

**The Women's Studies Research Center Internship:
Student-Scholar Partnership (SSP)
Project Proposal Form Fall 2011**

SCHOLAR INFORMATION

Name: Elizabeth Markson

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Brandeis Affiliation: Resident scholar

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Are there dates during the semester when you will be traveling/unreachable? Please specify.
no

PROJECT INFORMATION

Title of Project: Depictions of Older Women in Feature Film, 1930-2008

Is this a Continuing SSP Project or a brand-new project? continuing

STUDENT PARTNER INFORMATION

Have you participated in the Student-Scholar Partnership in prior years? Yes _____ No x_____
(Please specify year and student's name if yes)

Will you be continuing with a student partner from a previous semester? Yes _____ No x_____
If continuing, please provide the student's name and contact information:

Do you have a particular new student candidate or candidates with whom you would like to work?
Yes _____ No x_____
If yes, please provide each student's name and contact information:

Please note the Hiring Deadline is rolling so interviews (if appropriate) must be completed as soon as possible after receipt of application.

Student-Scholar Partnership
Fall 2011
Project Proposal

What is your timeline for work to commence on your research project this semester?

September--shortly after beginning of semester. The student can work for one or both semesters.

Scholars and faculty members participating in the SSP Program are required to meet with their student research assistants on a weekly basis for supervision.

Please explain how you will fulfill this commitment. Where do you plan to hold supervision meetings?

Profile of a Suitable Student Candidate:

	<i>Required</i>	<i>Preferable</i>
related coursework	_____	<u>psychology, social sciences/humanities.</u>
technical skills	<u>clear, concise writing</u>	<u>literature search</u>
past experience	_____	_____
similar professional interests	<u>women's studies</u>	<u>film, gender, sociology</u>
other (please indicate)	_____	<u>life course, aging</u>

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Please submit a curriculum vitae and a 3-5 page explanation of the following:

1. Describe your research project.
2. What role will the student play in the project? Please be specific regarding expected responsibilities.
3. How will your project benefit from the student's participation?
4. What specific knowledge or skills will the student acquire from carrying out this work?
5. What do you foresee to be the mutual benefits of the mentoring relationship?
6. Please feel free to add any other information you feel relevant.

Any questions? Please direct them to the Student-Scholar Partnership Coordinator, Kristen Mullin, Women's Studies Research Center, Brandeis University, MS 079, Waltham, MA. 02454-9110
Email: mullin@brandeis.edu

Older Women in Feature Film: A Brief Description of the Project and Research Assistant Opportunities

**Research Scholar: Elizabeth Markson.
Women's Studies Research Center, Brandeis University**

The Project. My project combines several long-term interests: gender, aging, and film. As an avid moviegoer as a child, I am sure that I never thought about the cinematic messages I was receiving about being a girl, a young woman, or an old woman. As an adult feminist film spectator, however, I began to ask the question: “What **is wrong** with this picture?” The women’s movement has traditionally ignored older women; as one older woman activist commented 25 years ago:

“From the beginning of this wave of the women's movement . . . the message has gone out to those of us over sixty that your sisterhood does not include us . . . You do not see us in our present lives, you do not identify with our issues, you exploit us, you patronize us, you stereotype us. Mainly you ignore us.”¹

Older women in general and their portrayals in feature film remain an underrepresented area of feminist studies. My project is a beginning in filling these gaps. Building on my interest in women, popular culture, and aging, it address the general question: “how have ideological and socio-demographic changes affecting older women’s lives been reflected in primarily American feature films (1930-2008)?” The project on older women in film over the decades will illuminate how often ignored 'background count' messages about gender and age are shaped in the idealized cinematic visions promulgated--and sold--in primarily American feature film.

Going to the movies is redefining what a social network is. Movies are an often forgotten form of social media, for we go to films with others, discuss what we have seen, share information about them on Facebook, Twitter, and trade opinions and perceptions about a 'good' or 'bad' film, using the medium of film to reinforce and enhance our social networks. Today, older woman and their depiction are not trivial topics; to stereotype or ignore them cinematically leaves out a huge

¹ MacDonald, Barbara and Rich, Cynthia. 1986. *Look Me in the Eye. Old Women, Aging and Ageism*. San Francisco: Spinsters Ink., p. 6.

sector of the rapidly aging American population (and also has possible economic implications for the film industry itself.) What are we learning about the "graying of America" as baby boomers themselves become 'old'? What cinematic changes have occurred during the period of rapid social change in the past 80 years? Is today's 'grandma' depicted as baking cookies, or incapacitated and in a wheelchair, or a partner in a law firm. As more and more women can expect to live into old age and have worked 'double shifts' as paid workers and wife/mothers, how has Hollywood responded to demographic and social changes in today's older women's lives? Has the women's movement impacted cinematic depictions mirroring age and gender stereotypes?

