

TRACKING THE COUGAR: PERFORMING THE OVER-THIRTY-FIVE SINGLE WOMAN IN
EVERYDAY LIFE AND MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS

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A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate College of Bowling Green
State University in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

MAY 2013

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ABSTRACT

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In the decade leading up to my divorce, the dating world had exploded with a new identifying term for women of my age and circumstance. Women who were over-thirty-five, often divorced mothers, who dated younger men began to be known as cougars and concomitantly, representations of cougars began to appear in various media. In this thesis I ask how women are discursively and socially constituted as cougars and how our choices are thereby limited. Given that I arrive at this topic from personal experience, I chose to interrogate the term through autoethnographic descriptions as well as through an exploration of media representations of cougar women, most notably Jules of the ABC television series *Cougar Town*, and through books written by and for cougar women. I employ a textual analysis approach focused on representations of the cougar body and implied lifestyle. I also analyze life stages for both the younger men and older women entering these relationships in order to possibilize why such cross-generational attractions potentially occur. Additionally, I critically engage medical discourse on reproduction as cougars often embody a contested state, that of both already being a mother and simultaneously not wanting to be a mother-to-be. My analysis has led me to conclude that insofar as cougar women are hypersexualized, they embody a stigmatized identity in the Goffmanian sense because of their presumptive relationship to sex for the purposes of pleasure versus sex for reproductive purposes. Thus, given that being a cougar is an identity laden with temporality and limitations, their reproductive capabilities necessarily influence how they are socially valued and often affect their intimate relationships. Cougar/cub relationships

bear a social expectation as short-term, casual relationships. They are, therefore, not accorded the social status of potential long-term commitments.

I aver that being a cougar effects a sort of social drama as proposed by Victor Turner. She breaches the social norms for women of a certain age, foments a sort of crisis by traversing these norms and inevitably must reintegrate with the social order to avoid the stigma created by her social breach or remain an outcast resolute in the recognition of the social schism she creates. The cougar label, consequently enacts social containment and marginalization that ultimately reinscribes normative relationship structures. In this thesis I detail my lived experience as one woman living under the stigma of the cougar label and explore the dynamics of containment, marginalization, and resistance that circulate in performing cougar.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am thankful for all the support I received from family, fellow graduate students, faculty members and friends during the writing of this thesis. There are a few that stand out, who were particularly important to me during this process. I am deeply grateful for the patience, encouragement and guidance of my thesis advisor, Lesa Lockford. Whenever I visited your office during a frustrating part of the writing process, I always left feeling re-energized and capable of tackling the problem. I could not have done this without you! Thank you so much for all you have done to make this thesis what it is. Thanks also go to my reader, Ronald E. Shields, who stepped in at what I thought was going to be the last minute and who contributed a crucial suggestion to the framework on the thesis. Thank you for adding your knowledge and insight to this project. I want to also mention the three program directors under which I have thrived academically over the past three years: Don McQuarie for advocating for my acceptance into the program and for always being a champion for each students' goals, Radhika Gajjala for her faith in me and her kindness, and Andrew Schocket for pushing me when I needed a push. Special thanks go to Ellen Berry, the best mentor I could ever have asked for. You inspire me!

I want to acknowledge special friends in my life who have listened when I needed an ear in particularly stressful times during the writing of this thesis and during the events leading up to it: Kirstin and Dr. Tom Apker, two generous and caring friends who have been there from the beginning and who I cannot thank enough for all you have done for me; Clare Lemke, who has weathered every graduate student and life storm with me for the past three years; Nathaniel Smith, my parallel life friend and the one who always understands; Glenn Brown, for stepping away when you needed to and coming back when you could; Jennifer Corwin, for always reminding me that persistence matters; Ryan Sanford Smith, for the hope you inspired; Jarett

DeAngelis, for never letting me think it was easy; and Dan Elkan for helping me start a new story.

I want to thank my sons, Shane and Andrew, who are two of the most incredible people I know and who changed my life in ways I cannot adequately express. I am so proud of who you are both growing to be and I am looking forward to all you will accomplish in the years to come. While the degree I will earn at the completion of this thesis is very important to me, you are my greatest accomplishments.

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INTRODUCTION

Society has repeatedly labeled women by how we negotiate our sexuality: we are frigid, loose, sluts, whores, etc. The identities created by these labels are not typically chosen by women themselves but function socially as the objectifying tools used to control, shame and dehumanize. The 1990s saw a new label, MILF¹ emerge. MILF is a term describing older women (no specific age indicated) who are sexually attractive to men and who conform to traditional standards of beauty. Even though the term includes the “M” for “mother” in my experience it is not always applied just to women who have children but to women who are older and could potentially be mothers. The term does not indicate a particular sexuality, marital status, socioeconomic status, race or ethnicity. Any older woman who was deemed sexually attractive could be labeled a MILF. Shortly after the popularity of the term MILF peaked another term emerged: cougar. There are many claims to the origination of the term but it seems clear that it began to emerge in the late 1990s to early 2000. Although understandings and uses of the term vary widely, at its most basic level it describes a heterosexual woman over age thirty-five² who dates younger men. It began as an objectifying term, like MILF, used to label and vilify women but has since become an identity some women claim for themselves and seek to revalorize. The term has gained much cultural currency in its short lifespan and has been the focus of books, films, advertising campaigns, dating websites, a reality show, a television sitcom and themed cruise ship vacations, among other things. My personal interest in the term began at the age of thirty-seven when after my divorce I began looking for a new partner. I had been a college

¹MILF is an acronym meaning “Mother (or mom) I’d Like to Fuck.” Although the term may have originated before, Melissa Ames and Sarah Burcon trace the popularization of this term to the a quote from the film *American Pie* (1999) regarding Stiffler’s mother (83).

²Some definitions place the age at forty and above. I use the age of thirty-five used in some definitions due to a connection with medical discourse as I will discuss.

student for several years and so my social network was composed of people much younger than I. After I divorced, one of those friendships grew into something more. This relationship began because of our geographic proximity, commonality of experience and interests, and not because of any particular sexual preference or desire on my part for younger men. In other words, I did not seek out a relationship with someone his age. People started calling me a cougar and I wondered what the implications of the term were. I wondered not only how the term may impact my life and relationships but what impact the term might have on the segment of society of which I am a part. What does being labeled cougars do to single women of a certain age? Is it simply a way to categorize and objectify women and delimit their sexual agency or does this marker offer women a way to freely express particular desires? Is it a control mechanism that constructs only certain types of relationship availability for these women or does it open up new possibilities? What I found through examining my own life experiences as well as media representations, and guidebooks for cougar woman is that cougar is not easily defined. It is used as both a derogatory term and an empowerment tool for women of this age group. It offers new relationship possibilities while also closing off doors to others. It carries with it both freedom and constraint. My thesis is designed to explore and explain this term and its contradictions.

My first understanding of the term cougar applied to women who seek casual sex with younger men and who resisted any long-term committed attachments. The beginning of the first definition on urbandictionary.com is a good example, “An older woman who frequents clubs in order to score with a much younger man” (Cougargeiger). I have since seen it used in other ways, specifically by women themselves as a term of empowerment connected to career and financial independence (c.f., Franklin). As it encompasses widely diverse definitions used in media and personal relationships, I believe the term deserves study and now, in the height of its

social saturation, is the time.

Two scholarly studies currently exist on the term “cougar”. Melissa Ames and Sarah Burcon's work “When Predator Becomes Prey: The Gendered Jargon of Popular Culture” and Michael Dunn's article “Universal Sex Differences in Online Dating Advertisers Age Preferences: Comparing Data from 14 Cultures and 2 Religious Groups.” Ames and Burcon trace the terms MILF, cougar and puma and their uses in various popular culture texts. They also assess, through a survey, attitudes about these terms. Dunn studied dating websites in an effort to ascertain whether the cougar phenomenon is widespread. My contributions to the existing literature will be an investigation into the various ways cougar is performed in media and by self-identified cougar women as well as by outlining the social factors that led to the term's emergence. To this end I seek to answer the question how are women of a certain age socially and discursively constituted as “cougars” in media and through social enactment?

Literature Review

As I mentioned above, two studies on cougars have been published as of the writing of this thesis. The study by Ames and Burcon traces the use of the terms MILF, cougar and puma³ in popular culture to determine social attitudes about them. Their study helps strengthen my discussion on the background of the term cougar. They come to the same conclusion I have about the use of MILF versus cougar. For MILF, “the word 'mom' is not in the subject position. Instead, it is the object of the word 'fuck,' which serves to both objectify her and eliminate her agency”

³The term puma emerged after cougar and refers to a woman younger than a cougar who chooses much younger partners. “Women who are 40 years old and older who date younger men have been labeled cougars, and 30-something women doing the same are labeled pumas” (Ames and Burcon 78). Puma has not gained the same level of use and acceptance as cougar and the age at which a woman might be called a cougar or a puma overlap some (many definitions place cougar age at 35). It is not a widely used term and from what I have seen so far it is a regional term. There are no books written on how to be a puma, no dating sites specifically targeting these women or media dedicated to representations of them. The implication of the terms cougar and puma are not the same, in my opinion. I will address the reasons I think so in my discussion of medical discourse on reproduction.

(80). Unlike MILF, the term cougar, while not unequivocally positive, nevertheless implies a woman's agency, at least in choosing a partner. Ames and Burcon also discuss the struggle women have had reconciling career desires and family. They feel the cougar phenomenon may resurrect the sexual double standard (77) and produce a “fear that women will, once again, veer away from having children and instead opt for a life of debauchery” (79). The term cougar, which implies women are free to explore their sexuality, places them in another bind in that they are, potentially, reductively thought of as sexual beings for use by young men.

As with any identity category, cougar is an identity that is circumnavigated by limitations and my study will discuss some of them, specifically those that attend a desire for long-term relationships and family. My preliminary explorations reveal cougars to be women who have gone through the social rituals of marriage and parenthood before finding themselves single once more; therefore, I will begin by discussing life stages, rites of passage and social rituals.

Victor Turner studied tribal cultures and considered the way societies are structured around ritual and rites of passage. Owing much to Arnold Van Gennep before him, Turner gives us a way to think about life phases and the way societies deal with transgressions from the norm. Richard Schechner summarizes Van Gennep's contribution, “Van Gennep proposed a three-phase structure of ritual action: the preliminal, liminal and postliminal. He pointed out that life was a succession of passages from one phase to another and that each step along the way was marked by ritual” (58-9). These stages and associated rituals exist both in professional and personal life. For the purposes of my project, I am focusing on rites of passage regarding relationships; these are, in Schechner's words, “social puberty (which may occur before or after the biological changes associated with the onset of adolescence), marriage, [and] parenthood” (Schechner 66). These life events specifically apply to normative heterosexual relationships. The rites of passage

are presumed to occur in a predetermined succession (Marriage comes after social puberty and parenthood follows, or so we have scripted it as such). In reality marriage can happen before social puberty, parenthood can happen before or in absence of marriage, but the social assumption in general is that social puberty comes first, followed by marriage and then parenthood. This cultural script typically does not allow for the deviations and the social dramas, which I will define momentarily, that can arise when the normative progression is breached. Turner writes, “There *is* a qualitative distinction between successive stages in social dramas and the rites of passage which renders them irreversible – their sequence is no illusion – the unidirectional movement is transformative” (80, emphasis his). Even though we can technically go through the rites in different order once we pass through a rite of passage we cannot go back; we are forever transformed. What I'm most concerned with is what happens when a woman who has passed through these rites, i.e., marriage and parenthood, and then is divorced? This is the situation of most women who are called cougars according to my research thus far, find themselves. What happens to their identity, their social worth, or their social opportunities when they fall outside of the normative system and pass through the transformative ritual of divorce? Is their identity always spoiled or are there ways in which they can be reintegrated into normative society? Can the term cougar be revalued in a way that hastens reintegration?

I find Turner's notion of the relationship between social and aesthetic drama useful here. First, Turner's use of “social drama” refers specifically to single incidents of social unrest and he states, “a social drama first manifests itself as the breach of a norm, the infraction of a rule of morality, law, custom or etiquette in some public arena ... a mounting crisis follows, a momentous juncture or turning point in the relations between components of a social field” (70). I employ Turner's phases of social drama as a heuristic lens to explore unrest that occurs, not

from a momentous, public event but the unrest that occurs on a smaller scale, a single divorce. Divorce has become a commonplace occurrence and hence we may not think of a single divorce as a cause of much social unrest. But despite its frequency, divorce remains the “breach of a norm, the infraction of a rule of morality” and it creates a “turning point in the relations between components of a social field.” Even though divorce doesn't come with the same stigma it used to, it does still cause social unrest, especially as it happens in the lives of a large number of the social actors; who, for the purposes of my study, are women over thirty-five. My project will explain why I believe this is so through exploring medical discourse on reproduction, my personal experience and through representations of cougar women in media. Turner explains social drama in four stages: breach, crisis, redressive action, reintegration or schism. Following Turner's phases, the breach is divorce, the crisis is this new body of single older women entering non-procreative relationships with younger men, the redressive action is the stigma attached to the cougar label and possible reintegrative strategies are the various media representations (what Turner calls aesthetic drama) of the cougar. Reintegrative strategies might also include a woman's decision to remarry quickly to an age appropriate mate or her abandonment of any romantic relationship. Whether the cougar is ultimately re-integrated into the norms of quotidian life or whether she will resist reintegration and produce a permanent schism in normative heterosexual relationships depends on how she conforms or not to the stigmas attached to cougar identity.

Additionally, in the scholarly literature, there has been some doubt as to whether the cougar phenomenon has been largely a media-driven passing fad. Michael Dunn studied dating websites in an attempt to ascertain whether the older woman/younger man relationship was a stated desire with people actively searching for a mate online. He found that overwhelmingly the

women in his study were looking for older men and the men were looking for younger women. He concluded that cougars are “an insignificant elite” (4), not a widespread phenomenon. While he mentions that “countless sites cater for more general advertisements whereas *others cater to more specialized niches*” (2, emphasis mine) he fails to consider the growing body of sites specifically catering to cougar women and the young men (so called “cubs”) who want to meet them. His study looks for cougars on the more general sites, in other words, he is looking in the wrong place to ascertain accurate numbers.⁴

Interestingly, there appears to be a resistance to allowing cougars in the mainstream. Google decided their site was the wrong place to advertise cougar dating sites in May of 2009. *The New York Times* reported, “Google has recently deemed those dating sites 'nonfamily safe,' and therefore its ads for such sites containing the word 'cougar' will not be allowed on so-called content pages ... Google continues to allow similar advertising for the many sites that match older men and younger women, like DateAMillionaire.com, which assures its clients they can meet 'sugar babies'” (Kershaw). What is “nonfamily safe” about dating sites that match older women with younger men as opposed to sites that match older men with younger women? Why is one perfectly acceptable and the other “nonfamily safe”? While there may be many reasons, I believe one reason for this disparity in acceptance is partly attributable to perceived potential fertility of the couple influenced largely by medical discourse on reproduction. If a match is non-procreative from the start then it is avowedly a match solely for the purposes of sex, whether that is the only intent or not. Since older man/younger woman matches could be potentially procreative and lead down the socially acceptable paths of marriage and parenthood, they are “family safe,” or future-family focused (This result may or may not be what the couple desires

⁴There is currently no data I know of on the number of men and women utilizing cougar-themed dating websites.

but there may be a taken for granted social assumption.).

In *Sex at Dawn: The Prehistoric Origins of Modern Sexuality* Christopher Ryan and Cacilda Jethá explain the “standard narrative of human sexual evolution” as “1. Boy meets girl. ... 2. Boy and girl assess one another's *mate value* ... 3. Boy gets girl” (7). It is then assumed that they make a lifelong pair bond and produce children. End of relationship story. Ryan and Jethá's description of our standard narrative echoes Turner's social ritual structure by ending the narrative at marriage/parenthood. In both of these lifestyle trajectories a guide exists to not only look at the way things supposedly are now and always have been, but they constitute expectations for how they should be. There is no next step. There are no socially approved relationships outside of this narrative. If we consider that this is the script we live by it is understandable that relationships that do not conform to the narrative cause social confusion, or “social drama” in the way I am using Turner's concept. Ryan and Jethá disagree with the standard narrative other scientists have claimed is natural human behavior and are claiming humans are non-monogamous creatures. Their study takes the body of “known” science and draws different connections to provide different conclusions. They claim early scientists made errors and the continuation of these early ideas, like the standard narrative described above, is the cause of our modern problems with sexuality.

