

**OTHER STORY FORMS OF AGING: PERFORMING AGING AND OLD AGE  
IN CONTEMPORARY, PROFESSIONAL CANADIAN THEATRE**

by

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The following individuals certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies for acceptance, the dissertation entitled:

Other Story Forms of Aging: Performing Aging and Old Age in Contemporary, Professional Canadian Theatre

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## Abstract

This dissertation is a critical exploration of aging and old age in contemporary Canadian theatre. It investigates plays produced on professional stages in recent years, asking in what ways they challenge, complicate, and/or offer alternatives to deep-rooted, stereotypical decline stories of aging, as well as denaturalize other ageist narrative tropes, through aspects of their dramaturgy and/or production. Building on the emerging, but still limited, scholarly work at the intersection of theatre studies and humanities age studies, this dissertation contributes four case studies. Each has its own chapter and centres on one or two key plays. The plays address themes of aging and old age, and each contains one or more characters who have aged past midlife. All plays thematically address areas of concern within the field of age studies, such as age performativity, embodiment, age identities, temporalities of aging, aging female sexuality, age-related memory loss, intergenerational relations, and autobiography. Utilizing mixed research methods that vary across chapters, this study employs dramaturgical close reading, detailed performance analysis, reviews of critical press, analysis of archival video, and interviews with the artistic team of one production. Taken together, the case studies illustrate a range of theatrical mechanisms, both dramaturgical and performative, that function to represent age, aging and old age. At times these mechanisms re-entrench ageist belief systems, however, the unifying focus of the chapters, and primary contribution of this dissertation, is that they reveal age-conscious dramaturgies that resist the narrative of decline and other ageist stereotypes. The study's most important original insights include: a theoretical expansion of Anne Davis Basting's *performative depth model of aging*; expansion of Jill Dolan's *theory of utopian performativity* as applied to autobiographical performances of aging subjects; and an approach to analysing how characters' interactions with dramatic space, stage properties, and structures of time influence narratives of generational continuity or rupture and consequently narratives of aging and old age. In summary, the plays studied offer positive interventions that work to shift Canadian social imaginaries away from repressive understandings of aging and old age, and toward more expansive and socially enfranchising meanings.

## **Lay Summary**

This dissertation explores how aging and old age are represented in contemporary Canadian theatre. It investigates plays produced on professional stages in recent years, asking how they offer alternatives to stereotypical, negative ways of depicting aging and old age. Included are four case studies, each focusing on plays that have themes related to aging and old age, and that contain one or more characters who have aged past midlife. The case studies demonstrate that messages regarding aging and old age are created by a playwright's decisions about genre, story structure, setting, and characterization. They are also influenced by decisions made about how a play is staged and acted in live performance. While at times these decisions can work inadvertently to reinforce negative stereotypes about aging and old age, this study reveals important ways that certain plays staged professionally in Canada in recent years have worked to re-imagine aging and old age in a more positive light.



## Preface

This dissertation is the original, independent work of Julia Henderson with respect to identification and design of the research program, performance of all parts of the research, and analysis of the research data. The research was approved by the UBC Behavioural Research Ethics Board, certificate number: H16-000429.

A version of the Chapter 1 section on the decline narrative is part of a published journal article. The author holds the copyright for this article. The citation is as follows: Henderson, Julia. “‘I’m an old fucking woman as of today’: Sally Clark’s Dramaturgies of Female Aging.” *Age, Culture, Humanities: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, no. 3, 2016, <http://ageculturehumanities.org/WP/preview-issue-3/>.

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An article version of Chapter 4 has been published. All materials are reprinted with the permission of the copyright holder, the University of Toronto, Centre for Drama, Theatre and Performance Studies. The citation is as follows: Henderson, Julia. "Challenging Age Binaries by Viewing King Lear in Temporal Depth." *Theatre Research in Canada/ Recherches Théâtrales au Canada*, vol. 37, no. 1, 2016, pp. 42-61.

Some of the ideas in chapter 6 (specifically the concept of “dramaturgy of assistance” and its application to the production *Sonic Elder*) have been included in an article submitted for publication and currently under review by a peer-reviewed journal.

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## **Dedication**

For Adam, Omar, and Hart, who sacrificed the most for me to do this.

## Chapter 1: Introduction

Theatre and performance have long played a pivotal role in the cultural construction of age, offering narratives of aging and older-aged characters on stages from antiquity to present. Consider, for example, such enduring Western dramas as Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*, Shakespeare's *King Lear*, Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya*, Shaw's *Back to Methuselah*, Beckett's *Endgame* and Albee's *Three Tall Women*. Contemplate, too, the theatrical and performance traditions surrounding the portrayal of aged characters including the following: the gatekeepers, nurses, and bawds of Attic Old Comedy; the *senex amans* and *iratus* characters originating in Greek New Comedy and Roman Comedy; the female *senex* popularized by Restoration Comedy; the idealized elderly pastoral figures in various theatrical forms including Shakespeare's plays, and the elderly tricksters (such as witches, wizards, mischievous schemers, and wise old crones) that persist today in dramatized folk and fairy tales. As I will reflect upon further in Chapter Two, these stereotypes of aging and old age have recurred in various forms of theatre for centuries. Over time theatre has shaped cultural expectations about aging and old age through choices about plot, characterization, theme, style, casting, and embodiment. Dramatic and theatrical traditions continue to find their way onto contemporary stages and help to imagine, construct and reflect how aging and old age are understood and experienced in Western cultures, and more specifically for my study here, in the English language Canadian professional theatre context. In this dissertation, I connect with the broader scholarly literature concerning representations of what it means to age and be old, and I interrogate a range of choices in playwriting and production that build particular cultural understandings of aging and old age.

Prominent age critic Margaret Morganroth Gullette, in her 2004 monograph *Aged by Culture*, provocatively claims that “[. . .] we are aged more by culture than by chromosomes” (101). Similarly, in *Learning to be Old: Gender, Culture, and Aging*, feminist and age studies scholar Margaret Cruikshank speaks to the constructed nature of aging, arguing that “[a]ging is a process socially constructed as a problem. Public discussion of aging in America [and I would add Canada] [are] narrowly focused on politics and economics, while a wide range of other relevant topics is ignored” (7). Cruikshank, Gullette and other theorists in the field maintain that culture has a profound influence on defining the meanings of and establishing the expectations and possibilities for aging and old age. In *Declining to Decline* Gullette writes “[e]verything we know of as culture in the broadest sense—discourses, feelings, practices, institutions, material conditions—is saturated with concepts of age and aging” (3). The fact that cultural influences remain largely under-examined means that messages about aging often remain invisible or are promoted through acritical cultural discourses. As a professional actor who works with and knows many senior actors, directors, designers, and theatre administrators; as a former occupational therapist who worked largely with populations of people over the age of 65; and as a daughter, granddaughter, and daughter-in-law of relatives who have aged past midlife, I have been long frustrated that older characters in plays are frequently much less complex than the engaging elders in my own life. I have witnessed many contemporary professional theatre narratives that have reinforced negative stories and failed to resonate with the interesting and varied experiences of my colleagues, acquaintances, clients, friends and family members. I have also felt a disjuncture between performances of inspirational exceptionality, and what most people can relate to in terms of their own experience of aging.<sup>i</sup> According to Gullette “It matters whether a given society [. . .] permits dense, interesting, encouraging narratives about aging, and

for how long in the life course, and whether those ideas are dominant or merely subordinate or resistant” (*Aged by Culture* 11). This dissertation is an examination of ways that contemporary theatre can challenge, influence, and potentially change problematic cultural narratives about aging and old age—from those that are negative, derogatory, or singular in their focus on decline, to those that simplistically suggest that remaining youth-like in appearance, behaviour and/or values is the only means of aging “successfully.”<sup>ii</sup> How might theatre instead offer new narratives about aging and old age that resonate with lived experience and are socially enfranchising? Exploring salient examples from plays produced in the Anglo Canadian professional theatre context, I try to answer this question.

Prominent age and theatre studies scholar, Valerie Barnes Lipscomb, observes that, while cultural awareness of aging is growing in North American and European contexts, and popular media are beginning to address issues of aging, old age, and ageism, unexpectedly, scholarship has not kept pace with recent public attention to the conventions of performing age (*Performing Age in Modern Drama* 1). Further, she argues, “While other branches of the arts and humanities have begun a critical exploration of what it means to age in our culture, theatre has lagged behind, focusing more on theatre projects with older people than on theorizing age onstage and in dramatic texts” (Lipscomb “Age in M.” 193). She underlines the need for increased scholarship investigating how plays reveal and illuminate cultural constructions of age, aging, and old age (*Performing Age in M.D.* 3).

Such cultural constructions can be examined by investigating age narratives in theatre. “The meanings of age and aging,” argues Gullette, “are conveyed in large part through the moral and psychological implications of the narrative ideas we have been inserting into our heads, starting when we were very young indeed” (*Aged by Culture* 11). In *The Becoming of Age*:

*Cinematic Visions of Mind, Body and Identity in Later Life*, film and age studies scholar, Pamela H. Gravagne, describes how narratives form: “Over time, these shared meanings and ways of being can congeal into systems of knowledge that not only structure our thoughts, emotions, and actions, but provide the context within which we build our theoretical, political, and institutional life” (17). According to Gravagne, “the most appealing and tenacious stories often become myth-like narratives” (18). These narratives have important functions which are outlined by Jan Baars, Professor of Interpretive Gerontology, in “A Triple Temporality of Aging: Chronological Measurement, Personal Experience, and Narrative Articulation.” Baars, an expert in social and philosophical approaches to aging, asserts, “Narratives do not constitute only periods of lives and (aspects of) the identity of a person or a life; stories that are shared in a life world also constitute the cultural codes that shape collective processes and their experiences” (35). According to Baars, traditional narratives play an important role in the transmission of cultural motives and ideals and embody a form of practical intelligence by providing warnings or wisdom. Narratives lay out possibilities and present challenges to reinterpret meaning. In a sense they function as “reconfigurations of life” (“A Triple Temporality” 36). Strikingly, Gravagne argues that, “Nowhere is the power of narrative to shape our lives or the power of our lives to resist narrative more obvious than in old age” (20).

Western culture’s most pervasive master narrative, first theorized in depth by Gullette in *Aged by Culture*, is the narrative of decline (130).<sup>iii</sup> Taking up this idea in relation to his analysis of theatre, Michael Mangan describes decline as “that invisible but dominant cultural ‘message’ which encourages men and women to experience and articulate growing older essentially in terms of loss, isolation, and diminished physical mental and material resources” (8). Decline stories serves to belittle, simplify, stigmatize, exclude, dehumanize, or otherwise limit the



possibilities for understanding old age. According to Gullette, the decline narrative makes people “minor defective characters in someone else’s story,” rather than protagonists of their own lives (*Ending Ageism*, xv). This pervasive narrative, Gullette contends, is one of the principal forces advancing ageism and has become “to the twenty-first century what sexism, homophobia, and ableism were earlier in the twentieth – entrenched and implicit systems of discrimination, without adequate movements of resistance to oppose them” (*Agewise* 15). In her award-winning essay on age-effects in new British theatre, Bridie Moore specifies that writers, artists, performers, and photographers construct age through “social, mediatized, and/or representative acts,” and that “such representations exert a powerful influence on the ways subjects might conceptualize and consequently perform their age or aging” (par. 1).<sup>iv</sup> Therefore, critically analyzing such representations is key to understanding the slippery and often surreptitious nature of cultural age narratives. As Gravagne demonstrates in her chapter “Masculinities and the Narrative of Decline,” it is useful to examine “how successful a character’s attempts [are] to challenge, escape from, or subvert the ability of the narrative of decline to define his [or her] life” (37). I seek to undertake precisely these kinds of examinations here with particular attention to contemporary Canadian professional theatre.

My work builds from and contributes to an emerging body of scholarly work at the intersection of age studies and theatre studies that primarily began in the late 1990s with Anne Davis Basting’s research. Basting, a playwright and scholar, published the first monograph on the interconnections between performance and aging in American Theatre, *The Stages of Age: Performing Age in Contemporary American Culture*. While currently the field offers much compelling work, a great deal remains to be explored in terms of how aging and old age have been expressed in Western drama over time.

There have been a number of rich studies considering representations of aging, old age, and their association with decline in the plays of particular historical playwrights, time periods, or theatrical genres.<sup>v</sup> To date, however, the most comprehensive (but still partial) analysis of the history of the decline narrative in theatre can be found in Michael Mangan's 2013 monograph, *Staging Ageing: Theatre, Performance and the Narrative of Decline*. Mangan notes, "One of the ways ageism is articulated and perpetuated is through stereotypes; and theatre and performance has [sic] always made extensive use of stereotypes and stock characters" (23). As I outline further in Chapter 2, Mangan tracks historical variations of the senex (or stock figure of the old man) and its associated negative stereotypes from its origins in Greek New Comedy and Roman Comedy through to its transformation into the trickster character that still appears (as both aged male and female variants) in contemporary drama and British television sitcom, noting that such caricatures and stereotypes continue to "have an important bearing on the master narrative of decline" in contemporary performance culture (23). While Mangan connects these character types over time, he cautions about our tendency to generalize: "In the past, as in the present, the elderly are seen in a wide variety of ways and are the subject of a wide range of attitudes, beliefs and opinions" (31). Mangan is wisely attentive to diverse approaches and understandings of the elderly over time in theatre. He nonetheless emphasizes the prominent role of the decline narrative in shaping Western theatrical representation of aging and old age for centuries. His assertion of the authority of decline in Western theatre lends support to the relevance of my research.

Although the forces in support of the status quo are many, Gullette argues that there are myriad imaginative possibilities that could provide alternatives, in society generally, or in theatre specifically, especially if audiences explicitly critiqued age ideology and demanded more care

(*Aged by Culture* 11). Conscious cultural intervention is necessary in order to rein in the decline narrative, and search for other stories, meanings, and ways of telling. Gullette calls for us “to go hunting for other story forms of aging” – to replace decline’s authoritative, but “flawed and injurious ideology” (*Aged by Culture* 13). I aim, through this thesis, to respond to Gullette’s call. I have researched and selected plays that offer resistance to decline and other age stereotypes through either their dramaturgy, or through choices made in the process of their production, staging, and/or performance. I also analyse plays that speak to major topics of relevance in the field of age studies: age performativity, embodiment and aging, temporalities of aging, aging female sexuality, age-related memory loss, intergenerational relations, and autobiography. In these ways, and centring on theatre as an important site for cultural exchange, I aim to add to the growing scholarship seeking to unsettle ageist stereotypes and expand critical discourse.

## **1.1 Methodology**

### **1.1.1 Purpose, Research Question, Objectives**

Like other cultural media, theatre cultivates and shapes Canadian perceptions, attitudes, expectations, and experiences of aging and old age. Theatre’s influence on Canadian cultural imaginaries of aging rests not only on plays written by Canadian playwrights, but also on prominent plays written by playwrights of other nationalities and staged in Canada. Of these, American plays in particular, frequently are produced on Canadian stages. Mangan highlights theatre’s particular cultural importance owing to its reliance on live embodiment and use of sign systems:

Indeed, theatre is more inextricably bound up with age ideology than is the case with most art forms. The primary medium of theatrical performance, after all, is the human body. And the human body is always of a specific age – whether that be old or young. The specificity of that age becomes part of the meaning of the theatrical experience as a whole. Moreover, the master narrative of decline may find that the fictions of theatrical performance offer it a particularly convivial home for other reasons. Theatre is, among other things, a sign system which necessarily refers to other sign systems. In particular, it draws on and quotes the signifiers, codes and modalities of everyday life. If the master narrative of decline is indeed, as Gullette suggests, ‘omnipresent’ in the discourses which dominate our lives, then it is to be expected that it will find frequent expression in plays and performances. (Mangan 8-9)

Mangan goes on to argue that theatre not only reinforces the “contradictions and complexities of the ideologies of culture,” but also has the power to play with, question, and contradict them (9). The purpose of this study, then, is to increase understanding of the ways that Canadian professional theatre can both trouble and reframe cultural age narratives. I seek to uncover and analyse select English language plays produced professionally in Canada in recent years to discover the ways in which they challenge negative, decline-focused narratives of aging and old age, as well as how they denaturalize old-age stereotypes such as problematic inspirational images of aging, negative attitudes toward aging sexuality, and uncritical constructions of age-related wisdom. Following Basting’s approach in *The Stages of Age*, I have sought out and chosen plays and performances that represent “a range of performance styles and outlooks on aging” (20), but always with a perspective that resists ageism. The plays and productions that I

discuss serve as examples of theatre that incorporates age-awareness. To this end, I pursue the following central research question: In what ways do five Western plays produced professionally in Canada in recent years challenge, complicate, or offer alternatives to the stereotypical or simplistic decline story of aging, as well as denaturalize other stereotypes and negative narrative tropes concerning aging and old age, through aspects of their dramaturgy and/or production? I have been particularly concerned with the contemporary Canadian professional theatre context as it is the theatrical environment by which I have been most affected as an audience member, artist, and theatre scholar. By professional theatre I mean theatre that is explicitly commercial, marketed to the general public, and responsible for paying its creators and performers.

My central research question can be broken down into four specific objectives, each of which has allowed me to consider theatre's role in the cultural work of constructing meanings for aging and old age. First, I aim to articulate some of the primary cultural messages at the intersection of aging, old age, gender, memory, intergenerational relations and other forms of relationality embedded in contemporary drama and theatrical performance with themes explicitly related to aging and old age. Second, I seek to describe ways in which theatrical productions illuminate understandings and create meanings of aging and old age through choices related to direction (e.g. casting, staging, style), design (e.g. scenography, costuming, soundscape, stage properties), and marketing (e.g. images, rhetoric, audience). Third, I aim to demonstrate how a play's dramaturgy can be mobilized to shift the meaning of aging and old age and thereby alleviate negative cultural attitudes and stereotypes about the experience of aging and being old. My fourth and final objective is to illustrate how embodied performances of age inform our understanding of age performativity, and also how they influence age narratives in both canonical scripts and original works.

### 1.1.2 Scope and Delimitations

In this study I have consciously chosen to seek out alternatives to the simplistic narrative of aging as decline as well as other stereotypes of aging and old age. I acknowledge that some degree of physical and mental decline is an inevitable part of most people's aging experience, and that by excluding decline narratives (or at least traditional straight-forward decline narratives) I am disregarding stories that would resonate with some people as true to their experiences. However, much of the academic work in age studies and cultural gerontology investigates and critiques the forces, structures, processes, strategies, and representations that reinforce ageist stereotypes and decline narratives. As noted above, this study is a response to Gullette's call to seek out and critically analyse *alternatives* to the decline story of aging (*Aged by Culture* 13).

The scope of this study is limited to Western English-language drama and, in all but one case, to plays that have been produced professionally in Canada since 2000, and has been produced by university and high school theatre programs and groups since 2000. The outlier, Sally Clark's *Moo* (first produced in 1988), was produced professionally in Canada prior to 2000. Since it has been anthologized, and produced and taught at Canadian post-secondary institutions, I include it because of its cultural reach and relevance to the other Clark play that I analyse here, *Ten Ways to Abuse an Old Woman* (first produced in 1983).

Recognizing that there are many potentially competing variations within Western and more specifically Canadian culture, in this study I approach mainstream, professional theatre, primarily because I am interested in theatre that reaches a wide audience, but also because my experience in professional theatre prompted my interest. In focusing on this context, I do not wish to undervalue community-based theatre, a sector in which initiatives like senior actor

training (for example, Toronto's Act II Studio<sup>vi</sup>) and senior theatre companies (such as Edmonton's GeriActors and Friends<sup>vii</sup>) have been gaining momentum and challenging audiences in critically and artistically important ways. I recognize that high quality, progressive, and sometimes radical work is developed and performed by non-professional theatre companies. Both Basting (*The Stages of Age* 24-133) and Lipscomb (*Performing Age in M.D.* 157-181) analyse performances by amateur senior theatre companies, highlighting elements of transformative promise within their productions. I also recognize the value of theatre as a therapeutic activity (e.g. drama therapy), and as a tool in educational contexts related to aging; however, these, too, fall outside my area of research here. For the purpose of this study, I confine my analysis to professional theatre productions that have sought to reach general public audiences and, in so doing, have had relatively far-reaching influence on Canadian social imaginaries of age, aging, and old age.

I choose to address the Canadian context, first, because to date there have been no extended and broadly comparative studies of representations of aging in Canadian theatre generally, or in Canadian professional theatre more specifically. Writer, director, and arts-based researcher in health, Julia Gray, with her collaborators, created and studied the Canadian research-informed theatre production *Cracked: New Light on Dementia*, first performed in 2014 (Dupuis et al.; Gray).<sup>viii</sup> This piece was performed in multiple locations by professional actors and has plans for further touring (University of Waterloo). Gray's 2016 University of Toronto dissertation, entitled *An Aesthetic of Relationality: Exploring the Intersection of Embodiment, Imagination and Foolishness in Research-Informed Theatre*, uses this play as a case study to theorize the creation of a research-informed theatre piece by critically exploring the artist-

researchers' creation process. Her work is more concerned with approaches to the play's development than the narratives of aging and old age contained within the final production.

A few other literary and age studies scholars have addressed representations of aging and old age in professional Canadian theatre. Ulla Kriebnernegg, in her article, "Putting Age into Place: John Mighton's *Half Life* and Joan Barefoot's *Exit Lines*," published in 2015 in *Age, Culture, Humanities*, analyzes Canadian professional playwright Mighton's 2005 play, along with Barefoot's 2008 novel. Kriebnernegg considers cultural constructions of old age promoted through these two contemporary Canadian care home narratives. She argues that the older characters in *Half Life* defy outmoded social expectations of passive senescence and reject cultural stereotypes of what it means to be old and living in a caregiving facility. The play serves, Kriebnernegg asserts, "to widen the focus to the whole person and consequently invite diverse readings that include questions of identity and the life course as well as of inter- and intragenerational relationships" (n.p.), rather than focusing solely on the aging body. In the concluding chapter of her 2017 monograph *Forgotten: Narratives of Age-Related Dementia and Alzheimer's Disease in Canada*, Marlene Goldman also analyzes *Half Life*, arguing that "[i]n *Half Life*, the threat of late-onset dementia highlights the shift from religious, elegiac modes of consolation to the Gothic" (331). Goldman contends that the play "[i]nterrogates our construction of and investment in personal, familial, and national memory" (331), and "bides us to confront and accept our interruption and decay as integral to our humanity, and to risk ourselves in this emptiness" (335).

Further, literary, theatre, and age studies scholar, Núria Casado-Gual, published an article on the entire oeuvre of Canadian professional playwright Joanna McClelland Glass in the 2015 Spring issue of *Theatre Research in Canada*. In this article titled "Ambivalent Pathways of



Progress and Decline: The Representation of Aging and Old Age in Joanna McClelland Glass's Drama,” Casado-Gual argues that Glass’s composite characterizations, plot structures, and temporal frameworks create truthful and dignified portrayals of aging and old age. The above-mentioned are the only research publications that I have uncovered, besides my own (Henderson “Challenging Age Binaries”; “I’m an Old Fucking Woman”), that study representations of aging and old age in plays produced professionally in Canada. My work is distinct in that it addresses a range of plays, playwrights, performances and Canadian professional theatrical contexts.

I include only plays written in English because it is my first language and as such I am able to achieve a greater depth of analysis. I recognize that plays such as Antonine Maillet’s *La Sagouine* and Michel Tremblay’s *Les belles-soeurs* and *Albertine, en cinq temps* have had a strong influence on both anglophone and francophone Canadian culture and I look forward to exploring representations of aging in such works in future as I begin my longer-range research program. Here, however, I focus primarily on plays produced professionally in Canada in recent years because I am most interested in the choices and impacts of current theatrical narratives about aging and old age. Because the decline narrative of aging has been prominent in the last several centuries, it is most likely that alternatives will be uncovered in contemporary plays or productions as a reflection of changing values. Since I am located in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, the choice to include only plays produced in Canada also has facilitated my ability to attend certain productions and follow the critical press surrounding them.

It is important to note that, while I focus on the Canadian theatre production context, the produced plays I have selected include not only plays authored by Canadian playwrights, but also British and American. This is because plays from a variety of sources are produced professionally in Canada, as well as discussed in the media, and therefore influence Canadian

social imaginaries of aging. As such, I include two contemporary award-winning, widely produced American plays (*August: Osage County* by Tracy Letts, and *4000 Miles* by Amy Herzog).<sup>ix</sup> In terms of playwrights, three of the plays under study were written by contemporary female playwrights (Sally Clark and Amy Herzog), one was written by a contemporary male playwright (Tracy Letts), one by a historical male playwright (William Shakespeare), and one play was a collaborative creation. Collaborators for this play included one female performer (Joni Moore), six male performers (Buff Allen, Billy Butler, Carlos Joe Costa, Joe Kosaka, Bill Sample, and Harry Walker), a male director (Christie Watson) and a female dramaturg (Anita Rochon). While I sought to represent both male and female playwrights (since female playwrights are underrepresented in Western professional theatre), it is beyond the scope of this study to compare representations of aging and old age based on the gender of the author. It is also beyond the scope of this study to consider the age of the playwright when writing the script. This type of analysis is particular to the research focus often called “late style.” This is an area of study that posits there is a connection between an artist’s age (or place in the life course) and the way that age is constructed and reflected in that artist’s work. A more expansive discussion of late style is included in Chapter 2. My interest in this study is with the messages about age that plays convey to their audience; I am less concerned with what they reflect about their author.

While at various points throughout my dissertation I consider differences in gendered performances of age, and I address the intersections of age and heteronormative female sexuality specifically, as well as age and ability (in terms of representations of memory), it is beyond the scope of this study to explore in depth the intersection of age with other identity categories such as race, ethnicity, sexuality, disability, and class. Because representations of age in theatre are underexplored, there is a limit to the amount of new territory my work can chart. However, I

recognize that all of the above limitations point to critical areas in need of exploration and theoretical development, both in my own future research, and in the field of age studies as a whole.

### **1.1.3 Theoretical Lens of Analysis**

This thesis draws upon two scholarly streams to build its questions and methodological approaches. It integrates and superimposes theatre and performance studies theories with critical age studies theories to analyse narratives and performances of aging and old age in select play scripts and theatrical performances.

From a theatre studies perspective I draw on semiotic and phenomenological approaches to inform my analyses. For example, I explore the visual and auditory markers of age, aging, and old age such as the physical presence of the actor's body, movement, gesture, vocal quality and use, costuming, etc. I build from semiotic theory to consider how these fit with cultural codes and conventions. Through semiotic analysis, I also seek to understand stage properties as signs that convey messages about age and intergenerationality. A phenomenological approach best represents my considerations of age performativity, utopian performativity, embodied selfhood, and autobiographical performance. I also employ cultural materialist and rhetorical strategies to analyse dramaturgical choices, as well as critical press and theatrical publicity.

In order to consider a play's dramaturgy, I am most guided by the theoretical perspectives of Ric Knowles in his 1999 book *The Theatre of Form and the Production of Meaning: Contemporary Canadian Dramaturgies*, in which he writes about traditional and alternative approaches to dramatic structure in Canadian plays. I am also strongly influenced by the work of Elinor Fuchs, especially her essay on dramaturgy titled, "EF's Visit to a Small Planet: Some

Questions to Ask a Play.” The set of questions she asks of plays in this introductory and highly influential article aims to avoid the all too frequent over-focus on character and normative psychology in dramatic criticism (5). This text is important to me as a reference point as I try to write about theatre in a way that is accessible to other disciplines within age studies.

The theoretical insights of Fuchs’ and her co-editor Una Chaudhuri regarding “landscape dramaturgy,” in their 2002 collection *Land/Scape/Theater*, also inform my analyses of dramatic space (1-50). Further, my considerations of spaces of performance follow the theoretical viewpoints of Marvin Carlson in his 2003 monograph *The Haunted Stage: Theatre as Memory Machine*, especially his consideration of the “haunted house” (131-64), and of Deirdre Heddon in her 2008 book *Autobiography and Performance*, especially her reflections regarding “autotopography” (89-102). My investigations of absences in plays are guided by Andrew Sofer’s concept of “dark matter” in his 2013 book, *Dark Matter: Invisibility in Drama, Theater, and Performance*. In addition, I adopt Sofer’s approach to considering stage properties in his 2003 monograph, *The Stage Life of Props*. Guided by the production analysis methods of Judith Milhous and Robert D. Hume, which they outline in their 1985 book *Producible Interpretation: Eight English Plays, 1675-1707* (10), Sofer focuses on the text (rather than a specific performance) in order to imagine the range of meanings props might have within a play, and at the same time maintains an eye for how props function within the theatrical event.

To understand critical structures of time in plays, I draw on Matthew D. Wagner’s 2012 monograph *Shakespeare, Theatre, and Time* in which he employs the analytical trilogy of temporal dissonance, temporal thickness, and temporal materiality (2). My analysis of time and age is also informed by Basting whose research, like mine, falls at the intersection of age studies and theatre studies. I employ her “performative depth model of age” to consider ways of viewing

performances of aging that take into consideration “the body’s performance of time in/across the life course” (*The Stages of Age* 145). Her model productively insists that there can be a post-modern poetics of the aging body that still considers its temporal component (*The Stages of Age* 140-146).

A number of theories help me think about audience responses to theatrical productions. I engage Jill Dolan’s theory of utopian performativity (“Performance, Utopia”; *Utopia*) to consider audience-performer intersubjectivity and to highlight affectively salient moments that transgress dominant age ideologies and open up new utopian potentials. I also draw on Erin Hurley’s writing on theatre and affect (such as her 2010 book *Theatre and Feeling*) to justify the importance of such feelings to theatrical analysis. Marvin Carlson’s theory of theatrical ghosting (the main premise woven through all chapters of *The Haunted Stage*) informs my understandings of how memory and recycling function for audiences in the plays that I study.

Several important theorists have examined autobiographical theatre in ways that I have found instructive for my research. My approach is guided by Susan Bennett, Heddon, Knowles (“Documemory”), and Jenn Stephenson (*Performing Autobiography*; “Please Look”). Bennett and Knowles place emphasis on the role of live embodiment in autobiographical performance. Knowles more specifically applies Dolan’s utopian performative to autobiographical performance and takes interest in bodies that are “physically and discursively ‘marked’” (“Documemory” 57). Heddon’s writing on autobiography and place, including her concept of autotopography, has advised my consideration of the co-construction of place and self in autobiographical performance. Both Heddon and Stephenson most strongly have informed my analyses of ethical issues in live autobiographical performance.

