bear children. Since gray hair is associated with aging, gray-haired women are outside of the original beauty ideal that includes reproductive value.

What if gray hair could represent the powerful later stages of transformation in a woman's life?

In *A Woman's Book of Life* in the chapter titled "The Midlife Metamorphosis"

Borysenko speaks about a woman's transformation into new found authenticity, wholeness, core beliefs, self-reflection and personal power that often rise up in middle aged women (140-158).

Baba is a good example of a strong gray-haired woman, who has embraced her graying hair and herself. Baba is happy to be at this stage of her life. She especially enjoys being friends with her five adult daughters and their spouses, whom she calls her sons. She also cherishes the time that she gets to spend with her grandchildren. Through the interview and portrait process of all eight women, I was overwhelmed with the power and authenticity that I saw in them. Yes, our society needs reproductive women, but our society also needs wise and experienced leaders, and our beauty ideals should reflect that.



Figure 6 Portrait of Joyce by Tabitha Deering 2018

Joyce is a healer and teacher, and spending time with her was a gift. I felt as if her words to me went deeper than the surface level. When I asked her what she was the proudest of, she answered, “That I am brave enough to keep taking risks.” The more I learned about Joyce’s life, the more that statement meant to me. Our interview took place in a home that Joyce and her husband had just moved into since losing everything a few months before in the Northern California Tubbs fire. Joyce said that it has been difficult, but they are eagerly rebuilding because she and her husband have more adventures left to find. Joyce has had a variety of

experiences and challenges in her life, including a modeling career, being in witness protection, beating cancer, fighting for women's rights, and now she stands as a beacon of light for others.

Joyce grew up with amazing gray-haired people around her, so she sees gray hair as a natural and honorable process. As an artist, Joyce has used her hair as an extension of her creative self. For years Joyce wore bold haircuts with extreme painted colors, she said her crazy hair would "mess with people" because they were not used to seeing a spiritual leader looking so wild. The process of growing out her hair was time consuming and difficult, but she was pleased to find the auburn hair of her modeling days now streaked with silver "tinsel" underneath.

Joyce has not experienced discrimination for having gray hair, but throughout her life she has experienced discrimination for being a woman. The feminist Barbra Macdonald believes that the exclusion of women, especially of aging women, from mainstream society is a form of invisibility that is a sign of deeper problems. She remarks: "Stereotyping and segregation do not just end with innocent, unconscious prejudice" (72). Joyce has seen negative ideas about women inform behaviors and limit opportunities. Joyce told me about a time when she was not allowed to open a line of credit independent of her husband even though she was a business owner. Joyce had to convince the bank manager to allow her to prove herself, by getting a small loan which she kept in a savings account to make the loan payments from each month. Joyce fought for women's rights by going into men's arenas and breaking down stereotypes. Presenting new ideas about gray-haired women is an extension of her advocacy work. In the documentary *About Face: Supermodels then and now* the supermodel Isabella Rossellini says, "As you grow older, you don't count anymore." Even though society may act as if that is true, Joyce does not. Joyce continues to fight for all women so her new granddaughter can grow up in a more accepting world.



Figure 7 Portrait of Amber by Amber- Used with Permission

Amber is my silver-haired muse whom I met through an online page she created called “Celebrate the Grey” which is a gray-haired supportive community on Instagram’s social media platform. Amber posts a photo of her growing out hair every Friday. Amber encourages women to share their own grow out photos and stories. Rather than feeling ostracized, Amber is using her silver hair as a source of influence and inspiration. Amber shared that in her experience, no woman enjoys the grow out phase when no longer using dye, and in order to get through it each

woman should make the bold decision for themselves and then find support as they go through the process. The use of social media has given rise to an array of marginalized people being able to share their experiences and can be a tool for changing the future of exclusive mainstream ideals.

When I asked Amber if she faced discrimination due to her gray hair, she said, “No,” and as difficult as it can be to grow out her hair it has been the best decision she has made for herself. Amber decided to stop dyeing her hair after 15 years because of the mental stress that covering it was causing. Amber has a bold demarcation line between dark brown and bright white, and she was covering her new hair growth every two weeks. She began to dread every aspect of dyeing her hair, and at one point she felt like she was planning her schedule around her hair dye.

Lorraine Massey, the author of *Silver Hair*, promotes gray hair acceptance as satisfying the deep desire for authenticity and the freedom to be oneself. Massey provides her readers with a questionnaire that helps them measure how much stress their root coverage is causing them. Massey suggests that if gray roots cause you to cancel plans it may be time to stop dyeing your hair (17). In contrast, Stephanie Dolgoff in *My Formerly Hot Life* asks her readers if shame over their appearance interferes with their plans and warns them to make more of an effort with their looks, so they don’t become one of “those opt-outers who don’t seem to be trying at all” (84).

