Old and Gay: An Exploration of Mary in *Strangers in Good Company* (1990)

Cythica Scott's *Strangers in Good Company* (1990) features seven elderly women along with one young Black woman that have to come together to survive the Canadian wilderness after their bus breaks down on the way to a location unknown to the viewer. Scott's use of the docu-fiction genre (the bus breaking down being the primary source of the film's "fiction") invites the viewer to think about subjects such as aging and beauty from the perspective of old women– a topic that is missing from scholarly research. The lack of vulnerability for women to address the imbalance of standards is stated by feminist theorists such as Susan Sontag. But there's even less information about the effect of normative beauty standards on queer individuals. To bridge this gap Mary Meigs, a lesbian casted in *Strangers in Good Company*, is able to speak on the lack of dialogue about identity's effect on beauty and aging. The film serves as a historical document of attitudes about these overarching topics in the 1990s. As a result, I want to look at Beth, a more buttoned-up figure who is illustrative of what film offers on critical insights of aging and beauty of women, in addition to looking at Mary Meigs for illustrating interest of queer perspectives.

Though limited research exists on *Strangers in Good Company*, surprisingly, most of the commentary on the film is about its unique genre, not the value that comes out of it. Articles like, "Semi-Documentary/Semi-Fiction: An Examination of Genre in *Strangers in Good Company*," written by Michigan Technological University's assistant professor Diana George, highlight the balance between the two genres. Although this article mentions the casting process and the resulting relationships that were formed amongst the women, it never dives into the critical conversations present in the film. In effect, this source serves as a summary of the conversations in *Strangers* and an analysis on the cast's unification instead of highlighting the authentic

conversations about beauty and aging. Don't get me wrong, it is true that this genre was significant to forming the connections amongst the women and allowed the actresses to truly share their lives with each other, but scholarly sources omit the insights of these women.

Before talking about Mary's identity and its effect on her perspective of beauty and aging, it is important to understand why the women formed a unifying bond with each other. Luckily, Mary Meigs published a book about her experience during the production process of *Strangers in Good Company* where she includes further information about the cast's lives and film's production. It is never mentioned where the women were going, or if they knew each other at all before getting on the bus. Assuming that in the fictional storyline of Scott's film these women were meeting for the first time, just as they were all cast separately in real life, it is shocking how quickly they opened up with each other. In her book, *In the Company of Strangers*, Mary begins with the casting process that eventually provided the older women an opportunity to not only act but also become vulnerable with each other. Mary Meigs writes about forming vulnerability in her book: "... since we did not know each other, that choice of us eight women would bind us into an entity, that the particles of our lives would open up and make room for our shared particles, and we would no longer be ourselves, the same old selves" (Meigs 21). Her words show that by creating this feeling of unity, the vulnerability featured in the film developed as the cameras were rolling. During the filming process, the women began making "room for [the] shared particles", which reinforces that the women felt safe enough with each other to deeply open up about their pasts and insecurities, and ultimately become new people after the experience. In this way, the film serves as a remarkable time stamp of the womens' unification.

To look more into how these women were able to open up with each other so easily, especially talking about beauty and aging, something that lacks research and has become a taboo,

I turned to Susan Sontag, an American writer about areas of conflict such as illness, war, and human rights. In her article, "The Double Standard of Aging," which highlights the problematic attitude of how society places greater pressure on women as they age, Sontag argues, "[n]othing more clearly demonstrates the vulnerability of women than the special pain, confusion, and bad faith with which they experience getting older" (Sontag 24). Thus for the women in *Strangers in Good Company*, their age is a critical factor in how easily they are able to open up with each other. Throughout the film, I was astonished to see the depth of the women's conversations and the level of comfort that they had quickly formed, such as when Mary casually mentions that she is a lesbian to Cissy while they are birdwatching. Setting this "coming out" during a relaxing task like birdwatching asserted that Mary did not find discomfort in revealing her sexuality. Through this scene and Sontag's point about older women sharing "special pain, confusion, and bad faith with which they experience getting older," it became apparent that the ease for vulnerability was catalyzed by the commonality between their ages. This similarity fostered an environment in which they were all biologically going through the same changes, and thus, as Songtag mentions, psychologically impacted by the same unfair treatment when it came to beauty standards.

In order for me to talk about Mary and queer perspectives I want to talk about aging and societal standards for women generally. Perhaps the best individual to look to for how the *Strangers* embodies societal beauty standards and portrays aging as something one needs to hide is 80-year-old Beth. In the film, she is filmed fixing her make-up and later revealing that she has a wig. Her actions correspond to something Sontag addresses in her article: "It is expected that women will disappear several times in an evening… simply to check their appearance, to see that nothing has gone wrong with their make-up and hairstyling…" (Sontag 22). Through showing us

Beth removing her wig, Scott breaks the expectations mentioned in Songtag's work. But, we can see the impact of societal standards because the next time we see Beth, the wig is back. In fact, Meigs writes about this in her book, "[i]n one of [Beth's] big scenes she takes off her wig with a decisive gesture, and then more courageous still, she appears wigless for dinner… The next day Beth is wearing her wig again" (Meigs 52-53). To clarify, this moment did not only happen in the film, but behind the scenes, Beth had taken off her wig for a dinner with the cast and crew, only to return to the comfort of her wig the next day. By returning back to wearing her wig, Beth conforms to the expectations Songtag addresses. Beth demonstrates that she was empowered only in the instant but could not accept her authentic hair, even if she was surrounded by women that embraced their natural aging beauty. Beth's heteronormative actions in *Strangers* are what should be studied and they add significant information about the way old women are affected by the standards that were set in their youth.