Drawing on the rich field of interdisciplinary research in humanities age studies, I have also been guided by age theory. In their introductory editorial to the 2012 issue of *The International Journal of Ageing and Later Life*, titled “Aging, Narrative, and Performance: Essays from the Humanities,” Aagje Swinnen and Cynthia Port describe four age studies perspectives on theorizing age, all of which I adopt in this dissertation. The first perspective identifies age as being shaped by culture. *Cultural age* “understands age not only as a biological function, nor simply as a calendar mark, but also as an accumulation of all the meanings various cultural contexts ascribed to categories of age across different historical periods” (12). Their approach therefore considers how age intersects with other identity categories such as gender, sexuality, ethnicity, race, class, and ability (12). At the core of my research I consider theatre a cultural product that contributes to shaping social imaginaries of age, aging, and old age. As I noted above, while I do not do so exhaustively, I adopt their approach to explore how age intersects with gender, sexuality and ability in some of the plays I analyse.

The second age theory perspective thinks about *age as narrative*. This perspective “starts from the metaphor of life as story and refers to the way age identities are constituted in and through narratives” (Swinnen and Port 12). This approach is a strong component of my research as I consider narratives of age in theatrical plots and performances. It guides my thinking about how both themes and dramatic structures influence understandings of aging and old age.

The third age theory perspective considers age to be performative. Considering the *performativity of age* “helps define aging as a development through time, negotiating between personal circumstances and aspirations, and the expectations of the master narratives in which we are inscribed” (Swinnen and Port 12). I include a discussion of age performativity in Chapter

2, however Swinnen and Port's summary below gives a brief, focused account of why the concept is particularly valuable to the field:

Theories of performativity claim that age identities are formed and perpetuated through the repetition of behavioural scripts connected to chronological ages and life stages. Since a repetition can never be identical to its original script, there is always the possibility of subversion and change. The concept of performativity has particular significance in performance studies, as actors both enact age upon the stage and negotiate behavioural norms associated with their own chronological ages. But it also offers an illuminating conceptual approach to understanding the actions and behaviours of individuals and groups across the life span. (12)

In the live event of theatre this perspective is ever-present. Lipscomb asserts that "the conscious performance of age on stage points to age as unconscious performative" (*Performing Age in M.D.* 4). Following Lipscomb, I consider ways that theatre illuminates understandings of age performativity through elements such as character development (throughout a play's dramatic arc) and casting. The concept of age performativity also helps to understand how narratives of aging and old age are formed in some of the plays that I study.

Finally, the fourth perspective on theorizing age recognizes *the materiality of age*. This approach "emphasizes the conceptualization of age as an embodied experience, drawing attention to the physical changes that undeniably come with age and to the way people manage these changes in their daily lives" (Swinnen and Port 12). It also takes into account how bodies are disciplined to people's body images, how disabilities are managed, and how bodily aging is

experienced (post)phenomenologically (12). In my research, considering the materiality of age allows me to think about the meanings of characters' interactions with material objects (stage properties and dramatic space), the materiality of time expressed through the body, and other elements of embodiment such as embodied selfhood as described and investigated by sociologists, health researchers, and age theorists, Pia Kontos and Wendy Martin (Kontos "Alzheimer Expressions"; "Musical Embodiment"; Kontos and Martin). These four theoretical approaches to age, then, constitute the multi-faceted age studies lens through which I approach theatre in this dissertation.

#### **1.1.4 Research Methods**

While this research is rooted in interdisciplinary theoretical foundations, it builds predominantly from the primary research methodologies of drama, theatre, and performance studies. In each chapter I analyse one or two plays. The plays I consider include Sally Clark's *Moo* and *Ten Ways to Abuse an Old Woman* (Chapter 3), Shakespeare's *King Lear* (Chapter 4), Tracy Letts' *August: Osage County* and Amy Herzog's *4000 Miles* (Chapter 5) and the Chop Theatre's *Sonic Elder* (Chapter 6). These otherwise geographically, stylistically and temporally distinct plays are united in the sense that each has had a professional Canadian production in English with relevance to my core research question about aging and old age. Analysis of these plays and productions also allows me to illuminate strategies of resistance to stereotypes and negative narrative tropes of aging and old age. My methodological approach to each of these dramatic works has varied somewhat across the chapters. In Chapters 3, 5 and 6, I have engaged in close reading dramaturgical analysis. In Chapter 3, I also gathered and analysed responses in the critical press to prominent early productions of Clark's plays. Chapters 4 and 6 both rest on



detailed performance analysis. The chapter which blends the most methodological approaches is Chapter 6 where, in addition to all of the methods noted above, I also had the opportunity to view archival video of the production, analyse the media associated with its various performance iterations, examine the dramaturgical process informing the play's development, and conduct interviews with the artistic team. In order to conduct these interviews, I followed the protocols for ethical research involving human subjects. In accordance with SSHRC and UBC guidelines, I submitted my research protocol to the UBC Behavioural Research Ethics Board; my certificate number is H16-000429. I provide further details about this approach in Chapter 6, but I note here that the letter of information and consent including sample interview questions is included in Appendix A (p. 304-7).

## **1.2 Significance**

### **1.2.1 Social and Cultural Significance**

Aging populations are growing rapidly worldwide. According to the World Health Organization's 2015 *World Report on Ageing and Health*, "Today, for the first time in history most people can expect to live into their 60s and beyond" (3). This is largely due to reductions in infectious diseases and mortality at younger ages (especially related to childbirth and childhood) in low- to middle-income countries; and to declining mortality among older people in high-income countries (World Health Organization 3). In Canada, for the first time in census history, the 2016 census found that the number of people over the age of sixty-five was greater than the number of people under the age of fifteen, and made up 16.5% of the overall population, an all-time high (Statistics Canada "Section 2: Population by Age and Sex" par. 4). Between 2011 and 2016 the number of people over sixty-five increased four times faster than the overall population

and almost five times faster than the number of children under fifteen, largely because the first “baby boomers,” born between 1946 and 1965, began turning sixty-five. As more “baby boomers” reach sixty-five and as life expectancy continues to increase, the gap between the number of seniors and children is expected to widen. (Statistics Canada “Your Census, Your Neighbourhood, Your Future” 00:01:07) By 2025 Statistics Canada estimates that people aged sixty-five and over will make up 25% of the Canadian population (“Section 2: Population by Age and Sex” par. 5). While historian Pat Thane asserts that the value attributed to old age varies from culture to culture and from one historical era to another” (6), social gerontologist Neena L. Chappell et al. contends that in contemporary Western societies social status declines past midlife regardless of age, social class, or gender (3).

As senior populations have grown, there is clear evidence that this demographic is looking for theatre that builds from and speaks to its interests and experiences while also promoting a more positive status in society. For example, the rise in number of Senior Theatre (ST) companies in the last twenty years has been remarkable. In the U.S. the number of ST companies expanded from seventy-nine in 1999, to over 530 in July of 2010 (Vorenberg par. 10). There are now international ST festivals (Kole 27; Schweitzer par. 5), senior playwriting competitions (Woods qtd. in Kole 4), ST training programs (Kole 29), and an expansive online ST resource centre (Senior Theatre Resource Center). In Canada fewer ST companies exist however companies such as Victoria B.C.’s Target Theatre Society (Victoria Target Theatre Society), which has been running for over twenty-five years, and Winnipeg, Manitoba’s Geri\the/atrics (Geary) demonstrate Canadian seniors’ desire to participate in and watch theatre that speaks to their experiences and interests. Act II Studio in Toronto (Ryerson University) is also a popular training centre for both professional and less experienced senior actors and

provides performance opportunities. In Vancouver, Western Gold Theatre Society, Canada's only professional ST company, is an active force in the city's theatrical scene.<sup>x</sup>

In addition to ST companies, Intergenerational Theatre (IT) companies pairing youth with seniors have also formed to promote positive images of aging and improve relations across age groups. Inspired by the New York company Roots and Branches, which founder Arthur Strimling writes about in his 2004 book, *Roots and Branches: Creating Intergenerational Theater*, and Basting studies in *The Stages of Age*, other companies have followed suit. In Canada the Edmonton-based IT company GeriActors and Friends (University of Alberta) formed in 2001 and has achieved considerable popularity. It also has received scholarly attention and been the subject of at least two academic studies. The CIHR-funded study *Health and Creative Aging: Theatre as a Pathway to Healthy Aging*, conducted by Janet Fast (University of Alberta), David Barnet (University of Alberta), Sally Chivers (Trent University), Sherry Ann Chapman (University of Alberta), and Jacquie Eales (University of Alberta), examined GeriActors and Friends archives "to document the historic and cultural context of intergenerational participatory theatre and healthy aging," and interviewed present and past theatre company members "to document the relationship between theatre participation and health" (Fast et. al.). The project was in partnership with the UK New Dynamics of Ageing (NDA) Ages and Stages research program led by Professor Mim Bernard at Keele University. Results have yet to be published. In addition, Matthew Gusul conducted an exploratory analysis (using autoethnographic research techniques) of GeriActors and Friends' 2006/07 and 2007/08 seasons for his 2009 University of Alberta Master's thesis, titled "Intergenerational Theatre and the Role of Play." He analyzed play and playfulness as it exists in the company's rehearsals and performances.

While the growing popularity of ST and IT companies is striking, it is important to note that many such companies perform mostly for senior audiences and in senior-specific venues like senior centres or care homes. Others forge links with educational institutions (performing at elementary schools, high schools and universities), or healthcare organizations (performing in healthcare settings and at conferences). While many seek to unsettle dominant ageist paradigms, their primary purpose is often recreational, therapeutic or educational. It is rare that ST plays reach mainstream, commercial audiences on a wide scale.<sup>xi</sup>

The needs and tastes of Canada's older demographic are also changing. This is evidenced by the fact that Hamilton Ontario's long-time ST company, Geritol Follies, folded in July 2015 after over forty years. In an article in the *Hamilton Spectator* published 7 July 2015, Carl Horton, former producer of the Geritol Follies, is cited as explaining that the show had become too hard to market because people now in their sixties were boomers, part of the rock 'n' roll generation, and did not tend to be drawn to the content or format of this variety show which employed geriatric stereotypes (McNeil). This suggests that Canadian seniors may be turning to other forms of theatre and performance to find stories that resonate with their experiences, interests, and identities. Professional theatre that seeks to resist typical decline-focused stories about aging is well-positioned to fill this need and would be well advised to do so given the shifting demographics and tastes of its audiences. It also reaches a more expansive age-range in its public audience than ST typically does, making it possible to influence age expectations in audience members from across the life course. Professional theatre marketing also typically has greater capacity to distribute messages far beyond the audiences who attend the plays themselves. Prominent theatres often receive international press. In Vancouver, advertisements for plays frequently appear in no-cost print and online newspapers, at bus-stop shelters, on public bulletin

boards, and on traffic-light poles at crosswalks. A good example of a widely distributed publicity campaign related to representing older age is that of Vancouver's 2015 International PuSh Festival, in which the festival's principal image featured a stylishly dressed elderly woman, pictured as if in a police photo lineup, holding a sign saying "cross the line" [see Figure 1]. This and other examples suggest that professional theatre marketed to a broad public audience has significant potential over time to shift social imaginaries of aging and old age.

### **1.2.2 Aesthetic Significance**

Against prevailing negative or ageist performance traditions theatre has great potential to blur edges, trouble binary thinking, and re-imagine ideas about aging and old age. Indeed, while theatre often reflects the attitudes of power and authority, it also has a long history of opposing current conditions and prompting social change. Because theatre brings into shared space performing and attending bodies, it is a particularly rich place to explore topics of embodiment. Therefore, it makes sense as a place to take up Gullette's challenge to search out story forms of aging that resist stereotypes and trouble the status quo.

Theatre communicates its narratives on many levels. Besides using text, stories are also told through visual images and style, auditory sound scape, the body of the actor, the use of the stage space, and performing objects etc. Theatre's unique relationship with time and liveness also provide unusual opportunities for examining aging. Throughout the chapters of my dissertation I explore the multiple, overlapping, and sometimes dissonant time structures of plays. Thus, beyond textual themes, old age can be represented visually (how characters are lit, costumed, made-up, contextualized by sets, stage properties and other elements of the *mise en scène*), auditorily (by means of sounds or sound qualities), and temporally (through time



**Figure 1: 2015 Vancouver International PuSh Festival Program. Image Design by me&lewis ideas inc.**

structures and how they are juxtaposed), as well as embodied or performed. Theatre can foreground the subtle messages about aging and old age that often remain hidden in our daily culture. Theatre also offers countless imaginative possibilities to change traditional narratives. Moreover, as an experience that turns on a complex relationship with liveness, it often evokes an

immediate response in shared times and spaces with audiences—responses that can be harder to ignore than other forms of media which one can experience alone or choose to start and stop.

### 1.2.3 Academic Significance

With a few important exceptions, research focused on theatre from the perspective of critical age studies has thus far been limited and fairly diffuse. Age studies is spread across disciplines and is still in the process of developing into a unified field. The relevance of age as a category of difference, however, has been reasserted by researchers across disciplines. Leni Marshall, literary and age studies scholar, stresses the need for disciplines to develop their specific approaches to age:

Each field needs to find ways to establish age as a category of analysis despite the instability of the category. *Age*, an often-invisible type of difference in which each of us lives, needs to become more than just an addition to a list of identity categories (Woodward Telephone)[sic]. A significant factor in personal and national identity, age needs to be more visible because of its centrality to theoretical positions, pedagogy, and research about what it means to be human. (4)

In theatre studies, broad uptake of critical age studies precepts is not yet evident. Lipscomb describes the limited research that exists to date:

A few critics have shown interest in the study of age involving theatre, but that interest tends to divide into two camps: focusing on performances by the elderly, overlooking both the range of age performativity and textual analysis, or commenting on the

representation of the elderly in a dramatic text, overlooking issues of performativity and the analysis of age over the life course (*Performing Age in M.D.* 3).

I explore a number of notable exceptions to Lipscomb's statement, including her own work in this vein, in Chapter 2 which provides a literature review of the field. However, the need for further research at the intersection of critical age studies and theatre studies is clear, especially in relation to Canadian theatre and performance where to date very few studies have been published. The plays included in this dissertation provide opportunities to explore contemporary, public artistic interventions by professional Canadian theatre into longstanding traditions of representing aging and old age.

### **1.3 Research Project Overview**

Each chapter in this dissertation centres around one or two key plays that turn on representations of aging and old age. Although created by different artists, and disparate in form, style, and production venue, the different case studies are united by the fact that all have been produced professionally in Canada. They also all address themes related to aging and old age, and all contain characters who have aged past midlife. The chapters are also unified by the fact that each thematically addresses several important areas of concern within the field of age studies, such as age performativity, embodiment, age-related memory loss, aging female sexuality, and relationality. These case studies are also connected by their conscious focus on ways that theatre resists simplistic, stereotypical, non-critical representations of the decline narrative and other age-based stereotypes and negative narrative tropes. Taken together, these case studies illustrate a range of theatrical mechanisms that function to represent age, aging, and



old age. These mechanisms, which are both dramaturgical and performative, at times continue to entrench ageist belief systems. However, the consolidating focus of these chapters is that they reveal age-conscious dramaturgies that resist ageism in their representations of aging and old age.

In Chapter 2, I provide a more detailed survey of the scholarly literature that informs this study. I open with an exploration of the ways that old age has been defined and understood in contemporary times and I include a discussion of the concept of age performativity. I then offer a summary of perceptions of aging and old age over time in order to locate common contemporary narratives of aging and old age. This allows me to then consider representations and stereotypes of aging and old age in Western theatre over time, highlighting the prominent role of the decline narrative for the last several centuries. Next, a discussion of the ways that aging and old age have been studied in drama, theatre and performance helps to situate my doctoral research and differentiate it from previous work. Finally, the chapter closes by highlighting the writings that have been most useful in tackling my primary dissertation research question.

I offer my first case study in Chapter 3. It concerns two early plays written in the 1980's by Canadian playwright, Sally Clark. Both have elderly female protagonists and explicitly address themes of aging and old age. I offer these as early examples of professionally-produced Canadian plays that push against ageist narratives. In addition to having had professional productions in Canada, both plays have been anthologized in collections and have been taught and performed over many years at post-secondary institutions. As such they hold a certain sway over Canadian social imaginaries of aging and old age. In this chapter I offer close readings of the two plays, enhanced by analysis of the critical press surrounding prominent early productions. I describe Clark's use of dramaturgical techniques such as achronicity, disruption of

rising conflict, intratextual polyvocality, ambiguous endings, and humour, and argue that these result in constructions of female aging and old age that highlight performativity, challenge disease as an objective category, and disrupt the simplistic association between aging and loss. This chapter illustrates ways that dramatic structure, characterization, and age performativity can be mobilized to convey and reimagine age narratives.

In Chapter 4, I provide another case study, this time of a production of Shakespeare's *King Lear* by Vancouver's Honest Fish Monger's Co-op in 2012. I selected this play because it is a play categorically about aging and old age. To cite Matthew D. Wagner "Its social and emotional range are nearly without horizon, and its formal and emotional range are sophisticated and multivariant" (87). Wagner argues that "*King Lear* represents the grandest, most super-human encounter with temporality in Shakespeare's dramatic canon" (87), therefore an examination of *King Lear*'s temporality as it relates to aging and old age is particularly germane to my study. *King Lear* has been produced frequently on Canadian professional stages. However, as Gullette has argued, many contemporary productions interpret the text in ways that reify ageism (Gullette "Losing Lear" 61). I argue that this can occur when age is interpreted through a chronological lens. However, contemporary performances can also resist ageist tendencies, and Honest Fish Monger's production is a good example. My concern in this analysis is with embodied performances of age. I apply Basting's "performative, depth model of aging" (*The Stages of Age* 145) to analyze age-effects in this production, arguing that the model reveals how the production engaged with postmodern concepts of time while still considering age. In this way, the performance foregrounded more positive textual narratives about aging rather than reinforcing a narrative of decline. I also extend Basting's model by drawing connections with Carlson's aforementioned theory of theatrical ghosting, and Gullette's discussion of the default

body (*Aged by Culture* 161). Connecting Carlson, Gullette, and Basting's models reveals that reception of theatrical performances of age is not only influenced by traditional layering of past memories of age on stage, but also by what I term a "ghosting forward." I also offer a way of differentiating older and younger ages in performance, in light of the fact that Basting's model suggests that all performances of age can be viewed as an amalgamation of past performances and a projection of future performances of age.

The case study I present in Chapter 5 concerns two prominent award-winning play scripts, *August: Osage County* by Tracy Letts first produced in 2007, and *4000 Miles* by Amy Herzog first produced in 2011. Both of these plays originated in the United States and had significant runs in New York before going on to be produced throughout North America and Europe, including at the Arts Club Theatre in Vancouver, the largest professional theatre in my city and region. They are examples of plays that have had wide cultural reach and, although not originating in Canada, represent prominent, influential plays that impact Canadian audiences. Many people have had an opportunity to see these plays and/or read about them in the press. While in Chapter 3 I concentrate on performances of age that depict an accumulation of moments across the individual life course, in this chapter I am interested in how age is constructed and performed through interactions across family generations. My analysis is based on close readings of the two play scripts, both of which are set in the same year and both of which feature aging female matriarchs who have lost their husbands and who are now negotiating their living space with younger family members in response to tragedy. I employ Milhous and Hume's production analysis methods in order to reveal the range of performance possibilities generated by the text (10). By comparing and contrasting the two playwrights' dramaturgical choices around the use of dramatic space, stage properties, and structures of time,

I reveal how they construct narratives of generational continuity or rupture. I argue that in *August: Osage County*, Letts uses space, props, and time to highlight generational rupture and cast the oldest generation as responsible for family discord. His depiction of intergenerational relations, therefore, reifies longstanding ageist stereotypes, often in hidden ways. Examining the dramaturgical techniques Letts employs makes it possible to highlight the contrasting strategies Herzog uses to reinforce generational continuity in *4000 Miles*. I demonstrate how Herzog employs dramatic space, stage properties, and time structures to create a narrative of intergenerational reciprocity and hope, one that reimagines stereotypes of old age and values the older generation for its knowledge, experience, and actions.

In Chapter 6 I offer my final case study. It turns on an original autobiographical work, *Sonic Elder*, devised by Vancouver's The Chop Theatre. I argue that this performance is an example of the type of new, age-conscious performance that is being developed by some current Canadian professional theatre companies. Here, I move from my consideration in Chapter 5 of how age is constructed across family (or vertical) generations, to thinking about how horizontal generations might contribute to generating and shifting cultural age expectations. *Sonic Elder's* success in opposing ageist narratives rests on its non-traditional choices in terms of dramaturgy, casting, and performance venue. The show featured six long-term professional musicians all over the age of sixty, none of whom were previously actors. They told stories about the role of music in their lives over time and performed as a rock band in a venue which had supported their early careers. One of the performers also was living with the experience of significant age-related memory loss. In this investigation, I employ a combination of performance analysis of live performance and archival video, interviews with the artistic team, and appraisal of the media surrounding the production. I build my arguments with reference to Jill Dolan's theory of the

utopian performative (“Performance, Utopia”; *Utopia*), as well as theories about autobiography (Bennett; Heddon; Knowles “Documemory”; Stephenson *Performing Autobiography*), spaces of performance (Carlson; Heddon), relationality (Basting “God Is”; Heddon) and embodied selfhood (Kontos “Alzheimer Expressions”; “Musical Embodiment”; Kontos and Martin). Together, these theorists help me to consider how the production engendered moments of deep intersubjectivity between performers and audience. Ultimately, I argue that in *Sonic Elder* the autobiographical nature of the performance, the specificity of the venue, the inclusion of personally revealing content, and the development of specific dramaturgical strategies (*dramaturgies of assistance*) allowed for performances of age that offered moving and hopeful glimpses of how it could feel to embrace more positive, expanded, and non-deterministic age expectations.

My concluding chapter reflects on and connects the themes of the previous case studies. I relate my findings in terms of concepts of time and age, age performativity, gendered representations of age, embodiment, generational continuity, the role of objects and space in representations of age, and the relevance of feeling to theatrical experience. I outline how this dissertation engages with critical approaches in theatre and performance studies and with cultural age theory to illuminate age narratives in contemporary Anglo Canadian professional theatrical productions with themes about aging and old age. I suggest ways that Canadian professional theatre contributes to cultural understandings of aging and old age, and I highlight how it constructively reimagines age narratives. Bringing these theoretical approaches into conversation allows for the expansion of theatre and performance studies theories to include considerations of age. It also proffers new approaches to age studies and cultural gerontology that consider theatrical and performative ways of representing and understanding age, aging, and old age.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

Since beginning my research in age studies, I have watched the interdisciplinary field gain momentum.<sup>xii</sup> While still years behind comparable fields like critical race/ethnic studies and women's/gender/sexuality studies in terms of institutional support and awareness,<sup>xiii</sup> age studies seeks to counter ageism and age-inequality by employing critical perspectives from the humanities and social sciences. As age studies expands, its proponents are also working to define the field. Stephen Katz, Canadian sociologist and critical age studies theorist, summarizes its key approaches:

[. . .] from the humanities, age studies looks to biographical, feminist, and narrative perspectives on self, memory, meaning, and wisdom, and imaginative alternative resources and experiences in performative, artistic, fictional, transsexual, poetic, and futuristic fields. From the social sciences, age studies elucidates the new cultural processes redefining later life and old age based on late-capitalist and globalized retirement lifestyles, cosmetic and body technologies, consumer marketing, and age-based hierarchies. ("What Is Age Studies" par. 9)

Further, he notes, the field's main concerns turn on "questions of identity, the body, experience, language and metaphor, life course continuity and disruption, sensation, emotions, and biography" ("What Is Age Studies" par. 8). Pursuing these questions, age studies scholars emphasize the cultural aspects of aging, and work both to deconstruct dominant narratives and express marginalized voices.

Much of the work within age studies demonstrates age's inherent performativity. Theatre and performance studies, therefore, offer valuable tools and connections. However, while the field of age studies has expanded, Lipscomb has argued that theatre has not yet kept pace ("Age in M." 193). Theatre projects tend to focus on the engagement and well-being of their older participants, she argues, rather than theorizing age onstage and in dramatic texts. Lipscomb asserts "This omission is all the more curious because age is so obviously integral to the dramatic text and its performance" ("Age in M." 193). While developing more slowly than other disciplinary work within age studies, theatre and performance studies have made some significant contributions in recent years. In 2015, the University of Toronto hosted the first North American conference on aging and performance, *Playing Age*, and attracted a wide, interdisciplinary range of scholars.<sup>xiv</sup> Building from this, *Modern Drama* published a special issue focused on aging and the life course in 2016. The field has also generated two key recent monographs on theatre and aging: Michael Mangan's *Stageing Aging: Theatre, Performance and the Narrative of Decline* (2013), and Valerie Barnes Lipscomb's *Performing Age in Modern Drama* (2016). In this chapter, I turn to these authors and other forerunners in the field for definitions of such core terms as *aging* and *old age*. I then survey historical views of aging and old age in order to give context to current cultural constructions. Next, I provide an overview of some of the ways that aging and old age have been mobilized in theatre over time, especially through the use of stock characters. These historical framings demonstrate that aging and old age has been understood in different ways in different times and places, but that the decline narrative has persisted over time and has frequently been represented in Western plays. This overview of older aged theatrical characters serves as a backdrop for understanding current representations. Building from this overview, I next describe research approaches that have been used to study

age and theatre in order to locate my own work within the field, and to clarify how my work is distinct. Finally, I review the writings that have most closely guided my own approach. These represent critical analyses of age both on stage and in dramatic texts from an age studies perspective. Although these works are few in number, they provide a solid basis from which my work expands.

## **2.1 Defining Age, Aging, and Old Age**

A fundamental problem facing scholars who wish to study the inter-relationship between theatre and *age*, *aging*, or *old age* is that these terms are notoriously difficult to define. However, as literary and age studies scholar Leni Marshall argues in *Age Becomes Us: Bodies and Gender in Time* (2015), we need language to communicate, even as we problematize and deconstruct that language. Although terms such as *old*, *aging*, *senior*, and *elder* are imperfect, we lack robust alternatives (Marshall 13). Understanding terms and their problematic nature is key. Depending on the disciplinary context, specific object of study, and primary research question, a broad range of definitions of “aging” and “old age” have had traction in contemporary research. As I demonstrate in the brief survey that follows, several distinguishing principles emerge across the definitions and rely on discourses from disciplines such as gerontology, biology, sociology, psychology, gender studies, literary studies, and performance studies. Understanding the many ways that age has been, and is still, understood, helps to position my own approach.

*Aging* is the simpler term to define. While Gullette notes that aging has been conflated in our common language with “old” or “elderly” (*Aged by Culture* 106-107), the term can be applied to the experience of becoming older throughout our lives. Basting describes aging as “an historical, social, psychological, and biological process” (19). It is a doing or becoming that “can



never be precisely pinned down,” adds Gravagne (11). In *Agewise* Gullette demonstrates that it is useful to qualify the term with phrases such as “aging-past-youth” and “aging-in-the-middle-years” (5). I use the term “aging” as it is universally accepted in age studies to describe the process of becoming older experienced by persons of all ages, at all times, throughout the life course.

Defining *age* is more complex. How do we describe what human age is? What is old age and how do we recognize, categorize and define it? How old is old? Here I look to contemporary conceptions of age, recognizing that ideas and definitions of age have changed over time and continue to evolve.<sup>xv</sup> In “Performing Age, Performing Gender,” Kathleen Woodward, literary scholar and one of the key founders of the field of age studies, suggests that definitions of age can be distinguished by chronology, biology, psychology, culture, and statistics. She defines *chronological age* as “the number of years a person has lived,” differentiating it from *biological age* or “the state of a person’s physical capacities” (“Performing Age” 183). Woodward further distinguishes between the two by explaining that a person suffering from a severe disease in middle age would be understood to be functionally older than their chronological age would normally suggest (183). Here, although she does not list it among her definitions, Woodward suggests the idea of *functional age*, a concept proposed by sociologists Toni M. Calasanti and Kathleen F. Slevin that “involves an assessment of an individual’s physical and mental abilities in relation to an ideal type for his or her age group” (17). Calasanti and Slevin also propose the related idea of *occupational age*, suggesting that “people may be considered ‘old’ at different ages according to their employment” (17).

Woodward goes on to define *social age* as “the meanings that a society accords to different categories of age, with the instruments of social policy providing clear-cut measures”

(183). For example, in Canada “senior discounts” are given at movie theatres and many stores starting from the age of fifty-five. Further, Canadians can collect Old Age Security from the age of sixty-five and the Canada Pension Plan (if eligible) after age sixty. Depending as they do on a sense of chronology, Woodward notes that *social* and *chronological* ages are strongly associated. *Cultural age* refers to “the meanings or values that a culture assigns to different people in terms of age” (183). Significantly, Woodward argues that in defining *cultural age*, “status and power are crucial”—aging women are considered older than men of the same chronological age (183). Woodward goes on to distinguish between two remaining categories of age. *Psychological* age, she claims, refers to “a person’s state of mind in terms of age,” suggesting that a person may feel older or younger psychologically than their chronological age (“Performing Age” 183). Basting uses the term *personal* age to refer to a similar conception, defining it as “age that is self-selected” (*The Stages of Age* 17). Finally, *statistical age*, Woodward notes, describes “predictions concerning age based on large data sets” (“Performing Age” 183).

Basting highlights the enduring legacy of the traditional life-stage model. While in medieval and classical times “ages of man” models divided the life course into distinct segments, it is uncertain to what extent the life course was thought of as a continuum versus discrete stages. However, some Early Modern texts emphasize specific years of profound change which they call climacterics (Ellis 5). For example, according to Ellis, “the English physician William Vaughan warned in 1626 that every seventh year in a person’s life was ‘Climactericall’ and thus perilous; the influence of Saturn, the planet associated mythologically with old age, was held responsible” (5).