Much analysis has been done about women’s beauty practices. Sheila Jeffreys in *Beauty and Misogyny* suggests that the average woman has a beauty routine that encourages mentally obsessive characteristics, like those found in some who have been clinically classified as mentally ill. Jeffreys calls many of our beauty routines harmful cultural practices. “It might be hard to work out what was normal and what was excessive in woman’s behavior in a beauty culture” (109). Rene Engeln in *Beauty Sick* calls the mental energy that American women spend

on their appearance “mental space,” and she believes it is a factor that should be considered when discussing the damaging side of the beauty ideal (87). Engeln suggests that women take back their mental space for things that matter to them, the way that Amber has done. Amber has felt more in control of her time and her life since she ditched the dye.



Figure 8 Portrait of Silver Shells by Tabitha Deering 2018

Silver Shells is a compassionate goddess who started going gray at a very young age. Silver Shells has stunning long silver hair that she wears down, and she walks with an air of playful freedom. Our photo shoot was a lot of creative fun. Silver Shells taught me the importance of loving wholeheartedly in spite of being hurt in the name of love. She said her rose-colored glasses are broken, but she just pretends that they are not.

At first, Silver Shells colored her hair with natural henna and later moved on to using traditional chemical hair dye. Silver Shells applied the dye and would leave it on for the required 30-45 minutes, but she began to feel like it was unhealthy to directly expose her scalp to the harsh chemicals. Often her head would tingle while she waited for the dye to work. Hair dye manufacturers have used over 5,000 chemical ingredients in their dyes, and some of them are classified as carcinogenic in animals. Not enough research has been done to link hair dye, or to rule hair dye out, as a contributor to cancers (National Cancer Institute). Silver Shells felt like she was exposing herself to poisons, so she asked herself, “Is it worth it?” Silver Shells’ words mirror one of L’Oréal’s own hair dye slogans: “Because you're worth it”. L’Oréal’s slogan implies that when a woman dyes her hair it is a pampering experience, but that is not the case for many women, including Silver Shells (L’Oréal Because).

When I asked Silver Shells if she experienced ageism based on her silver hair, she said, “Not really.” For the most part, she has received positive attention and comments, and a few women that she knows have even stopped coloring their hair after seeing her silver hair. However, she cautions women who are considering going gray to think about the social pressure they will face as well as how it will feel to be perceived as older because of gray hair. Silver Shells believes that women should look toward their future with acceptance of the changes that aging will bring. The 50/50/50 rule states that 50% of the population will be 50% gray by the

time they are 50 years old (Pandhi 645). The more that women can foster an attitude of gray-haired acceptance the better it will be for every one of us who are aging daily. Gray-haired women must fight against internalizing the social stereotypes, and hopefully the stereotypes will expand to embody modern gray-haired women better. Today's gray-haired woman is often strong, wise and independent, and should be considered a valuable member of her community.



Figure 9 Portrait of Cyndy by Tabitha Deering 2018

Cyndy is a creative entrepreneur with a sharp mind who exudes self-acceptance and confidence. Her gray hair journey reflects her authenticity and individuality. Cyndy found her

first gray hair when she was eighteen years old while trying on prom dresses with her mother. Cyndy's mother saw something shiny stuck in Cyndy's thick hair and pulled at it, only to realize it was attached. Cyndy said she "freaked out at first," because she felt like she was too young to deal with gray hair. Since then she has watched many women "freak out" over their first gray hairs, something she dealt with years ago.

Vivian Diller is a model turned psychologist who serves as a consultant to fashion and cosmetic companies who are interested in promoting healthy aging and age-related products. In *Face It* Diller speaks about how markers of aging, including the appearance of that first gray hair, can catch women off guard, "When the image we have of ourselves conflicts with the way others see us.....It forces into awareness the fundamental shift in our identities we are frequently unprepared to accept" (36). When Cyndy found her first gray hair, she decided not to use hair dye to cover it, and she went through some of the identity issues at an early age. Many women who cover their gray hair make an immediate transition when they stop coloring it, as opposed to Cyndy's progressive journey. Diller says women should acknowledge and grieve the loss of their youthful looks as the change in appearance can signify new stages in a woman's life (125).

Cyndy sees gray hair and aging as a natural process that our youth-driven culture has turned into a negative thing. These days Cyndy has been caring for her mother, and she says that true aging comes from losing abilities you had in the past, and at that point, it has little to do with gray hair anymore. Diller says that gray hair can be a marker of our aging self, she also says that our mothers are a big influence on our own identities because we are aging alongside of them (178). In many areas of our lives, those who are older than can show the way forward, and each stage of our aging body can prepare us for the stages to come.