Regardless of whether Ryan and Jethá are correct about the biological basis for human sexuality and whether our society will eventually change to come into line with these new ideas, at present cougars are stigmatized due to their non-normative, non-procreative sexuality. In his book *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*, Erving Goffman says, “By definition, of course, we believe the person with a stigma is not quite human” (5). Labeling women as animals, cougars, is in itself an indication that we see them as “not quite human.”

According to Goffman there are three types of stigma. The second type is described as, “blemishes of individual character perceived as weak will, domineering or *unnatural passions*, treacherous and rigid beliefs, and dishonesty, these being inferred from a known record of, for example, mental disorder, imprisonment, addiction, alcoholism, homosexuality, unemployment, suicidal attempts and radical political behavior” (4, emphasis mine). The cougar falls squarely in this stigma category and therefore is attached to other non-normative behavior that cause stigmas such as mental disorders, alcoholism and homosexuality. Even though cougar women are generally considered to be heterosexual, they do not conform to normative relationship behavior. Instead, they are closely tied to queer subjects by their socially labeled “unnatural passions.” Although I don't want to take this comparison too far, as conflating these experiences would disregard the unique experiences of living queer, Goffman's insights point to a kinship between queer identity and cougar identity that might prove fruitful to explore. I look further into Goffman's discussion on stigma and how society deals with stigmatized individuals as well as look further into medical discourse on women over thirty-five in Chapter Three to clarify the point that cougar women are stigmatized because of their presumptive relationship to sex for the purposes of pleasure versus sex for reproductive purposes.

There are attempts to de-stigmatize cougar by women who so self-identify. The same year that Google made their decision about the inappropriateness of cougar dating site ads, Linda Franklin published her book, *Don't Ever Call Me Ma'am: The Real Cougar Woman Handbook for Life Over 40*, and subsequently launched her website therealcougarwoman.com. Franklin claims there is a “real cougar” that is in opposition to the caricatures of older women portrayed in the media and that this “real cougar” is over 40, healthy, beautiful, financially independent and looking for a satisfying relationship not just for a young man with “boyish good looks and

washboard abs” (17). Franklin says on her website, “I know many women think that a cougar is a derogatory word used to describe women who prefer younger men. Nothing could be further from the truth. A Real Cougar®, a term I coined in 2007, is any woman over 40 who is turned on and excited about life” (“Who”). The tactic Franklin employs in tackling the stigma attached to cougar is not to resist use of the term but instead to re-appropriate and revalorize it so women can be empowered through the strategic use of this label. She claims there is a “real” cougar that is somehow different than what we see represented. She thereby seeks to empower women of a certain age by redefining the term cougar and by empowering women who fit her definition of this identity category.

Even early on in the term cougar's lifespan women were attempting to own the term, to redirect it away from its origin as an objectifying label. Valerie Gibson, columnist for *The Toronto Sun*, published a book in 2001 called, *Cougar: A Guide for Older Women Dating Younger Men*. Her take on the cougar phenomenon was about embracing the stereotype. She did not attempt to reimagine the definition, as Franklin did later, but she sought simply to empower women to accept their sexual desires for younger men. Her book was the first guidebook published that addressed cougar women directly and therefore possibly served as a subsequent blueprint for the image of the cougar woman. Whether directly or not, the image constructed in Gibson's book seems to be the cougar Franklin, and others, are pushing against.

Both of the previous texts written by and for cougar women are examples of the power of discourse to define women and thereby to help constitute what is appropriate performative behavior for them. Judith Butler's extensive discussion in her book, *Bodies that Matter: The Discursive Limits of “Sex,”* assists me in my discussion of older women's bodies and how they are constituted in discourse. Butler states,

Performativity must be understood not as a singular or deliberate “act,” but, rather, as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names. What will, I hope, become clear in what follows is that the regulatory norms of “sex” work in a performative fashion to constitute the materiality of bodies and, more specifically, to materialize the body's sex, to materialize sexual difference in the service of the consolidation of the heterosexual imperative. (2)

What Butler is getting at here is that discourse is a tool that constructs bodies for the purpose of making them conform to norms, specifically normative heterosexuality. Adding Butler's idea of performative discourse to the previously discussed framework of social rituals and the limitations present in medical discourse, I see heterosexual women over thirty-five being constructed as presumptively infertile and outside the bounds of normative heterosexuality (which requires that heterosexual relationships end in marriage and parenthood). Although the term “cougar” can function as redressive action against sexually active older women, I see books like Franklin's and aesthetic dramas like *Cougar Town* as attempts at reintegration. These reintegrative strategies might not force older women to conform to existing norms but rather could create a new space for them. This space is still precarious and potentially stigmatized but given time the stigma may fall away and the identity may become an accepted role for women in normative society.

In their introduction to *Performativity and Performance*, Andrew Parker and Eve Kosovsky Sedgwick discuss some of the key concepts regarding performativity. J.L. Austin's “performative utterance” began the debate on “[t]he question of when and how ... saying something [is] doing something” (Parker and Sedgwick 5). They use the example of the the U.S. Military's struggle around the “Don't Ask Don't Tell” policy and the difficulty in defining “the relation of *speech* to *act* ... [and] ... *act* to *identity*” (6). I will be investigating cougar

relationships through an examination of performative acts and performative discourse that constitutes cougar identity. Being called, or calling oneself, a cougar comes with certain expectations of behavior and “invokes a presumption, but *only* a presumption, of a consensus between speaker and witnesses” (9). In other words, when someone is called a cougar various interpretations of the term cohere and while we may assume everyone has the same understanding of the term, we more than likely do not. Conversations about the cougar over the course of the years I have been working with the term have highlighted the problem of iterability. What does cougar mean? My project does not seek to concretize a definition because, as Parker and Sedgwick explain, “relations between any subject and any utterance” are “contestable” (14) but I will be exploring the ways in which the term is being used. I will investigate the ways the term has been used in the media, how women who self-identify including my own performance of femininity are socially constructed by the term.

Methodology

Since my early understanding of the term cougar began in my personal life I found it useful to use these experiences in my research. As Richard Schechner wrote in *Performance Studies: An Introduction*, “Who I am is not irrelevant. I will be leading you on a journey. You ought to know a little about your guide” (1). Not only do I include stories from my life in this thesis but I interrogate them for meanings, both personal and social. I explore the self as a member of a culture. This autoethnographic methodology helps to connect my scholarship with the everyday. As Carolyn Ellis wrote in her book *Revisions: Autoethnographic Reflections on Life and Work*, “Stories are what we have, the barometers by which we fashion our identities, organize and live our lives, connect and compare our lives to others, and make decisions about how to live” (16). With this thought in mind I began each chapter of this thesis with an

autoethnographic reflection.

In addition to autoethnography, I explore media representations of cougar women, most notably Jules of the ABC television series *Cougar Town*, and books written by and for cougar women. These representations and guidebooks help to construct the socially constituted identity of cougar. I employ a textual analysis approach focused on representations of the cougar body and lifestyle. I also analyze medical discourse on reproduction in this same critical way as it is implicated in the construction of the cougar as being a mother but not a mother-to-be.

Preview of Chapters

Chapter 1: Looking Cougar: Performing and Controlling the Cougar Body

To begin a discussion about the cougar woman I start by looking at the cougar body; how it is constituted through personal efforts and social proscriptions. To be labeled cougar, or to take on that identity, a woman must be able to conform to certain bodily standards of beauty, youthfulness and physical fitness. What she cannot control she must camouflage. Using Judith Butler's concept of performativity and her insistence that repetition cements normative constructions, in this chapter, I look at performances of the cougar body in media and narratives that tell us how we cougar women should manage their aging bodies. I also look to how I constructed cougar characters for a stand-up comedy routine and what that said about my understanding of what a cougar looks like. Additionally, I employ Karen Throsby's work on elective surgery to elucidate how women feel about undergoing body transformation through surgical procedures.

Chapter 2: Becoming Cougar: Reasons for Entering Older Woman/Younger Man Relationships

Knowing that a cougar woman is defined largely by her sexual object choice, i.e., much

younger men, I dedicate this chapter to looking at the reasons these relationships sometimes happen and why and how they work. Divorce is implied in becoming a cougar woman. After divorce a woman often finds herself investigating new opportunities, starting a new job or going back to college. College environments put women in close contact with younger men who have similar interests. These situations can be launching points for relationship connections. In this chapter I talk about similarities in life stage between women in their late thirties and forties, and men in their twenties using Levinson's detailed descriptions of important phases men and women traverse through the life course for a clearer picture of why these couplings sometimes lead to deep connections. I also discuss the role of published guidebooks for cougar women and how they help create and cement stereotypes about divorced women in mid-life.

Chapter 3: Living Cougar: Marriage, Parenthood and the Social Limitations of the Cougar Woman

Even though there is much to be said for the benefits of older woman/younger man relationships, there are also consequences. One of the major stumbling blocks for these couples is the issue of procreation. This chapter looks at medical discourse on reproduction for the over-thirty-five woman. I also explore social pressures to form acceptable potentially procreative marriages and how this pressure affects a cougar/cub relationship. Recent media depictions of cougar women, and divorced women in mid-life, in *Cougar Town* and other popular television shows, help to show the social pressures around marriage and family for this age group. Levinson again provides important details about the life course but I rely here on Turner's work to help explain how divorce creates a breach of a social contract which may or may not be resolvable. I question whether the cougar is a reintegrative strategy or the intractable constitution of a schism.

CHAPTER 1: LOOKING COUGAR: PERFORMING AND CONTROLLING THE COUGAR

BODY

“Autonomy involves a certain authority and control within a context of constraint.”
~ Carolyn Ellis (226)

“You are a touchy subject.”
~Frank to Jules on *Cougar Town* (“Two Gunslingers”)

On a fairly typical weeknight after classes I walked down to the bar to meet some friends from my graduate program for a drink and a game of pool. I was dressed casually but feeling rather confident and even a bit sexy that evening. At one point, one of the group, a twenty-six year old man, said to me, “You're really hot for your age.” I was at once both flattered and offended. Since he and I had an established friendship I felt comfortable enough to confront him about the implication of his comment. My retort went something like this, “For my age? Why for my age? Can I not be hot in general?” The conversation rambled on a bit longer with him insisting that he meant I looked hot in general but I also did not look my age. What stuck with me was the notion that there is a beauty standard and expectations for older women that differs than that for younger women and that when an older woman is determined to be “hot” it stands in such stark contrast to the speaker's expectations that it warrants mention. Women who are labeled, or take on the label, cougar are expected to conform to certain standards of beauty and physical fitness. The slogan from *Cougar Town*, “Forty is the new twenty,” sums up the idea well. Cougars are women who appear to be much younger than their true chronological age would suggest.

The cougar body is a site of social tension and is under constant surveillance. The internet site Wikihow has a page titled “How to Tell if a Woman is a Cougar.” It gives tips on how to assess a woman's age indicating that cougar women often perform their cougariness so well it

becomes difficult to tell them apart from younger women. The site instructs,

You may run into problems trying to discern a woman's age (without asking her), thanks to the preponderance of plastic surgery and botox usage among cougars.

One way to around that conundrum is to study her hands. Women in their 20s and 30s typically don't have fine lines and visible veins in their hands. Additionally, check out fine lines around the eyes or mouth, which are another telltale sign that your lady friend is over 40. Elbows and knees are another spot to look for small wrinkles and thinner skin, typically signs of "maturity" (Cunningham).

The areas of the body the site suggests are areas difficult to change with surgery or exercise and often do indeed show tell tale signs of aging. Even if they show these signs of aging, women who perform cougar expertly, making it difficult to assess their age, are praised for the control they exert over their bodies and rewarded with the attentions of young men.

Long before Judith Butler and others wrote about the performativity of everyday life, William Shakespeare included in his play, *As You Like It*, the following lines, "All the world's a stage / And all the men and women merely players" (2.7). If we are all performing roles in our everyday lives, what is it like to perform cougar? This chapter will explore how the cougar body is constituted through personal efforts at control, social expectations and pressures, and proscriptive media messages. I will be discussing both deliberate acts of performance of cougar through fictional characters on the ABC television series, *Cougar Town*, as well as how bodily performativity can function in the everyday lives of women labeled or self-identifying as cougars. In this chapter I begin to outline the stakes present for women who make what Kandiyoti calls the "patriarchal bargain"⁵ the term cougar implies. My intention is to highlight

⁵Deniz Kandiyoti coins the term "patriarchal bargain" to describe the strategies women use to deal with the constraints placed on them living in a patriarchal society. She writes, "I will argue that women strategize within a set

the various pressures placed on post-thirty-five year old women in regards to their bodies, their possible responses to these pressures and the overall experience of embodying the cougar identity as I have experienced and observed it. I am organizing this chapter into two distinct yet interrelated sections, personal surveillance and community policing, to indicate how we police our own bodies and how society pressures us to do so. I will begin with a woman's control of her own body and later discuss how the outside world regards her.

Personal Surveillance

Foucauldian Examinations: When We Look in the Mirror

The ABC series, *Cougar Town*, begins with a scene where Jules, the main cougar character, exits the shower and examines her aging body. Courtney Cox (the thin, toned actress who plays Jules) has to, quite obviously, exaggerate the wrinkles and saggy skin of what is assumed to be the typical older woman's body because her body does not readily show these signs. This scene shows the concerns older women have, and should have according to Western standards of beauty, when looking in the mirror. This scene, while allowing for an older woman's body to appear on prime time television, polices the boundaries of what is an acceptable aging body, a sexually desirable body, a cougar body. Examination is Foucault's third instrument of disciplinary power. In her essay, "Foucault, Feminism, and Informed Choice," Carolyn Ells says of the examination, "A crucial feature of surveillance for Foucault's understanding of contemporary people is its turn inward. We are made to feel that at any moment we are being watched and judged. In response, we watch, judge, and control our own behavior in accordance with a normalizing gaze" (215). When Jules examines her body she is both investigating how well she has conformed to societal expectations for female embodiment and how age is

of concrete constraints that reveal and define the blueprint of what I will term the *patriarchal bargain* of any given society, which may exhibit variations according to class, caste, and ethnicity" (80).

impacting her body in presumptively negative ways. She is also assessing her ability to re-enter the dating scene. She is clearly not happy with the changes time has enacted on her physical body but she seems to accept that she isn't too far past acceptable parameters to be desirable. With an exasperated, "Crap!" she ends the examination accepting that she has done all she can to conform.

Before their recent breakup, Demi Moore and Ashton Kutcher were in the spotlight as an example of a successful cougar marriage. Moore's body, much like Cox's, is thin and toned, even muscular. At thirty-five, Moore played Jordan O'Neill in *G.I. Jane* (1997), which focused the cinematic gaze, the "male gaze," on her fit body (Mulvey). Moore and Kutcher met just six years later (2003) and married in 2005. Moore has maintained her fit, young-looking body to this day. These representations of older women's bodies serve as both extraordinary examples of fitness and youthfulness in bodies of an age normally thought to be deteriorating, but they also serve as a blueprint, a pattern for other women to follow. In effect they say: Your body can look like this but it probably doesn't. Women who are allowed to call themselves cougar, or who have been socially sanctioned to do so, have to maintain at least the illusion of a younger body. If she does so convincingly she can have the lifestyle accorded women who fit the cougar label, i.e., the attentions of younger men.