The more modern life-stage or life-cycle model, popular since the industrial revolution, is based on social and chronological age definitions and ties social roles to specific chronological

ages (*The Stages of Age* 17). In this model, the life course is divided into fixed stages typically described as infancy, education, work, and retirement. Definitions of old age which correspond with retirement most often consider old age to begin at sixty-five years. This socially constructed definition of old age is based on the historical decision of Otto von Bismarck in the late 1880's, who followed actuarial advice and determined that sixty-five would be the age at which military personnel would be eligible for a pension (at that time mortality rates meant few people lived long after the age of sixty-five). Gradually this age was adopted as the norm of retirement and became entrenched in our social institutions. (Chappell et al. 27)

Definitions of old age based on a life-stage model that associates old age with retirement are often criticized for homogenizing all people over the age of sixty-five, assuming that their life courses are the same. To address this issue, some theorists have proposed breaking down the life course into further categories. For example, in her 1974 chapter "Age Groups in American Society and the Rise of the Young Old," American psychologist Bernice L. Neugarten categorizes the elderly population into the young-old (sixty-five to seventy-four), the middle-old (aged seventy-four to eighty-four), the old-old (aged eighty-five to eighty-nine) and the frail-old (aged ninety and over) (187-198). More recently, in another direction, Julia Twigg combines chronological and functional age, and offers alternatives for the term "old age." In "The Body, Gender, and Age: Feminist Insights in Social Gerontology," she employs the terms "Third Age" and "Fourth Age." Third Age is taken to approximate the ages of fifty to seventy-five, and Fourth Age the ages seventy-five plus (64). However, Twigg highlights that the distinction between the two ages is qualitative, not chronological. The point of transition is marked by the onset of serious infirmity. She states, "As a result, the Fourth Age can seem to be not just about the body, but nothing but the body. It dominates the subjective experience, to the extent that it

swamps all other factors in determining matters like morale or wellbeing” (6). Woodward further explains that Third Age is characterized by independence and health, “which we might call ‘aging,’” and Fourth age is distinguished by “dependence and frailty, if not debilitation and decline, which we might call ‘old age’” (“Performing Age” 2).

While age studies scholars universally critique the homogenization of all people over the age of sixty-five, the field has not widely adopted the above noted models that still divide the later life course into stages. While these distinctions attempt to de-homogenize seniors, they are criticized for being essentializing since they forcibly group people into categories according to their chronological age, when considerable variation still exists based on, for example, race, culture, gender, ability, social and financial status, health history, and personal experience. As Leni Marshall astutely notes that, “attempts to quantify the stages of aging highlight the impossibility of taking such a positivist approach” and that “[c]onnecting a fixed chronological range to a particular age category is inherently arbitrary” (Marshall 11). Helen Small, who researches literary and philosophical approaches to old age, suggests in her 2007 monograph *The Long Life* that refinements to old-age terminology, such as terms like “old old age,” “late age,” “late life” (and in earlier periods, “green old age”), betray the basic poverty of our vocabulary, and “are often impediments rather than aids to social and political reform” (3).

Some theorists have tried to avoid chronological divisions by reconceptualizing and redefining the aging process. In “The Mask of Ageing and the Postmodern Life Course” Mike Featherstone and Mike Hepworth argue that the term “life cycle” implies fixed categories and a stable, inflexible system. They propose the term “life course” as it suggests a more flexible view of biological patterns with a constantly changing social system (386). However, Cruikshank counters that seeing aging as part of the overall life course instead of as a unique time may “de-

emphasize the role prejudice plays in aging in our society. [. . .] [and] obscure[] the fact that youth is favoured, while age is not” (6-7). Other theorists propose formulations of the life course which organize life stages around specific qualities and tasks that might occur at any age but are typical of certain general age groups (Basting *The Stages of Age* 17). For example, in the 1950s and 1960s developmental psychologist Erik Erikson created a new model for the life course based on functional definitions of age. In this model, the life course is divided into eight stages, each of which holds a unique challenge and reward for the individual. For example, the last stage of life is seen as the search to overcome “despair” and achieve “integrity” through integration, which involves coming to terms with one’s past and the inevitability of approaching death. Successful “emotional integration” yields wisdom and self-respect, and a willingness to lead as well as follow. (Erikson 98-99) The distinctive quality of Erikson’s model is that it defines stages of the life course free of fixed chronological categories, constructing maturity as a functional stage involving struggle for integration (versus despair and disgust), rather than defining it as a particular chronological age range. While Erikson’s model has been criticized for universalizing the aging process across gender, race and class (Basting *The Stages of Age* 15; Zender 9), Basting suggests it is one of the few models that “find[s] meaning and purpose for old age,” and “reestablish[es] a view of aging as *both* positive and negative” (*The Stages of Age* 15, emphasis in original).

## 2.2 Age Performativity<sup>xvi</sup>

The idea of understanding age as inherently performative has been explored by authors such as Basting (*The Stages of Age*), Gullette (*Aged by Culture*), Lipscomb (“Age in M.”; *Performing Age in M.D.*; “Performing the Aging Self”; “Putting on Her White Hair”),

Lipscomb and Marshall (*Staging Age*) and Woodward (“Performing Age”). These critics and others look to the conscious performance of age in acting roles, not only as a way of understanding how specific performances shape cultural notions of age, but also as a means of understanding age itself as fundamentally performative.

The concept of age performativity draws on Judith Butler’s influential arguments concerning gender’s inherent performativity. For Butler, gender identity does not constitute something essential but is created through the act of its repeated performance. As Butler puts it, “Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (*Gender Trouble* 44). According to Anna Harpin, Butler implies there are two types of repetition involved with performative identity: “one that affirms conservative foundational narratives and one that subverts these foundations by exposing their fictionality through a process of parody and pastiche” (79). Since gender identity is thus understood as created through behavioral scripts that can never be repeated exactly, it offers the possibility that those scripts can be undermined and changed. The notion of age performativity holds, likewise, that age identity is achieved by repeated stylizations of the body offered within a “highly rigid regulatory frame” (Butler *Gender Trouble* 43), that gather meanings, over time, that seem substantive and natural. This “stylized repetition of acts,” explains Gravagne, “can institute the illusion of an essential aging or aged self” (15). So, while age characteristics conventionally may be thought to manifest in innate ways at particular life stages, from an age performativity perspective, such age identities are produced through repeated performances that interact with a culturally sanctioned age script, and therefore are not essential but only appear to be so.

Both age studies scholars and theatre scholars have raised questions about the applicability of Butler's performativity theory to their respective fields of study. Age studies critiques of performativity turn on the notion that a view of age as purely performative dismisses the very real effects of time on the body. Age scholars such as Basting (*The Stages of Age*), Gullette (*Aged by Culture*), Lipscomb and Marshall, and Woodward (*Figuring Age*; "Performing Age"), among others, agree that age cannot be understood as wholly performative. In *Figuring Age*, Woodward passionately contends:

[. . .] unlike other markers of difference (gender and race, for example), old age cannot be theorized or understood as a social construction only, one that erases the real changes of the body that can come with aging and old age. There is a point at which the social and cultural construction of aging must confront the physical dimensions, if not the very real limits of the body. (xxii)

But while the legitimacy of this argument is widely acknowledged, most age studies scholars still find the concept of age performativity profitable because it allows for the possibility of subversion, and because, as Basting explains, it moves us toward a social space in which "no single image or experience of aging is deemed 'natural,' 'normal,' or [. . .] 'pathological'" (*The Stages of Age* 19).

In terms of theatre, critiques of Butler's theory of performativity hinge on the lack of specificity in *Gender Trouble* between the terms 'performance' and 'performativity'. Butler addresses this in *Bodies That Matter*, arguing that in the case of *performativity* the subject does not precede the gesture but rather is produced by it (24). By contrast, in the case of *performance*,

the performer precedes the act of impersonation according to Butler. However, Christina Wald points out that Butler “no longer allows for theatre’s critical distance from itself, for a self-referential sense of its own history” (21). Drawing on the work of many theorists,<sup>xvii</sup> she makes a case for the relevance of performativity theory to theatre studies. Wald argues that Butler’s gender performativity theory is applicable to theatre for the following reasons: that theatrical performance exists within a set of theatrical conventions that precede the performer, similar to the social ideals, rules, and rituals Butler describes as dictating gender performativity (17); that for actors, agency does not necessarily stem from deliberate and conscious acts (18); that actors must reproduce a script and performance, but the idea of an original is imaginary (18-19); and that the split awareness of theatre audiences and performers distorts complete illusion and contradicts Butler’s notion that “what is performed works to conceal, if not to disavow, what remains opaque, unconscious, un-performable” (Butler, *Bodies That Matter* 234, qtd. in Wald 17). For Wald, “the resignification that can take place within theatrical performance equals that of gender performativity” (18). I agree and echo her citation of Elin Diamond: “Performance [. . .] is the site in which performativity materializes in concentrated form, where the ‘concealed or dissimulated conventions’ of which acts are mere repetitions might be investigated and reimaged” (Diamond 47).

There is widespread acceptance, then, in both age studies and theatre studies, that Butler’s theory is generative to their theoretical foundations. Theatre and age studies scholars such as Basting (“Performance Studies”), Lipscomb (“The Play’s the Thing”), and Moore, all argue for the role of theatre as a research site where age can be critically examined through the multiple realities of performance, and where “disruptive effects might be generated or discovered” (Moore par. 1). Performing a character’s gender or age on stage intersects with an



actor's own age, the theatrical conventions within which the actor is performing, the requirements of the character and role, the time structures, design and staging of the play, and the culture within which the play is received. This creates a performative age identity on stage that can give insight into how we understand age performativity more broadly.

As age studies researchers continue to seek useful definitions of key concepts, Gravagne addresses the mercurial nature of these terms:

The reality of a concept as intangible as age may be that it is inherently ambiguous, that it is all these things [the many definitions of age] and none of them at once. Whether or not we manage to accurately capture its essence or describe its behavior, the ways in which we define age and the meanings we attribute to it have very real physical, psychological, and material effects on our lives. (12)

Throughout this dissertation, I will clarify how I mobilize or define key terms, as I, like most age studies scholars, use different definitions for different purposes. For example, when I investigate old-age stereotypes, I consider a broad range of the lifespan from midlife onward, in order to capture the sweeping and homogenous application of prejudicial ideas about old age (in theatre and otherwise). My work, as it actively searches for alternatives to the decline narrative, necessarily unsettles definitions which cast old age as "Fourth Age" since transition to "Fourth Age" is defined as the transition to serious infirmity and decline. In Chapters 3, 5, and 6, I am attentive to how age is constructed differently according to gender and ability. Considering age as performative is key to my work in Chapters 3, 4, and 6. The role of place in defining age is relevant to my analyses in Chapters 5 and 6, as is the materiality of age and embodiment. Finally,

the relationship of time to definitions of age is crucial to my work in all of the chapters that follow.

### **2.3 History of Perspectives on Aging and Old Age**

The broad range of definitions for old age reflect the fact that “[c]onceptions of old age vary with the time and place, the person, and the society” (Hutcheon and Hutcheon 6). For my purposes, I have been most interested in the current narratives of aging and old age in contemporary Canadian culture and how they have developed over time. To a large extent these have been influenced by broader shifts in Western culture’s understanding of aging and old age. I recognize that more than just Western histories influence contemporary productions with themes of aging and old age, and their reception in Canada. In my broader research program, I hope ultimately to engage beyond this scope, but the current field builds on Western-based work. Further, the works I found in response to Gullette’s call draw on Western theatrical traditions and have been produced in mainstream Canadian professional theatre contexts.

While a full history of conceptions and experiences of aging is neither possible nor desirable here, it is helpful to highlight a few of the striking shifts in Western culture that demonstrate changing attitudes toward old age over time. Both Basting (*The Stages of Age*) and Heather Addison (11-13) provide useful historical overviews as context for their performance analyses, highlighting similar historical transitions, with Addison adding insights into the role of consumer culture and the advertising industry. I draw on these helpful summaries as well as the more comprehensive research of historians Thomas R. Cole (*The Journey of Life: A Cultural History of Aging in America*), Lawrence R. Samuel (*Aging in America: A Cultural History*), and David G. Troyansky (*Aging in World History*). Although Pat Thane’s research is specifically on

the English context, I also incorporate this historian's work (*Old Age in English History: Past Experiences, Present Issues*) as she provides useful critique of widespread historical narratives of aging and old age.

According to Thane, "[a]ll cultures have a variety of images of ageing available to them from which individuals and groups shape their expectations. These images shift and compete and if any one of them gains hegemony it does not necessarily do so for long" (6). Thane contends that interpreting past discourse about old age is difficult because, "it often serve[s] polemical and metaphorical rather than descriptive purposes" (6). For example, while it is commonly argued that life expectancy in historical societies was around the ages of thirty-five to forty, Thane clarifies that these statistics are skewed by the high rates of infant and child mortality prior to the 20<sup>th</sup> century. She asserts that a person who lived past the age of twenty had a good chance of living into their fifties or sixties, especially if female (3).

Samuel proffers that from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries in America, old age was comparatively rare and, perhaps because of this, people who lived a long life were esteemed, and advanced old age was seen as divinely ordained (7). On the contrary, Thane argues that old age in most historical societies was, in fact, not as rare as we tend to think. It was also not universally venerated: "The very poor of all ages have always lived on the margins. [. . .] Older people were, and generally are, respected, or not, for their social position or their personal qualities rather than on account of their age" (7).

In terms of attitudes toward old age, Cole notes that prior to the mid-sixteenth century numerical age had virtually no social significance, and few people knew how old they were (5). Addison specifies that prior to the 19<sup>th</sup> century the Western Puritan-influenced model of age was one that acknowledged potential infirmity in the elderly, as well as seeing old age as having

redemptive spiritual potential. Pre-industrial America was based on economies of agriculture and artisanship, and thus, Addison argues, age did not play a strong role in stratification. Generations were not divided or isolated but lived and worked together supporting strong interdependence and mutual respect (Addison 11-12). Related age narratives, then, had contradictory elements, but offered an “essentially hopeful vision of the human life cycle” (Addison 11).

Troyansky also describes the rise of the grandparent at this time: “In a process that extended from the middle of the eighteenth century into the nineteenth, the idea of the grandparent evolved from a reminder of lineage and ancestry to an emphasis on specific individuals and their affective relationships with their grandchildren” (70). The grandparent became a figure that could soften the authority of parents, mediate conflictual parent-child relationships, supplement children’s socialization, and act as loving confidant (Troyansky 71). Thane, however, suggests that the idea that in the past families were the mainstay for older people is faulty. According to Thane, at least in the English context, “it was never the unquestioned custom in England, as in some other cultures, for families to be the main source of support to older people. [. . .] Adult children felt an obligation to give emotional support to ageing parents and what material support they could. But they were also not expected to impoverish themselves or their families to do so” (11). Thane suggests that intergenerational relations in historical periods should not be idealized; “at all times, some older people, with or without relatives, have been lonely and neglected, though most were not” (12).

One of the most significant shifts with respect to the meaning and value of old age in Western societies, writes Basting, occurred in the late 1800s as a result of the industrial revolution and the development of a burgeoning middle class (*The Stages of Age* 10). Workers were now favoured for their speed, strength, and endurance rather than their experience, which

created a more negative view of aging (Addison 12). Cole argues that beginning in the eighteenth century an increasingly rationalized, urban, industrial society gave rise to the emergence of the individual lifetime as a structural feature of modern society (3). According to Cole, “chronological age came to function as a uniform criterion for sequencing the multiple roles and responsibilities that individuals assumed over a lifetime” (3). Samuel, taking a different tack, argues that economic class replaced age as the primary differentiating factor among Americans (7). The increasing national values of democracy and independence undermined the authority of age, as did the fact that nineteenth-century heroes were primarily young men (Samuel 7-8). Samuel asserts that, “[o]ldness in all forms was condemned in an increasingly modern society, and old people were considered a drag on the noble pursuit of progress” (7).

Also, in the later part of the nineteenth century, in the United States (and Canada), age limits for hiring and forced retirements served to stratify the life cycle into stages (Basting *The Stages of Age* 11; Samuel 8). Around the same time, the introduction of age graded school for children had a similar effect. Both served to decrease interdependence and thus the value given to aging and old age (Basting *The Stages of Age* 11). However, Thane provides critique of this view of retirement:

To interpret the spread of retirement as degrading the lives of older people by depriving them of the status associated with paid work is to romanticize often bitter hardship in the past. Far from being a source of status and respect, the paid work to which many people for many centuries clung for survival as they aged [. . .] was itself marginalized and degraded and thankfully abandoned for the security of even a small pension. (7)

Despite Thane's critique of negative views of retirement, it is clear that life-cycle models that included retirement as a distinct phase of aging grew in popularity at this time.

Concurrently, the emergence and growing popularity of Victorian morality, which emphasized both self-control and productivity, contributed to a dualistic model of old age in which health, vigor, and self-reliance were lauded as "good" old age associated with God's grace (Basting *The Stages of Age* 13), and decay and dependence were devalued as "bad" old age (Addison 12). The middle class lost the ability to perceive of aging as both decline *and* life fulfillment, and as a result aging became increasingly associated with a stigmatized understanding of disability and loss (Basting *The Stages of Age* 11).

Around the turn of the century, improvements in sanitation and hygiene meant that infant and child mortality declined (Basting *The Stages of Age* 11-12). Before this time, people who lived beyond childhood and especially into old age were considered necessarily healthy. However, once longer life spans were expected, societal views of aging focused more on its negative aspects and began to view aging as a scientific and technical problem, rather than a mystery or existential concern (Addison 12). As medical specialties such as gerontology and geriatrics developed, they secured the pathologization of old age as something to avoid or delay (Addison 12; Samuel 10). The mission of these professions was to study the physical and psychological symptoms of aging and to develop treatments for aging-related ailments (Troyansky 73). This laid the foundation for science and medicine to seek ways to interrupt or reverse the aging process. No longer seen as a sign of God's grace or moral achievement, old age was increasingly cast as a "functionless fall from the heights of health, productivity, and reproductivity," and the idea that "the elderly constituted a problem for society" began to proliferate (Basting *The Stages of Age* 13).

Drawing on the research of Fernando Torres-Gil, Samuel argues that the 1930's were particularly hostile to old age. At this time the idea of age-related wisdom lost considerable worth. The economic pressures of the Depression meant that more older Americans were economically dependent and received subsidized benefits, "creating the image of older Americans as unproductive people and a costly drain on society" (Samuel 8). A similar phenomenon occurred in Canada where the first public pension plan was introduced in 1927. In addition, in the early twentieth century the rapidly growing advertising industry shifted from using a product-centred approach to sell commodities, to employing psychological methods that preyed upon consumers' fears and insecurities. This consumer culture was founded on the "exaltation of youth" (Addison 12-13) and its narratives served to further devalue old age, especially in women.

The 1960s and 1970s saw the emergence of an anti-ageism movement in North America. This targeted negative stereotypes about the elderly that had resulted from decades of viewing age as a problem and disease. However, while the movement inspired older people to advocate for their own rights and well-being, its strategy of replacing negative images with positive ones ultimately sabotaged more significant change. This was in part because it failed to question the division between 'successful' and 'unsuccessful' aging and fueled denial of physical and psychological changes natural to the aging process (Basting *The Stages of Age* 14). Samuel also notes that as part of the anti-ageism movement, the development of associations for retired people, while also contributing to positive changes, helped to "brand older people as less than fully contributing members of society and more of a liability than an asset [. . .]" (9). Discourses developed in the 1970s that likened the expanding aging demographic to a "quietly ticking time bomb" (Shabecoff as cited by Samuel 34). In the 1980's these discourses increasingly used the

metaphor of the silver tsunami. Both images served to instill fear and resentment of aging by equating the aging demographic to a wide scale disaster. Thane certainly asserts that the 20<sup>th</sup> century marks a period during which the range of experience in later life (or old age) is the greatest of all historical periods (8).

Today negative views of aging persist in cultural narratives, primarily the narrative of decline. According to Chappell et al. in *Aging in Contemporary Canada*, the roots of ageism include fear and vulnerability toward aging and death (old people forewarn young people of their futures and it scares them), marginalization of older people in industrialized countries and a reduction in their participation in social affairs, social separation of young and older cohorts in modern society, and circulation of negative information about the elderly (3). Negative narratives of old age infiltrate our belief systems such that the status of people in contemporary Western culture increases from youth to middle age but declines thereafter (Chappell et al. 3). According to Baars, “the modern Western tradition of the last four centuries harbors few inspiring narratives about aging” (“A Triple Temporality” 36). Gullette concurs. She denounces the devastating influence of the decline narrative and its primacy in contemporary [North] American culture. However, Gullette is also optimistic that changing our narratives about aging and old age, including those promoted by contemporary theatre, can positively influence cultural attitudes towards aging, and the treatment of older people.

## **2.4 Theatrical Traditions and Stereotypes of Aging and Old Age**

In order to recognize change and progress, it is helpful to reflect on tradition. To this end, I summarize key ways that Western theatre has contributed to constructing and perpetuating stereotypes of aging and old age (especially negative ones) over time. This is critical as my



analyses in subsequent chapters engage with these stereotypes, chiefly to explore how the chosen plays reinforce, resist, or reinvent them. Mangan argues that ageism is often articulated through stereotypes, and that theatre has drawn frequently on stereotypes and stock figures (23):

[. . .] the social and communal nature of the theatrical experience and the immediacy of the relationship between the stage and the audience mean that theatrical performance is quick to adopt and recycle beliefs and attitudes, the codes and the signifiers, the prejudices and stereotypes of everyday life (Mangan 79).

Age-related character types and patterns of behavior recur time and time again in the Western dramatic canon, and many of these are consistent with the narrative of decline.

To date, Mangan has offered the most detailed mapping of these recurring types and representational patterns in Western theatre. Focusing on the *senex*, or stock figure of the old man, he traces its origins in Greek New Comedy and Roman Comedy, where he argues it had two main variations. The *senex iratus* or angry old man usually appeared as a domineering father, controlling his children and obstructing their erotic desires. Interested in money and status, he often pursued a match for his child that would benefit him in these contexts (Mangan 79). Examples include Knemon in Menander's *Dyskolos* (*The Bad Tempered Man*) from Greek New Comedy, or Euclio from *Aulularia*, Plautus's variation on the same story in Roman comedy. The other type, the *senex amans*, was the stock character of an old man who fell inappropriately in love with a much younger woman, for example Demipho from Plautus's *Mercator* (*The Merchant*). This character type was often portrayed as lecherous or devious and was ridiculed about impotence. He also was often motivated by money (Mangan 80-81). Both

variations were represented as exaggerated two-dimensional characters who were the butt of jokes, most often about their decline. They formed stereotypes that became the root of many portrayals of old age for centuries.

Mangan describes development of the *senex* over time, mostly through comedic forms, with the two types of *senex* sometimes fused into one character (Mangan 80). He notes variations of the *senex* in the Corpus Christi cycle plays of the Middle Ages in which Joseph was written as much older than Mary and sometimes as foolish (85). According to Ellis, in 16<sup>th</sup>-Century Italian comedy, “ridicule of the comedic *senex* intensified [. . .] even as writers in other genres were finding new reasons to champion old age” (Ellis 4). Both Ellis and Mangan track the *senex* in *commedia dell’arte* (which expanded throughout Europe from the 16<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> centuries) through the stock characters of Pantalone, the Venetian merchant, and Graziano, (also known as Dottore), the Bolognese doctor (Ellis 115-35; Mangan 88-89). Both characters, but more consistently Pantalone, were featured as a father of one of the lovers, or the male lover’s rival, or sometimes both (Mangan 88-89). According to Mangan “Pantalone with his greed, his pettiness, his lechery and his self-centredness, [. . . was] a negative stereotype of old age which spoke to generation after generation in location after location” (89).

Mangan further points to variations of the *senex* in the 17<sup>th</sup>-Century French plays of Molière, who was strongly influenced by *commedia*, and used the stereotypes and recycled plots of classical Greek and Roman comedies in his French neoclassical comedies. In his chapter “Molière’s *Miser*, Old Age, and Potency,” which appears in Lipscomb and Marshall’s *Staging Age*, Alan Wood also notes Molière’s repeated use of the *senex*, identifying Harpagon in *L’Avare* (*The Miser*), Orgon in *Tartuffe*, Monsieur Jourdain in *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*, and Argan in *Le Malade Imaginaire* as all representative of obsessed authoritarian father figures. Harpagon

also takes on the role of a *senex amans* in that he is in love with a much younger woman (Wood 151). To those who argue that satiric representations of aging and old age such as these have a positive social function through warning audiences of how not to act out their senescence, Mangan replies, “[I]f behind this portrait of a vain and mean-spirited old man, there may lurk an implied ideal of what a *good* old man might be, to say this is not to say very much: it is something that is true of nearly all satire” (89). We are still shown a negative portrait of old age which highlights the character’s social and moral failings and alienates him from the audience’s sympathies. However, Mangan also notes that audience sensibilities change over time and that audiences of one period might respond quite differently to a play’s age representations than audiences of another era (103-104). These ideas regarding comic portrayals of aging and old age and the stereotypes implicated in them are important to my analyses of comedies in Chapters 3 and 5.

The *senex* persisted in the 16<sup>th</sup>-Century English Renaissance, reflects Mangan, most notably through the plays of Shakespeare. Although Shakespeare demonstrated an ambivalent attitude toward old age in his plays, including nuanced and positive portrayals of old age as well as ridicule (Charney; Ellis; Martin), the presence of “heavy” fathers (i.e. stern, controlling patriarchs) and foolish older lovers is evidence of the enduring ageist stereotype(s) of the *senex* during this period. Maurice Charney identifies Lord Capulet in *Romeo and Juliet*, Egeus in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Prospero in *The Tempest*, Brabantio in *Othello*, and Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice* (49-61) and Polonius in *Hamlet* (65-66) as variations of the heavy father in Shakespeare (49-61). All are stern, irritable, and interfere in their children’s love partnerships. Charney argues that Polonius is “an extreme example of the *senex* type. He is not only long-

winded but also frequently shown losing the thread of the conversation. There is thus the implication of [. . .] senility” (63).

The *senex amans* can be recognized in Falstaff in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (Charney 87-97). In addition, Charney’s analysis of the title character in *Othello*, and Leontes in *The Winter’s Tale* suggests that both are variations on the *senex amans*—they “imagine themselves the victims of adulteries and see themselves as cuckolds” (Charney 98). Anthony Ellis also points to the *senex* in Shakespearean tragedy, arguing that the character King Lear represents both *senex iratus* and *senex amans*. He is irascible and also obsessed with his daughters’ love for him; his love for his youngest daughter Cordelia, and his unwillingness to renounce his libido, are at the root of his madness according to Ellis (38). However, in contrast to the classical *senex*, Lear maintains the audience’s sympathy. Because of the character’s advanced age, Christopher Martin posits, *King Lear* stands apart from Shakespeare’s other plays, as well as other drama of the period, in its “sustained meditation on actual senescence” (174). An understanding of these stereotypes is helpful to my analysis of *King Lear* in Chapter 4.

Moving forward to the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the *senex* was further recycled and reinvented throughout English Restoration comedy, although was usually only a secondary character due to the culture’s heightened focus on youth, and mistrust of older authority figures (Mangan 95).<sup>xviii</sup> The jealous, slow-witted, and cuckolded Dr. Davy Duncie in Thomas Otway’s *Soldier’s Fortune* is an example of a Restoration *senex* (Mangan 96). Importantly, during the English Restoration examples of a female *senex* were notable, most famously Lady Wishfort from William Congreve’s *The Way of the World*. This character-type likely also extends from certain portrayals of aging women dating back to Attic Old Comedy, in which, according to Jeffrey Henderson, examples can be found where the sexually-interested older woman was ridiculed and exploited

for comic purposes, especially the woman who tried to look younger (119). However, in Attic Old Comedy these were minor characters, and the genre as a whole often portrayed older women in positive ways.<sup>xix</sup> The legacy of the more prominent male *senex amans* of Greek (or Attic) New Comedy strongly influenced the Restoration female *senex*. The female *senex* figure was a post-menopausal woman, who on the one hand fulfilled parental qualities, but on the other was foolishly in love with a younger man. According to Mangan, “The incongruity of such an old woman in a love-plot [was] a source of unending comedy” (98). Although she maintained some social status through her wealth, she was the centre of cruel, sexist and ageist jokes, especially in her attempts to appear and act youthful (102-103). In both male and female variations, the Restoration aging lover was fair game for ridicule. This derision usually hinged on his/her failure to conform to age expectations and emphasized his/her decline. However, as Mangan notes, “if the old men may sometimes get away with their follies in Restoration comedy, the same is rarely true for older women” (98). Such sexist age portrayals became an enduring feature of Western entertainment. The negative, formulaic portrayal of a sexually-interested older woman is important to my Chapter 3 analysis of Sally Clark’s play *Moo*, and its subversion of this stereotype.

Incarnations of the *senex* over time have been influenced by the political and social specificity of the culture, and according to Ellis, at certain times this has led to more nuanced pictures of senescence than at others (4). Mangan argues that “the *senex* flourishes best in societies, or in situations, where there is resistance to real or perceived gerontocratic power and authority” (Mangan 80). Ellis also asserts that the outcome for the *senex* is strongly tied to genre—for example, the outcome for the comedic *senex amans*’s inappropriate love is humiliation (he may even regain a prominent place in society if he repents enough), whereas the

outcome for the tragic *senex amans* is madness and/or death (Ellis 32). Ellis argues, then, that the *senex* is not a simple, static convention. However, Mangan counters that the character type is still usually rooted in decline and is most often the object of ageist ridicule. He explains,

The figure of the *senex* [. . .] articulates tension and resistance to the perceived power and/or authority of an older generation—a power or authority which might in reality be minimal, or even illusory, but which generates a reaction and a challenge. This is why the *senex* is so typically a character who has some degree of social power and authority, but whose grip on that authority is increasingly fragile. His attempts to impose that authority, and to hang on to his power, generally result in his becoming the butt of the play’s humour. Mean, obstructive, inappropriately lustful – these are all traits which make the classic *senex* a target of comedy and alienate him (or her) from the sympathies of the audience. In the history and the genealogy of the *senex* we see theatrical performances which repeatedly reaffirm negative stereotypes of old age in order to mock them.

(Mangan 111-112)

The enduring presence of the *senex iratus* and *senex amans* in contemporary theatre and other media forms shows these stereotypes’ tenacity. Whether stereotypically rigid, grumpy, stingy, or overly critical older characters, or ones that are portrayed as foolish and inappropriately lustful, both male and female versions of the *senex* still appear in contemporary works. We can recognize the *senex iratus* in television characters such as Mr. Burns from *The Simpsons*, Statler and Waldorf from *The Muppet Show*, Ida Kenzel from *Malcolm in the Middle*, and Sister Evangelina from *Call the Midwife*. Hannah Pitt in Tony Kushner’s 1991 *Angels in*

*America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes* is a theatrical variation of the blocking mother. In contemporary Canadian theatre, Queenie in Ronnie Burkett's *Penny Plain* is another good example. The elderly Queenie is rash, rude, angry, and constantly demanding and insulting towards her adult daughter. The character of Appa in Ins Choi's *Kim's Convenience* also reiterates this type, especially as he interferes with his daughter's love life. We can identify the *senex amans* in characters such as Melvin Udall in the 1997 romantic comedy *As Good as It Gets*, as well as Blanche Devereaux in *The Golden Girls* and Mona Robinson in *Who's the Boss*, both late 1980's television sitcoms. In 2016 an adaptation of *The Golden Girls* called *That Golden Girls Show! A Puppet Parody* was staged Off-Broadway using puppets and showed the continued popularity of its characters including Blanche (Simoes). In a recent pantomime version of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* by Vancouver's Theatre Replacement, the evil stepmother queen was portrayed as a fusion of the two types of *senex* (although in this case, casting the character with a male actor somewhat subverted the stereotype).