Not only did *Strangers in Good Company* effectively provide commentary on the long lasting effects of beauty standards in heterosexual women, the film also provided significant commentary on the unseen minority of older lesbians. Gloria Demer, collaborative writer of *Strangers*, "[had] a relatively simple image; she [was] looking for a lesbian" (Meigs 16). But seeking out an older woman just because she was a lesbian came with its own issues. Mary Meigs recalls in her book that she did not just want to play the role of "the token lesbian". With help from Cynthia, "who [seemed] not to care, who [seemed] to realize without saying it that lesbians wriggle uneasily when the word is thrown over us, obliterating everything about us except *that*", Mary agreed to participate in the film (Meigs 17). I found Mary's perspective on this casting choice very interesting. I think that directors usually look to check off demographic boxes when casting, but Mary's adamant concern of being flattened as a character was reassuring

as she was looking for her character to exist first as a person, then as a lesbian. Holding this lesbian identity that often defies societal standards of how one should act and look often meant that she was reduced to this identity, something that she didn't want to carry over into the film.

In the film, Mary's character doesn't center around her sexuality, something that she was worried about during the casting process. She does come out to Cissy during the first third of the film, but the scene reveals more about the attitudes of the women and raises questions about the ease with which older queer individuals can come out. Given that this film was released in 1990, a pivotal decade for gay rights during which the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy was instituted in the US military, I was impressed with the ease of which Mary comes out. About a third into the film during her conversation with Constance, Mary comments on growing up as a lesbian stating, "... it was very hard in my generation. We were the secret generation… You had to be [ashamed of it] back then… You had to hide it. It's hard not to be when everybody disapproves of you" (35:07-35:26). Coming out to strangers is a fear-inducing thought to queer individuals, and speaking on their experiences takes another level of vulnerability, making Mary a rare example– one which is critical to unpack.

Still interested by the ease of Mary coming out to Cissy, I wanted to explore why she was open to sharing her identity with the other women. Even in the present where there are advancements being made toward LGBT rights, it can feel like the media is writing stories and hiring actors from that demographic to check off boxes. Now, even though Gloria wanted to feature a lesbian in *Strangers*, the docu-fiction genre allowed for vast flexibility when it came to Mary's agency in the film. Mary became comfortable talking about her identity in the film due to the environment, as previously stated and also seen with Beth momentarily taking off her wig to reveal her natural hair. But her easygoingness could also be explained by her intersecting age and

sexuality. Raymond Berger, Ph.D., and ex-Assistant Professor at the School of Social Work, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, was well known for publishing work on aging in homosexual individuals. In his article, "The Unseen Minority: Older Gays and Lesbians," he aims to bring awareness to the social work field about "special needs of a large but often ignored group: elderly gay men and lesbians" (Berger 236). He provides an explanation of why it is easier for older homosexuals to come out, reasoning that they have spent their whole life hiding this part of their identity, and now in their old age don't have anything to fear by coming out as many of the factors that would have prevented them from living their true selves are now gone (such as their parents and emotional and financial dependence from them). This explanation is apparent in Mary's conversation with Cissy where she explains that she was "the silent generation."

Furthermore, Mary's physical appearance can be used to contrast that of Beth, and it provides an insight on the different attitudes about aging in homosexuals. In the same article, Raymond Berger explains how older lesbians "place less importance on youthful appearance… [and]... are less concerned about growing older and more likely to want to grow old with a lover," which is apparent by Mary's physical appearance of tall, slim, white hair, glasses, and Reeboks (236). Mary's physical appearance even stunned Gloria who mentioned in a 1989 letter that when she was first scouting for lesbians she was looking for a "'short, wire-spectacled, plump, dress-wearing, 'passing for straight,' Westmount matron'" (Meigs 16). Mary's dialogue with Cissy about living with women throughout her youth also confirms that Mary placed more importance on having a partner throughout her life than spending time fixated on her appearance like Beth who "[i]n photographs of her as a young woman, she [was] a dark-haired beauty with an oval face, and irresistibly flirtatious smile" (Meigs 51). But because "[t]he calendar is the

final arbiter" for the woman, and "time constraints her beauty and therefore her purpose in life," Beth puts her wig back on to try and upkeep her beauty throughout the film unlike Mary who has placed less importance on her looks (Sontag 21).

Through the examination of Beth and Mary in *Strangers in Good Company*, it is evident that the women hold different perspectives on beauty and aging based on their identities. Beth, the more buttoned-up figure, aligns with Susan Sontag's theories on beauty standards in women. Both in the film and behind the scenes, Beth is dedicated to looking her best, the prime example being her attachment to her wig, whereas Mary, the lesbian, portrays herself as relaxed and vulnerable to the point that she can casually speak on her sexuality. But something that this paper could not begin to explore were the montages from the womens' childhoods, something that deepened the connection between the viewer and the actresses through directly allowing access into the womens' pasts. Simone De Beauvoir, French philosopher and writer about feminism from the 1900s, argues in *The Second Sex* that for women, "past experiences make a person of her whether she likes it or not… this autonomy is intimidating; she tries to disavow it; … she ostentatiously brings up her memories of girlhood," something that the montages directly explored (De Beauvoir 705). This documentation of the past humanized the old women, but severely leaned into the documentary aspect of the film. To me, the incorporation of the montages is still unclear, but I do know that through their inclusion, I no longer felt like the women were solely strangers providing good company.

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