Cox performs the cougar in *Cougar Town* deliberately, donning the dress, the hair, the attitude of a cougar as interpreted by the writers and director of the show. She also lives the everyday life of an older woman in an aging body with pressure to fit into a standard of beauty that values youth. Cox, herself, can be described as a cougar in that she married David Arquette who is seven years her junior. Because she has a body that conforms to these social standards she performs the cougar everyday not as a deliberate act but part of a larger discourse that defines her

body for her. Judith Butler explains this notion of performativity in *Bodies that Matter*:

Performativity must be understood not as a singular or deliberate “act,” but, rather, as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names. What will, I hope, become clear in what follows is that the regulatory norms of “sex” work in a performative fashion to constitute the materiality of bodies and, more specifically, to materialize the body's sex, to materialize sexual difference in the service of the consolidation of the heterosexual imperative. (2)

Cox's performances as Jules and her actual daily life exist as a reflection and a proscription for older women's bodies. Hers is not a “single, deliberate act” but a series of practices that reiterate the terms of what cougar means. When the term cougar began to be used, it constructed certain women as cougars. It set boundaries and these boundaries are continually re-inscribed through the performativity of the embodied cougar woman. Depictions like Jules in *Cougar Town* further support the construction of the acceptable cougar. As Butler says, the performance “produces” cougar in a very specific way. It both refers to previous uses of the term and reconstructs its meaning. Through this “reiterative and citational practice” cougar has come to mean a heterosexual, single (most often divorced) woman beyond the age of thirty-five, who has policed her body effectively enough to look much younger. Her reward for this body conformity is the attention of younger men. This conformity to the “heterosexual imperative” Butler mentions only goes so far due to the cougar woman approaching menopause, the loss of her reproductive potential. I will address this issue specifically in chapter three but what is important to note here is that the attention of younger men can only be temporary.

Spots or Stripes?: Cougar Wardrobe Selection

Looking for an outfit that would signal “cougar” to my audience I found, in the back of my closet, a dress I had bought at a thrift store several months previous to this night. I had yet to wear it but knew it was the right choice for this evening's performance: a mid-thigh length, form-fitting, Nicole Miller faux wrap dress in turquoise and black zebra stripe. It showed off my curves and a little cleavage yet camouflaged all that I wished to hide of my aging body with pattern and ruching.⁶ As I zipped up my high-heeled black leather boots I felt a rush of powerful, sexual energy: a confidence rooted in the body. I was ready to perform.

The night was March 18, 2011 and I was performing my cougar-themed stand-up comedy routine for the Women's History Month “Last Feminist Standing: A Night of Comedy” event on the campus of Bowling Green State University. This was my third performance of the routine and I was looking forward to performing what I now considered to be a more polished version. Each time I have performed as a cougar I have given careful attention to my outward appearance. The mere fact that I am in the age range of cougarhood does not mean I am in every moment, in every outfit, noticeable as such. So I looked to descriptions of cougars to help create my character. In addition to watching Courtney Cox's performance of cougar in *Cougar Town*, I looked to writings on the cougar and other sitcom representations. In the season two episode of the CBS sitcom, *How I Met Your Mother*, titled, “Aldrin Justice,” Barney Stinson describes the cougar:

You can identify a cougar by a few key characteristics. Start with the hair: The cougar keeps up with current hairstyles as a form of camouflage. The prey may not realize he has engaged a cougar until he's already being dragged, helpless, back to her lair. Now the

⁶FabSugar.com, a web portal for fashion, defines ruching as “A French word which means to plait. It is a very ancient sewing technique. A strip of fabric or ribbon is gathered in a repeat pattern and as the gathering thread is drawn up the strip forms scallops or petals.” It is a commonly used technique in contemporary women's clothing design used to camouflage not-so-flat tummies and add visual appeal to a garment.

blouse: The cougar displays maximum cleavage possible to captivate her prey. While you're watching them bounce she's about to pounce. Let's see the claws: Long and sharp to ward off rival females or open alimony checks.

Valerie Gibson, author of the book *Cougar: A Guide for Older Women Dating Younger Men* (2001), writes, "Cougars are sexy dressers. They wear high heels, short skirts, and great underwear ... Cougars have modern hairstyles, and they never, ever let themselves go gray" (21-22). Linda Franklin, author of *Don't Ever Call Me Ma'am: The Real Cougar Woman Handbook* (2009), has a different take on the cougar. She writes, "Real Cougars know mini skirts and super low cut tops will make you look trashy, not classy after 40" (108). With these thoughts and the images of Jules and Barb - the cougars from *Cougar Town* - in mind, I chose outfits carefully to help the audience envision "cougar" as I walked onstage.

For each of my three performances I chose a different outfit. The first was all black, a knee-length suede skirt and heels with a black top. I did not go with a trashy miniskirt, but a sexy and sophisticated look. My cougar is stylish but not slutty in appearance, more like Franklin's cougar than Gibson's; but she is sexy in the way she carries herself and is not afraid to show some cleavage judiciously. For the next two performances I wore a dress. Both choices had a cleavage-bearing neckline but were not too short. I paired them with black, high-heeled boots since it was rather cold outside. The first was a red, knee-length, form-fitting, patterned dress with 3/4 length sleeves. The final performance costume choice hit the cougar mark better than the previous two. It was shorter than knee-length but not quite mini. It was very reminiscent of the costuming of Courtney Cox's character Jules on *Cougar Town*: Designer, low-cut, short and animal print, it screamed cougar and I felt like a cougar when I was wearing it. I walked differently, with more of a sexy saunter. I talked differently, with more confidence and command.

I could let things slide, tell my stories without the emotional attachment. I felt like I had taken control. By placing myself in the cougar persona, I was no longer stressing about what these stories of failure add up to. I could laugh about them as I hoped the audience would. It was the perfect costume to perform my version of cougar.

There are two cougar women in the television series *Cougar Town*, Barb and Jules. Over the course of the decade of its existence, as evident by the descriptions above, the cougar label has changed. These two characters represent two very different embodiments of the cougar and show the changes in the term's meaning. Barb is a woman who conforms to a more traditional standard of older women. Her hair is short. She wears professional clothing including designers suits and even when she is at the gym she is rarely seen wearing anything sleeveless; she shows her cleavage but not her upper arms. These are all markers of older women that I somehow grew up knowing. I can only support these claims through my understanding in my life experience. I cannot point to a particular instance where I learned this. The examples I have had of older women throughout my life were enough for me to pick up on the cues. I learned that older women cut their hair and cover their flabby upper arms by observation not necessarily through intentional training. This incremental social accumulation of expectations is how we learn how to perform our social identities. It is an invisible process but not immaterial. Like the women I grew up emulating, Barb does not try to mimic the clothing and hairstyles of the younger generation but she quips about plastic surgery, "I'm just going back to my dermo. That's right Cher, Barb's going to turn back time." She is not pretending to be young, she just wants to look like her body has not aged. While her appearance may not approximate youth, her behavior is consistent with the cougar stereotype of the aggressive older women preying on younger men. She goes so far as to prey on Jules' boyfriend. When she overhears Jules and Josh at a cafe talking about Jules' self-

imposed delay for sex with Josh she asks Jules, “I know I'm being rude but I'm starving. If you're not going to eat that may I have it?” (“Don't”). When Jules asks Barb if she was referring to Jules' omelette, Barb surveys Josh head to toe with her eyes indicating she meant Josh not the breakfast food. In contrast to Barb, Jules dresses in a very youthful style, often wearing sleeveless sundresses and she has long, flowing hair (tied back in these two photos but not normally so); both markers of youth. Her embodiment of cougar is very different than Barb's, yet through their performances we still recognize them both as cougars.

Taming the Wild Body: Routine Maintenance

In Figure 2, Barb and Jules are at the gym. Maintenance of the body can include working out to tone and build muscle and control weight but as the *Cougar Town* episode “Don't Do Me Like That,” explains it also includes removal of body hair through often painful procedures such as waxing, and other regular body maintenance procedures intended to keep the body in control. We first see this body maintenance in the third episode of Season 1 of *Cougar Town* when Jules is preparing to have sex with her new young partner for the first time. She discusses her preparations with her best friends Ellie and Laurie.

ELLIE. What time is your gentleman caller arriving tonight?

JULES. I told him to show up at eight.

ELLIE. Is that enough time to prepare?

LAURIE. It's ten in the morning. Is she serious?

JULES. We're forty, Laurie. For us, getting ready for sex is like preparing for a space mission.

LAURIE. Well, I already scheduled your mani-pedi. Now, my Russian eyebrow lady was murdered, long story, so I was thinking you could have the same girl

that does your bikini wax do your brows.

JULES. You can't use the same person for both things; one's a gardener, the other's an artist. (to Ellie) Oh, if I'm going to get waxed I've got to tidy the den before the maid comes.

LAURIE. What the hell does that mean?

ELLIE. Oh, it means Jules is so crazy she needs to give herself a trim before she gets waxed so her waxer doesn't think she's a cave woman.

JULES. I also have to blow out my hair, I've got to buy candles, wash my sheets, do a thousand situps and buy a bra that doesn't squeeze my back so tight that I get back boob.

Aside from the candles and sheets, Jules' list is all items implemented to control her body. Before she will let her young boyfriend see her naked she feels the need to sculpt her body into what she thinks is acceptable. This performance of body control even goes so far as to make Jules feel the need to prepare before she gets a bikini wax. No one is supposed to see the “cave woman” that Jules apparently really is or would think her to be if left unattended. She is wholly convinced she needs this regimen to be acceptable.

Women are expected to maintain their bodies to conform to strict societal expectations of acceptability. Aging creates more pressure on women to conform because they not only have to control weight and regulatory grooming routines as they always have but they are also expected to control the aging of their bodies. The examination and disciplining processes become even more important and even more rigorous than before. Beyond clothing and grooming maintenance, a woman might feel pressured to take even more drastic measures to conform and may face stricter consequences for failure to conform. In the next section, I address the pressures

women over-thirty-five experience that are coming from outside their usual personal efforts at control and the possible consequences they face due to (non)conformity.

Community Policing

Emerging a New Woman: Extreme Measures to Body Conformity

Moving beyond simple grooming maintenance that most women endure for the sake of beauty and social acceptability, there are far more extreme measures some, like Barb, will resort to under pressure to remain young looking. Valerie Gibson devotes a chapter of her book to what she calls “The Confidant Cougar” who is nonetheless “dissatisfied with at least one aspect of [her] appearance” (79). In this chapter she claims, “Once upon a time diamonds were a girl's best friend. In today's youth oriented and highly competitive world, a far better investment is the phone number of the best cosmetic surgeon and anti-aging physician in town,” (80). Gibson encourages women who are not happy with their aging bodies to do something about it and not just in the gym or at the waxer. Linda Franklin is less of an advocate of plastic surgery but does still mention the option of liquid and traditional facelifts (100-103). Unlike the way I learned that older women cut their hair and hide their arms, this social pressure to maintain a youthful face and body is in print and coming from several cite-able sources. Gibson, Franklin and other sources delineate a surveillance that is not the Foucauldian kind of surveillance from some unnameable distant authority but a direct pressure from women to other women.

This kind of pressure to discipline the body could potentially be received in a negative way but the narrative of cosmetic surgery is one of rebirth and renewal so it is often received by women as a way to feel good about themselves. The idea is, “You look great now but you could look and feel so much better with just a little work.” Barb on *Cougar Town* fully embraces this attitude of rebirth. In Episode 11 of Season One, “Rhino Skin,” Jules goes to a dermatologist for

some advice on potential procedures. While sitting in the waiting room with Ellie, Jules encounters Barb:

JULES. (to Ellie) Do you think every single person is here for botox?

BARB. Welcome to the time machine ladies. Which of the many fine doctors here are you seeing?

JULES. Dr. Evans. You?

BARB. The other twelve. See you in two days when I emerge from my chrysalis.

Barb does not see the decision to undergo cosmetic surgery as a failure of her aging body or her ability to control it but as a way for her to regain her true self: a necessity, like waxing feels to Jules. She compares herself to a butterfly post-chrysalis, a natural transformation from the ugly caterpillar to the beautiful butterfly. This notion of rebirth has been noted by researchers such as Karen Throsby, who in her discussion on makeover television shows in her article, “Happy Re-birthday: Weight Loss Surgery and the 'New Me',” found that

Fundamental to these accounts, and also to those of WLS [weight loss surgery], is the framing of the re-born “new me,” not as an entirely novel entity but as having been rediscovered and restored: the “new me” is also the “real me.” Central to this construction is the concept of the pre-transformation body as discordant with the true self; of the true self as trapped in the wrong body. This is most obviously evident in transgender narratives, but also in the context of cosmetic surgery, where a particular body part or feature is experienced as not aligned with the self.

(119)

To return to an earlier mention in this chapter, similar to the accounts to which Throsby is referring, the examination Jules conducts in front of her mirror shows her looking at a body she

almost does not recognize as her own. It is not “the real me” she knows, the young body she has lived with for all of her adult life. Her body has changed in ways that make it feel unfamiliar. While Jules has not yet taken the drastic measures Barb has, she still feels trapped in an aging body. The discussion at the dermatologists' office happens because Jules is investigating botox. She has reached a point of dissatisfaction where she is now considering medical intervention. She has done all she can on her own to make her body conform and now feels she needs help. She feels pressured by a society that values youth.

When Jules sees the dermatologist, Dr. Amy Evans, we see how women judge other women about their personal choices regarding their bodies. Dr. Evans is not pressuring Jules into getting the botox injections. Instead she is chastising her for her lack of self-confidence.

JULES. I was thinking about getting botox but I want to keep a natural look.

What would you do?

DR. EVANS. I wouldn't do anything but obviously I don't get work done on my face. I'm not judging it's just I guess I just feel secure enough as a woman that I don't need to inject poison into my head. But that's just me.

Dr. Evans represents another side to social pressure. On the one hand, as I have discussed earlier, we are told we should look like we did in our twenties and if we do not we should do everything we can to rectify that (including cosmetic surgery). On the other hand, as Dr. Evans indicates, we should be happy with who we are no matter what. It should be noted that Dr. Evans is played by actress Lisa Kudrow who does not look like the 48-year-old woman that she was at the time of filming. We are to assume that Dr. Evans looks young naturally. It certainly would be much easier for a woman with no visible signs of aging to feel good about their aging body than for a woman who has obvious wrinkles or other signs of aging in a culture that values youth. If a

woman shows signs of aging, she may feel pressured to seek help and judged no matter what she decides. If she undergoes cosmetic surgery she is judged for lacking self-esteem. If she chooses to refrain from all medical intervention she is judged for not aging well. No wonder women often keep it a secret if they have chosen cosmetic surgery.

In Episode 16 of *Cougar Town*, “What Are You Doing In My Life?,” we learn that Barb keeps her cosmetic procedures from her children. Travis, Jules' teenage son who is helping Barb after her chemical peel, says to his mother, “She's got kids of her own but she won't ask them for help because she's not comfortable feeling vulnerable around them.” Barb shrugs off any judgment that may come from society and even seems proud of her transformations but she still does not want to involve her children in this process. She does not want them to know how much she endures for the sake of a youthful appearance. She does not want her own children to know what she confesses to Travis, that the procedure is “a second degree burn induced by concentrated acid,” and that it hurts “like a thousand sons of bitches.” Our culture has trained us to hide the pain of beauty. For Barb, this quest for a youthful appearance has created distance between her and her family.

Former Friends: The Post-Divorce Exodus

Not only can the social pressures single older women face distance them from family, as in Barb's case, but they sometimes also lose the support system of friends. After it became known that I was getting divorced many of my married friends did not invite me over anymore. I was confronted by the husband of one of our married couple friends, “You lied to us! You said your marriage was just fine and it isn't!,” as if the dissolution of my marriage had some impact on theirs. In addition, a married couple who had been very close friends of ours, and with whom I had a closer friendship with the husband than the wife, made it clear I was not regarded as a

close friend anymore. This was not stated overtly until I questioned my friend, the husband of the couple in question, and he admitted that his wife was now uncomfortable with our friendship. Since I was unattached, my friendship with the male partner in their marriage was unacceptable. The years of our platonic friendship no longer mattered. I was now seen as dangerous. Since I did not have a husband I was, in the minds of the wives of these couples, looking to steal one of theirs. In this way, in the period after my divorce, instead of supportive friendship I encountered cold shoulders and closed doors.