The principal legacy of the *senex amans* is the message that old people interested in sex are ridiculous, grotesque, and worthy of ridicule (for women, especially, this message is often applied to anyone past midlife). A lasting message tied to the *senex iratus* is that aging parents are irritable, angry, selfish, and obstructive. Such older parents are usually blamed for the family's discord and dysfunction. Further, portrayals of *senex iratus*-type mothers, such as the aforementioned Queenie, or Violet in *August: Osage County* whom I discuss in Chapter 4, can also be linked to the monstrous mother archetype common in Western literature which has been detailed by Kristin Hanson in her 2006 Louisiana State University dissertation "Stage(d) Mothers: Mother-Daughter Tropes in Twentieth-Century American Drama." Both the *senex iratus* and *senex amans* are usually condemned for causing family disharmony. This feeds the

recurrent theme of intergenerational discord in Western theatre, which is not only common to comedy (for example, Molière's *Tartuffe*, Michel Tremblay's *Les belles-soeurs*, Edward Albee's *A Delicate Balance*, Ins Choi's *Kim's Convenience*), but also extends throughout the genre of tragedy as well (for example, Euripides' *Iphigenia at Aulis*, Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, Marsha Norman's *Night Mother*). This theme of rupture across generations and its relationship to the angry, obstructive, jealous, blocking parent undergirds my analysis of *August: Osage County* and *4000 Miles* in Chapter 5.

Although the theatrical treatment of *senex* characters is traditionally ageist, in some instances *senex* characters have been consciously used by playwrights to disrupt age expectations. Mangan contends that the *senex* has a flipside as a subversive trickster character similar to the trickster in folklore (112). He suggests that anarchic examples of old-person-as-trickster were staples of the music halls and live variety shows of late 19<sup>th</sup>- and early 20<sup>th</sup>-Century British popular entertainment and can be traced through to contemporary British sitcom and cinema. Tricksters can be old or young, but one of their defining features is that they lack social power or authority: therefore, elderly tricksters hold an important function in societies, cultures and situations in which the old lack agency (Mangan 112). The trickster is a boundary crosser traversing between right and wrong, sacred and profane, clean and dirty, male and female, young and old, living and dead (Hyde 7; Mangan 112). Features of this character are unconventionality, originality, and wisdom (Myerhoff 221). Variations of this stereotype, according to American anthropologist Barbara Meyerhoff, include "The wily old man, the truly frightening powerful old witch, the curmudgeon recluse in the hills, the mysterious unpredictable old crone" (221). Theatre variants of this figure include Friar Lawrence in Shakespeare's *Romeo*



*and Juliet*, The Witch in Stephen Sondheim and James Lapine's *Into the Woods*, Professor Marvel/The Wizard in *The Wizard of Oz* (The Royal Shakespeare Company's stage version by L. Frank Baum), and Geppetto in Ronnie Burkett's *Penny Plain*. An understanding of the function of the aging trickster provides background to my Chapter 3 analysis of Clark's characterization of Old Woman in *Ten Ways to Abuse an Old Woman*. It is also relevant to my Chapter 5 analysis of Vera in *4000 Miles*. Both of these characters cross boundaries, subvert age expectations in surprising ways, and rely on humour.

The final old-age stereotype relevant to my analysis is that of idealized pastoral figures. These are wise old characters who approach the sublime in their flawless intellect, morality, metaphysical powers, and/or spiritual pursuits. Mangan describes variations of this type as common in the Middle Ages when Christian elements were integral to the drama of the period (84). Dramatized biblical stories or tales of saints' lives incorporated such figures, and ideal old age was also used as allegory to represent wisdom and salvation (85). Charney notes examples of variations of this character type in Shakespeare including Old Duke and Old Adam in *As You Like It*, and Gonzalo in *The Tempest* (77-81). Another example is Uncle Tom in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, a novel that was adapted into numerous dramatized versions in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries (Frick). We can recognize this figure in fairy tales such as the grandmother in *Little Red Riding Hood* (e.g. recent version by Josephine Evetts-Secker) and Geppetto in *The Adventures of Pinocchio* (original 1883 novel by Carlo Collodi). Modern theatrical examples include Gandalf in *The Lord of the Rings* (2006 stage version by A. R. Rahman, Christopher Nightingale, Värttinä, Matthew Warchus and Shaun McKenna) (Russell), and Albus Dumbledore in *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child* (2016 stage version by Jack Thorne, J. K. Rowling, and John Tiffany). This character type has an important relationship to

problematized modern day inspirational images of aging and old age, which yoke successful aging to ideals of youthfulness through showing older characters as exceptional in their physical skill, unchanging youthful appearance, fashion sense, sexual prowess, active lifestyle, social popularity, and/or philanthropic enterprise. An understanding of this stereotype is useful as background to my analysis in Chapter 6 where I analyse portraits of inspiring aging that avoid or resist this stereotype.

## **2.5 Approaches to Studying Aging and Old Age in Drama, Theatre, and Performance**

Despite anecdotal evidence and the scholarly community's sense that these stereotypes are pervasive and recurrent on stage, the systematic and critical study of such stereotypes, as well as other representations of aging and old age in drama and theatre, remains limited and as yet incomplete. Nonetheless, there has been a variety of approaches to the study of aging and old age in theatre which I will now outline to situate my own research within the broader field.

Senior theatre, intergenerational theatre, and various forms of research-based theatre have all focused on topics related to aging and old age. These fields of artistry and research include many interesting and thoughtful representations and analyses of issues and experiences related to aging beyond midlife. Some of these seek to intervene in the stereotypical traditions I have described above, for example Edmonton Alberta's GeriActors and Friends is a not-for-profit company that creates and promotes intergenerational theatre. They describe their purpose and approach as promoting health and social/civic participation:

Adhering to the principles of Creative Aging, [GeriActors Theatre] believe[s] that seniors' engagement in the arts at a level of comparative mastery leads to significant

health benefits, an overall sense of well-being and a marked increase in social and civic engagement. Working intergenerationally, seniors have more creative energy and greater opportunities for expression. The stories they tell and the theatre they create are entertaining, but also challenge stereotypes, strengthen memory, develop skills associated with performance, and articulate issues of aging. (Edmonton Seniors Coordinating Council)

However, as I outlined in Chapter 1, these types of companies and research projects encompass topics, audiences, and methodological approaches that are different from mine. Research related to these forms of theatre mainly focuses on analyzing their processes for play development, evaluating the well-being of their participants, or determining the effectiveness of knowledge transfer to their audiences. As these are not my goals in this study, I will not review these areas of research in further depth here.

There are broad surveys of narratives of old age in Western history and literature that sometimes draw on dramatic works, along with other literary texts, to reflect historical attitudes toward aging and old age. Examples include the following: Simone de Beauvoir's *La Vieillesse (The Coming of Age)* originally published in 1970, Pat Thane's *Old Age in English History: Past Experiences, Present Issues* (2000), David G. Troyansky's *Aging in World History* (2016), and Jeanie Watson et. al. (eds.) *The Portrayal of Life Stages in English Literature 1500-1800* (1989). Helen Small's 2007 monograph *The Long Life* is also an instructive text which analyzes philosophical aspects of old age as expressed in Western philosophy and literature and suggests that old age can best be understood when viewed in conjunction with larger philosophical and moral concerns. All of these texts chronicle notions about old age across historical periods,

drawing on a variety of classical and contemporary texts, which sometimes include plays. However, none offers an in-depth study of drama. They tend to focus on plays in terms of their literary themes about aging, but do not think about plays in performance, nor do they offer performance analyses.

Lorna Berman and Irina Sobkowska-Ashcroft's *Images and Impressions of Old Age in the Great Works of Western Literature (700 B.C. – 1900 A.D.): An Analytical Compendium*, published in 1987, offers a broader survey of attitudes and depictions of old age in theatre over time. Of the 267 works analysed in this compendium, it draws on seventy-four dramatic texts dating from the 7<sup>th</sup>-Century BCE to 19<sup>th</sup>-Century CE. The compendium categorizes the attitudes of their authors toward aging and the elderly<sup>xx</sup> and the attributes of aging characters described in each text. Through analysing twenty-nine comedies, twenty-four tragedies, and twenty-one plays categorized as “drama: romantic drama, tragi-comedy,” this compilation provides a summary of how each work portrays aging. It lists the publication information for each text, information about the author including his/her age when writing text, the target audience, the genre, the popularity of the text, the setting of the story, the specified age of the old character(s), how the text describes the elderly, and the mode of description used (for example, realistic portrayal, allegory etc.). Finally, the compendium provides a brief plot summary for each work. This compilation does not offer in-depth close readings of any of its literary texts, however it does provide a cross section of Western dramatic literature over time up to 1900 CE. It shows that aging and old age have been the subjects of many dramas over time. It also confirms the claims of authors such as Ellis, Mangan, and Thane that aging and old age have been viewed in a variety of ways at differing times and places, but that negative attitudes have persisted throughout history, and, as Mangan asserts, have been demonstrated often in theatre.

Canonical Western dramas that turn on old-age narratives have been further analysed in studies that offer close readings of literary texts of a particular historical period, or sometimes of a particular genre. For example, Maurice Charney's *Wrinkled Deep in Time: Aging in Shakespeare* provides an in-depth reading of Shakespeare's aging characters and textual references to aging, proposing a continuum of what it meant to Shakespeare to be old, which ranged from senile, to foolish and intemperate, to wise, courageous, and resilient (2). Another example is Thomas Falkner's 1995 book *The Poetics of Old Age in Greek Epic, Lyric, and Tragedy* which examines the poetic traditions and social environments of ancient Greek texts in order to determine what kinds of meaning they carry regarding old age and how these relate to aspects of political, familial, and spiritual life. Falkner argues that "different treatments of old age are determined by the nature of these contexts as well as by the projects of specific works" (261). Studies of this sort offer alternatives to the decline narrative. For example, Jeffrey Henderson's 1987 article "Women in Attic Old Comedy" describes positive portrayals of aging women including nurses, housekeepers and doorkeepers (108, 123, 127). In addition, one of Lipscomb's early writings argues that old men and age difference are used as plot subversion in the works of George Bernard Shaw ("Old Gentleman"). However, many such investigations of canonical Western plays focus more on analysing negative portrayals of old age than on searching out or discussing alternatives to decline.

There is also a body of work which considers how artists of various genres (novelists, poets, painters etc.) confront their own decline and construct a range of related narratives, both positive and negative, in their later works. Such considerations of *late style* posit that there are connections between an artist's age (or place in the life course) and the narratives about age contained in that artist's work. Examples of the study of a dramatist's late style include Kenneth

Muir's *Last Periods of Shakespeare, Racine, and Ibsen* (1961); Russ McDonald's *Shakespeare's Late Style* (2006); and *'Make Sense of Who May': Essays on Samuel Beckett's Later Works* (1989) edited Robin J. Davis and Lance St. J. Butler. Most such studies focus on white male playwrights, primarily consider plays as literary texts rather than thinking about them in performance, and do not engage with aging beyond the biographical details of the author and their stylistic shifts. The concept of late style is also contested. Hutcheon & Hutcheon argue, for example, that underlying generalizations about creativity in later years are ageist. They suggest that, "universalized (rather than individualized) deployment of the term—whether positively or negatively—has led not only to falsifications, to elisions of distinctions and differences, but also to explicit or implicit denigrations of later-life creativity that are, in fact, ageist" (3). Whether one agrees with or opposes the validity of the concept of late style, this area of research represents a different approach to the study of aging and old-age narratives from that which I pursue in this dissertation. My concern is with the messages about age that plays convey to the public; I am less concerned with what they reflect about their author.

Finally, there is a small but important body of work that falls at the intersection of theatre studies and cultural age studies and employs theoretical approaches from both fields. This type of research is concerned with critically analysing plays both as dramatic texts and in performances. Such research has been most relevant to me in shaping my thinking and guiding my theoretical and methodological approaches. Within this field of research, analyses typically go beyond considering a play's themes related to aging and old age. Close readings of plays also focus on the role of dramaturgy in creating age narratives, and performance analyses also consider issues such as age performativity and other aspects of embodiment, as well as audience reception. For my primary purpose of actively seeking alternatives to the decline narrative in

contemporary Western theatre, four books in this vein have been most pertinent to my research, each of which applies a critical age studies perspective to analyses of theatre or other performance. Listed in chronological order, they are the following: *The Stages of Age: Performing Age in Contemporary American Culture* by Basting (1998), *Staging Age: The Performance of Age in Theatre, Dance, and Film* edited by Lipscomb and Marshall (2010), *Staging Ageing: Theatre, Performance and the Narrative of Decline* by Mangan (2013), and *Performing Age in Modern Drama* by Lipscomb (2016). Looking at the four alongside each other in more detail will help me to clarify how my own project builds from them and also moves in different directions.

Basting's *The Stages of Age: Performing Age in Contemporary American Culture*, established the field of age studies in theatre. Her seminal research explores eight different performances that trouble traditional Western constructs of aging. These performances include five amateur and three professional productions encompassing senior theatre, experimental theatre, and commercial theatre. Basting also describes the organizational structures of many of the producing companies and provides brief production histories for some of the plays. Through her analyses, which overlap theatrical performance with theoretical performativity, Basting draws on theory from gender studies, performance studies, psychology, sociology and social gerontology. Her insightful readings propose ways that the eight performances interrupt, transform, and highlight stereotypes of aging and old age.

Basting's goal is "to invoke and challenge academic discourses of gerontology, feminism, and postmodernism, and offer diverse, hopeful, yet realistic alternative models of aging" (*The Stages of Age* 23). In this dissertation I build on Basting's thesis that theatrical representation offers a way to imagine old age as a valuable stage of life, one that links

generations, that is engaged with both present and past, and that is constantly changing. I am guided by Basting's assertion that "[. . .] consideration of the *whole* life course and the relationships between generations are critical if we are to dislodge ourselves from the narrative of decline" (*The Stages of Age* 5, emphasis in original). My approach in Chapters 4 and 6 is especially informed by Basting's focus on *live* performance, although unlike Basting I also include analysis of written scripts in Chapters 3 and 5. In particular, Basting's model of the body in temporal depth, or performative depth model of aging (*The Stages of Age* 134-146) has been critical to my own analyses as I seek to affirm and expand the model. Inspired by Basting, I specifically look for alternatives to the narrative of decline in the theatrical performances that I study. My work begins, in a sense, where Basting's left off. I consider plays produced since her book was published in 1998 (Basting's work since that time has focused on dementia and the performance of self; she has not pursued a broader range of alternatives to the decline narrative in theatre). In addition, and as distinct from Basting, I consider the contemporary Canadian context and include Canadian and British plays where she focused on those that are American. I also focus only on professional theatre which was the minority of the work Basting considered.

Succeeding Basting's formative work, Lipscomb and Marshall's edited collection *Staging Age: The Performance of Age in Theatre, Dance and Film* has also been highly instructive for my research. The book aims to "stimulate further research and undergird pedagogy" (1) and consists of essays under the categories of Film, Theatre, and Dance from a variety of disciplines including cultural studies, psychoanalysis, film and theatre studies. The section on theatre consists of four essays. The three most instructive to me analyse narratives of aging and old age in canonical works (those of Shakespeare, Beckett, and Molière). Chapter 4 "Performing Female



Age in Shakespeare's Plays" by Janet Hill and Valerie Barnes Lipscomb, and Chapter 7 "Molière's *Miser*, Old Age, and Potency" by Allen Wood, both of which analyse age narratives in classical plays, inspired me to think about theatrical stereotypes of aging and old age and how these are constructed by both script and performance. Hill and Lipscomb's chapter also encouraged me to think about casting and its relationship to age narratives. Chapter 5 "Mediating Childhood: How Child Spectators Interpret Actors' Bodies in Theatrical Media" by Jeanne Klein, though less applicable to my work because of its focus on child spectators, still encouraged me to think further about embodiment and reception. Audience reception is central to my analyses in Chapters 4 and 6. Ruth Pe Palileo's Chapter 6, titled "'What Age Am I Now? And I?': The Science of the Aged Voice in Beckett's Plays," motivated me to think about aspects of performance that were less obvious than the spoken words or the visual images of the actor's body and costume. This eventually led to my focus on interactions with dramatic space, stage properties and structures of time in Chapter 5. As these and other essays in the collection explore performativity, embodiment, default bodies, casting, and masquerade, they have pressed my research forward. They differ from my work in that none of them considers narratives of aging and old age in the works of contemporary playwrights, which I do in Chapters 3, 5 and 6. My work also considers the Canadian context which this collection does not include. I build on the essays in Lipscomb and Marshall's book through the use of different theatrical examples, and bridge to new ideas as I consider additional factors such as the use of stage properties, dramatic space, structures of time, auto/biographical performance, as well as under-studied themes with respect to old age and theatre, such as age-related memory loss, aging female sexuality, and generational continuity or rupture (intergenerational relations).

Following Lipscomb and Marshall's collection is Mangan's *Staging Ageing: Theatre, Performance and the Narrative of Decline*. This book, which incorporates theatre and performance studies approaches, is an exploration of "the way that drama, theatre and performance engage either with old age as a socio-cultural category, or with old age as a lived experience, or with old age as a combination of the two" (Mangan 175). Through exploring selected texts and performances, both historical and contemporary, Mangan considers how plays and performances have shaped understandings of aging at various points in time. His historical examples are mostly drawn from canonical texts, while his current-day examples derive from contemporary British theatre, television, radio drama, dance performances and rock concerts. Mangan's historical investigation of negative stereotypes, especially through the stock figure of the *senex* (a major portion of the book), has informed my work in establishing the recurrent stereotypes that the plays I analyse resist. In addition, I am guided by Mangan's "Chapter 7: On Memory and Its Modes" which includes explorations of several plays that focus on the themes of aging and memory loss, some explicitly about dementia. Here his thoughtful analyses add to my consideration of the relationship between memory and identity. These ideas are most directly related to my Chapters 3 and 6, both of which expressly discuss aging and representations of memory loss. In addition, Mangan's writing about reminiscence and its relationship to autobiography, as well as the role of nostalgia, was informative to my work on autobiography, memory, and nostalgia in Chapter 6. Like Mangan I am interested in the material, social and ideological conditions surrounding representations of age in theatre. As his title suggests, Mangan is most attentive to the narrative of decline and how it is expressed and resisted in various plays across time—a project very similar to my own. My work differs from Mangan's in that I place increased emphasis on age performativity. Further, Mangan's contemporary

examples are drawn from the British context, whereas I focus on the Canadian. In addition, Mangan's approach tends toward breadth; he discusses a wide range of contexts, historical periods, and themes related to aging and old age in theatre (i.e. gerontology, liminality and late style, negative stereotypes, memory, reminiscence, longevity, institutions, song and dance). By contrast, my study encompasses a much more specific and limited time period, and focuses on detailed, in-depth close readings of six plays.

Highly instructive to my own research and building on the work of both Basting and Mangan, Lipscomb's *Performing Age in Modern Drama* investigates the conventions of performing age in canonical plays written in English, from the early twentieth century to the year of the book's publication: 2016. Lipscomb includes plays that have contributed significantly to American culture as indicated by critical and commercial success on the American stage, although not all works included are American dramas. Analysing works by playwrights such as Tennessee Williams, Edward Albee, Tom Stoppard and Brian Friel, Lipscomb's is the first book to consider the staging of ages across the life course (not just old age). Lipscomb seeks to provide an inclusive model for analysing age that encourages age studies to move away from investigating exclusively older age—an approach that she believes reinforces the youth/age binary and continues to segregate the elderly (6). The book considers mostly Modern canonical scripts produced on the professional stage; however, her last chapter also includes three original amateur senior theatre productions. Lipscomb analyzes the dramatic text with an eye for both literary themes and performative elements, and also considers plays in production through analysing performances she has attended as well as reviews of prevalent productions. I emulate this approach in so far as I also approach dramatic texts from the point of view of both literary

elements and performance characteristics. Moreover, like Lipscomb, I incorporate both close readings of plays and performance analyses into my broader study.

Lipscomb proposes several ways that memory plays reinforce or question the idea of a stable, enduring, ageless self; these are chiefly through dramatic structure, theatrical devices, and age-related casting. While the plays she investigates reflect varying attitudes toward age, as a whole, Lipscomb argues that both the memory plays and the Senior Theatre performances she interrogates reveal the longing for an ageless, essential self, a stable self that is recognizable and represents a unified identity regardless of the passage of time (10). Lipscomb concludes “Thus, the memory play as a subgenre can challenge contemporary Western culture’s binary construction pitting young against old, as it calls attention to all ages sharing a performative basis” (*Performing Age in M.D.* 6). This book adds to Lipscomb’s influential previous body of work which includes articles such as “Performing the Aging Self in Hugh Leonard’s ‘Da’ and Brian Friel’s ‘Dancing at Lughnasa,’” “‘Putting on Her White Hair’: The Life Course in Wilder’s *The Long Christmas Dinner*,” and “Age in *M. Butterfly*: Unquestioned Performance.” As a leading scholar of research on age and theatre, Lipscomb employs an approach that guides my own in numerous ways, especially methodologically. First, her focus on age narratives on the professional stage and their influence on American culture inspires my similar interest in the influence of professional theatre’s messages about age on the Canadian cultural imaginary. Lipscomb is expressly interested in both the literary themes and performative elements of the dramatic script, as well as the play in performance, which is also my approach. Her interest in age performativity and the effects of age-related casting inform my analyses in Chapters 3, 4 and 6. Lipscomb’s intricate close readings of canonical plays guide my work, particularly in Chapters 3 and 5, in which I also employ the technique of close reading. Like Lipscomb, in Chapter 3, I

analyse reviews of prominent productions in addition to the plays themselves. Lipscomb's final chapter "The Fullness of Self: Performing Identity in Senior Theatre," although considering amateur productions which are not my focus, much like my work, it references Basting's performative, depth model of aging (Basting "The Stages of Age" 145), as well as Marvin Carlson's theory of theatrical ghosting, both of which are important to my work in Chapters 4 and 6. Lipscomb's interest in structures of time also influences my thinking in all chapters of my dissertation. While firmly guided by Lipscomb, my work differs from hers not only by considering the Canadian context, but also by focusing specifically on narratives related to *aging and old age*, not on ages across the entire life course. While I admire her desire to establish an inclusive model for age studies that incorporates all ages, and I agree that it can contribute to reducing ageism by lessening youth/age binaries, I am also influenced by the fact that ageism is experienced most often and most forcefully by those who have aged past midlife. My particular interest, then, is in studying how contemporary professional theatre staged in Canada variously reinforces, redresses, and reimagines stereotypes and negative narrative tropes related to aging into and experiencing old age.

Beyond these four books, several key journal articles on staging aging have been particularly influential to my research. Gullette's chapter titled "Acting Age on Stage: Age-Appropriate Casting, the Default Body, and Valuing the Property of Having an Age" (*Aged by Culture* 159-178) was the first to consider the age effects of casting. It guided my thinking in this respect, especially informing my Chapter 4 analysis which employs her concept of the default body. Woodward's "Performing Age, Performing Gender" also contributed to my thinking about age performativity and age stereotypes in visual culture and media. Her concept of "the youthful structure of the look" ("Performing Age" 164) had been key to my Chapter 3 analysis of Clark's

construction of older female characters on stage. Fuchs's two articles "Estrangement: Towards an 'Age Theory' Theatre Criticism" and "Rehearsing Age" both discuss how dramatic structure can be implicated in promoting ageism. While I do not specifically apply her concept of "estrangement" [sic], thinking about the role of a play's dramaturgy in constructing age narratives has been central to my analyses in Chapters 3, 5, and 6. I also found instructional Anna Harpin's "The Lives of Our Mad Mothers: Aging and Contemporary Performance" which investigates representations of aging in contemporary British and Irish theatre through an examination of stereotype, comedy, illness roles, acting, intergenerational heritage, tragedy and politics (67). Like Harpin, I investigate contemporary plays that rethink the meaning of aging and old age, considering age performativity, auto/biographical techniques, memory, comedy, and intergenerational heritage. However, unlike Harpin, I focus on Canadian theatre and also include analyses of theatricalized male aging. Finally, with respect to research on Canadian theatre, I have been inspired by Casado-Gual's "Ambivalent Pathways of Progress and Decline: The Representation of Aging and Old Age in Joanna McClelland Glass's Drama." Although Casado-Gual analyzes McClelland Glass's entire oeuvre, whereas I investigate individual plays in more depth, her thoughtful consideration of characterizations, plot structures, and temporal frameworks has been instructional to my research in all chapters of this dissertation.

## **2.6 Conclusion**

As Switzky astutely comments, "Theatre, as an embodied art that unfolds over time, can both model and challenge narratives, affects, and cultural understandings (and misunderstandings) about aging" (137). In this dissertation, I seek to build on the work that has come before my own and offer new insights into narratives of aging and old age in contemporary

professional Canadian theatre. The following chapters contribute analyses of six plays that consider ways in which these theatrical works challenge, complicate, or offer alternatives to the simplistic or stereotypical decline story of aging, as well as denaturalize other stereotypes and narrative tropes concerning aging and old age.

### Chapter 3: “I’m an old fucking woman as of today”: Sally Clark’s

#### Dramaturgies of Female Aging<sup>xxi</sup>

Award-winning Canadian playwright Sally Clark has been an influential figure in Canadian theatre and scholarship since the 1980s.<sup>xxii</sup> Her unorthodox, tragicomic plays have been produced professionally in New York and across Canada, anthologized in collections,<sup>xxiii</sup> and taught in Canadian postsecondary courses. While critics have traced complex feminist impulses in her work,<sup>xxiv</sup> none have yet focused on how her plays unsettle dominant paradigms of aging and old age—a striking omission considering the transgressiveness of her characterizations of elderly women. Here I analyze Clark’s two plays that feature central female characters in old age: *Moo* (1988) and *Ten Ways to Abuse an Old Woman* (1983; henceforth, *Ten Ways*).<sup>xxv</sup> Like Clark’s complex feminism, her constructions of aging and particularly old age are not straightforward; they walk the line between reinforcing ageist narratives and offering resistant alternatives to commonly held beliefs. While at times this tends toward aporia, I argue that in these plays—which were written well before the recent expansion of the anti-ageism movement—Clark does important work toward contesting the fixed scripts that serve to anchor ageist notions, particularly the ubiquitous decline narrative. Neither play completely departs from tropes of physical and mental loss accompanying aging. Indeed, certain readings might interpret Clark’s writing as reinscribing these devaluing tropes of decline, particularly if they fail to consider ways in which the text’s satirical elements can be exposed through performance. I argue, however, that although Clark is not always successful, in key ways both plays resist fixed, stereotypical framings of old age, highlighting instead the ambiguities and incongruities of old-age identity. I contend that Clark’s use of dramaturgical techniques including achronicity,



disruption of rising conflict, intratextual polyvocality, ambiguous endings, and humour results in constructions of female aging and old age that highlight performativity, challenge disease as an objective category, and disrupt the simplistic association between aging and loss.<sup>xxvi</sup> Clark's work has significance because of its striking, focused, and complex engagement with negative fixed assumptions about female aging and old age.

Clark's short play *Ten Ways* employs a darkly comedic approach to explore the relationship between an apparently senile elderly mother and her middle-aged daughter, in which the mother seems happier and often better adjusted. *Moo* is a black comedy that tells the life story of Moo (short for Moragh) and her obsession with a "rotter" named Harry (*Moo* 11), which leads to years of mutual torture, strained relationships, and Moo's probable murder at his hand. At the same time, it presents Moo as free-thinking and shows her transcendence over abuse and stereotypes.

Like Clark's other plays, *Ten Ways* and *Moo* feature complex female protagonists replete with ambiguities. Unlike her other plays, however, both feature central female characters aging into and experiencing old age; in the case of *Moo*, the character ages from approximately her late teens to her seventies, while in *Ten Ways*, "Old Woman" is likely about aged seventy or more, since her daughter is described as aged fifty ("Ten Ways" 319). Despite the fact that Clark's central female characters might at first seem to lack agency—both potentially suffer abuse and exhibit senility in their old age—attention to the satirical elements of the plays reveals that these women are not objects, but rather agents of comedy.

According to Lisa Colletta, "Satire is an attack [. . .] which exposes human vices and folly to scorn and ridicule" using strategies such as inversion, exaggeration, contradiction, incongruity and juxtaposition (209). While an analysis of Clark's comedy is not the primary

focus of this article, discussions of her use of humour and satire contribute to my analysis of the ways in which her dramaturgy resists ageist narratives. By highlighting performativity, resisting decline, and incorporating humour, Clark's dramaturgy creates provocative portraits of female aging that are often resistant and rebellious.

### 3.1 Age Performativity

One way Clark creates defiant portraits of age in *Moo* and *Ten Ways* is by clearly foregrounding age performativity to defamiliarize dominant age scripts. For a more detailed discussion of age performativity, please refer to Chapter 2, pages 41-45. Clark's notes concerning the casting of *Moo* play an important role in understanding the play's enactment of age performativity. Clark writes, "This play can be performed by eight actors: 5 women and 3 men" (*Moo* 10) and she recommends under "suggested casting" that *Moo* be played by the same actress throughout the play (10). *Moo* has been cast this way in all productions I have uncovered. *Toronto Star* reviewer Robert Crew describes this casting in a review of the play's first Toronto production at Factory Theatre: "*Moo* starts as a determined teenager and ends as a senile woman in her seventies. It's a gloriously dangerous assignment for an actor" ("*Moo* Puts Humorous Bite on Snatches of Family Life" C2). Because *Moo* spans fifty years, the lead actress playing *Moo* must play outside her own age range. In the first two productions, *Moo* was cast and successfully played by actresses of quite different ages. In the first production, at the 1988 Alberta Theatre Projects' festival of new plays, thirty-one-year-old Wendy Noel played the title role. Peter Wilson for the *Vancouver Sun* reviewed her performance: "Wendy Noel, as *Moo*, dominates every scene she is in, always perfectly in sync with the age and mental state of her character" (D6). In the 1989 Toronto Factory Theatre production, Patricia Hamilton was about

fifty-one when she played the role. Reviews also recognized her facility with performing age. Ray Conlogue wrote in the *Globe and Mail*:

I saw the play before with a young actress doing the role, and in some ways that worked better [. . .] But Hamilton is so consummately and exuberantly at one with Moo's spirit that it doesn't matter after the first two seconds. If she says she's 19, then she's 19. (C9)

In the *Toronto Star*, Crew noted that, "The final scenes [played by Hamilton], of a weak, tired and forgetful old woman still obsessed by her Harry, are powerful and touching" ("Moo Puts Humorous Bite on Snatches of Family Life" C2). Much like how Lipscomb describes the character Mother Bayard in Thornton Wilder's *The Long Christmas Dinner*, Moo "embodies senescence while recounting girlhood" ("Putting on Her White Hair" par. 8) in the relatively short time span of the play. The jumps back and forth in the play's chronology mean that the actress playing Moo is required to shift her stylized performance of age quite quickly. Similar to *The Long Christmas Dinner*, in *Moo* "the accelerated time forces audiences to confront the physical transformation of age" (par. 14). Reviews suggest that actresses with a twenty-year age difference have both successfully achieved this effect.