Cyndy has not experienced direct ageism because of her gray hair, she feels that her gray hair is a part of her personality. Cyndy knows who she is and is comfortable being herself. Diller believes that a woman's sense of beauty should be an internal rather than external experience, and I believe Cyndy embodies that idea (50). Cyndy wears her "nature's highlights" with confidence, and her advice to women who are considering going gray is, "Just be you. Whatever that means to you, don't be afraid to be that person."

Conclusion

Although my original theory, that gray-haired women experience ageism directly due to their gray hair, was not proven through the women I interviewed, they did confirm that social pressure based on gray hair stereotypes is a factor that affects gray-haired women. Gray hair is outside of the mainstream beauty ideal and navigating the world of gray hair and aging can be a difficult, expensive, emotionally and mentally draining process for women. In addition to providing a broader understanding of gray hair issues, listening to the women's personal experiences provided me with support on a personal level.

Lyn taught me about the responsibility I have to engage in the world around me. By acknowledging my place in society, I can be an advocate for others, and I can do whatever I can wherever I am to be inclusive, including paying attention to my use of limiting speech, and exposing my own subconscious acceptance of stereotypes. Emily showed me that how I choose to display my beauty is my own decision, and it is okay for me to take into consideration the way people perceive me in the larger community. Ultimately, I am the one with the power to decide who I am.

JD demonstrated that by standing up for myself, I am also standing up for others. JD helped me understand the intersection of marginalized groups, and how individuals and groups

can come together across issues to support larger change. Baba showed me how, in a society that reads its member's appearance for messages, the natural process of aging and having gray hair could be used to convey a message of transformation, authenticity and personal power.

Joyce demonstrates what it looks like when someone harnesses strength and wisdom that only comes by personal experience. Joyce has turned hardships into inspiration, and she stands as an example of courage and bravery to keep fighting for the things that matter in life. Amber gave me an example of how to find support for myself when she completely flipped the narrative of her white hair journey, by creating a reason to celebrate when there was only dread, and when she did not feel represented, she built up her own thriving supportive community.

Silver Shells illustrates what it means to live life as a bright light. She has walked through difficult circumstances, yet she continues to see the good and shine. Silver Shells uses her hair to create her own unique identity. Cyndy taught me the power of personal acceptance. When you know and accept yourself you can make decisions that fit who you are. If you decide to step outside of mainstream culture, it is because it is what is best for you. Along with having the power to decide, comes a level of personal freedom. These women created a chorus of support, acceptance, and power around me.

I set out to prove that society is ageist based on a dominant beauty ideal, but it was only when I stopped blending into mainstream society that I realized that I have always been a part of it. I chose gray hair as the avenue to observe social norms in America, but social norms exist on many levels and influence the power structure, including representation and opportunity. After sharing a section of my research regarding stereotypes around hair and the lengths that women often go to, an African American woman came up to me and said, "Wow, you really get it, I never realized that black women and aging women had so much in common."

My biggest take-away from this project is the importance for all members of society to examine their place within it, and if they find themselves in a dominant position, to make room for other voices. Where and how we spend our resources is another indication of where the social power is. Everyone should analyze the resources they spend to fit in, and make sure that they are happy with the arrangement and not just acting out of social pressure. We can choose to stop participating in the systems that keep us marginalized by monitoring our speech, our spending, and our views.

Lastly, there is a thriving community outside of the norm that will welcome women who step outside of it. Women have the power to define who they are, and though there may be a social price to pay, every time someone crosses a boundary not only is it possible for the stereotype to bend a little, but the way is being paved for women who come after. Gray-haired women need to hold their place in society with pride.

This project is not about gray hair, but about a community of amazing and strong women who cannot be contained by social stereotypes. There are as many stories as there are women.

Gray Hair Questionnaire

Demographics:

What is your name?
What do you do?
Are you married?
Do you have children?
How old are you?

Gray Hair History and Coverage Expenses:

When did you notice your first grey hair?
Did you color your hair?
How did you color your hair?
How much did it cost you?
How often did you color it?
How long did you color it?
Why did you stop?

Social Aspects of Going Gray:

What were you most concerned about with going grey?
What were your views on greyed hair people prior to being grey yourself?
Have you heard of or participated in any grey hair myths or superstitions?
Growing up, how did your family speak about grey hair?
What do you think causes grey hair?
Did you notice a difference in the way you were treated as a grey-haired person?
Do you feel older with grey hair?
Would you recommend other women continue to dye their hair or let it go grey?

Gray Hair and Attitudes on Aging:

Do you associate having grey hair with aging?
What age do you consider old?
Does appearance influence opportunity?
Do you think Grey hair is beautiful?

Personal Accomplishments and Life Celebrations:

What are you most proud of in your life?
What are some words that would be used to describe you?
What have you overcome in your life?
What do you want to celebrate?

Do you have any other stories you would like to share?
Do you have any questions for me?

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