In the *Cougar Town* episode entitled “Two Gunslingers,” post-divorce Jules unknowingly strains a friend's marriage. One of the quotes with which I opened this chapter comes from this episode, “You are a Touchy Subject.” Frank and Shanna were a married couple who were close friends with Jules and her ex-husband, Bobby, before they divorced. Now that Jules is no longer part of a couple they have excluded her from their lives. In this episode Jules finds out why when Frank confesses,

FRANK. Ok, a couple of years ago it was weird. Shanna got all sweet. She gets sweet and she says to me, “Frank, if I was to die which one of my friends would you, you know, you know?”

JULES. And you picked me?

FRANK. Yes.

Before the divorce, Frank and Shanna maintained a friendship with Jules despite Frank's attraction to her. Now that she is divorced, she is seen as a threat. In my introduction I discussed Victor Turner's writings on social drama and rites of passage. He insists that once a rite of passage has been traversed, the individual cannot go back: They are “forever transformed.” Marriage is one of the rites of passage, in his description. Once a person is married s/he cannot

go back. Divorce is a breach of that social contract that creates social tension. The person breaking that contract is dangerous, unstable, maybe even untrustworthy. The social reaction to this breach is to shun the offending individual. Jules has been shunned by some of her former friends.⁷ This may be the reason she values so strongly the relationships she has with Ellie and Andy Torres (a married couple) and Laurie, her younger single friend and employee. These friendships are dear to her because they are the people who stood by her through her divorce and remained close after.

Heterosexual Imperative: Cougars Are Not Lesbians

Now that Jules is divorced, and seen as a threat to married women, her relationship with Andy and Ellie needs to be explained. Why is Ellie not worried about Jules and Andy forming too close of a bond as Shanna was with Frank? For starters, the show depicts Andy and Bobby, Jules' ex-husband, as having a very close friendship. Andy is much closer with Bobby than with Jules. Andy rejoices when the post-divorce tension subsides and he is allowed to spend time with Bobby again. I use the word “allowed” because in their marriage Ellie is positioned as the one in control. Ellie makes the rules: Andy follows them. Andy is afraid of Ellie's wrath, and the subsequent restriction on sexual activity if he steps out of line. He rarely does so in the series and seems to feel satisfied with his subordinate position in the marriage. Ellie feels secure in this relationship dynamic and therefore does not fear the possibility of a liaison between Andy and Jules. The close relationship between Jules and Ellie, however, could potentially be seen as a threat to the marriage, if we were to consider a possible same-sex attraction, but it is not a threat because the cougar is constructed as being always and only heterosexual. Nonetheless, the show tackles this possibility directly.

⁷In addition to Frank and Shanna, we learn later in the episode that there is a group of married mothers that no longer wish to associate with Jules.

Media outlets (television and film) have shown themselves to be invested in maintaining the heterosexual imperative, and *Cougar Town* is no exception. Women who are labeled cougars are not depicted in lesbian relationships in any of the mainstream media depictions I have reviewed, although these types of age gap relationships surely occur in the lesbian community. The message for older woman is that they can and should enter into relationships with younger men, and men only, if they can maintain bodies that conform to Western standards of beauty, youth and fitness. *Cougar Town*, and other media representations of cougar woman, serve both to reflect and to construct the acceptable cougar body and behavior which is always heterosexual. In the pilot episode of *Cougar Town*, Jules jokes with her son Travis:

JULES (holding two glasses of wine). Hey, you want to stay in, hang out on the couch, maybe watch a movie?

TRAVIS. Are you hitting on me?

JULES. This wine's for Ellie. She's been looking so hot lately. I thought I'd get her drunk and try to hit that.

TRAVIS. [sarcastically] Lesbian mom jokes. Awesome.

This lighthearted exchange might seem innocuous but joking about the possibility that Jules could be a lesbian reinforces the idea that she is not and that her son is uncomfortable with the implication that she could be. To further this heterosexual imperative, *Cougar Town* offers us one scene, a dream sequence, where Ellie and Jules are in a lesbian relationship. This dream implies that cougar women can fantasize about alternate relationships but they will eventually “wake up” to reality. Including this scene and its message in the show highlights how a hegemonic power structure allows for some mention of what is unacceptable in order to circumscribe and sanction what is. This handling of the relationship between Ellie and Jules says, in effect, yes, you could

be in a lesbian relationship but that is not what you *really* want.

Unexpected Hailing: When Age Becomes an Issue

Even when knowing and conforming to expectations of a youthful body, women over-thirty-five are sometimes still faced with a society that is somewhat uncomfortable with their presence. I often hear from friends that I do not look my age. I usually respond with, “But I am my age and that matters.” We may feel like we can pass for younger and fit in with a younger crowd, like the friends of our younger partners, but there are times when our age becomes apparent. There are times when the inescapable fact of age is brought to our attention. The following story is just one example.

I overheard two women talking as I walked past a room wallpapered in coloring book pages depicting various fairy tale scenes. I was attending a costume party at a friend's apartment in the Fall of 2009 when I was thirty-nine years old. He had decorated the place to coincide with the party theme “Fucked-up Fairy Tales,” a take-off on the *Rocky and Bullwinkle Show* segment, “Fractured Fairy Tales.” He enjoys costume parties and holds them several times a year. He has dubbed his apartment “The Purple Parlour of Unimpeded Imagination” to encourage partygoers imaginations. For this party we were invited to attend costumed as a fairy tale character individually and interestingly interpreted. For example, attending this party were Zombie Prince Charming (the gallant undead) and The Pied Pimp (who lured women instead of rats or children). I was wearing a pale pink, filmy costume with a short, crinolined skirt, and six-inch platform heels. With wings and a feathery magic wand I was attempting to reinterpret the depiction of fairy godmothers. A godmother is usually a good friend of the child's parents for whom she will serve as godmother. In typical fairy tale depictions, like Disney's *Cinderella*, she appears more like a grandmother than an aunt or other contemporary of the parents' generation.

To challenge these godmother as grandmother depictions, I went as the Fairy GodMILF. When overhearing the private conversation in the other room I tried my best not to react to what I was quite obviously not supposed to hear. “I hope I look as good as she does when I'm her age.” Although this was certainly meant as a compliment, it stopped me dead in my tracks. I felt a little faint and flushed. I ducked into the bathroom across the hall.

While I was purposely playing with age as part of the interpretation of my character, this was the first time I had heard this group of people directly acknowledge my age. Most of the attendees at this party were in their twenties except for the host, who was in his early-thirties, and me. Most were unmarried, childless, college students. I had met this group of people when I began dating Russell, a man nine years younger than me. They all knew me as Russell's girlfriend and as part of an extended friendship circle. They knew I was a mother, that I was divorced, and that I was a bit older than they were but they never made mention of it previously at least within my earshot. I suppose I was under the assumption that I was adequately passing for just a few short years older than they were. In this moment I was deliberately drawing attention to myself as fitting the parameters of the MILF definition and, in hindsight, should not have been as surprised as I was by the comment but nonetheless it signaled to me that this group of people did not consider me just one of the crowd but in some way an outsider. This moment was the first and only time I became well aware that my age was something on their minds. Although complimentary, the comment made it very clear that even though I did not look my age, I am still marked by my chronological age and by the socially embedded meanings of it, of MILF, of cougar. I cannot escape the consequences of my age even though I can pass as younger, as part of a group of younger people, as well as partner to one of them.

The experience of embodying the cougar persona deliberately in my stand-up comedy

routine and in the costume noted above helped me learn some things about embodying the cougar in everyday life. The lessons I learned correspond with a new story that appeared in May of 2011 on NYDailyNews.com. The story featured the estranged wife of Willard (Ross) Lanham, former computer consultant to the New York Department of Education who was currently under investigation after being suspected of stealing millions in public money from the city school district. He had rightfully been the subject of many news stories at the time. This story, however, did not discuss the investigation or accusations of theft but instead featured his estranged wife Laura's new dating life as a "self-proclaimed cougar" (Jaccarino). Many commenters questioned why this was news. That is certainly a fair question. Laura Lanham has not been accused of assisting her husband in the theft. Other than her connection to him as his estranged wife there was no particular reason for her to be the subject of news. She has begun to rebuild her life after leaving her husband which included re-entering the dating scene; something quite normal that most separated or divorced people will do. Her choice of dating partners was what raised interest in her story. Her status as a "self-proclaimed cougar" was apparently newsworthy. While some commentors simply questioned the newsworthiness of this story, others had harsher words to say about her dating choices. The following is a sample of the many disparaging comments about Lanham's clothing and behavior that appeared on the website:⁸

42? No way, I say add 15 to it. She's pretty worn out looking if she's really just 42. Somebody must tell this poor woman she's too old to dress like a teenager, she looks ridiculous! She's an embarrassment to her children and felon ex-hubby. -
Sandy Lynn

College age guys go out on the weekend, get wasted & find themselves without a suitable young lady to provide what they need ... that's where "Last Ditch Laura"

⁸A recent visit to the site revealed all comments have since been removed from the article with no explanation.

fits in. She's the "Any port in a storm" old lady who hangs around a gin mill seeking guys who are blind drunk and want 10 minutes of 'fun'. If they wake up next to her in the AM, they scream in horror & run! - Glad To Be Here

I like to think that when our life is ending and we look back at the race we've run we can be proud of the things we've done. I rather doubt that this poor woman will be proud of what she's done and what she will leave her children. -

Cluelessinky

The cougar may be able to pass as younger in certain crowds and in certain situations where her age may not be discussed, as I did except in particular moments when I marked that difference as in the Fairy GodMILF costume. She may feel she embodies of the old adage, "Looking good is the best revenge," and she may dress as an alluring cougar to protect herself from critiques about her age. It can feel like wearing a suit of armor in public. Is it ridiculous? Some, like the above commenters, might think so. Does it make a woman feel confident? Probably so. I certainly felt more confident when dressed in my cougar costume and when receiving compliments on my looks. I tend to prefer to hide among the crowd in normal clothes but when dressed as a cougar I felt powerful, albeit vulnerable in the spotlight. I knew I was being looked at so my walk was more powerful. My posture was more straight. I was in control of an audience. I was making things happen. I was a successful, accomplished, non-apologetic woman.

In donning my cougar costume I boldly walked out and accepted whatever critique others might have had. Lanham admits to have doubts about dating younger men at first until her friend encouraged her. She indicates a deeper connection to these younger men than simple sexuality. The interview quotes her as saying, "I'm not going to say there isn't a sexual compatibility there, because there certainly is," she said. "Let's put it this way: I get along with these kids." What I think Lanham is getting at is something Gibson writes about, too. While I have many critiques of Gibson's book, this comment stands out as a most genuine sentiment I can relate to: "After spending my entire life on men's dreams, I found myself wondering what had happened to my

own” (12). I think this is the key to what many women of my age experience. After being married for many years and living a life devoted to a husband and children, we want to make our own decisions. We want to follow dreams we have often left behind, or compromised, for other people's needs. This desire to re-invent ourselves leads us to friendships and relationships with younger people who are going through a life transformation themselves. By accepting, and sometimes purposefully performing, the cougar identity, we feel accepted in a younger crowd. At the same time we are often confronted with critiques, some quite harsh, from the public and even from those closest to us.

Conclusion

Most of us want to believe that we have control over our outward appearance and how we are read by others. We go to great lengths to maintain our bodies in accordance with social standards in order to feel in control. There are moments when I have chosen to be cougar and moments where I have been labeled cougar unwillingly. There is a feeling of power when one chooses to be rather than allowing oneself to be labeled by others.

Policing of older women's bodies and behaviors into the category of cougar occurs on a personal basis, as well. At the writing of this chapter I am forty-one years old. I am a size six or eight depending on the brand. My body fits into the typical standards of acceptable body size for a woman. I have been told by many that I do not look my age. In fact, most people guess I am five to ten years younger than I am. However, because I am an older woman I get compliments like, “You look good for your age.” My age is a factor that enters into any interaction I have with potential dating partners. When meeting someone new I always have to wonder whether he is interested in dating me or interested in a casual relationship with a cougar. I am marked by this label. I am cougar even if I don't want to be. Sometimes I do. There is both a power and a disempowerment in being cougar.

Cougar women are expected to control their bodies through any means necessary that results in looking much younger than their chronological age. They are expected to do so without others' knowledge so that their youthful appearance seems natural. If their physical appearance does not match up with the way they act or dress, they will be harshly judged for performing their identity incorrectly. It is not enough to call oneself a cougar or to date a younger man to be accepted as a cougar woman. A woman must also look the part to a degree that assessing her age is difficult, even by her sexual partners. Some women seek out the identity of cougar. Some are labeled as such whether they want that kind of attention or not. It is important to note that not all older women who work to look young are looking for a younger partner but any woman who is over the age of thirty-five and single is potentially subject to the pressures and expectations I have written about here.⁹ While what Jones writes seems optimistic, “When makeover culture is ‘correctly’ performed it embodies elasticity, adaptability and mobility in physical, mental and emotional terms. And it values, above all, a state of constant becoming (102),” that state is reached through levels of social and personal control and constraint that the positives seem somehow less empowering and more an achievement in conformity. Women are expected to age politely, to not offend others with their aging bodies, to not flaunt their youthfulness and sexuality but to continue to be diligent in the care and control of their bodies so as to look and act in accordance with current standards of beauty. When others are uncomfortable with a woman's presentation of self as an older woman, they do not take responsibility for their own discomfort but instead place the blame on the older woman who they take to be out-of-place.

⁹The upper age limit of cougar is contestable. In Chapter 3, While I make a connection between reproductive ability and cougar persona suggesting that menopause is the upper limit, others are more flexible in their definitions. For example, the TLC series “Strange Sex” begins with an episode, “Cougars and Cubs” where the cougar woman is seventy-three dating a man in his thirties. This same woman, Hattie, also appears in a TLC special “Extreme Cougar Wives.”

CHAPTER 2: BECOMING COUGAR: REASONS FOR ENTERING OLDER
WOMAN/YOUNGER MAN RELATIONSHIPS

“One time. I did it one time and I'm already one of them.”
~ Jules Cobb *Cougar Town* (“Pilot”)

What do you wear to a divorce hearing? When I got married I could turn to *Brides Magazine* or any of the plethora of publications and websites dedicated to wedding etiquette. There are clear expectations: a white gown for the bride and a tux-clad gentlemen. A wedding happens in an elegant venue decorated for the happy occasion. Family members and friends attend. Although, they may not all be happy with your choice of spouse, they are all there to celebrate with you. I remember pondering all this on an April morning in 2008 as I gathered my things and drove thirty minutes to the county courthouse, alone, for my final divorce hearing. It had taken a year of planning, much like a wedding, but there was no celebration and no family or friends there to support me. Since the divorce was uncontested, I did not even have a lawyer by my side and my soon-to-be-ex-husband did not have to attend.

In the car outside the courthouse I emptied my purse. Cellphones were not allowed. Anything sharp that could be construed as a weapon was not allowed. Last time the security officer informed me that my caribiner keychain was not allowed. This time I methodically removed anything that could be disallowed. The remainder was my wallet, a single car key, a pen and a few tissues in case I felt the need to cry. As I sat on the cold, hard wooden bench, I shivered not with fear but because the courtroom felt like a morgue: cold. I thought, “This is a fitting metaphor for divorce.”

With no lawyer by my side I sat nervously waiting until the judge called my case. She asked only a few questions and stamped and signed my forms. I was at the courthouse for no

more than fifteen minutes. It was over without the Hollywood fanfare I was used to seeing on film, television, and the covers of tabloid magazines. There was no, “Starlet Wronged By Cheating Musician,” headline or, “It’s Splitsville for One Hollywood Power Couple.” There were no screaming attorneys, paparazzi photographers or a jury deciding my fate. No oaths or vows were dutifully parroted. It was just over. After fifteen years of marriage and a year of legal obstacles I was divorced. Now what?