Not only does the actor playing Moo have to perform a wide age range, but Clark also suggests that the characters Ditty, Sarah, and Harry be played by one actor per role, so these actors, too, must produce performances of age spanning fifty years (*Moo* 10). Other actors are double cast and also perform various ages. The *Globe and Mail* review of *Moo*'s Factory Theatre production noted, "All these actors, over the half-century time span of the story, play several other roles: [Michael] Simpson, remarkably, goes from being Moo's father to being her son, and

pulls it off” (Conologue C9). The responses of reviewers demonstrate that audience members were able to recognize performances of age despite the fact that the physical body of the actor did not always match the chronological age of the character. This supports the idea that potentially controllable aspects of performance (nuance in movement, facial expression, vocal tone, etc.) play a role in constructing age, but also that certain aspects of performative identity remain consistent over time, since the audience was able to recognize a character despite the character’s shifting age and the fact that the same actors played multiple characters. Because the same bodies play a variety of ages, age is revealed as a system of beliefs and behaviors mapped onto the bodies of the actors. This draws attention to what Lipscomb describes as “performative elements that mark the self as aging and aged” (“Putting on Her White Hair” par. 30), and serves to denaturalize and defamiliarize dominant age ideology, which tends to consider particular age characteristics as essential or natural to discrete life stages.

### **3.2 The Decline Narrative**

Michael Mangan has noted that the representation of aging as decline has been a significant force throughout Western theatrical history (23, 79), and stereotypes have often denigrated aging and old age. For a more detailed discussion of the decline narrative, please refer to Chapter 1, pages 4-5. In recent years, Western theatre has shifted away from a singular focus on decline. Harpin observes that beginning in the 1980’s British and Irish theatre began to mirror the increased cultural presence of older women (71). She claims that this period brought “an emerging focus on the complexities of the lived experience of female aging [on stages] in the UK and Ireland and the narratives of decline and stereotypes of eccentricity attendant on such experience” (72). In Canadian theatre, a similar phenomenon occurred. The 1980s saw the

emergence of a greater number of older characters on English Canadian stages, and this included the appearance of several nuanced portraits of older women. The first English language productions of two important French Canadian works appeared at this time. In 1979, the well-known Acadian play *La Sagouine*, by Antonine Maillet, featuring an old washerwoman, was first performed in English on CBC (Bite Size Canada par. 3). In 1985, *Albertine, en cinq temps* (*Albertine in Five Times*) by Michel Tremblay had its first English production at Toronto's Tarragon Theatre (Tarragon Theatre). It was during this period that Sally Clark's plays *Moo* and *Ten Ways* were first produced. I now turn to a discussion of how unique elements of Clark's dramaturgy serve to interrupt the decline narrative in these two works.

Gullette has argued that the decline narrative is deeply ingrained in our unconscious by early exposure to accepted story-structural forms that tell the meaning of time passing (*Aged by Culture* 12-13). Theatre might be understood to produce such a conditioning effect by its use of traditional dramatic structure. Theatre scholar Ric Knowles argued in 1999 that, especially since the 1960's, the dramaturgical unconscious of most playwrights, directors, theatre critics, and audiences in Canada had been shaped by the combined influence of Aristotle's *Poetics*, the Oedipus myth, and the Bible, all of which promote dramatic structure in the form of exposition, complication, reversal and denouement (*The Theatre of Form* 31). Knowles contends the following:

This Aristotelian/oedipal/biblical narrative, then, has become the standard structural unconscious of dramatic naturalism in Canada [. . .] and the meanings and ideologies that it inscribes, [are] fundamentally conservative and patriarchal [. . . and] constitute the

primary and affirmative social impacts of the plays that use it, whatever their (conscious) themes or subject matters. (31)

Through adhering to and reproducing familiar structures, such works “deny form or structure any ideological weight or cultural coding, treating them as neutral and value-free tools” (26). As audiences, then, we have tended to accept hidden messages in plays because they fit with our unconscious expectations about plot and characters, many of which are shaped by ageist narratives. For example, contemporary Canadian audiences may fail to question why the oldest character in a play is written as eccentric or forgetful, or as unwittingly causing conflict, because the story structure unfolds in a way that we expect and thus naturalizes such depictions.

In contrast to this dramaturgical approach, Sally Clark uses what Knowles terms “dramaturgy of the perverse.” According to Knowles:

As a structural principle, perversity may usefully be seen as a revisioning of Aristotelian *reversal* [sic] (and recognition) as well as an intertextualist (or “interstructuralist”) rejection of modernist purity, clarity, and self-containment. Unlike the more familiar concept of subversion, however, the perverse is not simply arranged in an oppositional (and therefore affirming) relationship to the dominant. Perversion is dialogic in Bakhtin’s sense, more variously disruptive and less simply reactive than the concept of subversion suggests. (*The Theatre of Form* 44-45)

This approach uses dramaturgical techniques such as chronological jumbling, narrative instability, and disruption of rising conflict. Prior to the 1980s, when Clark’s plays were first

produced, such techniques were not uncommon in European and some pockets of Canadian modernist theatre. However, in Canada, theatrical production had long been dominated by the tradition of realism and the well-made play (Barker and Solga vi-xi)). Thus, Clark's use of these techniques ran against the common grain of realism in Canadian theatre, and in so doing, helped to challenge the depiction of age as a natural and inevitable process of decline and loss.

Clark's play *Moo* is constructed in forty-seven short scenes. While the overall narrative tells Moo's life story from youth to old womanhood, the play does not unfold in a chronological sequence. For example, in Act 2, scene 7 Moo appears in a nursing home; we know she is older than sixty-five at this point. In the next scene Harry, Moo's former husband and the object of her obsessive love, reappears to deliver a brief monologue. His presence reminds us of Moo's youth when we last saw them together. Next Moo appears with her young son, locating her as the mother of a child. The direct juxtaposition of scenes in which Moo appears as an old woman, with scenes in which she is a variety of younger ages, reminds us of her varied experiences at many points across her life course and undercuts the representation of old age as a category yoked to decline and distinct from youth.

In terms of staging, Clark specifies, "With the exception of the blackout after the first scene, the play should be performed without blackouts or fades" (*Moo* 9).<sup>xxvii</sup> The audience is not given a moment to look away or separate the scenes. Rather, the successive showcasing of multi-aged images disrupts what Woodward describes as the cultural convention of looking away from old age and illness, which she terms "the youthful structure of the look" ("Performing Age" 164). Woodward suggests that in American [and, I would add, Canadian] visual culture, spectators typically cast themselves as younger than and superior to the old person they see portrayed, unless they are invited to do otherwise by the non-normative nature of the cultural text

(164). Clark offers precisely this kind of non-normative invitation by juxtaposing scenes of old age with those of different ages, never fixing on a clear chronology. In each case the same actor plays Moo and as audiences become invested in her narrative, they follow her in successive scenes in which her age varies. Their sense of her as a character is based on an accrual of perspectives that does not follow the neat logic of either chronology or straightforward decline. The absence of black-outs, the use of the same actor, the jumps forward and back in chronology and the recurrence of leitmotifs such as Moo's obsession with Harry, her recoveries from supposed illness and injury, and her non-conventional and often unorthodox responses to situations build the sense of complex continuity between Moo at different ages.

Clark also challenges the decline narrative by avoiding Aristotelian dramaturgy's steady linear cause-and-effect complication toward a single climax. Clark incorporates many small climatic moments throughout her achronological scenes; none of them leads to clear resolution. Some of the mini-climaxes show Moo's health compromised at various stages of her life. Decline is not constructed as inevitable or (apart from her probable death) as irreversible. Near the beginning of the play we see Moo as a young woman confined to an insane asylum by her husband, Harry. Moo claims that there is nothing wrong with her: "Look, Harry is lying. I don't know why he's lying but he's lying. Call my sisters" (*Moo* 20). We then see Moo start to question her sense of reality: "You're sure I have a sister [. . .] And Harry is not my brother" (*Moo* 61). However, she is then released from the asylum and once again appears self-assured. Next, we see Moo as an even younger woman who is shot in the head by Harry, yet she recovers. As a relatively old woman, Moo experiences a broken hip; it is unclear if this was caused by a fall or by her sister, Ditty, jumping on her. As a result, Moo's sisters have her confined to a nursing home, claiming she is unfit to live alone. This recalls her commitment to the asylum in



her youth, and again causes us to question whether Moo is actually physically or mentally compromised, or whether her sisters construct her “decline” because it is convenient to them. Clark shows Moo in decline at a number of life stages, but this decline is not continuous; it is reversed a number of times, challenging its validity as a natural process. Although Clark’s disruption of this narrative is not complete—Moo’s decline seems accelerated as she becomes older and is questioned less at her oldest age— by highlighting and interrogating the social factors influencing decline, Clark moves toward denaturalizing it as the primary and inevitable story of aging.

In *Ten Ways* Clark employs similar dramaturgical techniques. This play, like *Moo*, is structured in short scenes – fifteen in all; the play is only thirty minutes in length. In this case the temporality is ambiguous. The repetitive nature of both Old Woman’s actions (such as boiling eggs, running the dishwasher, and preparing food for the deceased dog), and her interactions with her daughter, gives a sense of cyclical time. Old Woman is not portrayed as more physically or mentally compromised in any scene as compared to any other. Ratsoy suggests that the brevity of the play and the fragmentary nature of the scenes, combined with the play’s title, echo popular how-to manuals (317). Generally, how-to manuals provide a set of specific instructions to help people (usually non-experts) accomplish a specific task, but here Clark perverts the essential purpose of the how-to manual. Not only is her topic not socially affirming (as opposed to most how-to manuals), but the goal of the manual is never accomplished. Throughout the play, we see Daughter “abusing” her mother in different ways, but Old Woman never seems to suffer from the abuse. She remains happy throughout. For example, in scene 13, when Daughter and George remind Old Woman that her husband, Charlie, is dead and that she was very unhappy about it for years, Old Woman “*mulls it over*” and replies, “But, I’m happy now” (“Ten Ways” 328). As

Daughter grows increasingly outraged throughout the play, her angry reactions become comically excessive, particularly because Old Woman remains unfazed. Since the abuse does not appear to have any impact or to accumulate between the discrete scenes, the manual form reads more like a collection of strategies in resisting ageist mistreatment. Through such an outrageous, humorous, and culturally taboo representation (including the audacity of naming the character “Old Woman” and the brazen satire of the play’s title), Clark deliberately foregrounds the issue of elder abuse.

Clark also uses the dramaturgical technique of ambiguous endings to challenge the decline narrative. According to Knowles, use of such perversion techniques “disrupts the complacent, voyeuristic, oedipal, or ecstatic satisfaction and containments provided by dramatic catharsis” (*The Theatre of Form* 45). Robin Whittaker argues that in Clark’s plays ambiguous endings “function as a complication instead of a resolution or a restabilization of culture values” (“Narrativizations and Perversions” 18). In the second-to-last scene in *Moo* we see Harry enter Moo’s nursing home room with a gun. He places her hand on the gun, “raises the gun to Moo’s heart. Moo does not resist. She and Harry pull the trigger” (Clark *Moo* 131). This is apparently assisted suicide, but it could be murder. We never get to see the outcome. We are left wondering whether this was Moo’s ultimate moment of agency, whether she was victimized, and we might even wonder if Moo actually died.

The idea that Moo’s life would end in old age by non-precontemplated assisted suicide or by murder is clearly troublesome from the perspective of ageism. Gullette worries that the media’s neoliberal messages that old people are expensive “burdens” might be putting pressure on older women, and men as well, to end their lives prematurely (by refusing care or committing suicide) (Gullette “V. Why I Hesitated”). She denounces the growing numbers of spousal

murders (by husbands of their dependent, often memory-impaired, elderly wives) that often go unpunished, considered "euthanasia" by a legal system that is not upset when old white men use their guns (Gullette "Our Frightened World"). I wish not to minimize these critical issues. But Clark's ending also serves a useful purpose—the unresolved shooting of Moo, through disrupting dramatic catharsis, prompts the audience to question the personal, social, and cultural factors that would lead to such a violent, complicated end to a long life.

In *Ten Ways* the ambiguous ending similarly complicates the decline narrative. In the last scene of the play, Daughter and George discover Old Woman "*sitting in the dark, staring straight ahead of her*" (Clark "Ten Ways" 329). The audience is left uncertain whether Old Woman has died, as Daughter and George question her continued vitality and shockingly decide to "put a blanket over her and leave her till tomorrow morning" (330). As Daughter and George brutally turn their backs on a woman who could be either sick or dead, it is unclear whether this is the ultimate scene of abuse, or whether Old Woman has played a trick on them and will have the last laugh. Here Clark plays with the duality Woodward describes as producing the older female body as both invisible and hypervisible in Western culture and media (*Figuring Age* xvi-xvii). Old Woman is made invisible and objectified by being covered by a blanket.

Paradoxically, however, this makes her hypervisible at the centre of the final scene of the play and serves satirically to expose the barbarity of Daughter and George's actions. In both plays, then, by creating ambiguous endings, Clark disrupts traditional dramatic catharsis and emotional resolution. Rather than restabilising cultural values linking aging and old age to decline, Clark asks audiences to question the inevitability of decline as the master narrative for aging adults.

### 3.3 Aging Female Sexuality

In addition to manipulating dramatic structure, Clark also poses a direct challenge to the decline narrative in her construction of Moo as a woman who is sexually interested and active at the age of sixty. In recent years media discourses have constructed the sexuality of aging adults such that “active sexuality—defined narrowly as the ability to perform heterosexual intercourse—has become a key indicator of positive and successful aging” (Barbara Marshall 170). Such framings of aging women’s sexuality are often complex and contradictory. For example, in film roles aging stars such as Helen Mirren now represent a challenge to notions of aging women as asexual (Overton et al. 195). But such representations are not all positive. Scholar of aging, gender, culture, and media, Sadie Wearing, argues that Mirren’s sexuality is framed as having a complex relationship with power and sexual victimization (157).

While such contemporary constructions still represent progress, in the late 1980’s when Clark wrote *Moo*, these were not common media representations of women in midlife or beyond. Our cultural image repertoire of aging at that time was more in line with how Woodward described the late 1990’s in “Performing Age, Performing Gender,” as a culture not used to accommodating visions of older women as sexual or reproductive beings (170). Woodward pointed to the “the sexless and comfortable grandmother” as one of our stock images of older woman (170). The 1967 film *The Graduate* exemplified the popular depiction of a middle-aged woman as sexually predatory of a much younger man (although the “middle-aged” character was only forty-two, and the actress who played her, Anne Bancroft, only 36) (Overton et al. 186-187). Leni Marshall and Aagje Swinnen note that such media portrayals (another example being Blanche Devereaux in *Golden Girls*) serve to represent “aged female sexual agents” as “predatory ‘cougars’ or as comedic figures [. . .] reinforcing their social exclusion and restricting

old women's ability to act even as objects of desire" (159). So, in 1988, by writing Moo as a sexually active and interested sixty-year-old woman not predatory of a younger man, and as a character we laugh with, not at, Clark was pushing against common contemporary representations.

In a scene that stages Moo's sixtieth birthday party (an event that highlights her age), the character twice proclaims, "I'm an old fucking woman as of today" (Clark *Moo* 84, 85). Here Clark draws together Moo's age and her sexual appetite, reclaiming the term "old" as positive. In the scene, Moo's sexuality is not sentimentalized, sanitized, or infantilized; rather, it is refracted through different ages and presented in excess. We see Wally, referred to as an "old man" (84), trying to pull off Moo's dress. The two then disappear under the table as the other guests attempt to toast Moo's birthday. Moo's sexuality is represented as "in-the-moment" (her niece Jane complains, "Must she celebrate here and now" [86]) and as somewhat reckless (she disappears with Wally under the table at an otherwise decorous party). This is consistent with her behavior at younger ages and serves as a point of character continuity.

Clark also perverts the cultural norm of female attraction to a handsome man. As Moo enthusiastically talks about Wally: "[I'm] Never too old to play with Wally. Isn't he disgusting? I think he's the most repulsive man I've ever come across. And that's saying something" (87). Moo's interest in Wally is not represented as a last resort; she is not a victim but zealously chooses him. Clark's construction of Moo's sexuality recalls Mikhail Bakhtin's descriptions of the carnivalesque (303) and its topsy turvy world of exaggeration and hyperbole, temporary liberation from established social order, ambivalent laughter, and sexual excess (1-12). Moo's sexual attraction to Wally is presented as liberating through its fulsomeness. Moo and Wally as 'older' characters are presented as the two people having fun at the party, while younger

generations experience interpersonal friction and worry about social propriety. The audience identifies and laughs with Moo because she is enjoying herself, and because she offers an opportunity for them to admit their own sexual perversions. Here laughter is not demeaning but liberating as Clark upends age expectations about sexuality (the young are more conservative, the old more liberated).

While today representations of women's sexuality in midlife and beyond are becoming more common, the construction of a sexually interested and active sixty-year-old woman in 1980's Canadian theatre was a rare occurrence. The fact that the role of *Moo* was played (in all cases I have uncovered) by bodies chronologically younger than age sixty-five does problematize the representation, as it could suggest a more youthful physical ideal is necessary to be sexually desirable or active. The impact of such casting could only be properly analyzed by observing the actual performing bodies on stage. It is also recognized that this representation is limited to heteronormative aging female sexuality. Still, through constructing Moo's sexuality using carnivalesque humour and performative excess, Clark opens up the possibility of representing aging women as interested and active participants in their own sexual lives.

### **3.4 The Complexity of Overcoming Decline**

While Clark effectively unsettles decline through the techniques I have discussed, the complexity of overcoming this narrative is also evident in her plays, particularly in *Moo*. If taken in isolation, Act 2, scene 15, in which Moo appears in a nursing home, might be thought to produce a negative age-effect by emphasizing decline and personal failure. In the brief monologue that makes up this scene, Moo complains: "I'm old and Harry Parker never loved

me,” and also, “I’m an old dog left out in the rain. No one likes my smell and it’s time to die” (118).

But the suggestion that Moo has become devalued in old age is challenged in the following scene when her niece, Susan, comes to visit. Susan declares, “All the relatives say you’re senile but I know you’re not. Don’t worry. I’ll get you out of here” (119) Here Susan demonstrates ongoing trust and desire for connection with Moo. Also, the negative physical associations drawn in this monologue are countered in Moo’s final scene (in which she appears at her oldest age). Harry’s only line in the scene is “Moo? (*goes to MOO, takes her hand*) What beautiful hands you have. You always had beautiful hands” (131) which reinforces her enduring beauty in old age. Within the Act 2 scene 15 monologue itself, Moo suggests that her youth was imperfect and a building block of her current situation: “I have done selfish things in my time [ . . . ]. My youth and my love — foolish, frail, self-deceits” (118). Her increased self-knowledge over time disrupts the narrative of decline.

Both in this scene and throughout the play, Clark presents Moo as not just a victim, but also a highly culpable agent of her own misfortunes. In constructing Moo this way, Clark shows a complex and self-reflexive character. She avoids simplistic inspirational images of old age that can result in positive stereotypes of the elderly that, according to Woodward, can be as limiting as negative ones (*Figuring Age* xxii). However, Clark does evoke associations between negative physical images and old age and locates the greatest deterioration of Moo’s relationships at her oldest age (Susan becomes angry with her, the nurses in the nursing home do not believe her, her sisters no longer visit). So, while Clark is able to challenge or subvert the decline narrative in many ways, in her construction of deep old age in *Moo*, the decline narrative proves difficult to escape.

### 3.5 Senility, Narrative Instability, Questioning Disease

Memory loss arises in both *Moo* and *Ten Ways*. This theme, common to stories about aging and old age, often functions to naturalize mental decline as part of the aging process and instill a sense of fear about the prospect of aging. Critics invite us to think reflexively about the language surrounding memory loss. In the last half-century, a medicalized, pathology-based understanding of old-age memory loss has become increasingly favored; it is now most often articulated as the medical diagnosis of “dementia,” or, its most common form, Alzheimer’s Disease (AD) (Cohen “Introduction: Thinking About Dementia” 7-8; Gravagne 137-138).

Framing old-age memory loss medically was an attempt to destigmatize the term “senility,” divorce it from negative associations established in the Inquisition (Cohen *No Aging in India* 73-74), and root it as a physiological—not moral—problem (Gravagne 132). However, it also has served to other those experiencing the condition (132). Basting asserts that in recent years, “Alzheimer’s has [. . .] become something much more than the disease. It has swollen into a fear that permeates the cultural consciousness of the United States” [and, I would add, Canada] (“Looking Back” 87). This fear both infiltrates and is bolstered by many artistic representations of AD and related dementias as seen in film and theatre. Film scholar Sally Chivers argues that in film this fear has shaped the use of AD as a symbolic shorthand for old age and as a way “to neatly signify a set of simple losses rather than to convey the complex transformations that cognitive decline invites and entails” (60). In short, many of our artistic outputs reinforce a medicalized understanding of old-age memory loss by naming it dementia or AD and presenting it as an individual’s pathology. This hinders our ability to contemplate other meanings that might be given to the experience.



Contrastingly, Lawrence Cohen, in *Thinking about Dementia: Culture, Loss, and the Anthropology of Senility* discusses “senility” as a term that extends beyond the specificity of dementia or AD. He defines senility as “the perception of deleterious behavioral change in someone understood to be old, with attention to both biology and the institutional milieu in which such change is marked, measured, researched, and treated” (“Introduction: Thinking About Dementia” 1). According to Cohen, senility has had, at various times and places in history, “broader relevance for critical thought and application” (3). He reclaims the term “senility” because it “leaves open the hierarchy of relations between the varieties of material and social process at stake in understanding loss, voice, and the body in time” (*No Aging in India* xv).

I adopt Cohen’s perspective because I am interested in how theatre (as an art form and cultural institutional milieu) has constructed—and continues to construct—meanings about senility (under which I group dementia and AD). I am attentive to how “senile” characters behave, to what various characters seemingly believe (or say) about senility, and also to how a play functions dramaturgically to construct cultural messages about what senility is and how it manifests. I adopt this term because I find the terms “dementia” and “AD” at times cannot capture the way that old-age memory loss is represented in theatre. This is particularly evident in Clark’s plays, which stage a memory loss that is contested, subjective, and not medically framed.

Presentation of the oldest character in a play as senile or becoming senile is a recurrent theme in canonical Western plays: for example, Lear in Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, Maria Josefa in *The House of Bernarda Alba* by Federico Garcia Lorca, Mrs. Winemillar in *Summer and Smoke* by Tennessee Williams, and Firs in Chekhov’s *The Cherry Orchard*. To date there has been no comprehensive overview of historical representations of senility (or dementia) in

Western theatre generally, or Canadian theatre more specifically. Mangan, referring to what I term senility but what he calls dementia (reflecting the inconsistent use of these terms), notes that “drama—and live theatre in particular—has tended to fight somewhat shy of the representation of dementia; ever since *King Lear*, certainly, comparatively few plays have attempted to portray dementia ‘from the inside’” (145).

In recent years more portrayals of senility, particularly medically-framed understandings of it, are appearing on North American and British stages. Some considerations stage a dementia that is not specified, but that is clearly constructed so that causes other than the physiological remain unquestioned, for example Daisy in Alfred Uhry’s *Driving Miss Daisy*. Other plays tell stories specifically about AD or a related dementia, for example Peter M. Floyd’s *Absence* (Aucoin). Often plays focus on the caregiver’s perspective and tend to promote themes of burden and loss, for example Dennis Foon’s adaptation of *Scar Tissue* (Thomas) or Marcus Youssef’s *How Has My Love Affected You?* (NeWorld Theatre), both recent Canadian works.

While some plays reinstate negative beliefs about senility, others, particularly in recent years, have functioned to disrupt entrenched narratives. Various dramatic techniques that challenge expectations about age and memory loss have been described by Basting (“God Is”), Harpin, Pia Kontos (“Alzheimer Expressions”), Mangan, and Moore, and involve the non-traditional use of dramatic structure, characterization, narrative, and language in recent plays.<sup>xxviii</sup> These authors highlight the richness of theatre as a site for reimagining senility, representing it as an experience beyond the memory impairment, decline, and loss that typically accompany a medicalized “dementia” perspective. These researchers and the playwrights they discuss are notably invested in questioning the varying truths surrounding representations of senility: Is senility/dementia represented accurately and from whose perspective? Is a life given value? To

what extent is the disease allowed to be performed? How is identity represented? Where Clark's works differs from these later plays is in her greater concern with questioning the social construction and validity of the condition itself. While I have already discussed the effects of her disrupted chronology, I now turn to her use of narrative instability and its influence on her construction of senility.

Clark uses the technique of polyvocality in *Moo* and *Ten Ways* to create narrative instability, and unsettle the assumption that disease is an objective category. Whittaker describes polyvocality as the use of conflicting voices such that synthesis is not the desired conclusion, but rather the goal is an open-endedness that allows for multiple interpretations ("Narrativizations and Perversions" 29). Clark sets up opposing narratives as a catalyst for conflict (25). For example, in Act 2, scene 7 of *Moo*, when Moo appears in a nursing home for the first time, she and her sisters offer different interpretations of what led to this situation:

MOO – It was your idea, wasn't it? Lock me up for good this time.

SARAH – (to DITTY) What's she talking about?

MOO - (to DITTY) Don't try to deny it. I saw you looking at me. Goddammit, you paused, counted to three and then you jumped.

DITTY – I did not jump on your hip.

[. . . . .]

SARAH – Moo? Are you going senile?

MOO – So help me, you may think you've got me right where you want me. But I'm getting out of here if it's the last thing I do.

[ . . . . . ]

DITTY – She’s going senile, isn’t she, Sarah?

SARAH – Yes, dear. I’m afraid she is. (Clark *Moo* 100-101)

Here, Clark sets up the narrative so that we never know whose side of the story is “true.”

Another example of Clark’s use of polyvocality is seen in *Ten Ways*: the narrative is structured so that we question whether Daughter and her partner George’s reactions of anger and frustration toward Old Woman are warranted based on her actions. For example, in scene 13 Old Woman is eating with her plate on her lap and does not notice that anyone is talking to her. Her daughter asks loudly (as indicated by Clark’s capitalization), “WHY DON’T YOU PUT YOUR PLATE ON THE TABLE?” (319). When the Old Woman responds, “I’m very happy, thank you, dear. [ . . . ] We’re all in this world to be happy. Ho ho ho,” George exclaims, “That’s it! You’re right, enough’s enough. She has got to go!” (327).

Clark’s narrative formulation leads us to question whether Old Woman is acting out of true confusion and disorientation or out of choice. In actions such as not passing on phone messages or taking out her hearing aid so she cannot hear Daughter, it is not clear whether Old Woman acts “out of malice or as a result of senility” (Whittaker “Narrativizations and Perversions” 25). Here again, the audience is asked to reflect on whether (or how) senility is socially or personally constructed. We are propelled to contemplate whether Old Woman’s apparent forgetfulness is an organic condition (i.e., a biomedical understanding of dementia), whether it has been caused by social factors, or whether it could be a choice to escape unpleasant conditions and interactions. Thus, Clark asks us to evaluate the role of subjectivity in our understanding of decline and, in particular, of mental losses. By compelling audiences to

consider that senility might be socially constructed or even self-chosen, Clark destabilizes representations of the elderly that insidiously link old age to mental deterioration. On the one hand, by writing her older female characters as perhaps having memory problems, Clark does reinstate the link between old age and memory loss; she is not telling an alternative story, so the repertoire of how we talk about old age remains fixed on the same themes. By introducing this common narrative and then undoing it through narrative instability and humour, however, Clark undercuts notions of old-age memory loss as necessarily pathological and inevitable.

### **3.6 Conclusion**

Clark's dark and satirical plays about two elderly women (*Moo* and *Old Woman*) speak of individual lives. While they are not attempting to be universal stories, they open up possibilities for the inclusion of a wider range of older adults' life stories, particularly those of women, in our theatrical and literary culture. By perverting traditional Western character and plot construction through the use of achronicity, disruption of rising conflict toward a single climax, intratextual polyvocality, ambiguous endings, and humour, Clark's plays work to dismantle entrenched narratives of aging and old age that link aging to physical and mental decline and limit the expression of aging female sexuality. However, the complexity of cultural narratives means that even texts like Clark's that attempt to challenge age norms, and in many ways succeed, also reassert negative age ideology in surreptitious ways. Clark does not venture far from themes such as physical and mental decay, deterioration of relationships, and the invisibility of old women to offer unique themes about aging. However, through her many dramaturgical twists on these themes, she often manages to resist and rework traditional ageist narratives, which position aging as a process of decline and loss. Her portraits of old women are

thus paradoxical, non-traditional, and in many ways rebellious. For the time in which they were written, these early works by Clark were quite innovative.

Analyzing plays and the way they are realized in performance provides a valuable angle from which to consider cultural narratives of aging and old age. Lipscomb writes, “Too often consideration of aging in dramatic form is limited to textual themes regarding older characters, and occasionally to issues of casting” (“Putting on Her White Hair” par. 2). Less often do analyses consider how age performativity can be revealed through performance, or how a play’s dramatic structure works to expose or conceal, subvert or reinforce dominant age ideology. Through considering these elements, this particular analysis of Sally Clark’s plays *Moo* and *Ten Ways* reveals the complex processes through which age narratives are imprinted on our cultural consciousness in the ways that stories are told—not just through their themes, but also through their structure, which influences how we understand time, the finitude of events, and the prominence of voices. Sally Clark was in her early 30’s when she wrote *Moo* and *Ten Ways*. Now, about thirty years later, she has two new plays in the works. It will be interesting to see if and how she brings forth elderly female characters that reflect her own shifting experiences with and perspectives on aging.