During the coming year I plan to continue to explore these questions, viewing and re-viewing a random sample of 126 feature films in which female performers, nominated at any age during their lives in their lifetimes for an Oscar, appeared in at least one feature film when age 60 or older during the 1930-2008 period.² Because no single source dealt specifically with movies in which women (or men) age 60+ appeared whether nominated or not for an academy award, I have compiled a filmography of 715 films spanning the 1930-2008 period, and have taken a 10% sample of these for analysis. Academy Award nominees for best or supporting roles were selected not because they appeared in the 'best' films but because they provide a distinct data base. Academy award nominations also generally reflect the idealized images of the 'celluloid dreams' being promoted at a specific time. My long-term goal is to produce both articles and a book that hopefully will call attention to the importance of older women

Student Role and Benefits to the Project. For the coming semester, I hope to work with a student research assistant who is interested in learning more about film, about how women are portrayed in feature film, and in reading and summarizing research and opinions thereon. Specifically, the student will conduct a literature search of print materials about film portrayals of women, with an emphasis on midlife and older women, and will write

² The first year in which the Oscar was awarded was 1929-30. The choice of age 60 is arbitrary—a social fiction-- as is the age at which one is "officially old" enough to receive a pension.

summaries of the findings. My own preliminary explorations suggest that at first glance the films of the 1980's seemed to feature older women, with 3 of the 10 winners of the Academy Award for best actress aged 60 or older. Perhaps reflecting these three Oscar winners, an article by sociologist Andrea Walsh (1989)³ suggested that films depicting older heroines in the 1970s and 1980s represented a filmatic undercurrent of elder advocacy. Is this true? Or, as Helen Mirren recently commented, is it that: "Hollywood film-making continues to worship at the altar of the 18 to 25 year old male and his penis....Quite small I always think" (reported in *The Telegraph*, 2/7/2011). How do print views of older women reflect or construct cinematic portrayals of aging women?

The student research assistant's work will provide a significant background for the monograph that I am planning to write and help provide a context for my own findings from viewing and reviewing cinematic portrayals of older women in feature films, selected randomly over the decades. The student research assistant thus will help expansion of this analysis to consider decade changes, and to identify major themes that are conveyed about older women and trends in cinematic depiction of late life by genre. It will not only flesh out the background for the study but may generate additional hypotheses to be analyzed.

Not only will the project benefit from a targeted and inclusive summary of print materials on midlife and older women in film, but the student assistant will have an opportunity to explore the persistence--or non-persistence--of stereotypes about older women--rich bitch, saintly mother, tycoon, witch, etc. And to think critically about these depictions and what relevance do these messages have, if any, to contemporary social policy debates in the USA.

Student Skills to be Gained/Enhanced. The student assistant will have an opportunity to increase her/his qualitative research skills and analytic skills, not only summarizing print materials but thinking critically about what is being discussed. S/he will

³ Walsh, Andrea. "Life Isn't Yet Over: Older Heroines in American Popular Cinema of the 1930s and 1970s /80s. *Qualitative Sociology* 12 (1) 1989.

also become more familiar with how social science, humanities, and cultural views of portrayals of women in film have varied since 1930 —and to view them considering their socio-historical context. Another gain will be greater familiarity with cultural assumptions about women and the life course, and how going to the movies is redefining what social networks are.

Mutual Benefit. A mutual benefit is the opportunity to contemplate new directions about how women are portrayed in the 'reel' world of cinema and its 'real' relevance for who we are as a nation, our potential power, and allocation of national resources. During almost 8 decades of feature films, remarkable social changes have occurred that especially impact women: greater longevity, more contraceptive and parenting choices, more sexual choices, more educational opportunities, and greater choice and participation in the labor force. .

There is also an opportunity for preparation of a joint paper for presentation or article for publication if the results of the lit search warrant it. I welcome the opportunity also to exchange and bounce ideas about the project and to hone mutual interests in women, aging, film. A benefit for me is the opportunity to work with and mentor a student interested in critical analysis of film focusing on an underrepresented area of feminist studies: older women.

Meeting times. Through feedback on what the student research assistant has found and written plus weekly or bi-weekly discussion at the Women's Studies Research Center, we'll explore together the extent to which these cinematic images reflect persistent or time-bound ageist and gender stereotypes. Exact meeting times will be determined by our mutual schedules.