I married and had a family early in life. I postponed my college aspirations. When I returned to school part-time, my older son was five and I was twenty-five. I was a part-time student for six years as I pursued an associates degree. I then took some time off and returned as a full-time student several years later, when I was thirty-five, for my bachelors degree. Halfway through the degree, I divorced. People like me are called non-traditional students. There were many of us on the commuter campus I attended, so I never felt out of place. I never thought about being a statistic; but while I was in school, I saw many mentions in the media about women in education. When media was ablaze with statistics showing that the number of women attending college had surpassed the number of men, Dr. Karen Holbrook, thirteenth president of The Ohio State University, penned an article for the *New York Times* that sought to elucidate the fact that many of these women, like me, are returning to college after prioritizing family first. In her article, Holbrook says of a study published in the 2002 *Digest of Education Statistics*

that in 1970, women under 25 constituted 41 percent of students enrolled in college. In 2000, the figure was 54 percent. An even larger change occurred among students over 25. In 1970, 26 percent of full-time students over 25 were women; in 2000, however, the figure was 54 percent. When you look at the numbers of part-time students over 25, you see continued increases in the number

of women enrolling, from 41 percent of part-time students over 25 in 1970, to 62 percent of part-time students in 2000. (Holbrook)

Increasingly older women are finding themselves in social situations with younger men through their educational pursuits. In an article for ERIC Digest, Janene White explores the reasons older women attend community colleges. In it she cites several studies that show divorce as a prime reason for the return to school. For them, pursuing higher education often thereby coincides with the pursuit of a new partner. College environments bring people together with similar interests and passions. While a woman may not be seeking out a relationship with a younger man, if her social environment is composed of available partners much younger than she with similar interests, the chances of forming older woman/younger man relationships are surely high. This story was my story. After my divorce I began dating a man fifteen years younger than I whom I had met through my university program. My goal in this chapter and by telling this personal story is to wrench the term cougar away from the strictly sexual connotation and offer some additional reasons why older woman/ younger man relationships can work.

A Modern Love Story: When I Became a Cougar

Given that I am a student in the twenty-first century, digital technologies are integral to my studies. I, as many people today, utilized these services to stay in touch with friends, share notes and organize events. As almost a necessity, I was friends on Facebook with many of the other English majors in my undergraduate program. One night, when a fellow English major was having a particularly difficult time dealing with his post-breakup loneliness, I felt compelled to reach out to him. I know how hard breakups are, so I sent him a message of support. It was a simple offer of friendship during a difficult time, “Are you ok? If you need an ear, I have two.” This began a very unexpected friendship and later a romantic relationship of great importance to

both of us.

My story is an everyday story of two people meeting, forming a friendship and falling in love. It would not, normally, make headlines. Many people meet while in college. Many people begin relationships after being friends. The story is unique because I was thirty-eight and he was twenty-three when our relationship began. After the initial Facebook contact, Justin (a pseudonym) and I began talking more regularly. We were supporting each other through post-breakup difficulties. I had just ended a fifteen year marriage and he broke up with his girlfriend of four years. We spent many days sitting in the English majors' lounge drinking tea and talking about life, relationships and hopes and dreams for the future. Neither one of us was sure at the time what we would do after graduation. We were both in transitional places in our lives. Through these talks we found we had much in common from the kind of tea we liked to drink (Tazo Awake) to our mutual passion for the arts and love of the zany, animated television series "Futurama." Neither one of us liked the overhead lighting in the lounge so we always used the lamps instead. It was a quiet, dark, cozy space. If I had been thinking along those lines, at the time, I might have called it romantic. After several weeks of hanging out in the lounge Justin asked me out on a date, off campus and outside of our lounge. I do not know why I was so shocked because our relationship had quite clearly progressed and a date would be a natural next step but I was shocked nonetheless. Without even thinking I responded, "Do you know how old I am?" To this he replied, "I don't care." I was apprehensive due to our fifteen year age gap but I agreed to a date.

We met at eight o'clock on a Saturday night at our local Barnes & Noble bookstore cafe. This seemed the perfect first date for a couple of English majors. We shared a slice of cheesecake and talked until an announcement alerted us that the store would be closing in fifteen minutes.

Nearly three hours had gone by while we were engrossed in conversation. We had planned to peruse the bookshelves so we quickly walked over to the nearest bookcase, the comedy section, and began reading book titles. He noticed, “How to Heal the Hurt by Hating” and we laughed about our recent breakups. We both spied the pack of “Boyfriend Training Flashcards” and I suggested maybe I would need those since he was so young. Then I saw, “Old Age is always Fifteen Years Older than I Am;” I groaned and laid my head on his shoulder. He comforted me with an arm around my waist. We left the bookstore and went across the street to T.G.I. Fridays for a drink. When they closed two hours later we were left with nowhere to go but did not want to go home yet. We spent the next three hours sitting in the parking lot in his car just talking. Our first date lasted a total of eight hours. It was six hours into the date before he was brave enough to kiss me for the first time. That is as physical as we went that night. The cougar persona is so often attached to notions of older women and predatory sexuality that I find it important to note our first few dates did not include any sexual activity and moreover, our eventual sexual activity was initiated by him.

Traversing Life with Our Age Peers

Why did I feel so uncomfortable with the idea of dating someone much younger than I? To begin to discuss why these relationships work, I first want to examine my initial reaction to Justin's interest. Even though we had much in common and an admitted attraction, I hesitated. I believe that hesitation came from a deeply embedded notion that he was not an appropriate partner for me strictly based on our ages. Why did I think that? I believe it is partly to do with the way we structure our society. From birth on, we are shuttled through life in groups of people born within a year or two of each other. Schools, sports teams, and nearly every extra-curricular activity I can think of are organized around age. Dyads with large age ranges generally fall into

roles of parent/mentor/teacher/authority figure and child/novice/student/apprentice. We don't view each other as friends or potential partners if we have more than a couple of years difference in age because we only interact with each other in very specific contexts with structured power relations. We all pass through what Victor Turner refers to as social rituals, such as puberty, and their intervening rites of passage or “limens” (as used by Turner and Van Gennep before him) at roughly the same time as our age peers. There is a social expectation that we choose someone from our age cohort to form a partnership, cohabit, procreate and become full members of society. Following a similar life trajectory is the norm. What happens when we do not conform to the norm? What happens when we follow a different path through life or when the path abruptly stops, as in when one of these “happy” couples gets divorced? This is where cougar women post-divorce find themselves: They exist within a society that does not know what to do with them.

Cross-generational Boundaries: Sexuality a Little Too-Close-for-Comfort

In her article, “Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality,” Gayle Rubin offers a sexual hierarchy wherein she visually divides what she calls “The charmed circle: Good, Normal, Natural, Blessed Sexuality” with what she calls “The outer limits: Bad, Abnormal, Unnatural, Damned Sexuality” (281). The cougar fits into Rubin's outer limits category based on sexuality that is generally unmarried, often promiscuous, non-procreative, casual and cross-generational. The cross-generational descriptor here refers to pedophilia, sexual attraction or sexual acts with children. Cougar women would not be considered pedophiles in the typical legal or moral way society deems it in that they are not depicted as having relationships with men younger than the age of consent. However, being that cougar women are often mothers with grown or nearly-grown children, are entering into relationships with men not much older than their children and these relationships often have a mother-son aspect, we can see them as

violating that cross-generational boundary. I believe this social breach is the source of much of the cougar stigma.¹⁰

Media representations of this too-close-for-comfort feeling show up in both *Cougar Town* and the YouTube video series, *Cougars*. In the pilot episode of *Cougar Town*, Jules is attending a football game at her son's school. She notices an attractive young man and comments to her friend, Laurie, just a little too loudly, "I'd like to lick his body." Jules is embarrassed and moves farther away in the bleachers when a woman overhears and responds, "That's my son!" In *Cougars*, Renee, a new cougar woman, meets a young man when out with her new cougar friends. They all come back to her house to continue the party. When her son comes home we learn that the young man his mother is with is a friend of his. He is angry and avoids contact with his mother for some time. These media texts illustrate the potential for accidentally breaching that cross-generational boundary and effectively warn women of the social stigma and repercussions of being cougar.

While I did not experience any discomfort on the part of my children in my relationship with Justin, I did see some discomfort on Justin's part and experienced judgment from friends. Earlier I mentioned Foucault's theory of disciplinary power and how we police ourselves to conform even in the absence of direct policing. I felt judged by friends but I do not remember anyone verbally accusing us of having an inappropriate relationship. I found myself policing my own behavior, keeping our relationship secret for a long time, in light of how I knew society felt about cross-generational relationships. When we did make our relationship public, our friends were supportive. The fear of repercussions was enough to make us want to stay hidden.

Despite the Stigma: Why Cougars Prowl

¹⁰In Chapter 3, I discuss the reason why older man/younger woman relationships are not plagued by this boundary quite as strongly.

I believe there are many reasons for relationships between older women and younger men. The primary and most often cited reason in favor of cougar relationships in articles, blog posts, advice columns and on cougar dating sites I have seen is compatibility based on sexual prime. Men are considered to reach their prime in their late teens/early twenties and women in their thirties. While the coalescence of the prime of an older woman and a younger man is certainly one possible reason why they get together, I do not think it holds up as the only reason or even as the most significant. In her book, Valerie Gibson sought not only to describe her experience as a cougar woman but to explain a phenomenon that, at the time, was newly emerging. She writes, “Far from panicking and running the other way (as was still expected in those restrictive and societally condemning days), I jumped right into the deep end and became an outspoken “cougar” - a single, older woman who prefers to date younger men, and is proud of that choice” (13). She gives several reasons for her choice of a younger partner in a section titled “Why Younger Men?”:

Younger men are plentiful and often very willing to be lured. They tend to find cougars irresistible – for their confidence, sleek sophistication, independence, and considerable sexual experience. Younger men have flat stomachs, firm butts, strong thighs, and ever-ready sexual equipment. They also bring a fresh taste to palates dulled by jaded older men. They are optimistic, enthusiastic, energetic, passionate, and – essential when dealing with the strong and powerful cougar – brimming with youthful stamina. Younger men never want to leave a party early, and they never criticize your driving. They love your cooking. They love to kiss, walk barefoot on the beach, trek through the woods, sing out loud, dance until the small hours, accompany you shopping (especially for lingerie), and make love in

the back seat of the car (yours, usually). Most importantly, they know how to stop your VCR from constantly flashing and can actually program your car radio (24-25).

Gibson's book was the first published on cougars. She set a precedent for the way we talk about women who choose younger male partners so her words are important to understanding the origins of cougar identity. Her choice of words like "lured" are part of how cougar woman have been constructed as predators. Her idealized construction of young men is equally problematic. She highlights availability, physical fitness, attitude, adventure, technological aptitude, and sexual ability in younger partners that she sees as lacking in partners closer to her age. They are "optimist, enthusiastic, energetic, passionate," in her construction. They "*never* want to leave a party early (emphasis mine)." The characters she describes are one dimensional caricatures of the partners in an older woman/younger man relationship. These caricatures create unrealistic expectations and limiting stereotypes for both the men and women in these relationships. Gibson's emphasis on young men as appropriate partners as opposed to other partner choices during this time in a woman's life helped to construct the cougar as strictly heterosexual with a predatory sexuality in our social imaginary. Her book, along with portrayals of cougar women that came later serve to create a cougar stereotype that has prevailed through more than a decade.

Gibson wrote her book after her marriage ended at the age of forty-four. She was looking for partners who were ready for anything. She found younger men fit her with her interests more than men of her age or older. Part of this fit had to do with availability. Her first statement, "Younger men are plentiful" is echoed in the ABC sitcom *Cougar Town* when Jules says, "I'd date guys my own age but they're all out dating younger girls" ("Pilot"). The reasons older men look for younger women as new partners is much different than the reasons older women look

for younger men and ties into the expected trajectory of any socially accepted marriage. I will deal with that issue in chapter three. For now the important point is that older, often divorced women are entering a dating pool with few available partners. This discrepancy seems to be the biggest problem with dating as an older woman. Most people that have followed society's prescribed life plan are coupled by the time they reach their late thirties. In order to find a new partner older women often have to widen their options by looking to younger partners who are not coupled yet. Gibson's reasons for dating younger men represent her experience. I offer my experience, as well as a critical, scholarly perspective, to interrogate assumptions, fueled by Gibson and others, about older women who date younger men.

Gibson's description of the reasons to look for a young partner include her feelings about starting life over and wanting a partner who understands and supports her new lifestyle. To add further dimension to Gibson's argument, in the next section I use Yale psychologist Daniel J. Levinson's work on life stages and do so for both men and women. Levinson and his co-authors Charlotte N. Darrow, Edward B. Klein, Maria H. Levinson and Braxton McKee conducted a ten year study delving into the question, "Is there an underlying order in the progression of our lives over the adult years, as there is in childhood and adolescence?" (vii). resulting in the book, *The Seasons of a Man's Life*, published in 1975. Later, Levinson returned to his study of the life course, this time for women. This fifteen year study of adult developmental stages for women resulted in a new book titled *Seasons of a Woman's Life* published in 1996. There are clear parallels in Levinson's work between the experience of a man in his twenties and a newly-divorced woman in her thirties or forties; these parallels offer a possible rationale for why older women and younger men find a workable or engaging relationship.

Nurturing: Cougars, Cubs and Cross-Generational Boundaries

If cougars are older women who date younger men what are the men called? Cubs, of course. These metaphors personify a mother-son dynamic within the relationship where the older woman is discursively constructed as responsible for, not only satisfying the man's sexual desires, but also for providing other kinds of nurturing. Most of the prominent representations of cougar women in media today (Jules Cobb from ABC's *Cougar Town*, Renee from the YouTube series *Cougars*, Stacey Anderson from *The Cougar* reality dating show, Demi Moore and other celebrity figures) are women who chose to be mothers early in life and now have grown or nearly-grown children. To at least some extent, these women are used to being in a nurturing role and may offer their partners the comfort of being “mothered.”

In Levinson's *Seasons of a Man's Life*, he describes the stage roughly from the age of seventeen to twenty-two as the Early Adult Transition and offers these insights:

In the Early Adult Transition, a young man's efforts to establish an intimate marital relationship are complicated by his continuing sense of himself as a little boy in relation to a powerful maternal figure. He is engaged in a struggle both to express and to control his various fantasies of this figure as devouring witch, feeding breast, sexual seducer, humiliating rejecter, willing servant and demanding master. His wife attracts him in part because she seems to lack the qualities he fears and resents in his inner maternal figure. Yet their relationship may actually contain these and other aspects of the mother-son interaction (such as her indulging and admiring him), which in time are likely to become more problematic. (107)

Levinson's description indicates that any relationship a man forms at this stage may contain mother-son elements. I possibilize that, if the woman is much older, and a mother herself, this

element of their relationship may be even stronger as she is used to the role of nurturer while he is looking to be nurtured. This dynamic appears in a scene from the pilot episode of *Cougar Town*. Jules brings a younger man home from the bar with her. She is clearly uncomfortable since this is her first foray into dating younger men after her divorce. She offers to make him crackers and peanut butter because that's what she always makes for her son's friends when they come over. Thus, in her awkwardness, she defaults to the role of mother. After this moment of awkwardness, later he is shown eating crackers and peanut butter, happily accepting her nurturing gesture.

The next phase of a man's life is described by Levinson as Entering the Adult World (roughly ages twenty-two to twenty-eight). In this phase, “he seeks a woman who will appreciate his emerging aspirations and want to share his planned life with him (108). In this section Levinson describes the “Special Woman” in whom I also see shades of the mother-son relationship:

The special woman is a transitional figure. During early adulthood, a man is struggling to outgrow the little boy in himself and to become a more autonomous adult. The special woman can foster his adult aspirations while accepting his dependency, his incompleteness and his need to make her into something more than (and less than) she actually is. Later, in the Mid-life Transition, he will have to become a more individual person. With further development, he will be more complete in himself and will have less need of the actual and illusory contributions of the special woman. (109)

Here we see a man who is making strides to lead an independent life but still needs guidance. He may look to an older partner who has more life experience to provide support in his efforts.