## Chapter 4: Challenging Age Binaries by Viewing *King Lear* In Temporal

### Depth<sup>xxix</sup>

As the previous chapter demonstrates, dramatic form plays a key role in shaping cultural age narratives. As Clark's plays reveal, however, the body of the actor is also central to theatrical performances of aging and old age. Interest in embodiment is central to age studies. This has stemmed partly from recognition of the limitations of chronological time and its corresponding way of defining age in terms of a linear progression of fixed life stages. By disconnecting points across the life course, such definitions create the youth-age binary foundational to ageism. Recognizing the limitations of the life-stage model, postmodern discourses have considered age in terms of its performativity. Building from Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity (*Bodies That Matter; Gender Trouble*), age theorists have looked to theatre as a way to study age's inherent performativity. Such considerations risk dismissing the idea that aging involves the embodiment of time because, in postmodern tradition, they do not want to understand time as simply progressive and linear. However, certain age theorists such as Woodward argue that it is impossible to deny aging as the embodiment of time since aging brings with it very real physiological changes; time is inscribed on the body (*Figuring Age* xxii). By contrast, Basting insists that there can still be a postmodern poetics of the aging body that acknowledges its temporal component. In *The Stages of Age*, Basting refers to this as "the performative, depth model of aging" (145). The model provides a way to acknowledge "the body's performance of time in/across the life course" (145). It invites scholars to engage closely with actual bodies and their temporal registers on stage.

In this chapter I use Basting's model to analyze the age-effects in a Vancouver production of Shakespeare's *King Lear* by Honest Fishmonger's Equity Coop. Through a close reading of the actor's embodied performances and my affective response to them, I argue that Basting's performative depth model of aging (*The Stages of Age* 145) reveals how the contemporary production of a classical work can engage with postmodern concepts of time while still considering age, and thereby highlight more positive textual narratives about aging rather than reinforcing a narrative of decline. The process of applying the model also raises questions concerning how to differentiate one age from any other. If, as the model claims, age is performative, and every performance of age is an amalgamation of past and future age-selves, how can old age, or for that matter any age, be recognized or distinguished? To address this question, I propose to extend Basting's model by drawing connections with Marvin Carlson's theory of theatrical ghosting, a theory that considers the recycling of materials in theatre and how such recurrence interacts with personal and cultural memory to influence theatrical reception. In particular the recycled body and persona of the actor (53) become relevant in considering postmodern embodied performances of age. Bringing Carlson into conversation with age studies, and in particular with Basting's model, reveals that reception of theatrical performances of age is not only influenced by traditional ghosting or layering of memories of past performances of age on stage, but also by a kind of anticipatory quality engendered by the ghosting process, which I term a "ghosting forward". My analysis contributes to the rather new body of research at the intersection of age studies and Canadian theatre studies.

My analysis of *King Lear* deliberately toggles between the theoretical and the personal, specifically attending to my feelings evoked while watching bodies performing age during this production. I borrow from the methodological approach that Basting uses in her chapter "The



Body in Depth: Kazuo Ohno's *Water Lilies*" (*The Stages of Age* 134-146). While I explore this Chapter in further depth below, it is important to note here that Basting attends to details of her affective response to Ohno's performance of *Water Lilies* and uses this to springboard into discussion of concepts of time and postmodern poetics of the aging body. Similarly, Bridie Moore bridges her personal responses to performance with theoretical analysis of theatrical representations of age, aging, and old age in her award-winning article "Depth, Significance, and Absence: Age-Effects in New British Theatre," published in 2014 in *Age, Culture, Humanities*. I am also informed by Ann Cvetkovich in her 2012 book *Depression: A Public Feeling*, and Woodward in her 1999 article "Statistical Panic," both of whom describe the compelling nature of blending the theoretical with affective engagement and embedding it within personal experience. Cvetkovich argues that:

[. . .] the focus on sensation and feeling as the register of historical experience gives rise to new forms of documentation and writing, [. . .] practices often turn the ordinary into the scene of surprise, and they slow down so as to be able to immerse themselves in detail and to appreciate the way that magic and mystery sit alongside the banal and the routine.  
(11)

Woodward also elucidates the value of critical analysis of feelings: "Identifying a particular and pervasive feeling, or a structured complex of feelings, as the cultural materialist Raymond Williams has argued, can help us recognize the emergence of a new social formation" ("Statistical Panic" 181). She suggests that "an attention to feeling can itself be a methodology" (181). More specifically, in terms of theatre, I turn to Erin Hurley, to justify the value of

attending to my personal affective engagement with this specific production. In her 2010 book, *Theatre and Feeling*, Hurley writes:

Feeling is the core of theatre. It furnishes theatre's reason for being, cements its purpose – whether such purpose is construed as entertainment or instruction – and undergirds the art form's social work and value. Moreover, it organises theatre's functions and theatre's people's professional lives. And finally, it attracts audiences. [. . .] We go, in the end, because feeling matters. (77)

Feeling matters. And so, like Basting and Moore, I offer my own embodied critical perspective on the performances of age in this case study of Honest Fishmonger's' *King Lear*, through the application of Basting's depth model of aging.

#### **4.1 Age, Time, and Narrative**

It is important to begin with a detailed overview of Basting's depth model of aging, Carlson's theory of theatrical ghosting, and related theoretical considerations of time and embodiment. Basting's depth model of aging suggests that when we see a person performing age (in life or on stage), we are not seeing an isolated life moment. We are seeing the performance of an amalgamation of the person's former selves and a projection of their future selves, revealing not only the present moment, but the "accumulation of the moments across the life course and across generations" (*The Stages of Age* 140). She asserts that to see the body in depth "is literally to see time across space" (*The Stages of Age* 141). Basting developed her provocative model to understand the world-renowned butoh dancer Kazuo Ohno in *Water Lilies*, a performance that

she describes as semiotically spilling over simple divisions of youth and old age (*The Stages of Age* 134-146). At the time of the October 1993 performance, Kazuo Ohno was eighty-seven-years-old and his son and fellow performer, Yoshito Ohno, was fifty-five years of age.<sup>xxx</sup> The performance was composed of solo dances and duets, marked by changes in music and costume, in which father and son “alternately dance[d] roles ranging from a coy young girl and a sophisticated aging lady, to a young man exploding with anger and energy and an older man barely able to lift his wooden staff” (140). Basting writes that Ohno’s performance “exemplifies an *embodied post-modern poetics of the aged body*, one in which the body is irreducible to discursive binary divisions, and one which acknowledges the body’s performance of time in/across the life course” (145, emphasis in original).

Anca Cristofovici’s work is foundational to Basting’s depth model. In “Touching Surfaces: Photography, Aging, and an Aesthetics of Change” Cristofovici contends that we often think of aging internally as a split between a younger self and an older, stranger self that is aging away from youth (269). While this suggests more of a binary that Basting is willing to concede, Cristofovici also proffers the idea that “[. . .] on the inner screen of aging, these shadows – memories of younger selves, anticipations of older selves – meet, conflict, interact” (269). Her essay focuses on ways photographic images can create a sense of continuity, of “the possibility of bridging our different age-selves, of creating a space of communication between one’s own ages and between generations” (269). Like Basting, Cristofovici is concerned with aesthetic representation of both “the state of being old and the process of growing old” (271) and sees it as possible to perform various age-selves across time, all present (and in tension) in the same moment.

Marvin Carlson is also interested in the amalgamation of selves in performance. Through his theory of theatrical ghosting, he contends that theatre is a site of both personal and cultural memory and that it constantly recycles material to evoke memories. These memories “have conditioned the processes of theatrical composition and, even more important, of theatrical reception in theatrical cultures around the world and across the centuries” (4). Carlson argues that in theatre, memory functions in a more central way than in other arts (6), in that theatre audiences do not encounter “a new but distinctly different example of a type of artistic product” (7), but rather the identical thing that they have experienced before. Theatrical texts, performing bodies, stage properties and sets, theatre spaces, performances within a production, even entire remounted productions, as well as theatre audiences themselves, are all part of a process of recycling. Carlson names this process theatrical “ghosting” (7). Of particular interest here in relation to the idea of simultaneous performance of multiple age-selves within the same body, is Carlson’s chapter on “The Haunted Body” (52-95) in which he considers “the recycled body and persona of the actor” (53). Noting that “text does not in fact become theatre until it is embodied by an actor and presented to an audience” (52), Carlson explores how the ghosting of famous performances of a role, and the ghosting of an actor’s previous performances of the same role or of other roles, evoke memories and create expectations which influence theatrical reception of the performance. Much like Basting and Cristofovici, Carlson suggests that any performance is received as an amalgamation of previous performances, and thereby also a synthesis of previous performances of age. I will return to Carlson as his theory figures into my later analysis.

Why did Basting feel the need to develop her depth model of aging, and why has Moore found it useful in studying age-effects in theatre? Why are both Carlson and Cristofovici also interested in the simultaneous embodiment or aesthetic representation of multiple ages within

one performing body, and by extension in reworking ways of defining aging? What is wrong with a more traditional understanding of age as the progressive embodiment of chronological time? In order to address these questions, I now explore various constructions of time (chronological, postmodern, Shakespearean), and their implications for narrative and embodiment.

According to aging, philosophy, and social theory scholar Jan Baars, we begin to think about time when we experience change (“Critical Turns of Aging, Narrative and Time” 145). A *chronological* or *chronometric* sense of time is interested in defining the *regular* changes that occur across time in order to be able to influence or predict processes. While the earliest understanding of this was grounded in the rhythmical movements of the earth and moon (145), a growing sense of chronometric time came to dominate Western thought as a result of the industrial revolution in the late eighteenth century (Basting *The Stages of Age* 11). As speed and efficiency became valued over experience and wisdom, time was separated from the rhythms of nature and became an external phenomenon linked to clocks and schedules. Time was thus stripped of personal meaning in favour of precision. The time used to measure human aging, then, became “not based on the rhythms of living nature, but on the ‘movements’ of *dead* material such as oscillations of cesium or aluminum atoms [in atomic clocks]” (Baars “Critical Turns” 146, emphasis in original). Such a sense of time defines age objectively in terms of the number of years a person has lived (Woodward “Performing Age” 183), and divides the life-course into stages – infancy/childhood, education, working life, and retirement.<sup>xxxix</sup> In “A Triple Temporality of Aging: Chronological Measurement, Personal Experience, and Narrative Articulation,” Baars asserts that chronologically dividing the life course into successive stages is problematic because it presupposes a causal concept of time that implies that the effects of time

are steady and universal, that people of a certain chronological age should inevitably experience certain effects of time (4). Further to this, Basting specifies that dividing the life course into measurable chunks creates binaries in which one stage is valued and its opposite is marked as an undesirable other, for example: productivity/non-productivity, activity/inactivity, health/disease, life/death (*The Stages of Age* 135). Baars and Basting are both interested in how the meaning of aging is influenced by concepts of time. According to Baars “the one-sided emphasis on chronological time tends to neglect not only personal meaning but *all* meaningful dimensions of aging” (“A Triple Temporality” 17, emphasis in original).

From the perspective of narrative, the dominance of a chronological sense of time has led to an equation of aging with decline. As discussed in Chapter 1, the decline story has become a master narrative for our culture. It infiltrates our laws and policies, the things we create and market, and our artistic products including theatre. While historically dramatists have expressed a range of attitudes toward old age, and more recently playwrights have started to rewrite negative age-related stereotypes, the decline narrative has played a prominent role throughout much of Western theatrical history (Mangan 23). Stock characters, life-stage models of age, and linear plots are all used extensively and serve to articulate and perpetuate ageism through reinforcing the decline narrative. Modern and contemporary Western theatrical narratives of aging and old age, then, frequently show older adults as on the edge of good health about to descend into illness, on the edge of sanity about to descend into madness, on the edge of productivity and self-sufficiency about to descend into dependency, and on the edge of life about to experience death.<sup>xxxiii</sup> Unless dramatic strategies clearly interrupt linear chronology, plays tend to be interpreted through a chronological lens (by directors, producers, and audiences), often reinforcing the pervasive decline narrative that predominates Western views of aging.

I now turn to Shakespeare because key aspects of his dramaturgy draw focus away from chronometric time and therefore can be useful in theatrical explorations of aging. Shakespeare lived and wrote during an era when chronometric time did not structure society in the same way it has for the last two hundred and fifty years. Perhaps as a result, Shakespeare puts less emphasis on chronology and this results in a more ambiguous view of aging and old age. On the one hand, the life-stage model associated with chronological time is at times foregrounded. For example, Jacques's speech from *As You Like It* (2.7.139-166) clearly separates man's life into seven distinct stages, the last two of which offer a deeply negative view of aging, linking aging with loss and a return to helpless childishness.<sup>xxxiii</sup> On the other hand, according to Charney in *Wrinkled Deep in Time: Aging in Shakespeare*, Shakespeare as a dramatist is not concerned with chronological time (32). He mostly avoids mention of specific ages of characters and the specific amount of time elapsed during dramatic action (32). He employs a sense of "double time" in which there is "a sharp contrast between time projected by the narrative and time imagined to have elapsed during a specific scene" (29). According to Charney, Shakespeare's characters age as a result of dramatic context rather than the logical progression of the narrative (29). They mature or age psychologically as they face important decisions, and as a result, usually gain important insights. For example, in *Romeo and Juliet* when Juliet is abandoned by her parents and nurse, she develops a maturity and resolve as she prepares herself to take Friar Lawrence's potion and readies a dagger in case the potion fails. Suddenly she seems much older although little chronological time has passed (Charney 30). So, Shakespeare offers us a view of aging that acknowledges a potential gain (achieving knowledge or worldliness), rather than a decline narrative that focuses purely on loss. Loss remains a prominent theme, however, and the before/after paradigm still creates binaries that disconnect stages of the life course.

## 4.2 Age Performativity and Postmodern Time

When we consider Shakespeare's plays, it is necessary to remember that they were meant to be *performed*. As such, narrative emphasis is not simply created within the text, but achieved through performance. At times performance can oppose or reorder the emphasis in a written script, and therefore must be considered in discussing theatrical narratives of aging. For example, there have been a number of recent adaptations of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* in which the lead characters are experiencing old age. This can be seen in Tom Morris and Sean O'Connor's *Juliet and Her Romeo*, and Ben Power's *A Tender Thing* (both British), and the Canadian play *The Last of Romeo and Juliet* written and directed by Mitchell Cushman.<sup>xxxiv</sup> While these adaptations alter and reorder the script to varying degrees, the words remain Shakespeare's, and the most striking change in narrative emphasis is achieved through performance, by virtue of casting Romeo and Juliet with older actors. The result is that rather than exploring the more common trope of teenage forbidden passion, the plays reflect on the seldom-staged theme of romantic love in old age.

To understand such staged performances of age better, we must also explore age performativity. Considering age as performative offers a way to approach age in a non-chronological way, thereby offering an alternative to the narrative of decline. Judith Butler's work on gender's inherent performativity is useful here. As discussed in greater depth in Chapter 2, Butler understands gender to be performative. According to Butler, "Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (*Gender Trouble* 44). Butler does not consider gender to be an inherent fixed category, but rather a series of performances repeated over time that give the *impression* of being substantive and natural, but



rather are constructed through stylizations of the body. Similarly, authors Basting (*The Stages of Age*), Gullette (*Aged by Culture*), Lipscomb (*Performing Age in M.D.*) and Woodward (“Performing Age”), among others, all consider age to be at least in part performative.<sup>xxxv</sup> Lipscomb and Marshall’s explanation of age performativity is illuminating: “[. . .] each of us performs the actions associated with a chronological age minute by minute, and [. . .] the repetition of these performances creates a so-called reality of age both for the subject and for those who interact with the subject” (2). According to Basting, the value of considering age to be performative is that it does not allow any single image or experience of aging to be privileged as more natural, acceptable, or appropriate than any other (*The Stages of Age* 19).

Age performativity is linked to the concept of postmodern time. Some researchers resist this idea because postmodernism as a movement has been critiqued for its lack of coherence and because some think its relativism discounts the reliability of any knowledge. However, the concept of postmodern *time* has still shown to be useful to age studies scholars. Beyond Basting’s writing, this is evidenced, for example, by Stephen Katz’s 2009 chapter “Growing Older Without Aging? Postmodern Time and Senior Markets” in *Cultural Aging, Life Course, Lifestyle, and Senior Worlds*. Katz writes that conceptualizing of postmodern life courses and postmodern time offers ways to resist “bureaucratic standardization of age-graded behaviours and identities and the industrial segmentation of the life course into distinct age differences” (189). Katz argues that “postmodern treatment of traditional age categories has fostered new experiments with time and timelessness” (191), and allowed for consideration of concepts such as agelessness, uni-age (or multi-aged) bodies, new age identities, unique living situations such as retirement communities, and reconceptualizations of senior’s sexuality (for example with the advent of sexual dysfunction medication like Viagra).

Basting's enthusiasm about age performativity and its embrace of postmodern time is adopted particularly cautiously by some. Basting herself cites scholars Harry Moody and Kathleen Woodward as critical of the idea of postmodern definitions of age since they consider ideas of embodiment to be incompatible with the economies of postmodern time (Basting *The Stages of Age* 144), which emphasizes replication, speed, impermanence, simultaneity, and immortality (Katz *Cultural Aging* 191). Embracing such concepts can neglect the consequences of time on the body. In her influential manuscript *Aging and Its Discontents*, Woodward writes that the body in advanced old age cannot be accounted for by postmodern discourses; "We can resist and we can destabilize social constructions of old age. [. . .] But death we cannot ultimately deny" (*Aging and Its Discontents* 156). Woodward emphasizes her belief that "[. . .] there can ultimately be no postmodern poetics of the aging body" (157).<sup>xxxvi</sup> The problem that she and others see with postmodern theories of aging is that, in order to avoid understanding time as simply progressive and linear, they dismiss the idea of aging as the embodiment of time. Like Woodward, theorists who are interested in embodiment are often wary of postmodern definitions of aging because they lack a temporal component that embraces the body's change across time. Lipscomb and Marshall who whole-heartedly espouse the concept of age performativity, still caution that, "As with gender, age may be socially constructed and performative, but that performativity *is in tension* with the undeniable ongoing change of the body as it physically ages" (2, emphasis added). Basting's depth model of aging offers a possibility to understand age as an embodiment of time without limiting time to a linear chronological conceptualization. In performance, Basting argues, time is produced by the body rather than the body being destroyed by, or being a victim of, time (*The Stages of Age* 145). I tend to agree. I believe that performances of age can be received as simultaneous embodiment of multiple points across the

life course and therefore be understood to produce a postmodern poetics of the aging body. The reception of such performances of age, I believe, is influenced by the receiver's history with other age performances and experiences with conceptions of time.

### **4.3 Performing Age in *King Lear*: Temporal Depth, The Default Body, and Theatrical Ghosting**

I now return to theatre as an important medium to analyze the performativity of age because it often carries our master cultural narratives, at the same time that it has the potential to rewrite them. According to Mangan:

An emphasis on the *performed text* is particularly appropriate in relation to the theme of ageing, because in theatrical performances the physical presence of the actor's body itself—and the way that that body is used in conjunction with the codes and conventions of movement, gesture, make-up and costume—inevitably becomes one of the theatrical signs from which the audience constructs meanings (6, emphasis added).

A written text like *King Lear* contains internal narratives that could be interpreted or emphasized in a variety of ways *through performance*.<sup>xxxvii</sup> *King Lear* tells the story of the aging king of Britain, who rejects his youngest, best-loved daughter for her lack of flattery, and divides his kingdom between his other two daughters who ultimately betray him. The tragedy teaches the necessity of looking beyond a person's rank, power, and words before judging their loyalty and worth. The play has been much studied for its age-related themes. Some research focuses on associations between aging and loss.<sup>xxxviii</sup> However, Small proposes that Shakespeare's textual

construction of Lear in some ways opposes Aristotle's negative account of aging and shows a man who is not diminished in mental and moral capacity (67-88). On the other hand, while Gullette feels, along with other critics, that Lear grows through his ordeal, and attains a moral stature that is hard to imagine in the first Act, she argues that in performance, "Some of the startling 'novelties' in directing *King Lear* in recent years come from directors and actors making ageist changes in the interpretation, staging, and acting of the play" ("Losing Lear" 61). One explanation for such renditions is that the play can be interpreted through a chronological lens by contemporary directors, focusing on the decline and losses that accompany old age. However, the Vancouver Honest Fishmongers Equity Co-op's production of Shakespeare's *King Lear* pushed beyond a chronological age-stage paradigm. The production, directed by Kevin Bennett, was performed at the Havana Theatre in Vancouver from February 23 to March 17, 2012. By applying Basting's model to some of the production's acting and directorial choices, I demonstrate how embodied performances of age can de-emphasize the decline narrative and offer a more nuanced image of age by exposing the body in depth.

Honest Fishmongers is a collective that describes its style as follows: "We work with extreme intimacy, and surrounding our audience with the play, creating an inclusive, surround sound, lively theatrical experience" (The Honest Fishmongers par. 3). Extreme intimacy was truly my experience of this production, and for me it served in certain moments to foreground an anti-ageist postmodern poetics of embodied aging. The play was performed in a small black box theatre. The audience was seated in alley style with a raised and a lower row on each side of the theatre. In addition to using the central aisle, the actors often moved between the two rows of audience seating on each side of the theatre. The central alley was not more than six feet across. The actors often spoke directly to audience members, and at times even touched them,

effectively dissolving the boundary between actor and audience. In terms of my interests, this proximity allowed me to readily observe the subtleties of performances of age.

The idea that Simon Webb as Lear was *performing* age was first highlighted by the staging and style of the opening. As audience members entered the theatre they were greeted by the actors who were not in character but spoke as themselves. Webb (who would play Lear) welcomed us, chatted warmly and suggested where we should sit. His posture was upright and elegant, his movements assured. He laughed and made witty jokes with the audience. There must have been a signal as the actors suddenly moved from casual conversation, to a tightly choreographed original song and dance. Webb performed with upward-directed energy and lightness of foot. He accomplished the choreography with apparent ease [see Figure 2]. At the end of the number, as the audience applauded, the actors moved to their positions for the first scene. Now, Webb (who was sixty-one years old), transformed to a much older man – Lear of “four-score and upward” (*King Lear* 4.7.61). Although he donned simple additional costume pieces, Webb’s transformation was primarily achieved through embodiment. His shoulders rounded as if weighed down by years of responsibility. His movements became more deliberate and rooted in a downward energy, as if he sought contact with the ground to maintain equilibrium, an equilibrium perhaps upset for the character by physical and psychological changes which accompanied aging. His hands appeared to tremble subtly as he handled the maps and documents before him, as if betraying the unraveling of his assurance [see Figure 3]. His voice deepened and his pauses for breath elongated. The transformation in Webb’s demeanor was sudden, complete, and extremely detailed, and thus served to emphasize the performative nature of age.<sup>xxxix</sup>



**Figure 2: Simon Webb performs his own age or “default body” in the opening number of Honest Fishmonger’s *King Lear*. Photo by Emily Cooper.**

I focus on Simon Webb’s performance of old age because it stood out as a performance in temporal depth. The role of Gloucester, Lear’s contemporary, also offers opportunities to play the body in depth, but despite an otherwise strong acting performance, Anthony F. Ingram (who was forty-five at the time) tended at times to resort to stereotypes of old age in his embodiment of Gloucester, particularly after Gloucester’s blinding (e.g. shuffling feet and searching arms). In her analysis of the role of Kent, Helen Small argues that textual references suggest Kent is also a contemporary of Lear, but ‘acts’ and claims to be younger in order to secure a position in the service of Lear (an older man would have been considered undesirable) (69-88). In this sense, David Bloom’s performance of Kent was successful, in that his embodiment of age was



**Figure 3: Webb demonstrating age performativity as he transforms to Lear of “four-score and upward.”**

**Photo by Emily Cooper.**

somewhat ambiguous. He did not appear to be ‘old’. However, he seemed to be simply playing his own default body (he was fifty-two at the time); acting and staging choices did not create a sense of layering of former and future age-selves and did not create the nuance of a man trying to disguise his age or offer the ambiguity of embodiment that Small describes. In contrast, Webb’s performance transcended age stereotypes. At several moments in the production Webb’s staging and acting choices created a performance of age that could be perceived as stretching across the lifespan and occupying multiple points in time, simultaneously. In these moments the edges of age categories were dissolved, and the binaries dividing youth and old age transcended.



The most notable of such moments occurred in Act 4, scene 6, when Lear according to stage directions, enters “fantastically dressed with wild flowers” and meets Gloucester. Webb entered wearing a wreath of flowers around his head [see Figure 4]. His shirt was unbuttoned to the waist, his cuffs undone, his shirttails out. He carried a handful of flowers. Among the range of images he conjured was one of frailty as his movements suggested those we often associate with an old chronological age, a slight wobble on certain steps, a quivering of the hand as he presented his flowers to audience members. But also there was sensuousness to his movements, a slight swaying of the hips and lightness of movement that was reminiscent of a younger adult self. There was also a sense of wonder, of a pure joy in nature that recalled a child playing in a field. Thus, Webb’s performance of age seemed a composite of former selves; he simultaneously performed an old man experiencing a dotage of frailty and confusion, a young adult flower child searching to right social wrongs by spreading love, and an innocent child. Perhaps it is the common cultural narrative that associates old age and infirmity with childishness that helped to construct some of these images in my mind. But they did not serve to diminish King Lear. The child-like image seemed redemptive not infantilizing, and importantly it was not the only image; it was layered with the other images and served as a point of connection. So in keeping with Basting’s and Cristofovici’s discussions of accumulation, Webb’s simultaneous embodiment and performance of multiple age-selves seemed to acknowledge and perform both the connection and tension between them and ultimately gave the sense that he was drawing on a sort of elemental understanding of justness which existed across time (despite other points in his life when wealth and power obscured this). For me this strengthened the play’s message that sometimes it is only through letting go of our fixed beliefs (or perhaps fixed performances) that we come to see more clearly.





**Figure 4: Webb as Lear (Act IV, scene vi) demonstrates performance of age in “temporal depth.”**

**Photo by Emily Cooper.**

Basting’s model thus proves useful in considering the embodiment of age across time and illuminates aspects of this production of *King Lear* in terms of performance of age. What continues to intrigue me, however, is how we might define *old age* within this model. If we consider age to be performative, and performances of age to be a composite of former and future selves, how can we differentiate between ages? And how can we do so in a way that does not restore binaries that contribute to ageism?

Basting herself describes the difference as follows: “To see the *older* body in-depth is to recognize the wrinkles and age spots while also seeing the thick, pliant skin of a child. To see a *younger* body in depth, on the other hand, is to imagine the uncharitable changes that the body will produce” (*The Stages of Age* 141). In order to propose an expanded way of defining old age

within this model, I would like to consider two moments in this production, when staging facilitated a comparison of the performance of age by Webb as Lear and Katherine Gauthier as Cordelia. My comparison of these two performances could be criticized for suggesting a youth/age binary since Cordelia is young and Lear is old. However, I believe that the extreme connection between these two actors, along with their notably charismatic performances, and the similarities in their staging served to highlight the connection between the generations rather than create a youth/age split.

In Act 4, scene 7, Lear is reunited with Cordelia. Webb was carried on stage by the Fool (played by Sebastian Kroon) [see Figure 5]. Webb's body curled into Kroon's chest creating a sense of fragility seeking protection. He appeared weak and ill, representing the decline narrative of old age. But at the same time, his body recalled that of a child protected and nursed by his father, or an injured boy being carried off a sporting field by his coach, an overindulgent youth being rescued from a party by his mate, or perhaps a man whose friend supported him after some unimaginable grief. Webb's performance of age read primarily as a multi-layered composite of his former selves.

In contrast, during the final scene of the play, after Cordelia has been killed, Lear carried her body on stage [see Figure 6]. He appeared from the same entrance as he had when carried by the Fool. Webb carried Gauthier in the same manner that he had been carried. Yet, Gauthier's performance of age was quite different. While the image did recall a young child carried by her father as she slept (a former self), Gauthier's performance of age placed greater emphasis on the future selves she might have become. As her head hung back and her left arm dangled, her breasts were raised to the sky. Her body appeared mature, sensuous, womanly. We saw her as a lover, as a powerful queen, as a mother who should have carried her own children thus. The



**Figure 5: Webb's performance of Lear's old age (Act IV, scene vii) read primarily as a multilayered composite of former selves. (Pictured with Sebastian Kroon, as The Fool.) Photo by Emily Cooper.**

image also, in recalling the way Lear was carried by the fool, reminded us of the old woman Cordelia eventually should have become. Basting herself notes that this forward projection is “tricky territory” (*The Stages of Age* 141) in that we can never account for all of the future factors that will actually influence a person’s aging. But she believes that “a rough sketch is quite sufficient” (141) to acknowledge the links between the many stages of the life course. To me Gauthier’s performance achieved this beautifully; the staging and acting choices resulted in a performance of age that highlighted Gauthier’s projected future selves.

I would like to propose that we could define old age within this model, as the combination of willful actions and biological imperatives that produce a performance of age such that the expression of former selves reads like a deep, rich, extensive repertoire<sup>x1</sup> of past performances, so much so that it partially eclipses the projection of future selves. The performance of future selves, while still present, represents a thinner, relatively tapered collection of potential performances that read as secondary to the performance of the multilayered composite of former selves. This is not to say that in old age the future is of no value or that the focus should be retrograde, but simply that the embodied performance of old age highlights the past repertoire of a rich life lived. In the case of Webb’s performance of King Lear, because I saw a repertoire of past performances of self that eclipsed the projection of future selves, I defined this as a performance of old age. In the case of Gauthier’s performance of Cordelia’s age, the projection of future selves was emphasized, which caused me to categorize her as performing a younger age on the continuum.

Such a premise—the idea that performance is a composite of performances of self—is bolstered by Marvin Carlson’s theory of theatrical ghosting. Carlson’s concept of “the haunted body” or the recycled body and persona of the actor (53) relates particularly to performances of





**Figure 6: Katherine Gauthier's performance of Cordelia's youth highlighted her projected future selves.**

**Photo by Emily Cooper.**

age. This partly involves the phenomenon that our reception of an actor's portrayal of a role is ghosted by the former roles we have seen that actor play. Carlson notes that, while in the United States (and I would add Canada) casting traditions in recent times have largely favoured

verisimilitude in terms of age (57) (or I believe at least discouraged older actors from playing younger), in other time periods and cultures, it has been and still is common for actors to specialize in role types or ‘lines of business’ in which they play characters of a similar age for their entire careers (62-66, 81-84). Carlson describes the actor’s “haunted body” as being ghosted by multiple previous performances:

Before we too hastily condemn the apparent folly and vanity of an aging actor still playing youthful roles, we must recall that every new performance of these roles will be ghosted by a theatrical recollection of the previous performances, so that audience reception of each new performance is conditioned by inevitable memories of this actor playing similar roles in the past. The voice that might seem to an outsider grown thin with age may still to a faithful public echo with the resonances of decades of theatregoing, that slightly bent body still be ghosted by years of memories of it in its full vigor. (58)

Here Carlson traverses similar territory to Cristofovici and Basting. He describes a ghosting process whereby audiences not only see well-known actors performing their current ages and roles but an amalgamation of previous ages and roles they have been seen playing in the past (67-68). Their performance exists in and across time, although Carlson does not address projection of future selves directly as these other authors do.

