



old lesbians

Discussion Guide

A Film by Meghan McDonough, 2023

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Using This Guide



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Old Lesbians seeks to create a space for intentional conversation about and exploration of lesbian and queer history. This guide is a way to invite communities and viewers into these discussions and dialogues. It is designed for anyone who wants to use *Old Lesbians* as a way to engage with lesbian queer herstories and intergenerational dialogues with their friends, family, classmates, colleagues, and communities.

The discussion questions and prompts provided have been curated to help an audience with a variety of viewpoints engage with the topics of the film and with each other. Do not feel like you need to answer every question, but take the time to reflect on what topics of questions will be most beneficial to your unique community, while also leaving time for follow-up questions, resources, and action steps for further engagement and discussion outside of the event.

**For further screening requests and more information on the film,
visit www.oldlesbiansfilm.com.**

Background

Having once lived in fear of losing her job for who she loved, Arden Eversmeyer recognized the importance of reclaiming the words ‘old’ and ‘lesbian’ with pride rather than shame. In 1998, after losing her partner of three decades and realizing that many of her Houston peers would die before telling their truth, Arden purchased a small audio recorder and began taping. As the Old Lesbian Oral Herstory Project (OLOHP) expanded by word of mouth, Arden and others began to road-trip across the country to gather more.



Only about half of the interviewees are still alive. Many once believed they were alone in what they felt; they did not have examples in the media nor vocabulary. Still, they carved out lives for themselves with no blueprint in a patriarchal and heteronormative society. Through archival footage and audio, animation, and vérité scenes in the present day, Old Lesbians takes viewers inside these women’s lives– from beginnings to “ah-ha” moments to coming out and proudly living their hard-earned herstories.

Discussion Questions

- What are your initial reactions to the film?
- Which scenes or interview clips stuck with you most and why?
- Was any historical detail from the film completely new to you? What detail? What does learning this detail mean to you?
- How does the Old Lesbian Oral Herstory Project reclaim stigmatized words? What are other words that can be reclaimed in this way?
- What are the advantages of oral history as a method of preservation? What do we gain when participants tell their own stories in their own words?
- Do you have any thoughts on ways to seek out and uplift queer history and women's history?
- What does the term "herstory" mean to you?
- Why is it important to preserve lesbian history? What barriers exist to doing so?
- Which herstories resonated most with you? Which were harder to relate to and why?

Discussion Questions

- If you could ask anyone in the documentary a single question, whom would you ask and what would you want to know?
- What did you learn from this film that you wish everyone knew? What would change if everyone knew it?
- If you could require one person (or one group) to view this film, who would it be? What do you hope their main takeaway would be?



- Do you have any thoughts on how our language describing sexual identity has evolved over time?
- What can younger generations learn from LOAF and others in the film about building and maintaining strong queer communities?
- How can we create truly intergenerational spaces for dialogue?

Next Steps



Research Local Queer History Organizations

Getting connected with the history of your area is a great start to learning more about queer history in general. Lots of groups worldwide are dedicated to the preservation of local queer history – whether you’re looking for an archive in your town or an affinity group connecting queer historians in the region, there’s an organization for everyone.

Talk to Members of Other Generations

Whether we’re young or old, lesbian or not, anywhere in between, we can learn a lot from those who came before us.

Talk to your parents, grandparents, teachers, mentors, and neighbors, and ask about their experiences in the world – how they grew up, how they remember the world and community in the past, their connections to historical movements and events, and their journey to become who they are today. Make sure to balance the conversation between serious and joyful memories – we want to learn about all parts of someone’s history. You can even take a page from the OLOHP’s book and record the conversations (with their consent, of course!)



Preserve Your Own History

Collect an archive of your own by preserving parts of your life you want to remember, or that you want others to remember in the future. Capture memories by taking photos, filming, or writing down your favorite moments. Find documents and artifacts you want to save – ticket stubs, pins, letters from friends, posters and flyers, even clothing – that will remind you of specific moments of your life. Encourage your friends to do the same! If you want to go further, you can write down your own queer journey in a notebook or gather your friends to share your stories with each other!



Resources

Following your discussion, we encourage you to direct participants and community members toward several resources to further discuss the topics brought up by Old Lesbians. These resources can also serve as a guide for you before your discussion!