Additionally, this special woman is called “transitional” by Levinson. This seems to coincide with the idea of cougar women being a temporary part of a young man's life. The special woman here seems to be responsible for supporting him through a transition but maybe not carrying on with him after. This idea will again surface in my next chapter. For now, I wanted to signal an important part of how cougar relationships are defined and how they might fit in with the life stage of a young male partner.

What's In It for Her?: Life Stage Compatibility on the Cougar's Side

The dynamic described above offers the cougar woman much control in this relationship which may be very desirable to a woman who is recently divorced and who's children are finally more independent themselves. She may enjoy his acknowledgment and admiration of her experience and may be happy to share it. Hence, this relationship can offer her a boost of confidence and self-assurance which she may be in need of after the dissolution of a marriage and the resulting life transition. In my case, this was definitely true. What I learned about myself through my relationship with Justin was that I really do have a strength born from life struggle and I shake things off better now than ever before. While I was struggling through my transition, I was also enduring, and Justin helped me see that. Instead of allowing me to wallow in my own self-pity he helped me through my struggles and it made a huge difference in my life.

In his book, *Seasons of a Woman's Life*, Levinson describes eras and developmental periods across the life course for women. He divides the women in the study into two main groups: homemakers and career women.¹¹ Homemakers are those women who chose family over career in the beginning adult life developmental stages. Although Levinson is quick to point out that the career women may eventually have families. They simply delayed family to focus on

¹¹Levinson further divides the career women into two groups, “women with careers in the corporate-financial world” and “women with careers in the academic world” (10). Although, these worlds of work are different in the demands they place on women, the distinction is not terribly useful in regards to my arguments here.

career first. Since the prevailing representations of cougar women are mothers with grown or nearly-grown children and since this is also my own story, I focus on the homemaker sample. The cougar age range (beginning at 35) sits mostly in Levinson's era of Middle Adulthood (40-65) although it has some crossover from the previous Early Adulthood era. More specifically, when Levinson breaks down the eras into developmental periods the cougar spans three periods, the Culminating Life Structure for Early Adulthood (33-40), The Mid-Life Transition (40-45) and the Entry Life Structure for Middle Adulthood (45-50). I will focus here on the earliest of these periods, the period in which a woman might become a cougar: The Culminating Life Structure. Levinson calls this stage "Becoming One's Own Woman" and writes, "She has a desire, inchoate or clearly articulated, to be affirmed in her world, to speak more with her own voice, to be recognized in her own right and not merely as an appendage to husband, children, parents, boss, or anyone else" (144). This is a period of striking out on her own. As I noted earlier, Gibson writes, "After spending my entire life on men's dreams, I found myself wondering what had happened to my own" (12). While early in life she certainly made decisions, getting married and having children stand as just two of them, in this phase it is about breaking away from those early structures. In terms of my experience, I can say that in the homemaker role I found it is easy to lose myself. I also felt a need to find my voice and use it more often during this phase. It was almost like starting over. In my first chapter I introduced the phrase used to market *Cougar Town*, "40 is the new 20." It seems appropriate here in a different way, to invoke it as emblematic of this phase. It did feel to me like starting life over again. It was like being 20 again.

There is much connection between the phase I previously discussed for men in their twenties and this phase for women. Levinson adds that in the Culminating Life structure for a

woman, “First, she is trying to become an adult rather than a child – in the world and in herself. She wants to be independent, competent, responsible, taken seriously, in ways that distinguish adults from children” (145). The life stages of men in their twenties and of women in the homemaker sample in their late thirties, are very similar. These are times of transition and introspection. This common ground can form the basis of a relationship. They are both striving for the same essential things, to break away from a previous life structure and to stand on their own. In my relationship with Justin, I found much support through this life transition because he understood. He was going through much the same process.

Conclusion

As Louis Althusser, the French philosopher, would say, I was “always-already” a cougar before Justin “hailed” me as such. I was always-already, to use another of Althusser's words, “interpellated” by this hailing. I fit the description and even though I had not been called a “cougar” before, I had not dated a much younger man before, I recognized myself as such when I was hailed. Althusser explains that “Experience shows that the practical telecommunication of hailing is such that they hardly ever miss their man [or woman]: verbal call or whistle, the one hailed always recognizes that it is really him [or her] who is being hailed” (162). I knew as soon as I said yes to the date that I was accepting this subject position. This was the first step in my becoming cougar. I had to recognize myself as fitting the parameters of cougar identity, then I had to accept that identity. Even after I accepted this hailing, I still struggled with being described this way as I did not and still don't see myself fitting in to every aspect of the term's meaning, but I accept that I fit the general description. Yes, I date younger men and therefore, in this time period, I am sometimes hailed as a cougar. The harder part of being hailed into cougar identity was choosing to go public with an age gap relationship.

Many women my age re-enter the workforce after years of being stay-at-home-moms. They either return to their previous careers or find new ones. Sometimes this transition entails going back to college. Regardless of the specifics of that transition, we find ourselves in a stage where we are beginning, or rather beginning again. We have much in common with people in their twenties who are beginning a career or in college working towards beginning a career. We may find ourselves enjoying club nightlife when for years we were busy caring for children and having dinner parties with other married couples. After leaving that comfortable nest, we find ourselves breaking out on our own. Again, we have much in common with twenty-somethings leaving the comfortable nest of their parents' homes. This commonality of life stages can lead to forming friendships and relationships with younger people as it did for me.

When it became known that Justin and I were dating, I began to be called a cougar by people who knew of our relationship and our age difference. I wasn't terribly familiar with the term at the time except for the references to Demi Moore and Ashton Kutcher's relationship. I had not yet considered the implications of the term on my life and relationships. When people laughed and called me a cougar I did not think much of it and even laughed along with them. Later, I discovered that the term has impacts on my life in many ways. I also found that I wanted to explicate the effects this term has on my life and on potentially on the lives of other women of my age group. What I found was that aside from the cultural phenomenon of the cougar persona being tightly tied to a notion of female predatory sexuality, there was much that was positive to be said for these relationships. Both partners are in transitional phases and in need of a supportive and understanding partner. While my intimate relationship with Justin ended, we still keep in touch with one another. Our relationship went far beyond sexual chemistry and was important in many ways for both of us.

One way my life has been impacted is that when in relationships with younger men, I have felt judged by others. The judgment takes on two different tones. I am either congratulated or looked down upon. In the first case, I am made to feel I have won a prize for dating someone so much younger. I want to be clear that I do not feel this way nor do I date younger men to get that acknowledgment. In the second case, I am made to feel that I have broken a rule. The implication is that I should act my age and date accordingly (meaning date a man my age). Why is society so concerned about my dating life? Gayle Rubin would presumably say because I do not have socially sanctioned sexual relationships. I am outside the boundaries that are deemed appropriate. I question those boundaries and want to make a case for why these relationships work. Society is changing and our notions of what is appropriate need to change along with it. As Levinson says of his homemaker sample,

The difficulties of these women must be placed in a socio-historical context. We live in a time when the Traditional Marriage Enterprise, and the gender meanings, values, and social structures that support it, are undergoing major change. The homemakers' lives give evidence that the traditional pattern is difficult to sustain. Most women who tried to maintain this pattern formed life structures that were relatively unsatisfactory – not viable in the world, not suitable for self. The few who were more or less contented paid a considerable price in restriction of self-development (415).

I experienced the “restriction of self-development” that Levinson mentions. When I finally made the decision to leave a marriage that was not working for me, I lost support from friends who did not understand my choice. When I began dating a younger man, I again experienced this loss of support.

Though these stigmas exist for cougar-identifying women or women who are labeled cougar there is much to say about these relationships. Through life stage similarity, nurturing, and sexual compatibility women often find relationships with younger men fulfilling. My work on the cougar identity seeks to elucidate both these freedoms and restrictions of the term on women in my age group and to open a discussion on a cultural phenomenon that until now has been little studied. Becoming cougar is about recognizing the fit into a social position, learning what it means for her life and how to manage both her personal desires and social expectations. Gibson and others stress the confidence of the cougar woman. I think it takes much confidence to walk through life under any stigmatized identity and this identification is no different. In order to experience the freedoms any identity category offers, accepting the constraints also has to occur.

Beyond becoming cougar, my ultimately short-lived relationship with Justin made me wonder about the long-term viability of a relationship such as ours. Can cougar women and their partners form a bond that lasts? What are the issues they will face that are specific to this type of relationship? I was to discover one imposing hurdle in my next relationship with a younger man which I discuss in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 3: LIVING COUGAR: MARRIAGE, PARENTHOOD AND SOCIAL
LIMITATIONS OF THE COUGAR WOMAN

“You know how scary it is to be a single, forty year old woman? Whatever you do you feel judged by the world. You feel judged by yourself. And if you ever deep down feel like you might get married again you're not going to, not when you can't make babies anymore and your looks have faded. So you put on a brave face and you try really hard not to think about the fact that maybe, maybe this is all your life is ever going to be.”

~ Jules Cobb *Cougar Town* (“Pilot”)

Russell and Reconsidering Reproduction

When I met Russell (a pseudonym), in January of 2009, I was thirty-nine. He was nine years younger, just about to turn thirty. At the time I was pretty sure I did not want any more children. My boys were eleven and eighteen. I knew that having a baby was still a possibility, though. I was not yet menopausal after all. I still had to take precautions to prevent pregnancy. When we started dating I did not expect it to get serious. When it did, I was faced with reconsidering things I thought I had long since decided. I knew Russell had never been married and did not have any children. I did not know at the beginning whether he wanted to be a father but I suspected so. At the time we met we were both cast members in a community theatre production of *Cabaret*. One day, inexplicably, I began to cry in the dressing room. A fellow cast member asked me what was wrong. I did not realize until that moment just how much I had been troubled by his potential desire for a family. I sobbed, “He doesn't have any children. He's going to want them. This can't last.” We had not even been dating that long but somehow I knew this would be a problem for us. I did not open a discussion about family with Russell at that time but I began to seriously ask myself if I wanted to have another child, if I would be willing to do so

for this relationship. I had not yet come to a decision when, about three months into our relationship, he asked me to meet him at a local coffee shop after work.

I walked into the coffee shop knowing something was wrong. He greeted me as usual with a smile and a kiss but his voice was full of forced optimism. He ordered a big chocolate chip cookie, warmed, with two forks for us to share. He walked me past the colorful stuffed chairs and the bright table with the postcards we used to read together to a very bland table in the corner. I felt sick to my stomach with dread. It was hard to put one foot in front of the other and I was relieved to find a chair and sit. As I tried to force down a bite of cookie he began to explain his urgent request to meet him that day.

RUSSELL. I can't have what I want with you.

ANN. What do you mean?

RUSSELL. I want to have kids and I can't have that with you.

ANN. Are you breaking up with me?

RUSSELL. I think that's what I have to do, yes.

ANN. Did you ever ask me if I wanted more kids?

RUSSELL. No, but ...

A few more sentences struggled out of our mouths until I could sit there no longer. I got up and walked out. A week later, when emotions had calmed a bit, we met in the park to talk. I did not know what to say. I was very much in love with him and did not want this relationship to end. I was shaking with nerves that I did not want him to see, so I suggested we walk instead of sitting. We climbed trees and we talked about our possible future children doing the same. I asked, "If it wasn't for the baby issue would we be planning a long, happy life together?" His expression was pained as he looked me directly in the eyes and said, "Yes." It wasn't long before his arms were

around me and we had decided to give this another try.

The conversation in the park about futures and about children happened long before Russell said, "I love you." Those words came after after our second breakup when we again met to talk and got back together. It went something like this,

RUSSELL. I love you but I feel like a fraud. What do I do with that?

ANN. You go with the first part and see what happens.

What happened was two more breakups caused by the same apprehension. Pursuing a long-term relationship with a woman nine years older made him worry he could not have the family he wanted. He fell in love with me before he began to think of the potential consequences of a future together. He would not commit to marrying me because he could not envision a family with me. He also could not accept the fact that he would be a stepfather to my two nearly-grown children and the third man to father a child with me. This was not the family he dreamed of having. It did not follow the script he had in his mind. It was not what society had taught him he should want. He was worried that if he did continue this relationship that my age would mean declining fertility and possibly loss of desire to have children even if I said I wanted more now. He did not want to have a child immediately. He wanted to have one two or three years down the road. Would I be able to? Would I want to by then? He never gave me the opportunity to decide. He never asked. He felt so strongly that he made the decision alone but struggled with it for many months, even years as I write this now. The issues of fertility and family were what kept driving him away from me despite his strong feelings and seeming inability to stay away for long.

I learned a great deal about the social limitations of my post-divorce re-entrance into the dating world through this relationship. According to Valerie Gibson, cougars know the

importance of never saying I love you (19). I began to understand the substance of that statement during my relationship with Russell. There are social restrictions that limit women of my age group from exercising their procreative potential. Without this potential we are not seen as viable marriage partners. We fall outside the social ritual structure on which normative society is based. The figure of the cougar and her positioning in the sexual economy is a way to temporarily reintegrate women of my age group into the social fabric of society. Our place is as sexual partners for young men who are not ready for marriage yet desirous of intimate relationships. We may accept the label cougar as it may offer a kind of limited empowerment but ultimately it restricts our choices and repositions us as objects in the service of young men's sexual desires.

Cougars Have Eggs: Reproductive Viability of the Over-thirty-five Woman

The first six definitions on urbandictionary.com [May 10 2011] refer to a cougar's age as, “an older woman,” “A 35+ year old female,” “an attractive woman in her 30's or 40's,” “a woman in her sexual prime,” “between thirty and fifty years-old,” and “in her 40s or 50s.” One of the definitions states a clear age of fifty as the end point of the cougar age range and another alludes to fifty with “in her 30's or 40's.” Menopause is typically considered to occur in woman around the age of fifty. So it seems that cougar women are women who are in the latter stages of their childbearing years. Most of them are probably not yet menopausal. In regards to procreation Gibson explains, “She may be a single parent with grown cubs,” and “She isn't interested in marriage or in having any more children” (17). Cougars may be mothers but they are definitely not mothers-to-be. The cougar discourse, such as I can discern it, constructs us as women who no longer have a desire for procreation even though we are probably still fertile. Hence, we are sexual but not procreative subjects.

Medical discourse sanctions women for having procreative desires past age thirty-five

and teaches us to fear our own bodies. Our reproductive capacity is dangerous, or so we are told. It has become commonly accepted knowledge that there are higher risk factors for women who become pregnant over age thirty-five and for their babies. One study states, “Approximately 1 in 1,400 babies born from women in their 20s have Down syndrome; it increases to about 1 in 100 babies born with Down syndrome from women in their 40s” (“Pregnancy”). The statistic may stand as a frightening proscription against pregnancy for women of this age group. That is just one scary medical “fact” discursively deployed that may have the effect of frightening women. This quote above comes from WebMD, one of the most popular websites providing medical information to potential patients. Aside from the statistic on Down's Syndrome, they warn that women over thirty-five are at a higher risk for miscarriage, stillbirth, need for Caesarean section, development of high blood pressure and diabetes as well as difficulty getting pregnant in the first place. WebMD's page concerning pregnancy over thirty-five begins with this warning:

While advances in medical care can help women over age 35 have safer pregnancies than in the past, infertility and pregnancy complications for this age group are higher than for younger women. If you have decided to delay having a child, you should understand the risks associated with this so you can take precautions to minimize risks and improve your chances for a healthy pregnancy and child.