Ghosting, then, influences our perception of a character’s age in that it describes the layering of memories of past performances of age with our reception of the present performance choices. Perception of a character’s age is also influenced by what Gullette describes as “the

default body”, which she defines as a person’s “package of habits”, or embodied cultural attitudes and ways of behaving (*Aged by Culture* 161). The default body functions in the Butlerian sense (Butler *Gender Trouble* 44) such that repetitive stylized performances of age become consolidated over time so as to appear as a natural way of being. Gullette writes “A body, like an identity, is better thought of as a series of try-ons and reaffirmed performances: new consolidations. Age on the body can involve both passive accretions and will” (*Aged by Culture* 161). While Gullette is concerned with audience reception of performances of age on stage and believes that reception of age hinges on “our culture’s unconscious shared understanding of the default body’s development” (166), she focuses mostly on age as the consolidation of past performances from the actor’s perspective. For example, she believes actors can more readily play their former default bodies than ages they have not yet experienced because they retain psychological memory of those bodies (170). Gullette shows concern for how cultural age scripts influence reception, but she is less specific about the role of audiences’ past theatrical experiences. Reading Gullette alongside Carlson is generative then and suggests that Gullette’s default (aged) body is not only a matter of consolidated performances, but rather also a matter of reception influenced by theatrical ghosting. Well-known actors do not simply perform their default body, but rather are ghosting previous default bodies and performances of age, their own and those of others.<sup>xli</sup> Ghosting then influences our perception of the performance of a character’s age, and I propose it is influenced by the time span and the range of ages over which an actor has appeared before the same audience in the past, as well as the age ranges of other actors who have been seen (or heard of) playing the same or similar roles.

Lipscomb’s book *Performing Age in Modern Drama* went to press shortly after the original article on which this chapter is based was published in *Theatre Research in Canada*. In

the last chapter of her book she also considers Carlson's theatrical ghosting, arguing that ghosting can account for an audience's willingness to accept an older actor playing a younger role. In the case of a known actor or celebrity, Lipscomb agrees with Carlson, that the ghosting of past performances can lead audiences to accept an older body playing a younger character. Lipscomb adds that in the case of an unknown actor, the incongruity between the performer's older body and the characteristics of the younger role-type can subvert expectations.

The performance can invite the audience to consider age norms on and off stage, from typical casting practices and the dearth of meaningful roles for older actors to the assumptions about appropriate behavior among older people. . . . The audience is afforded the opportunity to consider and reject limitations placed on the self by the cultural norms of aging. (Lipscomb *Performing Age in M.D.* 177)

In *King Lear*, although Webb was playing older not younger, Carlson's ghosting figured into my reading of his performance of age. Webb has been a prominent actor in Vancouver's theatre scene for many years, thus many theatregoers will readily ghost memories of his past performances. My own reception of his performance of Lear (and of Lear's age) was ghosted by the range of ages and type of roles I have seen him play which include the following: Alfred P. Doolittle in *My Fair Lady* (Gateway Theatre Co.), Polonius in *Hamlet* (Honest Fishmongers), an ageless god-type character in *The 8<sup>th</sup> Land* (Pi Theatre), Joe Gargery in *Great Expectations*, Estragon in *Waiting for Godot*, and the Button-molder in *Peer Gynt* (all with Blackbird Theatre). This made it easy to perceive Webb's performance of age as primarily a repertoire of former selves. While the ghosting of other actors' performances of Lear (for example Christopher



Gaze's 2008 *Lear* at Vancouver's Bard on The Beach, or Ian McKellen's famous performance in the 2008 television movie directed by Trevor Nunn<sup>xliii</sup>) no doubt filtered into my reception, the fact that I had not seen these performances live, coupled with the compelling charismatic nature of Webb's performance meant that his own ghosting had far more leverage on my reception. Perhaps my reception of Webb's performance was influenced by our cultural tendency to homogenize all older ages (usually those over sixty years) into the single monolithic category of "old" causing me to see his sixty-one-year-old body as convincing when playing eighty. But considering that I am aware of this issue, I do not think this was entirely the case. I believe theatrical ghosting, combined with Webb's superior skill as a physical actor which allowed him to palimpsestically layer on top of his default, meant that although he was playing twenty years outside his age range, he remained convincing in his performance of Lear's age.

Carlson also suggests that if an actor is less known to audiences but playing a well-known role or type of role, that actor's performance will likely be more strongly ghosted by performances (particularly famous ones) of that role or role type by other actors the audience has previously seen or heard of (59). In a way this could be seen as what Basting describes as a projection of future selves. The lesser known actor's performance is an amalgamation of their own thin repertoire of previous performances of age, but more strongly ghosted by performances of the role set by well-known actors who in many cases may be older. This is almost a 'ghosting forward'; it gives us a sense of the future ages the young unknown actor might play, and the future roles he or she might take on.

Gauthier was a young up-and-coming actress at the time of this production. I had only seen her in one prior performance: *Honest Fishmongers' Hamlet* in which she played a male character. Thus, ghosting of the recycled body and persona of this particular actor had minimal

impact on my reception. My response was not so much shaped by memories of Gauthier's previous performances, but rather by expectations based on performances by better-known actors in the same or similar roles. For example, her performance for me recalled Melissa Poll playing Cordelia in Vancouver's 2008 *Bard on the Beach* production, or Romola Garai in Trevor Nunn's 2008 television movie (both tall striking blondes like Gauthier). These were performances that occurred prior to Gauthier's and involved actors of chronologically older ages; ages that Gauthier had still to become. This, combined with my knowledge that she was an actress on the rise, made it more likely that I read her performance of age as projection of future selves.

#### **4.4 Conclusion**

In both cases my reception of Webb's and Gauthier's performances involved the sense that they transcended stereotypes of age—an important contribution considering theatrical interpretations of *King Lear* often employ negative age clichés. Old age, despite the growing proportion of elderly people in our population, is still marginalized, under-represented, and often negatively constructed in our culture, including in our artistic products. One contributing factor is the dominance of a chronological sense of time which can result in theatrical texts with aging themes being interpreted for the stage in ways that disconnect life stages and highlight loss.

However, some contemporary productions of classical works function to re-imagine representations of aging and old age through embodied performances which redress or downplay the decline narrative and highlight more positive messages about aging contained in their texts.

This was the case with Honest Fishmonger's' production of *King Lear*.

Basting's depth model of aging offers us a way to understand how some of this production's acting and staging choices engaged with postmodern concepts of time without

neglecting time's effects on the body. Read alongside Basting, and Gullette's concept of the default body, Marvin Carlson's theory of theatrical ghosting provides a way to build on Basting's depth model of aging. Carlson's concept of recycling allows us to understand how familiarity with an actor's previous performances of age, as well as with famous performances of the role (or similar roles), prime an audience to receive a performance as one involving a body in temporal depth.

Lipscomb argues that, when enhanced by the effects of theatrical ghosting, referential disjuncture (or collision between a role and our expectations for that role) can be transformative, especially in relation to aging: "The disjuncture between actor and role when the senior plays against apparent age can truly enact change in the lives of the performers and community" (*Performing Age in M.D.* 177). In addition, I contend that, as Basting found with Ohno and I found with Gauthier and Webb, a performance of aging in temporal depth that acknowledges the body's performance of ages in and across the life course and is irreducible to age binaries can also be transformative by the affective power of its portrayal. By examining my subjective, emotional responses to performances of age in this production of *King Lear* through the lenses of Basting's and Carlson's theories, I offer a way to differentiate between performances of age without relying on a chronological sense of time or restoring age binaries. I believe that considering the relative ratio of the layering of the repertoire of former age-selves to the projected future age-selves, offers a generative non-ageist way to think about performances of age.

## **Chapter 5: Generational Continuity Versus Rupture: A Comparative Analysis of Dramatic Space, Stage Properties, and Structures of Time in *August: Osage County* by Tracy Letts and *4000 Miles* by Amy Herzog**

As exemplified by Lear and his daughters, antagonism between generations<sup>xliii</sup> pervades the Western dramatic canon. Although stories of legacy and domestic harmony can also be found, intergenerational conflict is a widespread and recurrent theme. It is represented on stage, for example, in Greek tragedies like Euripides' *Iphigenia*, in the works of Shakespeare such as *Hamlet*, in realist dramas like Ibsen's *Ghosts* and Chekhov's *The Seagull*, and American Expressionist works like Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, Williams's *The Glass Menagerie*, and Treadwell's *Machinal*. In such plays the older generation is often made liable for the family's dysfunction. Particularly, older mothers are frequently vilified, and blamed for family discord and their children's failures.<sup>xliv</sup> The recent award-winning and widely-produced American family dramas *August Osage County* (henceforth, *August*) by Tracy Letts and *4000 Miles* by Amy Herzog continue the tradition of exploring intergenerational conflict as families cope with crises. Both plays are set in the home of an aging maternal figure and examine how she and her family cope with tragedy and loss. The two plays invite comparison on several grounds, despite the fact that Vera of *4000 Miles* is considerably older than Violet of *August*, and that *4000 Miles* stages a grandparent-grandchild bond, in contrast to the parent-child kinships that are the main focus of Letts's drama. Both plays arise from the same moment in American cultural history, they are set in the same year and season, and they explore similar weighty themes such as incest, drug use, and broken relationships. They also confront issues of aging.

In this chapter I move from focusing on how stories about aging are told through an individual aging character (as I did in Chapters 3 and 4), to considering how meanings of aging and old age are constructed through depictions of intergenerational family relations. Because I am interested in what the live theatrical event uniquely contributes to stories about aging and old age, I am intrigued by how characters' interactions with dramatic space, stage properties, and time structures orchestrate and arrange intergenerational interactions and how these interchanges, in turn, shape the meanings of aging and old age. I ask what tacit instructions space, props, and time produce for characters across generations during live performance. In my analysis I apply the concepts of generational continuity and rupture. I argue that in *August* Letts formulates interactions with stage properties, dramatic space, and time structures such that they highlight generational rupture and cast the older generation as responsible for family discord, thus reifying longstanding ageist stereotypes. In sharp and revealing contrast, Herzog's use of space, props, and time in *4000 Miles* emphasizes continuity across generations and offers a narrative of intergenerational reciprocity and hope that resists stereotypes of old age. My purpose is not to equate parent-child relationships with grandparent-grandchild relationships. Rather, by reading the plays against each other, my purpose is to illuminate the hidden repertoires of oppression and resistance related to age ideology that are embedded in characters' interactions with dramatic space, stage properties, and time structures.

Although representing relations across generations as antagonistic is a recognizable trope in dramatic (and other) literature, Woodward contends that this understanding is grounded in a patriarchal, Freudian viewpoint that considers only two generations, placing them in violent struggle with one another ("Tribute" 100). She argues that generations are not necessarily divided by negative forces such as envy, fear, hostility, guilt and jealousy. Reflecting on her own

relationship with her grandmother, she describes a sense of connectedness—“an emotional attunement and mutual recognition that stretched across a continuity established by three generations” (*Figuring Age* 149). For Woodward generational linkage should be understood in terms of more than two generations (“Tribute” 96). Generational identity, she suggests, “entails a difference based on *similarity* that finds its temporal expression in *continuity*” (98). Patricia Mellencamp, expanding on Woodward’s ideas, defines generational continuity as a “way of thinking through time that includes lifetimes ahead and behind” (320). To Mellencamp, *continuity* means “to persist, to persevere, to carry further” (320). It is a force that “joins, unites, holds things together [. . .] brings coherence and establishes value” (320). The antithesis, Mellencamp maintains, is generational *discontinuity* or rupture (319-20). Both Mellencamp and Woodward focus on continuity of female lineage as a perspective that resists the oedipal struggle between generations embedded in Freudian psychoanalysis. My approach is not restricted to female generations and does not involve Freudian concepts; however, I was inspired by Woodward’s descriptions of her relationship with her grandmother. In “Tribute to Older Women: Psychoanalytic Geometry, Gender, and the Emotions” she remembers how their connectedness was grounded in visits to specific places, such as the beach and a hotel room (91). In “Inventing Generational Models” she describes the role of objects in inspiring feelings of companionship and affinity with her grandmother:

[. . .] my grandmother and I would stay in the bedroom [. . .] while I explored the contents of the bottom drawer of her chest of drawers, fingering objects that seemed to me fragile and exotic while she embellished them further with stories—tiny seed pearls

from oysters, a small book of drawings of birds, a miniature bronze pineapple [. . . ]. It was the objects that enchanted me then. (*Figuring Age* 149)

These anecdotes stimulated me to think about the role of space, objects, and time in promoting or disrupting generational continuity. I became interested in how playwrights' use of these devices on stage might work to reify age stereotypes or support alternative representations. While generational continuity and rupture can exist simultaneously and in varying degrees, I purposely chose to compare plays with opposing narratives. *August* tells a story of extreme generational rupture; *4000 Miles* tells one of strong generational continuity. I wanted to compare how the use of dramatic space, objects (represented on stage as stage properties), and time structures were implicated in the telling of these stories. I also wanted to examine ways that narratives about aging and old age were embedded, often surreptitiously, in interactions with space, objects, and time.

This chapter, then, represents a close reading of the plays *August* and *4000 Miles* in which I demonstrate how dramatic space, stage properties, and time structures contribute to understandings of age, aging, and old age, and the processes of generational continuity and rupture. At core, my approach rests on two foundational texts. First, I draw on questions from Fuchs's article "EF's Visit to A Small Planet" to guide my analysis. Fuchs's describes her approach as a "template for critical imagination" ("EF's Visit" 5) and offers a series of questions to ask during play analysis which are meant to "forestall the immediate (and crippling) leap to character and normative psychology that underwrites much dramatic criticism" (5). Focusing the key tenets of this influential text through an age studies lens allows me to demonstrate the ways

in which dramaturgical choices about dramatic space, stage properties, and time structures shape the play's representations of age, aging, and old age in profound ways.

Second, my analysis is guided by Judith Milhous and Robert D. Hume's approach to "production analysis." They describe it as follows:

By the term we mean interpretation of the text specifically aimed at understanding it as a performance vehicle— "reading with a directorial eye," if you like. While heavily grounded in textual analysis, such criticism will be undertaken on the principle that what should emerge is a sense of multiple possibilities in actual performance. Production analysis should draw freely on theatre history and drama history. [. . .] The object is to clarify possible meanings and effects, primarily for readers, critics, and theatregoers, secondarily for the interested director. The result should be improved understanding of the performance potentialities of the play at issue. (10)

Andrew Sofer, who adopts this approach in *The Stage Life as Props*, also provides insight: "the production analyst is more interested in the horizon of performance possibilities generated by the text than in the realization of those possibilities within a given performance" (*The Stage Life of Props* 5). Adopting this approach from an age studies perspective, I analyse the scripts of these plays for the horizon of possibilities informing how age, aging, and old age might be portrayed, particularly in the unfolding of intergenerational relations.



## 5.1 Justification for Comparing the Two Plays

Upon first consideration, the plays *August* and *4000 Miles* have several distinct differences. *August* is a large-cast family drama, featuring sixty-five-year-old Violet, the Weston family matriarch, who has mouth cancer and is addicted to a host of prescription drugs. During the Prologue her husband, Beverly, an alcoholic and former award-winning poet, hires twenty-six-year-old Native American Johnna to be their housekeeper. She is the youngest adult in the play. Beverly then goes missing, and in response, Violet summons home her family, consisting of her sister (Mattie Fae), her three middle-aged daughters (Barbara, Ivy and Karen), and their partners and off-spring. Barbara's daughter, fourteen-year-old Jean, is the play's youngest character. When it is discovered that Beverly has committed suicide the family gradually implodes as family members find it impossible to escape cycles of addiction, lies, cruelty, and abuse. The play focuses most strongly on the relationships between the older mothers and their children, but in terms of my arguments, it also notably stages Violet and Jean's grandmother-granddaughter interactions, and the relationships between Johnna, the young outsider character, and various family members. Structurally, the play has a linear plot and fits Fuchs's definition of a tragedy as it moves from threat to disaster ("EF's Visit" 8).

In separate studies, authors Blatanis, Kochman, and Mohler, all suggest that the value of *August* is its post-modern ruminations revealing "the gaps, ruptures, and contradictions in 'master narratives' of Western culture" (Kochman 10). Mohler argues that Letts uses ironized nostalgia and the Native American character, Johnna, to point toward the breakdown of the idealized (white) American Family and the failure of the American Dream with its ideals of "domesticity, fidelity, independence, and progress" (137). Kochman asserts, "that in *August* the value of poetry is diminished and this devaluation is shown to be detrimental to the individual,

the family, and society” (66). Textual references to poetry, she claims, not only criticize the American Dream, but suggest that reframing our thinking from a narrative perspective to a poetic one might offer guidance toward progress (68). Blatanis contends that in *August* “the dystopia of the family hearth directly mirrors and is intensified by the disintegration of the enveloping sociopolitical space” (257), causing us to “re-examine the nature of family bonds by revealing ways in which the microcosmic sphere interrelates with the macrocosmic one” (254). Blatanis proposes that Letts “explores the tragic in ways that depart markedly from safely-defined and conventional ones,” valorizing encounters with suffering and meaning (258). While these authors make compelling arguments, I maintain that the master narratives of aging and old age are not fully exposed or challenged in *August*. Instead the play reifies negative stereotypes about aging, particularly female aging and older age. I contend that in *August*, the stereotypical treatment of the older female characters is emphasized through the staging of relationships across generations, especially as depicted through the use of dramatic space, stage properties, and structures of time.

By contrast, *4000 Miles* has a much smaller cast of four and begins when ninety-one-year-old Vera discovers her twenty-one-year-old grandson, Leo, at the door of her New York apartment in the middle of the night. He has arrived after biking across the country—a journey during which his best friend was tragically killed. The play also addresses Vera’s ongoing adjustment to the loss of her husband, Joe, who died ten years earlier. While this play too consists of a linear plot, *4000 Miles* fits Fuchs’s definition of a tragicomedy as its plot moves from threat to peaceful celebration (“EF’s Visit” 8). The primary relationship staged in this play is the grandmother-grandson bond between Vera and Leo. Their seventy-year age difference brings to light the kind of connectedness across three generations that Woodward describes (“Tribute” 96). In *4000 Miles* the middle generation of parents, and their conflicts with Vera and

Leo, are discussed but not staged. As a result, the focus of the play is on continuity that skips a generation. In contrast to *August*, *4000 Miles* uses stage space, props, and time to promote a narrative of generational continuity and recast aging and old age in a more nuanced and positive light.

Despite their differences, these two plays invite comparison on several grounds. As mentioned in the introduction, they both address weighty themes such as incest, drug use, broken relationships, as they also confront issues of aging. The two originate from the same moment in American culture and history. Both are set in 2007 and have further temporal similarities which I will discuss in my analysis of time. Both plays also stage a traditional heteronormative White American family. Both garnered critical acclaim, and both had significant runs in New York before going on to be produced throughout North America and in Europe.<sup>xlv</sup> While *August* has attracted some scholarly attention, neither play has yet been considered from an age studies perspective. This is striking given that both plays centre on intergenerational relations and foreground an aging maternal figure in whose home the play is set. While I do not wish to homogenize aging past mid-life, it is clear that, despite their notable age difference, the characters Violet and Vera have similarities. Both are dealing with significant personal losses, as are the younger family members in each play. Both women have lost their husbands and both are negotiating relationships with younger family members who now share their living space. Both women are also experiencing physical and cognitive decline. Where Vera's is connected to her advanced years, Violet's is explicitly related to illness and drug use. Both women, too, express negative attitudes and dissatisfaction toward their own aging. Violet attempts to hold onto a younger identity. She likes Eric Clapton because, she states, "I'm not old, you know" (Letts 28). However, she also bemoans her own aging: "I was beautiful. Not anymore . [ . . . ] Women are

beautiful when they're young, and not after. Men can still preserve their sex appeal well into old age. [. . .] Women just get old and fat and wrinkly" (65).

Vera is past claiming she is not old. However, like Violet, she resists and laments her own aging. Several times in the play she describes the effects of growing older as "disgusting," for example she says to Leo, "[. . .] it's getting harder for me to hold the whadayacallit, the – *key*, because my hand shakes, which is disgusting" (Herzog 25). Vera struggles with the losses she experiences: "You know, there are a lot of bad things about getting old, but the worst one is not being able to find my words. I just hate not being able to find my words, I feel like an idiot half the time" (21). While *4000 Miles* focuses on a grandparent-grandchild relationship and *August* puts more weight on parent-child relationships, both plays deal with issues of aging and intergenerational relations and make use of dramatic space, stage properties, and structures of time to express their narratives. Although Vera and Violet both voice opinions about "getting old" as an undesirable experience, their interactions with younger characters and with space, props, and time structures create in each play quite contrasting portraits of aging and old age, particularly in light of how they stage generational continuity or rupture.

## 5.2 Dramatic Space

I first consider how the mimetic (onstage) and diegetic (offstage) spaces of a play, including the greater landscape within which the drama is set, work to create narratives about generational interconnection and about age. Space is fundamental to our understanding of and interaction with the world according to Henri Lefebvre in *The Production of Space*. His conceptions of space have laid the groundwork for spatial considerations in many disciplines. Lefebvre understands space to be both physical and mental, and always a social product.<sup>xlvi</sup>

According to theatre scholar Joanne Tompkins, “Lefebvre’s influential work addresses spatiality at large, but it barely mentions the obstacles and opportunities that shape the art form of theatre” (*Unsettling Space* 3). Tompkins argues that “theatre, more than other art forms, offers the opportunity to experiment spatially with the depiction of possible worlds in performance” (*Theatre’s Heterotopias* 8). Theatre space can be studied from a variety of perspectives. As Tompkins summarizes, “‘Space’ might include the imaginative setting created with and through a narrative, the scenic space of a production’s design, the contribution to meaning that the architectural, cultural, or historical surrounds of a venue might offer, and/or the efficacy of an unconventional venue” (*Theatre’s Heterotopias* 1). In *Land/Scape/Theater* editors Fuchs and Una Chaudhuri further develop considerations of theatrical space by proposing “landscape” as a new paradigm for understanding the spatial dimensions and cultural meanings of modern theatre. Fuchs submits “landscape dramaturgy” as an analytical technique that exceeds the limitations of more conventional character-based approaches to dramatic structure (“Reading” 37). She posits that, “Every dramatic world is conditioned by a landscape imaginary [. . .]. This spatial surround both emerges from the text and shapes its interpretation, guiding the ‘visitor’ to a reading in depth of the dramatic world’s scale and tone” (“Reading” 30). In “Estrangement: Towards an ‘Age Theory’ Theatre Criticism,” Fuchs melds landscape dramaturgy with age theory, demonstrating the paradigm’s efficacy in revealing narratives about aging and old age. While her thesis<sup>xlvii</sup> does not apply directly to my work, I take from her writing the belief that landscape conditions our understandings of age, aging, and generations.

Like Fuchs, Sofer contemplates more than the spaces that are staged. In *Dark Matter: Instability in Drama, Theater, and Performance* he examines the meanings of spaces (as well as things) that are absent in theatre and performance. His work is influential in guiding my

considerations of how spaces that are not staged influence narratives of generational continuity and rupture, as well as age identity. Sociologist Kevin Hetherington foregrounds the importance of space in his analysis of the formation of expressive identities:

Identity, as well as being about identification and organization is also about spatiality. In part, this means that identity involves an identification with particular places, whether local or national. It also means that certain spaces act as sites for the performance of identity. (105)

Similar to Hetherington, I focus on how spatiality shapes identities, age being an identity category. I ask how dramatic space organizes and shapes age identities and generational identities by either encouraging generational continuity or rupture.

### **5.2.1 Space in *August: Osage County***

*August* is rife with examples of how the landscape and setting shape age and generational narratives and identities. As its title suggests, the play is set in Osage County, Oklahoma, a county named after the federally recognized Osage Nation to which it is home. The nation's name in the play's title foregrounds the centuries-long Indigenous presence and engagement with the land in this territory. It highlights the layers of history and ancestry embedded in the place—a place that for hundreds of years has been threatened, encroached upon, occupied, and dominated by settlers, despite the shrewd negotiation skills and exceptional political power of the Osage people.<sup>xlviii</sup> As Mohler puts it “Historically, culturally and politically Oklahoma symbolizes the ultimate success of the United States’ colonial and imperial project” (134). The plains setting,

Mohler notes, is “ideologically central to the development of the American Dream: agricultural development, values of industry, and Christian family living eventually prevail on land once deemed undesirable by the United States government” (135). The term “the American Dream” was first coined by James Truslow Adams, and describes a belief that prosperity and upward mobility can be achieved through hard work regardless of social class or the circumstances of one’s birth (Adams 170). In *August*, this dream “in which so many generations of Americans have placed their faith” has “failed the Westons entirely” (Mohler 135). Blatanis argues that Letts’s drama exposes “the gaping wound of the family narrative” (254). Likewise, Choate writes that the play “exploded [. . .] the fiction that nothing untoward occurs within the walls of the home” (105). In terms of landscape, Letts sets up the pastoral of the plains and then dismantles it, emphasizing the Westons’s failure to achieve the idealized family of the American Dream. Barbara’s response to the geography of the place in Act 1, scene 1 accentuates the collapse of a romanticized home setting: “The jokers who settled this place. The Germans and the Dutch and Irish. Who was the asshole who saw this flat hot nothing and planted his flag? I mean, we fucked the Indians for *this*?” (Letts 29).

Besides the greater landscape, the onstage scenography in *August* also highlights the disintegration of family. The extensive set, as specified by Letts in stage directions, consists of a country house described as “rambling” with numerous playing areas (9). On the first floor to stage-right is the dining room. The “sitting room” or living room is located down-stage. To stage-left is the study, and far left, the front porch. A stairway advances to the second floor where there is a landing leading to offstage bedrooms. Another stairway rises to the third-floor attic, which is a single bedroom with a “peaked roof and slanted walls” (10). Letts’s opening stage directions note that “*Additions, renovations and repairs have essentially modernized the*

*house until 1972 or so, when all structural care ceased*”—the play is set in 2007 (9). The decaying Weston home not only signifies the dissolution of family, but also yokes deterioration and neglect to the process of aging. Additional stage directions describe the interior at the top of Act One: “*All the windows in the house have been covered with cheap plastic shades. Black duct tape seals the edge of the shades, effecting a complete absence of outside light*” (10). Both Violet and Beverly have, over time, and fueled by alcohol and drugs, allowed their home to deteriorate. Several characters object to how hot Violet keeps the house. Not only is it the month of August, as the play’s title indicates, which is historically the hottest month in Oklahoma, but the windows are sealed and there is no air conditioning. The heat is so stifling, Barbara proclaims that at one time Violet’s pet parakeets repeatedly died: “It was too hot. They were dying from the heat . . . These are tropical birds, all right? They live in the fucking tropics” (20).

In addition to the oppressive heat, Beverly’s disappearance and then his demise also mark the space. His absence is felt throughout the play. Sofer’s concept of “dark matter” describes “the invisible dimension of theater that escapes visual detection, even though its effects are felt everywhere in performance” (*Dark Matter* 3). Beverly’s spectral presence continuously imposes itself by means of his many books. Mattie Fae in the past told Violet to burn them in order to assert her own identity and presence in the home: “You take all those goddamn books he’s so fond of and you make a big pile in the front yard and you have yourself a big bonfire. Take his papers too, just everything and throw it in—” (Letts 18). The specter of Beverly exerts a gravitational pull within the world of the play, repeatedly reminding us of the family’s failure to achieve the American Dream or develop positive attachments to one another. His felt absence does the phenomenological work of creating a looming sense of death for the audience. His spectral presence combines with the deficiency of outside light, the extreme, sweltering heat, and



the scenography depicting the rambling, decaying home, to support the central narrative of decline and ruin. As a result, the space becomes antithetical to family bonding and accentuates a narrative of failed progress undermining connection across generations.

Not only is the house in disrepair and overheated, it also feels over-crowded. It is difficult for family members to find privacy. Jean's usual room has been re-assigned to Johnna (Letts 43). Barbara and Bill sleep on a hide-a-bed in the living room (48), Ivy on an inflatable mattress in the study (99). Remarkably, there is no mention of their childhood things persisting in the space. No actual aspects of the space conjure Barbara, Ivy, or Karen's girlhood histories. In Act 2, for example, Karen laments that their old fort has been torn down (90). In addition, we do not see Violet making her family comfortable or preserving family memories through interactions with the space. The overcrowding also means that characters lack room for self-reflection, privacy, or solitude, despite the expansiveness of the set. Blatanis argues that for members of the Weston family "survival coincides with the act of flying away from the center" (255). Barbara's children do not wish to persevere in the space, but rather to flee from it.

The one instance in which Violet seems invested in the space in a way that could nurture generational continuity takes place in the first scene of Act 3, when she joins her three daughters in Beverly's study. She makes a bid for connection by reflecting on how the space holds memories of their teenage years for her, and she links these experiences to her own. It is the only time during the play when she acknowledges that her dwelling houses memories of value to her, and perhaps to her daughters as well.

VIOLET: [. . .] You girls together in this house. Just hearing your voices  
outside the door gives me a warm feeling. These walls

must've heard lots of secrets.

KAREN: I get embarrassed just thinking about it.

VIOLET: Oh . . . nothing to be embarrassed about. Secret crushes,  
secret schemes . . . province of teenage girls. I can't imagine anything more delicate, or bittersweet. Some part of you girls I just always identified with . . . no matter how old you get, a woman's hard-pressed to throw off that part of herself [. . .] (Letts 106)

While the moment holds potential for mutual connection and shows a reflective side of Violet not revealed elsewhere in the play, it does not develop into a deeper expression of generational continuity. This, in part, is influenced by the sense of discomfort created by the space. The scene is set in Beverly's study, a space where he appeared during the Prologue, but that is now marked by his absence and death. The space creates a sense of uneasiness during this interaction as we realize that the walls of this room have not listened to Violet's daughters' secrets, so much as concealed Beverly's—secrets that have led to the family's dysfunction and will later in the play lead to its destruction. Violet's contemplation in this particular space seems strange and out of place and does not succeed in forging any forward-looking connection with her daughters.