Old Lesbian Oral Herstory Project (OLOHP)

You can find Arden Eversmeyer's work and the archive of old lesbian voices in the OLOHP collection, which is now housed with Smith College Special Collections. Though the film animates these stories and brings these voices to life, we also encourage viewers to continue their own research of the collection and explore these stories for themselves. Find more information at [Smith College Libraries](#) or olohp.org

National Resource Center on LGBTQ+ Aging

The country's first resource for the support of older adults who identify as part of the LGBTQ+ community, their families, and caregivers, the National Resource Center has many virtual services including a library and archive to document LGBTQ+ history, as well as education on support, technical assistance, and mental health services. You can find more information at lgbtagingcenter.com.

Services and Advocacy for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, & Transgender Elders (SAGE)

SAGE works with the National Resource Center to provide lifesaving mental health support for the LGBTQ+ elderly, who are more likely to live alone and in crisis than other LGBTQ+ age groups or their heterosexual peers. They provide support groups and connections to other like identities, as well as information on advocacy rights, focusing on specific issues prevalent to the LGBTQ+ community. Find more information at sageusa.org.

National Center for Lesbian Rights(NCLR)

While working to support the rights of all identities within the LGBTQ community, NCLR focuses specifically on lesbians and LGBTQ women, connecting to legal resources to advance lesbian and queer rights. On their website, you can find past case studies, learn about laws related to the LGBTQ community, and connect with their legal helpline. There's even a page focused on elderly rights at nclrights.org.

Lesbians Over Age Fifty (LOAF)

As portrayed in the film, LOAF was founded by Arden Eversmeyer prior to the OLOHP and is still going strong today! Old Lesbians can join and socially network with other women exploring their sexuality and seeking a strong community. LOAF is predominantly Houston-based; however, their website can be found at lesbiansoverage50.org.

Documenting Lesbian Lives Oral History Project

Documenting Lesbian Lives is an oral history project based out of Smith College that pairs student interviewers with older people who “consider themselves to be (presently or at one time) lesbian, queer or bisexual.”* This intergenerational project records narrators’ life histories, providing important primary sources to American lesbian history. You can find more information about the collection at [*https://findingaids.smith.edu/repositories/2/resources/909](https://findingaids.smith.edu/repositories/2/resources/909)

Invisible Histories

Invisible Histories prides itself on being an unapologetically queer and Southern resource for LGBTQ History in the Deep South. Their Queer History South conference appears in the film and their trailblazing work is preserving queer history, making it accessible, and further protecting our queer futures! They work with scholars and institutions to provide direct access to materials, archives, educational resources, and programming. You can check them out at invisiblehistory.org

LGBTQ+ and Women's Texas Histories

Compiled by Agatha Beins in March 2024, this presentation links to queer history resources local to the Texas area. This can serve as an example of resources tailored to specific communities. We encourage you to create your own guide for your own unique community.

Houston LGBT History.

J.D. Doyle was a close friend of Arden's and meticulously documented her efforts with LOAF (Lesbians Over Age Fifty) in his archive of Houston queer history. This resource was extremely helpful in the making of the film! We also recommend his Queer Music History 101 lesson plan to anyone interested in queer history and culture.

Lillian Faderman

The award-winning historian Lillian Faderman, who is featured in the OLOHP and *Old Lesbians*, has a plethora of books on lesbian history, encompassing periods like the Renaissance and the turn of the century, while others focus on more niche topics, like the queer history of Los Angeles. Notable titles include:

- *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America,*
- *To Believe in Women – What Lesbians Have Done for America*
- *Chloe Plus Olivia: An Anthology of Lesbian Literature from the 17th Century to the Present*
- *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship & Love Between Women from the Renaissance to the Present*
- *Gay L.A.: A History of Sexual Outlaws, Power Politics, and Lipstick Lesbians*

You can find more information about Lillian Faderman and more of her books at lillianfaderman.net

Thank you!

It is because of community builders like you that this film is possible, and the stories of the Old Lesbian Oral Herstory Project live on. We appreciate the efforts you are making to preserve queer history and to facilitate these important conversations, which we hope will lead to more understanding, education, and collaboration among people of all generations.

Please contact oldlesbiansfilm@gmail.com if you have any questions or suggestions to improve our discussion guide.