These words are potentially terrifying to any woman who might be considering having a child after the age of thirty-five. Words like “safer” instead of “safe” and phrases like “understand the risks” make pregnancy during this time period seem very dangerous, and it may be, but the implication that a woman who gets pregnant in her late thirties or after has “delay[ed]” childbirth feels to me, and probably many other women of my age group, like we are being scolded. We

should have known that having children is for younger women. Certified Nurse-Midwife Mary Murry writes a blog on mayoclinic.com. In her post on March 27, 2008 she addresses the question, “How old is too old to have a baby?” She begins with her experience, “When I had my first child I was 32 years old and considered an 'elderly primip.’¹² I felt I was in the prime of life, certainly not elderly.” She did not feel old, or too old to conceive, yet she was treated as a “elderly” mother. This attitude by the medical establishment serves to curtail pregnancies in women over thirty-five as Murry's statistic shows: “About 14 percent of births in the United States are to women 35 and older.” While many women may be choosing to have children in earlier years of their lives, I believe the language of medical discourse serves to control women's procreative choices over age thirty-five. Murry tries to quell the fear somewhat by addressing some of the major worries medical practitioners continually repeat to older women desiring pregnancy:

The concern many women over 35 hear about most often is Down Syndrome or other chromosomal abnormalities. At 35 a woman's risk of any clinically significant chromosome abnormalities is about 1 in 200. Her risk of a baby with Down Syndrome is about 1 in 365. In other words, the odds of having an absolutely normal baby would be about 99.34 percent.

If you are not following her complicated math, one instance in 100 would be a one percent chance, one in 200 would be one half of one percent and one in 365 far less than one half of one percent. Put this way it doesn't seem nearly as scary as the way WebMD states the same information. Turning the WebMD statistic around as Murry would have us do means the chances of having a normal, healthy baby free of Down's Syndrome if you are over forty is well over 99

¹²Primip is short for primipara, a term used in the medical field to describe a woman who is pregnant for the first time. Elderly generally refers to over-thirty-five in this case.

percent. I believe most women if given the statistic this way would deem a less than one percent chance an acceptable risk. Even though most women remain fertile until around age fifty, these statistics render women socially sterile well before menopause. I believe this discursive medicalized construction of women's identity is a prime factor in shaping interpersonal relationships for older women.

Pair-Bonding: The Cougar Woman and Re/Marriage

Marriages between older women and younger men became news when the celebrity couple Demi Moore and Ashton Kutcher married in September 2005.¹³ This relationship was already making headlines simply for the couples' fifteen year age difference but when it became serious, when the couple married, a new question arose. Would they have a baby together? Regardless of the primary reason for any interview with Moore and/or Kutcher, the question was continually and unabashedly asked. In 2007 Moore appeared in the February issue of *Vanity Fair* where the topic was her return to Hollywood. She was asked and reportedly said she “most definitely” wanted children with Kutcher (“Demi Gloss”). On *Nightline* in May of 2010, in an interview which began with a discussion of the recent death of Kutcher's ex-girlfriend Britney Murphy, Cynthia McFadden asked Kutcher if he wanted to have biological children with his wife. He responded, “I don't know... it's 'I don't know.'” Throughout their relationship rumors of Moore being pregnant or of the couple adopting have continued. In March of 2011 it happened again. Several internet and celebrity magazine sources claim that after an allegation of Kutcher cheating, the couple had rekindled their passion and were again talking about adopting. Moore is the mother of three daughters by former husband, Bruce Willis. Why were Moore and Kutcher, a seemingly happy couple at the time, continually bullied by the media about the non-procreative

¹³The couple has since ended their relationship according to news reports but have not yet filed for divorce. This ending could be a result at least partially due to social pressures on this type of relationship.

nature of their marriage? Why did we care? I believe that Victor Turner's explanation of social ritual and Daniel J. Levinson's description of the life stage of men in their twenties can help us understand.

Victor Turner explains that human societies involve certain phases. These phases are attached to social and sometimes religious rituals that mark the passage from one stage to another. For instance, many cultures have rituals welcoming a newborn child such as baptism, rituals surrounding the passing through of adolescence into adulthood, marriage rituals and death rituals. At each stage the individual is thought to advance into the next gaining a new level of status in society. The stages come in a strictly scripted succession: birth, adolescence, marriage, parenthood, death. One can only go forward. There is no stepping back in the ritual process. As I noted earlier, the space between each phase is called the limen. It is a time where the individual is not one or the other, is apart from society for a time until the ritual is completed and they are welcomed back in with a new status. I will return to the idea of the liminal but first I want to take a more in-depth look at life stages, first for men and later for women.

As I have discussed in Chapter 2, Daniel J. Levinson, et.al., conducted a study in the nineteen seventies that sought to determine changes over the life course for men published as *The Seasons of a Man's Life*. Although this work was written some time ago it is still quite relevant to my discussion here because it gives us a detailed look at social expectations on the life course for men. The men in the study were the generation of men that became fathers to today's young men. Since social expectations change far slower than personal experiences, I see Levinson's work as an important indicator of how today's generation were brought up. I also think that even with shifts over time, our life courses remain somewhat consistent insofar as we still pass through social rituals in much the same way, although these changes may happen

sooner or later than the generation before us and with some variation.

In his book on life stages for men, Levinson identified four eras in the life course which are further broken down into developmental periods and transitions. The young men cougar woman are said to prefer are usually in their twenties, an era Levinson calls Early Adulthood and a phase he refers to as The First Adult Life Structure: Entering the Adult World. He states,

The young man has two primary yet antithetical tasks: (a) He needs to *explore* the possibilities for adult living: to keep his options open, avoid strong commitments and maximize the alternatives. This task is reflected in a sense of adventure and wonderment, a wish to seek out all the treasures of the world he is entering. (b) The contrasting task is to *create a stable life structure*: become more responsible and “make something of my life.” Each task has sources and supports in the external world and in the self (57-58).

The ultimate goal in this stage of the life cycle in regards to relationships is to form a marriage and family. While a young man is free to experiment with many types of relationships at this time he ultimately is expected to settle down with a woman with whom he can procreate. Due, in part, to the socially constructed infertility of older women most of these relationships are not seen to have long term viability. When Moore and Kutcher married their union violated our social understanding of the purposes of marriage. Since Kutcher has not had children of his own, we expected any marriage he entered into to include the possibility for children. Since marriage is seen as a lifelong commitment, older women who partner with younger men who who have not fathered children can be seen as selfishly denying their partners this possibility. Without procreative potential a relationship is not fully accepted in society, especially for a man in his twenties who is expected to fulfill the social requirement of forming a family. Moore has already

fulfilled her requirement and in effect, by being a mother and his wife, she has taken away Kutcher's reproductive potential. In order to quell the constant onslaught of questions Moore claims she wants a child with Kutcher, even while Kutcher himself seems indifferent. Whether Moore's desire for children is genuine or a way to answer to social pressure is unclear but her repeated insistence indicates an understanding of society's procreative expectation for married couples. We do not see the same outcry when a couple are both older and both already parents, as in couple who wed when they are in their retirement years or when two divorced parents marry each other. We do not even see it that much when the man is older than the woman. It is in my view the idea that the older woman is somehow denying procreation to her younger partner that casts a social pall on the cougar marriage.

Danger Danger!: Divorced Women Threaten “Normal” Society

I was married once. I passed through the social rituals of both marriage and parenthood. I was a married mother, something understandable, someone important and acknowledged. I had a status. I had friends who were also married mothers. We, as a couple, had married couple friends with children. When I got divorced that all changed. My married friends did not want to associate with me anymore. I was an outcast. As the label cougar (after a large predatory animal) indicates, divorced woman of my age range are perceived as a threat to “normal” society. This makes sense if we return to Turner's idea of liminal spaces in the life course. When a person passes through the ritual of marriage they attain a certain social status. In Turner's conception one cannot go back after this transition. The person is forever transformed. I, therefore, gained social status as a married woman. When I divorced I then occupied a space outside of the social forward-moving process. I could not and cannot go back to simply being a single woman. I entered into a kind of perpetual liminality unless I can find some reintegrative strategy to assume

a new acceptable identity. Single identity is no longer socially acceptable unless I transform myself into an unattractive, desexualized person. If I were to enter into a social approved second marriage I might again be able to claim the status position I had attained but currently society has no real place for me. Being divorced, if thought about in these terms, is very different than never being married.

Levinson, in his accompaniment to *The Seasons of a Man's Life* called *The Seasons of a Woman's Life* (1996), further stresses the importance of marriage in our society. Again, although his work is somewhat dated, it is evident that society still expects us to conform to these, possibly outdated, notions on the life course. Women who never marry, choose to not have children or enter into lesbian relationships all fall outside these social acceptable parameters. The fact that lesbian women and gay men still cannot marry in most states in the U.S. is just one piece of evidence showing that society on a broad scale moves much slower than individuals do. So while I use Levinson's descriptions on the stages of a woman's life, I use it knowing that individual experiences potentially differ from these descriptions. Although there are many women who have chosen paths that do not conform to Levinson's descriptions, most women who have been defined as cougar in media have been women who followed the paths he describes. For this reason, I find his work relevant to my discussion here.

As I described in Chapter 2, Levinson divides the women of his study into two categories: homemakers and career women. While homemakers may focus mainly on the "Traditional Marriage Enterprise," from the start, career women are also concerned about their ability to participate in the enterprise while also building careers. For Levinson, society is largely based on this enterprise and the purpose of marriage is to serve this end. He states,

We usually think that marriage is mainly a matter of the emotional relationship

between the partners. In fact, marriage is never simply about being in love. It often takes place when one or both partners are not in love. It often does not take place even when two persons are in love. A marriage is, first of all, about building an enterprise in which the partners can have a good life, according to their lights. ... Among the homemakers, the primary aim of matrimony was to build and maintain what I call a Traditional Marriage Enterprise. Its goal is to have children, to create a certain kind of family life, and to continue (with some improvements) the basic traditions of the family of origin (39-40).

When we decide, as Levinson has, that society is based on this enterprise, to be outside the foundational society is to not be full members of society. When a woman is divorced she falls outside this structure. She no longer has the status she used to have since she is no longer a married woman. Society does not really know what to do with a woman who is perceived as past her reproductive years and without a partner. She cannot fulfill the requirements of the “Traditional Marriage Enterprise” upon which our society is at least somewhat based. This unstable position makes her a feared element. She has created a “breach” of a norm and initiated the process Turner calls a “social drama.” That breach can have serious social implications as Turner explains:

I hold that the social drama form occurs on all levels of social organization from state to family. A social drama is initiated when the peaceful tenor of regular, norm-governed social life is interrupted by the *breach* of a rule controlling one of its salient relationships. This leads swiftly or slowly to a state of *crisis*, which, if not soon sealed off, may split the community into contending factions and coalitions. To prevent this, *redressive* means are taken by those who consider

themselves or are considered the most legitimate or authoritative representatives of the relevant community. (Turner 92)

Who are the “most legitimate or authoritative representatives of the relevant community” in this case? Since it is a formerly married women who has created the breach, I believe that currently married women take on the role of authority. They are expected to play the role of gatekeeper with single women. They allow or disallow a single woman's participation in community. We can see this play out in media representations. In the second episode of the ABC series *Modern Family* (“The Bicycle Thief”) we briefly meet the character Desirae. Phil and Claire, a married couple, are riding bikes around their neighborhood with their son when they see Desirae jogging in the other direction. She and Claire had met before this encounter.

DESIRAE. Hey Claire.

CLAIRE. Hi. Ok. Hi. Um. This is my husband Phil and that's my son Luke.

PHIL. Hi.

DESIRAE. Hi there.

CLAIRE. This is

DESIRAE. Desirae (shaking Phil's hand)

CLAIRE. Deserai just moved in down the block.

PHIL. Where?

DESIRAE. 314

PHIL. Oh, the two bedroom cottage with the indoor/outdoor family room.

DESIRAE. Very good. How did you...

PHIL. I bet you're loving that steam shower.

CLAIRE. Phil. That's creepy.

PHIL. Oh, I'm sorry. I'm a real estate mogul. What? I'm a real estate agent. We caravanned that house. Great deck.

DESIRAE. Thanks. I'm just there til my divorce is final.

PHIL. Now who is coconuts enough to divorce you?

CLAIRE. We've got to go but we'll see you around.

PHIL. We'll have to have you over sometime.

DESIRAE. I'd love it.

PHIL. Alright.

DESIRAE. Bye.

PHIL. Bye (to Desirae). She's awesome (to Claire).

CLAIRE. No. We are never having her over. I heard she already slept with two dads from the school.

In a later episode, "Truth Be Told," Claire again mentions the threat divorced women are to married couples. This time through communication on social media websites.

CLARE. Let me guess, Denise isn't married.

PHIL. Recently divorced. What's the big deal?

CLARE. C'mon Phil, you can't be that naïve. Seriously. Women in their thirties on the internet are like, they're like ninjas. They get into their little black outfits and try to sneak their way into your marriage.

Claire is one of, as Turner describes, "those who consider themselves or are considered the most legitimate or authoritative representatives of the relevant community." She is a married woman who holds status in society. This status allows her to judge those who do not conform or, again in Turner's terms, enact "*redressive means*" to keep her family safe from a dangerous element. The

redressive means she uses are to blame and shame Desirae and other divorced women so they are ostracized from her community and rendered powerless.

On *Cougar Town* we see this social policing of women by women again. In the episode “Two Gunslingers,” Jules, the cougar of *Cougar Town*, encounters a married couple whom she knows from her community, Shanna and Frank. Shanna feels threatened because Frank is clearly attracted to Jules. In a later scene, Shanna and her other married friends ostracize Jules when she runs into them at a local restaurant.

SHANNA. Ever since you got divorced we've noticed the short skirts, the twenty-eight-year-old boyfriend.

JULES. Twenty-eight and a half and we broke up.

SHANNA. His mom told me. She's in my church group. Let's go girls.

JULES: Let's go girls? Is this some weird mom gang?

As a means of redressive action Shanna has restricted Jules from associating with the other women in her community. She has spread the word that Jules is a dangerous element to be avoided. *Modern Family*, *Cougar Town* and other, in Turner's terms “aesthetic dramas” serve to not only represent lived experience but to also construct the limits of identity categories. In these shows older single women, or cougars, are represented as those to be controlled.

Other means of redressive action include erasing cougar presence in certain spheres. As I mentioned in my introduction, in May of 2009, Google restricted cougar dating sites from advertising on their product pages while still allowing sites like dateamillionaire.com (a site intended to match older men with younger women). Google justified the restriction because they regarded cougar dating sites as “nonfamily safe.” While I believe Google meant that cougar dating sites were more for casual sex connections than long-term relationship connections, and

therefore in some way connected to the sex industry rather than the dating service industry, using the words “nonfamily safe” also says something about the non-procreative nature of cougar/cub relationships. If the relationship is not potentially procreative then the couple cannot form a biological family. If this is the way the family is normatively conceived, the so-called “nuclear family” or the traditional American family, in Levinson's terms not conforming to the “Traditional Marriage Enterprise,” then the cougar undermines this taken-for-granted social cohesion. Hence, relationships perceived to breach the procreative expectation are “nonfamily safe” or a threat to the notion of family. Since older man/younger woman relationships do not have the same restriction (as men remain fertile much longer than women¹⁴) these couples, despite being just as divergent from the norm as older women/younger man relationships, are far more socially acceptable.

Put a Leash on Her: *Cougar Town* and Navigating Marriage

In season three of *Cougar Town*, Jules and her 40-something single neighbor Grayson begin a relationship. Even though he is her age he has not fathered any children and still wants them. When the relationship becomes serious and the couple begins talking about marriage they have to face this very real issue. This is the same issue I discussed previously that often ends older woman/younger man relationships, as it did for me. Jules is ambivalent about the prospect of having another child. On the one hand she values her relationship with Grayson and does not want to lose it. On the other hand she is unsure of whether she really wants to have another child. She agrees to go through this journey with Grayson but she remains ambivalent. Eventually, the show devises a way to let Jules off the hook by introducing a new character; Holly, a woman

¹⁴Recent research suggests that men also have fertility issues later in life. The *New York Times* reported recent findings in a 2007 article, “It Seems the Fertility Clock Ticks for Men, Too” by Roni Rabin. Regardless, the social pressure on early life procreation exists more strongly for women than men at this time.

from Grayson's past ("Something Big"). Grayson had a short-lived sexual relationship with Holly after his divorce. Holly had since been trying to contact Grayson but he had ignored her calls. When Jules and Grayson run into Holly we find out what she had been trying to tell Grayson. She had a baby and he is her daughter's father. Here the writers of the show have solved Jules' reproductive problem by having a younger woman take her place, providing Grayson the child he so desires. Now, when Grayson and Jules marry, a suitable marriage of same age peers both having fulfilled their procreative potential, social norms are preserved. Turner's last phase of reintegration (of the cougar) has occurred thus quelling the social drama, the breach, the cougar enacts. By definition her attachment to an age appropriate man and being rescued by Holly from having to fulfill Grayson's desire to procreate, Jules, the cougar, has been tamed.

Conclusion

If a woman over thirty-five wants to have a child she has to face a society that has constructed this choice as irresponsible, maybe even selfish. If she has a male partner who is not already a father she has to face a society that will blame her for taking away his reproductive potential if she decides she does not want to have a child. Her male partner may feel pressured by society to procreate even if he does not want children and to choose a partner who is within a medically approved childbearing age range regardless of who he loves. Even in a society where marriages fail on a fairly regular basis we, as a society, still think the nuclear family, brought about through the "Traditional Marriage Enterprise," is the ideal and the only fully socially approved relationship structure. Cougar identity offers women the opportunity to have casual, sexual relationships with younger men but forecloses the possibility of a lasting relationship if both partners have not traveled the path of procreation previously. Absence of long-term

commitment may be acceptable to some women but there are costs and benefits whichever direction middle-aged women choose.

Despite the seeming potential for cougar identity to empower women and offer them new choices previously unavailable, it brings with it limits. If a woman is going to accept cougar as an identity then she has to accept being left out of traditional marriage and family. She has to accept being sexually marginalized. Even though there have been attempts to reimagine the term cougar (cf. Franklin), it still carries a stigma. Medical discourse plays a vital role in the construction of over-thirty-five women as carrying a dangerous kind of fertility, a social and medical proscription, that renders them socially infertile. Until medical discourse changes to represent statistics without the skewed judgmental gloss, women will continue to be seen as deviant for having children over the age of thirty-five. Unless this social taboo changes, women over thirty-five will continue to be restricted in their partner, marital and parenting choices.

CONCLUSION

“I'm just in a bad place in my life, Josh. It's like an outlet mall. You think you're getting a deal but you're not. They're just selling you poor quality stuff. It's a trick is what it is.”

~ Jules on *Cougar Town* (“A Woman in Love: It's Not Me”)

When someone tells me I look hot for my age I am initially flattered and later a bit offended and then question myself for feeling flattered. “Hot for your age” indicates a different standard of beauty for women in different age brackets and sets up a hierarchy of attractiveness that values youth. “Hot for your age” means you are attractive despite the socially constructed assumption that women beyond a certain age are not attractive or are declining in their sexual capital. “Hot for your age” indicates, as does the acronym MILF, both used to describe many older women, that you are deemed attractive enough for a young man to be sexually aroused by you: You are an exception to the rule that aging means loss of sexual desirability. Women are supposed to be flattered by this “compliment” about our successful conquering of the aging process and we do often take it as such. Why? We are part of a culture that values youth, we make efforts to conform to our society's standards of youthful beauty, and therefore we help perpetuate that system. As Judith Butler says, we are part of a “reiterative and citational practice” that continually reinscribes social norms (2). Therefore we sometimes feel flattered when we are said to have stunned the observer for looking younger than our chronological age would suggest.

Due to social pressures to conform to a youth-focused culture, older women undergo various body sculpting, grooming and modification procedures intended to help them pass for younger. They pay close attention to their wardrobe, as well, choosing youthful styles and cuts

that accentuate their bodies. The goal is to hide any perceived flaws and to look as though the beautiful exterior you have achieved is effortless and natural because in addition to pressures to conform there are pressures to hide any efforts, like cosmetic surgery, we may undergo to do so. We are not only expected to look younger but to do so without help from a surgeon. This additional pressure can create distance between a woman and her family and friends. She may feel the need to hide her procedures from them. If she is successful, her reward is the attention of men and the admiration of other women who applaud and admire her youthful appearance, if she is a married older woman, that is.

Problems can arise when the older woman in question is recently divorced and her youthful appearance is read as a threat. When a woman is hailed as a cougar, or when she decides to take on the cougar identity, she faces rewards but also additional pressures and challenges. To use Victor Turner's very apt word, a divorced woman exists in a "liminal" space outside the bounds of a traditional life trajectory. The divorce creates a breach of a social contract which can cause social tension (Turner). The divorced woman is seen as a threat to society's expectations for life stage progression. She does not fit. I see the cougar as a way for this threat to be contained. Labeling allows us to know where a person fits in society and how to respond to their existence in our world. By pairing these older unattached women with young unattached men (far more available than older men), the threat of a divorced woman damaging other marriages is lessened. While she is preoccupied with dalliances with young men, she is contained. This label also allows the cougar to be marginalized which would render her voice and actions inconsequential as far as normalized society is concerned but since cougar relationships are always seen as temporary the threat is not permanently contained. Her marginal status does not

mean she is easily dismissed since she is continually seen as a potential threat. The cougar is never reintegrated but effects, in Turner's words, a schism in normalized society.

With more and more women returning to college for new degrees or additional career training, thereby coming into frequent contact with young available men, potential for cougar relationships is increased. Not only is proximity implicated in this situation but also commonality of interests, the basis of many relationships. Since women who are rebuilding a life as singles, re-learning how to live on their own, and often following interests and dreams long abandoned are coming into close contact with men who are striking out on their own for the first time, these couples have more than interest and availability in common. They share similarities in life stage. Young men in their twenties and older, divorced women in their thirties or forties are both in stages of their lives where they are building or rebuilding their futures. This commonality can create a kind of understanding that can lead to close bonds.

The danger for the women in these relationships is bonding too closely with her young partner and experiencing emotional trauma when the relationship ends. The cougar is an identity laden with temporality. Older woman/younger man relationships are not expected to last despite the potential strong bond that may exist between the partners. I believe part of the reason for this lack of a future as a couple is related to how we think about reproduction and how we define, as a culture, what a woman's child-bearing years are. As I discussed in chapter three, medical discourse warns of higher risk factors for a variety of birth defects and pregnancy complications for women over-thirty-five. While a woman is physically capable of bearing children until her body has gone through menopause (around age fifty for most women), the years directly prior to menopause are not seen as childbearing years in our culture. In medical discourse, women over-

thirty-five are frequently compared to women in their twenties painting a picture of healthy fertility in younger women and suspect fertility in older women that are still pre-menopausal. Although there may be other factors, this constructed social infertility plays a role in some women over-thirty-five ruling out having children, or more children. What I am arguing is that medical discourse on reproduction has an impact on partner selection for women over the age of thirty-five if they are seeking a long-term partner. Medical discourse is a factor that not only helps to frame society's notions about the reproductive viability of a woman over-thirty-five but also has an impact on how a woman views herself and her place in a relationship. Recognizing the strong social pressure for long term relationships to be procreative, and medical discourse that frames her as having a dangerous kind of fertility best to be avoided, a woman may choose not to have children during this time period strictly based on factors outside of her own desires. I am not suggesting that all women over-thirty-five should consider or reconsider having a child during this time period. Instead, I am suggesting that we begin to consider why we think we should not and how that construction of self affects our relationships.

I am also suggesting that men consider how they feel about fatherhood, where these thoughts originate and how these thoughts affect their relationships. Men, regardless of age, who are not yet fathers, can experience social pressures to choose a partner with whom to have children. As Daniel J. Levinson's and Victor Turner's research indicates, we expect that by a certain age a person will marry and have a family. While that age may vary through time and by culture, this heterosexual imperative, as Judith Butler calls it, exists and drives our long-term partner choices. The cougar may be a temporary placeholder in the life of a young man, satisfying sexual and emotional needs, but ultimately not the woman he will choose to partner

with long-term if he wishes to have a family. This procreative desire, fueled by social pressure, can potentially create such a strong procreative mission that a man, regardless of his feelings for his current partner, leaves an otherwise satisfying relationship that is non-procreative, or perceived to be so if his partner is a woman over-thirty-five, to seek one that may be. I have experienced this personally and have also seen the same messages enacted in media.

The cougar in media is treated as a comedic interlude or a what-not-to-do warning. Until *Cougar Town*, a cougar character was always part of the subplot not the protagonist. She came and went in several episodes of popular television shows like *How I Met Your Mother*. The over-thirty-five divorced woman sometimes appears without the cougar label. She has been used effectively in recent television comedy as a foil for the more respected characters like Claire of *Modern Family*. Even in *Cougar Town* a dichotomy exists between Jules, the reluctant, respectable cougar, and Barb, the stereotypical, over-the-top, not-to-be-taken-seriously cougar. Where Jules shows women how to be, Barb is the example of what not to be. In the beginning Jules embraces the label cougar and begins to enjoy dating younger men. Eventually, *Cougar Town*, the only network television sitcom to featuring an over-thirty-five, divorced, lead cougar character, has moved from focus on older woman/younger man relationships to pairing the lead cougar lady with a man her age. Not only that, but in the tenth episode of season three, “Southern Accents,” we discover that Barb, the only other cougar in *Cougar Town*, has also married. Her new husband is the mayor of the fictional Gulfhaven, Florida and is played by sixty-seven year old Barry Bostwick. Barb has clearly also given up her cougar ways. There are no longer any cougars in *Cougar Town*.

Not only have the relationships changed but so has the network. *Cougar Town* began on

ABC. This January, 2013, the series is making a move to TBS. The series creators have considered changing the series name since the beginning of season two. Instead of a name change they opted for funny title cards where they often comically chastise themselves for calling the show *Cougar Town*. For example, some of the title cards say “(Still) Cougar Town,” “Badly Titled Cougar Town,” “100% Cougar Free Cougar Town,” “It’s Okay to Watch a Show Called Cougar Town,” “Sorry, We Still Cringe at the Title Cougar Town,” and “She’s marrying a man her own age so why is it called Cougar Town?” TBS continued with the self-deprecating comedy with their new ads for the show. One ad titled, “Crappy Title” explains, “Wow! This worked out nice. I just so happens that we at TBS were looking for a comedy with a beautiful cast and a crappy title.” Another ad titled, “Jules Explains Cougar Town,” tries to comically explain the dissonance between the title and the content of the show. Jules explains:

Have you ever thought something about something only to find out you were wrong? Well, if you're nodding your head yes or no, odds are we're talking about the show *Cougar Town*. Maybe you thought it was a show about cougars or maybe you thought it was about the other kind of cougars. Whatever you think you thought, think about this. *Cougar Town* isn't about cougars or cougars. It's about friends who are like family and like to drink a lot of wine around a kitchen counter.

The announcer follows with, “*Cougar Town*: It's everything you thought it wasn't.” The first season of *Cougar Town* was clearly following the life of a newly divorced woman who was dating younger men; in other words a cougar. After that, a shift happened and Jules was paired with a man her age. It took until season three for Barb to also be paired with a partner of socially

acceptable age.¹⁵ In the life of the series claiming a cougar identity lasted only a year in Jules' life. The show creators clearly could not maintain the narrative or chose not to. I believe they did not see a future for Jules as a cougar and that is quite telling. The show took a risk embracing the cougar stereotype but eventually circled back to socially acceptable narratives. There is no permanence with cougar identity as depicted in media.

I have embarked on this research project to bring to light some of the issues implicit in the labeling of women over-thirty-five as cougars. Too often we see comedic representations and view them only as caricatures without delving into the deeper meanings behind them. Until *Cougar Town* came on the air in 2009 there were no leading cougar characters on television (at least not labeled as such). Since then many have appeared on single episodes or sometimes short recurring roles as did Jane Seymour on *How I Met Your Mother*. Their stories do not last and we are left to wonder what happened to them. *Cougar Town* opted to show Jules marrying a man her age thus leaving behind her cougar identity. All this points to the socially accepted idea that the cougar is a sideshow character not the main attraction and the woman who is labeled cougar is appropriately marginalized, ridiculed and laughed at as a way to reinscribe normative relationship structures. With this idea in mind what happens in cougar-identifying women's everyday lives? What impact does living as a cougar temporarily have on a woman's future, if any? How does living as a cougar change the way we think of relationships, or does it? In this thesis, I only begin to answer the many questions about cougar identity. I have found that cougar identity is constructed as temporary, is influenced by medical discourse on reproduction, and is possibly a way to socially sanction women who fall out of socially accepted life trajectories.

¹⁵It is not clear if Barry Bostwick's character is intended to be the same age as Barb or older.

Instead of allowing over-thirty-five divorced women to continue to float unattached as a threat to normalized communities, we have constructed a position for her, albeit temporary and stigmatized. We have glamorized the cougar lifestyle through media depictions and self-help books. The cougar is a fun-loving, fast-living woman who does not think about the future, does not have plans for long-term relationships or family and is content to have casual relationships with young men who will eventually move on to partner with more age-appropriate women. The cougar, as described and depicted, is happy to be free of her pair-bonded life with a husband and children. She is happy to be free to do as she pleases. But always under that happy, fun-loving discourse is the expectation that she will age with time and she is not really happy unless she has a man with whom she can permanently bond.

Moving beyond the cougar label is difficult, too, as Jules learns after leaving that label behind her. In the thirteenth episode of season two of *Cougar Town* entitled “Lost Children,” Jules runs into Barb and the following discussion occurs:

BARB. Oh, hello Jules. I just finished the tastiest Cuban sandwich.

JULES. Barb, I'm going to stop you right there and assume that you're not talking about your lunch but rather two young Cuban boys that did horrible things to you.

BARB. Hector and Julio. Yes, they're cousins.

JULES. Why me? Why do you want to torture me with your filthy stories?

BARB. You used to be one of us, stalking young prey without mercy or shame.

JULES. When are people going to understand that's not who I am anymore? What do I have to do, change my name?

BARB. You'll be back. The filth is strong within you.

Here, as I discussed in Chapter 1, we see women policing other women. Jules is insisting she has moved beyond the cougar lifestyle and she chastises Barb for continuing her “filthy” ways. Since Jules is now in a socially acceptable relationship, she feels she can again take up the position of the “most legitimate or authoritative representatives of the relevant community” (Turner 92) which she previously had when she was married. She is now using her position to police the actions of other women as she had been policed. Barb's retort holds little sway since it is coming from the marginal voice of the “filthy” cougar. This moment is a reflection of the way the cougar label has felt to me. As I have described throughout this thesis, dating younger men has been a function of the contours of my life at this time. I never self-identified as a cougar but I have repeatedly been referred to by that label. This thesis has been an attempt to detail the lived experience of one woman, me, living under the label cougar and what the glamorized cougar persona is actually like outside of the having-it-all attractive media depictions.

I have focused attention on the intersection of sexuality, age and gender in this thesis. Through my research process additional questions have emerged. What I have not discussed are issues invoking race and class in cougar identity. All of the television representations I have mentioned, and most celebrities labeled as cougars, are white upper-middle to upper class women. Future considerations looking more closely at how race and class affect women who choose to identify as cougars that might not be financially well off or who are women of color.

Does society recognize them as cougars? How does their social position affect their experience of cougar identity? Are they afforded more or less flexibility in partner choice at this stage of their life than do women who fit the stereotypical representation?

Also, when reviewing medical discourse on reproduction, I learned that the medical establishment often compares mid-life women to younger women. When thinking about the construction of cougar as temporary, I wondered if allowing young men these brief relationships with older women removes some of the pressure young women face surrounding sexual relations. Are young men turning more to older women to satisfy sexual desires and does this have any effect on sexual relationships with their age peers? These questions are not easily answered and fuel my future research interests.

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