We also have a sense in *August* that Violet's space is not her own. In addition to Beverly's presence, which continuously encroaches on Violet's space and her independent identity, we also see Violet's space changed against her will. In Act 1, scene 1, stage directions tell us that Mattie Fae "*start[s] to peel the tape from one of the shades*" (Letts 21) to let in light. It is clear that this is not Violet's desire when Charlie tells Mattie Fae to stop, "[. . .] this isn't your place, you can't come into somebody else's home and start changing—" (21). In the

Prologue, Beverly hires Johnna to care for the space, declaring that his drinking and Violet's pill addiction have "over time made burdensome the maintenance of traditional American routine: paying of bills, purchase of goods, cleaning of clothes or carpets or crappers" (11). He grants Johnna free reign over the space, proclaiming "You're welcome to make use of anything, everything [. . .]" (15). Subsequently, the house becomes tidier and homier throughout the play. Stage directions at the top of Act 2 note "*The house has been manifestly refreshed, presumably by Johnna's hand. The dull, dusty finish has been replaced by the transparent gleam of function*" (57). In addition, at the top of Act 3 stage directions state that "*The window shades have all been removed*" (99). However, Violet opposes and resents Johnna's presence in her home. At no time do we see Violet consent to or approve of the changes Johnna makes. So, Johnna, then, alters the space against Violet's will and presumably in collusion with Violet's daughters. She also materializes Beverly's continuing spectral presence by carrying out his wishes in spite of Violet's objections.

Mohler argues that Letts consciously uses the outsider Native American character of Johnna to critique the values of the "American Family," arguing, "Dramaturgically, Johnna represents what the family is not: she is calm when they are turbulent, strong when they are psychologically and physically weak, and spiritually grounded as they curse and damn one another" (130). Borrowing a term from literary critic Linda Hutcheon, Mohler asserts that Johnna represents a type of "ironized nostalgia" (131). Through Johnna, "Letts illustrates the fragility of [. . .] cultural myths [for example progress and independence] by ironically positioning a Native woman who never neatly fit into (white) American ideals in the first place, as the one sane and active character in the play" (Mohler 137). Johnna's presence in the home brings to mind Indigenous displacement and dispossession of the land by colonial settlers. Her

restorative interactions with space are the inverse of the violence of colonial land appropriation. Through Johnna's investment in and care for the space, she demonstrates more functionality. Her interactions with the space bring coherence to the home and create opportunities for connection across generations. For example, she cooks meals for characters to share (Letts 80, 129), she tidies and decorates the space to make it more comfortable (17, 57, 84), she calmly cleans up messes (83), and she occupies the spaces others reject, for example the chair at the kids' table (81).

As Mohler concedes, however, "In some ways, her [Johnna's] role as spiritual-guide-cum-house-servant renders her as a 'historical relic' who lives on the margins of white centrality, appearing to highlight the Westons' tragic flaws, psychological angst, and to literally clean up their mess" (131). From an Indigenous studies perspective, then, Johnna might be interpreted and critiqued as merely a token Indigenous character whose primary purpose is to signal an outsider status and allude to Colonialism. The complexity of Indigenous experience in Osage and the violence of Colonialism are therefore not fully examined, and Johnna's presence and activities in the space serve mostly as brief counterpoints to the Weston family's dysfunction and violence. From an age studies perspective, Johnna's characterization also presents problems. As she functions to highlight colonial folly, Johnna also draws attention away from narrative(s) of age connected to her character. Through Johnna, Letts creates the message that the right to regulate one's own space diminishes with age, since Johnna changes Violet's space without her consent, and the ethics of this action are never questioned. In addition, the character of Johnna is derivative of the "noble savage" archetype,<sup>xlix</sup> and as such she is depicted as being morally pure and without fault. Her virtue positions her as the moral authority when it comes to behavior. Aside from the issue of Indigenous stereotyping, this problematically contributes to a message

that the young know better than the old, and as such have the ethical right to make decisions on their elders' behalf. Further, Violet rejects Johnna's presence and makes numerous derogatory comments about her. For example, in Act 1, scene 1 Violet says to Ivy, "Goddamn your father for putting me through this. For leaving me to handle this. [. . .] He hired this Indian girl a week ago to look after the place for some goddamn reason and now I have a stranger in my house. I don't know what to say to that girl. What's her name?" (Letts 25). While the younger characters welcome and admire Johnna, Violet repeatedly insults and devalues her. For instance, in Act 2, when Barbara comments that Johnna cooked the whole meal by herself, Violet responds, "'Swhat she's paid for. (*A Silent moment.*) You all did know she's getting paid, right?" (86). Violet also insists on calling Johnna an "Indian":

VIOLET: I don't know what she's doing here. She's stranger in my house. There's an *Indian* in my house.

BILL (*Laughing*): You have some problem with Indians, Violet?

VIOLET: I don't know what to say to an Indian.

BARBARA: They're called Native Americans now, Mom.

VIOLET: *Who* calls them that? *Who makes* that decision?

[.....]

VIOLET: Let's just call the dinosaurs "Native Americans" while we're at it. (37)

Letts, then, constructs Violet as the only character to voice explicitly racist attitudes and beliefs. An age studies perspective invites us to ask how the play's framing of age would change if the character of Johnna were an elder rather than a young woman.

While Violet lacks agency over much of her space, the spaces that are her own, we do not see. This is another example of Sofer's dark matter—that which is unrepresented on stage but phenomenologically un-ignorable (*Dark Matter* 4). In *August* Violet's private spaces are not staged but hold critical meaning. These clandestine spaces are where she hides her pills and are linked to deception and a sense of shame. The central older female character, then, struggles but ultimately fails to control even illicit spaces. These personal spaces are violated at the end of Act 2 when Barbara declares a pill raid. We see her instruct Johnna, Bill, Ivy, and Jean to imagine and expose all of Violet's private spaces: "[. . .] Go through everything, every counter, every drawer, every shoe box. Nothing's too personal [. . .]" (Letts 97). While Barbara's actions could be conceived as caring for Violet, they also succeed in exposing her and stripping her of power. She is robbed of agency in complex ways because of her addiction. The younger generation exposes and attacks Violet's private spaces and habits in an attempt to stop their negative impacts on the family. However, it is partly a function of her advanced age and gender that allows her family to disregard her wishes, using the excuse that she is a dysfunctional addict. We are reminded that no one staged an intervention over Beverly's drinking, Bill and Steve's pot smoking is barely questioned, and young Jean's marijuana use is expressed as only a minor concern to Barbara and even encouraged by other adults. In the case of Violet, then, this older female character is constructed as being a hopeless addict, damaged beyond self-help by her secrecy and addiction. The younger generations seek to become the redeemers; Violet is the destructive force requiring rescue.

Violet responds to the feeling that her space is not her own, by expressing intense desire both to change it and to discard many of its elements. In Act 1, scene 3 she claims she wants to downsize and cast off her possessions, saying: "All this shit's going. [. . .] I don't plan to spend

the rest of my days walking around and looking at what used to be” (Letts 65). Her attempt to gain agency over her space shows her struggle to overcome the narrative of decline that links aging to loss of power and control. However, she initiates this divestment with shocking self-involvement. In Act 2, the day of Beverly’s funeral, Violet announces that she plans to rid herself of all the family belongings; “All of it, I’m clearing all this stuff out of here. I want to have a brand-new everything” (86). She contemplates an auction, offering to sell the best items to her children; “[. . .] if you like I’ll sell it to you, cheaper’n I might get in an auction” (92). Through her lack of generosity and failure to consider her daughters’ feelings and wishes, Violet creates an effacement of mutual family history so extreme, it can only lead to generational rupture. To Violet the space has no value for joining or uniting the past with the future for her family. Rather the space holds worth for Violet only as a weapon to wield for her own gain in the family politic.

### **5.2.2 Space in *4000 Miles***

Quite in contrast to Letts’s foregrounding of generational rupture and aging as decline through the use of dramatic space, Herzog in *4000 Miles* uses space to create a narrative of generational continuity and reciprocity. Herzog describes the play’s setting, Vera’s living space, as “a spacious rent-controlled apartment in [New York’s] Greenwich Village” (5). In scene 6, when Leo brings home Amanda (a girl he has picked up), she is very excited upon first seeing the apartment, and exclaims that the view is “amaaaaaaaazing!” (45). She cannot believe that the rent is so affordable. In this play, Vera’s space has gained value over time, an accrual appreciated by the younger generation. Vera demonstrates mastery and generosity with the space, sharing her living quarters freely with Leo, providing him with his own bedroom (13), and

showing him how the space works. She uses the space to foster generational connection and is demonstrably successful as we see Leo appearing quite comfortable there. In scene 3 stage directions state that he starts the scene “*lying down, eating something and reading a book*” (25); he clearly feels at home. Leo also stays with Vera three weeks longer than the “couple of days” (23) he originally intended.

In *4000 Miles* Herzog’s setting description notes that the apartment “hasn’t been redecorated since 1968” (5). This is a strikingly similar time frame to last time the Westons’s house in *August* was upkept in 1972 (Letts 9). However, in contrast to the Westons’s home, Vera’s space in *4000 Miles* is not in disrepair. In describing the apartment, Herzog states, “The key decorative element is books” (5). However, we do not get the sense, as we do in *August*, that the books are simply an extension of Vera’s husband, Joe (who was also Leo’s grandfather). Rather, Vera’s interest in ideas and knowledge suggests the books are symbolic of their shared life together and her continued interest in learning. Vera has left elements of the space unchanged to preserve Joe’s memory. However, throughout the play, we see Vera alter her living space in response to Leo’s influence, such as changing the name on the apartment buzzer to her own. Contrary to Violet in *August*, in *4000 Miles* Vera maintains agency over her space. She makes changes out of personal desire, and her actions encourage generational continuity as she responds to Leo’s concerns, and also passes along memories of Joe anchored in their shared space. Vera’s neighbour and contemporary, Ginny, is also described as cultivating her space. In scene 10, Leo says “I saw, in her apartment, there was like a/ forest” (Herzog 71). He and Vera admire Ginny’s green thumb. Age, then, is not shown to be linked to a neglect of one’s surroundings. Rather older characters are shown to be proud of and respected for their homes. Vera also uses her space to shelter, nurture, teach and pass on memories to Leo. This contrasts



with Violet's neglect and rejection of her surroundings, her willingness to erase family history, and her failed struggle for agency over her space, all of which disrupt generational continuity and create a disturbingly negative view of female aging.

The narratives of aging and old age created through Vera's interactions with space are not only positive, however. The space also gives a sense of the loneliness and isolation that can accompany old age. Although she lives in New York City, one of the busiest cities in the world, Vera has limited contact with people other than Leo. Two members of her small social circle die during the play. Leo worries about Vera's isolation during a phone call to his sister, Lily, ". . . I've been here three weeks now and I know there are some days if I wasn't here she wouldn't see anyone" (Herzog 61). Even Vera's neighbour, Ginny, who lives in the next apartment, only speaks to her by phone. The large size of Vera's apartment also serves to highlight her solitude. The space, while not unmanageable, provides physical challenges that frustrate Vera in terms of aging. She describes having difficulty turning the key in the top lock (25), and according to stage directions, we see her take two tries to get up from the sofa (24).

The play's title, *4000 Miles*, underscores the distance between Vera and her family. When Leo describes the expansive landscape he has traversed to arrive at Vera's door, it emphasizes the far-reaching physical divide that separates Vera from her children and grandchildren, all of whom live on the other side of the country. However, it also foregrounds the connection or generational continuity that draws Leo to Vera. He has literally crossed mountains and plains to see her. Leo describes his motivation to visit in terms of wanting to help Vera: "Well, my grandma's really old, and she doesn't really have anybody, so. I thought it would be cool to come spend some time with her" (Herzog 49). He also admits he was seeking shelter from his own tragedy: "My best friend died this summer. We were biking across the

country together and he died. That's why I'm here. Because I don't know where else to be" (50). The landscape, then, serves to emphasize generational connection across time and space. Its presence as a dangerous obstacle that is overcome symbolizes the characters' (especially Leo's) investment in pursuing and preserving generational continuity.

### **5.3 Stage Properties**

Within space exist objects. According to prominent sociologist and cultural gerontologist David Ekerdt, "objects actualize the lifecourse" (00:08:28). He describes the total of one's possessions, collected and carried across time and place, as "the material convoy" (00:09:10). Ekerdt explains the significance of the material convoy in later life as follows:

Advancing age may deepen and even shift the meanings of things and their possession motives. [ . . . ] In later life, possessions can at once be a comfort and a burden and determinative of action. Thus "things" and "possessions" create a fluid, complex but often neglected dimension through which the ageing process is materialized in time and space and where subjects and objects create meaningful relationships deserving of attentive research. (00:46:27)

The material convoy is represented on stage through the use of stage properties. These "performing objects and theatrical things" as Marlis Schweitzer and Joanne Zerdy call them in their book of this title (2), are key players in performance and have been studied in a variety of ways. Semiotic analyses have focused on the object as sign (or symbol) in theatre. Stanton B. Garner Jr. and Bert O. States both have approached stage objects using phenomenology,

maintaining that such an approach “awakens the reader’s memory of his own perceptual encounters with theater” (States 1). States famously proposed the use of binocular vision to consider the world both phenomenologically (in terms of our sensory engagement with objects) and semiotically (in terms of the object as sign) (8). Cultural materialists study stage props and costumes in terms of how they contribute to and reflect a particular, historical, material culture. New materialism moves away from binaries (human/nonhuman, nature/culture) and aims to de-centre human agency by placing emphasis on the dynamic collaborations that exist between human and non-human entities such as objects, animals, environments, forces etc. (Schweitzer and Zerdy 5). Such approaches consider how objects “powerfully script, choreograph, direct, push, pull, and otherwise animate their human collaborators” (6).

In this chapter, I adopt an approach similar to that of Sofer in *The Stage Life of Props*, emphasizing the script, rather than analyzing a specific production, to decipher the range of meanings a prop could have in performance. Sofer’s analysis of stage props combines semiotics, phenomenology and cultural materialism (vii). He seeks to “make visible [. . .] the temporal and spatial dimensions of the material prop in performance” for both actor and audience (vii). I, too, am interested in the stage prop as it functions within the theatrical event. Sofer defines a stage prop as “a discrete, material, inanimate object that is visibly manipulated by an actor in the course of performance” (11). He further elaborates, “By definition, a prop is an object that goes on a journey; hence props trace spatial trajectories and create temporal narratives as they track through a given performance” (2). Props move forward in present time through the plot of the play; but also conjure up histories (viii). Of particular interest to me is Sofer’s insistence that props can be employed to establish *new* meanings:

Although the spectator is always free to take up a range of understandings of the prop's meaning, the prop's very fluidity as a theatrical sign encourages playwrights to use it as a concrete tool to subvert the symbolism previously embodied by the object it represents (ix-x).

I am attentive to the conscious, purposeful use of props on the part of the playwright, whether that is intended to be subversive or otherwise. I am also interested in the surreptitious meanings that props might carry when acting in live actor-object interactions. These may exist in spite of the playwright's intentions. Sofer's approach allows me to consider, based on the play's script, how props might carry cultural meaning about age, aging, old age, and intergenerational relations throughout a range of productions.

### **5.3.1 Props in *August: Osage County***

First, I consider how props influence the narratives of connection or disconnection across generations in *August*. Fifer argues that Violet and Beverly "show little pride in surroundings or possessions" (Letts 192). In the Prologue, when instructing Johnna, Beverly makes clear his ambivalence toward his and Violet's possessions referring to them as "all this garbage we've acquired, our life's work" (15). There are few instances in *August* in which an onstage prop is used across generations as a means of joining together. Sometimes props demonstrate generational difference. Jean listens to music on an iPod; Violet, on a record player. Violet and Jean never discuss or compare their different uses of technology or other props (which is distinct from Leo and Vera in *4000 Miles*). Jean hides her marijuana pipe from both the middle and older generations, suspecting they will disapprove, and sneaks up to Johnna's room to use it (41-42).

While Johnna seems notably older than Jean by virtue of being an adult, the two are only divided by twelve years in chronological age. As such, there is not the same breadth of generational divide between them as each has with the other characters (generations are typically defined as separated by 25 years).

In this play, props offered by one family member are also at times rejected by another across generations, and actively perforate a sense of attachment. For example, Violet and Mattie Fae ask Ivy to look at photos of Beverly, and to try on clothes, and Ivy refuses (Letts 63). Ivy admires a photo of Violet saying, “You’re beautiful, Mom” (65). Violet spurns her compliment:

VIOLET: No. One of those lies we tell to give us comfort, but  
don’t you believe it. Women are beautiful when they’re young, and not after  
[ . . . . . ]  
You’re about as sexy as a wet cardboard box, Mattie  
Fae, you and me both. Don’t kid yourself [ . . . ] (65-66)

Interactions with objects also become struggles for power. Violet offers Barbara a sideboard which Barbara declines. Violet then offers it to Bill in a manipulative move to expose that the couple has separated (Letts 92-93). Barbara and Violet have a violent brawl over a bottle of Violet’s pills (96-97). Mattie Fae orders her son Little Charles to get her casserole from the car, and when he accidentally drops it, she is outraged and belittles him (83). Props, then, become catalysts for generational rupture. During Act 3, scene 5, the play’s climax, Violet, Barbara and Ivy all purposely smash the family china, as Violet viciously reveals to Ivy that she and Little Charles (who is her lover and, she thought, her cousin) are actually half-brother and

sister (132-34). The scene ends with Ivy leaving forever. The act of destroying these family artifacts symbolizes a blatant disregard for their mutual history and the demolition of kindred ties.

During the final moments of the play, as Violet searches for her family, she puts on an Eric Clapton record. Readers may recall her claim that she listens to Eric Clapton because she is “not old” (Letts 28). In a moment of realization that her family has left her and she is alone, stage directions indicate that Violet “[. . .] *attacks the record player, rakes the needle across the album. She looks around, terrified, disoriented*” (138). In destroying the record, Violet shatters her identity as “not old”, and destroys one of the few objects she valued and at one time attempted to share with her family. Her sense of self and her connection to her children are annihilated with the record. One final time, she proves, through interacting with a prop, the suitability of her name—Violet is one letter short of “violent.” Violet and the other mothers in *August* are constructed as monstrous in their interactions across generations as their interplay with props demonstrates.

The one notable instance in which a prop is used to proffer connection among family members in *August* occurs when Karen shares her hand cream with Violet in Act 3, scene 1 which takes place in Beverly’s study. This moment stands out as a rare instance of tenderness between Violet and her daughters, but the potential for generational continuity is immediately undercut by awkwardness and discomfort when Violet tells a story about a cruel Christmas gift from her mother (Letts 107). Instead of the beautiful cowboy boots she wanted, her mother gave her holey, dirty men’s work boots (106-07). We learn through this story that the history of generational rupture as expressed through objects in this family is cyclical and repeated. Later in the scene Violet further disrupts filial tenderness by rejecting the support that Barbara offers:

BARBARA: [. . .] I just want you to know, you're not alone in this.

*(no response)*

How can I help?

VIOLET: I don't need help. (109)

Any optimism for generational continuity inspired by the hand cream is dissolved through this interaction.

Many instances in which props connect characters in this play involve Johnna. In the Prologue, we see Beverly give Johnna a handkerchief and a book (Letts 12, 16). Her happy receipt of these objects contrasts sharply with his material absence from his own children. Johnna also connects with Jean through props, although, as I have previously discussed, there is not the same generational divide between Jean and Johnna as between either of these women and the other characters. In Act 1, scene 2 Johnna allows Jean to smoke a marijuana pipe in her room, providing Jean with refuge from the other adults (41-42). Johnna shows her deceased parents' wedding photo to Jean, in which they wear traditional ceremonial costume (43). Johnna also allows Jean to hold a necklace. This intensely personal object was made by Johnna's grandmother in Cheyenne custom, and contains Johnna's umbilical cord; Cheyenne people, Johnna tells Jean, are meant to wear such necklaces for their entire lives (44-45). Johnna uses these props to teach Jean about her traditions and about the values of her ancestors. The umbilical cord as a lifelong material reminder of family ties provides a sharp contrast to the Westons's many material ruptures and absences as noted above. Johnna's interactions with props provide a stark contrast of generational continuity preserved through objects. They show positive relationships across generations and construct older characters as valued. However, since the

older characters are only briefly discussed and not staged, these positive intergenerational family relations represented through props act as only brief relief to the negative and sometimes violent ones staged between older and younger members of the Weston family in *August*.

Johnna also appears several times during the play cooking and serving food to the family (Letts 17, 57, 61, 75, 128-31) and characters comment on its excellent quality (37, 80, 95). She thus uses props to demonstrate nurturing. Her one violent action involving a prop is purely protective in its motivation. Fifty-year-old Steve, Karen's fiancé, shares a joint with the underage Jean, and then proceeds to "mess" with her, kissing and groping her in the darkened living room (114-17). Here he uses a prop (the joint) to take advantage of a much younger character. Johnna enters "*brandishing a cast-iron skillet*" and hits Steve with it; the injury necessitates his exposure to the others (117). It also conjures up and contrasts with Violet's Act 2 story of being attacked by one of their mother's "gentlemen friends" with a claw hammer (Letts 94). In this case, the adult (Johnna) uses violence to protect the child (Jean) rather than to inflict injury upon her. In *August*, then, Letts uses the character of Johnna, a character from outside the family, and again the youngest adult, to offer a different model of interactions across generations. Johnna uses props as a means of nurturing, teaching, and protecting characters both older and younger than herself. Her presence highlights the Weston family's contrasting use of props to perform acts of rupture across generations. This effectively critiques the colonial values of independence and individualism. However, once again the fact that the youngest adult character models positive interactions that the older characters (especially the older female characters) are not able to achieve creates a problematic message about aging and old age, especially for women. Her characterization, which highlights and celebrates a surface understanding of Indigenous values, also serves to mask subtle ways that older age is negatively represented.



### 5.3.2 Props in *4000 Miles*

By contrast, in *4000 Miles* stage props are most often used to encourage generational continuity. Both Leo and Vera use objects to offer mutual caregiving and to foster communication. Vera does Leo's laundry (Herzog 15-16) and gives him keys to the apartment (22), food (17), money (24), and her husband's old suit (65). Vera's open-mindedness is demonstrated through props in scene 2. When Leo picks up a box of condoms that Vera has found amongst his things and left with his folded laundry, she remarks, "I was glad to see you carry those and surprised they weren't opened" (15). Besides caring for Leo, Vera also serves tea to Bec (Leo's ex-girlfriend) in scene four as an offer of hospitality and an attempt to bridge the awkwardness between them. Leo, too, uses props to connect with Vera. He sets up her computer and this elicits a discussion in which the two discover shared values of Marxism (21). Leo's bicycle and paniers also inspire Vera's curiosity about his bike trip and Leo enjoys educating her about cycling across the country (18). Props become conduits for learning across generations, and both older and younger characters are shown to be capable of and invested in acquiring knowledge. Throughout the play, Vera is often seen putting in her hearing aids. Although they clearly bother her, she is repeatedly depicted, through this prop, as being invested in hearing what Leo has to say.

Props, too, are used to show preservation of generational memories across time. In the final scene of the play, when Leo appears wearing Joe's suit, it is an opportunity for the two characters to remember him (Herzog 65). Leo also reminisces about Joe with Vera in scene 3, when he reads a book that Joe wrote. Through this prop, Joe's knowledge and values persist across generations as Leo declares he has learned "stuff" from the book he did not know before

(28). Props (including this book) are also used to resolve conflict. Following a fight in scene 4, during which Leo tells Vera to “shut up” for commenting on Bec’s weight (41), Leo and Vera smoke pot together in the immediately juxtaposed scene 5. The two discuss personal topics, including their sex lives, before it is revealed, surprisingly and humorously through props, that they are stoned. Stage directions state that part way through the scene “LEO *picks up a bowl and lighter that we haven’t noticed*” (43). Here, the sharing of props facilitates reconciliation and celebration. The two characters communicate on a deeper level than previously and are shown to have mutual respect and affection for one another. The prop also shows Vera’s measured and responsible use of substances. In *4000 Miles*, destructive use of drugs is tied to younger characters. Leo has recently caused family discord by kissing his adopted sister after using peyote, and Leo describes his mother, Jane, as having valium hangovers (11). By divorcing aging from substance misuse in *4000 Miles*, Herzog serves to break up the narrative of decline that is so strongly reinforced through patterns of addiction that increase with age in *August*.

In *4000 Miles* props are, at times, implicated in relationship ruptures. Leo’s animosity towards Jane is clearly linked to her use of valium (Herzog 11). Family dysfunction, then, is not absent from this play. Leo’s relationship with his mother is characterized by ongoing, unresolved conflict, frustration, and emotional distance, similar to parent-child relationships in *August*. However, in the case of *4000 Miles* this relationship is not staged. We never see Jane or hear her voice. As a result, the relationship between Vera and Leo has far more impact. In addition, while Leo describes Jane as anxious and over-protective, he never describes her as abusive. Vera also counters Leo’s one-sided view of Jane with a more nuanced description of her, offering the chance to see Jane from a different perspective. Vera describes aspects of Jane’s upbringing and personality that humanize her. This coupled with Vera’s caring, thoughtful nature, and her own

challenges at times in seeing eye-to-eye with Leo, offer, through Vera, the possibility to resist the construction of Jane as a monstrous mother.

In *4000 Miles*, when interactions with staged props are involved in, or expressive of, relationship breakdowns this occurs amongst peers not across generations. In scene 4 Bec breaks up with Leo. Twice during this scene she rejects a pumpkin Leo offers to her (Herzog 35, 40). Refusal of this object further fractures their relationship. Amanda, in scene 6, declines to let Leo see under her band aid, an act symbolizing the end of their short friendship (52). Vera uses the telephone to terminate her relationship with Ginny in scene 8 (56-57). This creates quite a different message about age. Props do not highlight discord in a way that shows it increasing with age as they do in *August*. It would be false to suggest that objects are never embroiled in disharmony between Vera and Leo. Twice objects trigger conflict between the two characters. In scene 3 Vera is upset because she believes Leo broke her faucet and did not tell her; in scene 10 she is angry because she believes Leo stole her check book. However, as opposed to the many props that appear on stage and function to advance generational continuity in *4000 Miles*, these two objects are not staged and manipulated by the characters, only discussed. Because they lack physical presence, and because their number is few, they do not interrupt the play's overwhelming pattern of using onstage props to highlight generational continuity.

## **5.4 Structures of Time**

Just as dramaturgical choices about space and props have revealed patterns for representing aging, old age, and generational continuity and rupture, choices about time can be equally illuminating. Making sense of time's functioning on stage and in dramatic texts has been a longstanding concern of theatre theorists since in theatre time functions in distinct,

idiosyncratic, and often multi-layered ways. It is important, therefore, to establish a shared vocabulary for analysis. To this end, I employ the model of Matthew D. Wagner in *Shakespeare, Theatre, and Time*. His approach focuses on the unique qualities of time as it exists and functions on stage.

Wagner identifies three temporal phenomena that emerge in a stage-oriented study of Shakespeare's plays: temporal dissonance, temporal thickness, and temporal materiality (2). Temporal dissonance describes time that is "out of joint" (2), in other words, time schemes that are juxtaposed, clashing, or in disharmony. Temporal thickness is an "understanding of the present as being heavily weighted by the past and the future" (2). Temporal materiality describes the sense of "time being material, having a bodily presence in varying forms" (2). According to Wagner, "The human body allows the stage to be a place of material presence; the poetic voice then can manipulate that materiality [. . .] as bodies populate the stage, poetic, imagistic depictions of time are given material force and grounding" (8). Both temporal thickness and temporal materiality resonate with Basting's depth model of age previously discussed in Chapter 4, which describes how embodied performances of age can be viewed as a layering of past, present, and projected future performances (Basting *The Stages of Age* 140-46). Although Wagner focuses on Shakespeare's plays, his method is applicable to a study of aging in theatre for the following reasons: first, his attention to the juxtaposition of different time structures helps explain how different ways of experiencing and understanding age can exist simultaneously and often in tension with one another; second, his emphasis on embodiment supports the fact that aging is necessarily a bodily experience; third and finally, his emphasis on theatricality allows for reflections on ways that time and age are uniquely intertwined and co-constructed on stage.

Wagner argues that in staged versions of Shakespeare “time is material, thick, and in continual and varying forms of disharmony” (2). He goes on to assert, “More specifically, theatre sharpens our awareness of different, often conflicting schemes of time, and of the ‘thickness’ of the present, past, and future” (4). In the plays that I study here, this has important implications for understandings of generational continuity or rupture, and as a result also for narratives of aging and old age. In a sense, I already have discussed time’s materiality within these two plays. Continuity and rupture are ways of experiencing generational time. I have argued that these concepts are materialized through the actors’ bodies and their interactions with dramatic space and props. While I will return to some discussion of temporal materiality within *August* and *4000 Miles*, my greater focus here is on temporal dissonance and temporal thickness in each play.

In terms of temporal dissonance, two of the most elemental dissonant time schemes are objective time and subjective time (Wagner 10). Objective time describes time that is measurable (by clocks, schedules, calendars) and shared across individual experiences (13). Wagner argues, “it is a version of time that is constant (at least within reason), social, and tangible *by virtue of its measurability*” (13-14, emphasis in original). Objective time is external to human experience (14). On the other hand, drawing on Husserl and Heidegger and the long tradition of phenomenology, Wagner argues that time is also often experienced subjectively. Subjective or phenomenological time is time that is not measurable, but experienced and sensed individually and internally (14-15). Theatre, Wagner argues, creates opportunities for these two time schemes to interact (13): “It seems more appropriate to propose that temporally speaking, the theatre places us between phenomenological and objective time. It provides us a sharpened awareness of both, by shuttling us back and forth between each, and, most significantly, by not reconciling the one with the other or explaining one in terms of the other” (18). The oscillating and often

synchronous experience of subjective and objective time in theatre produces a phenomenological temporal experience unique to each particular play and each performance of a play.

When we read *August* and *4000 Miles* against each other, the parallels in terms of objective time are remarkable. Both are set in the same year, 2007, and the same season. *August* takes place explicitly in August. *4000 Miles* takes place approximately 2 months after July 3<sup>rd</sup> and shortly after the American college calendar has commenced (so approximately late August or early September). Surprisingly, both plays unfold over an exactly three-and-a-half-week period of calendar time. *August* begins with daytime scenes and ends at night; *4000 Miles* begins with a night scene and ends in the day. These parallels and similarities make all the more surprising the quite distinctive, phenomenological experience of time offered by each play.

#### **5.4.1 Time in *August: Osage County***

First, consider time structures and their impact on family relations in *August*. At the top of this play Violet and Beverly try to avoid objective time. They pursue a kind of temporal suspension, dampening their experience of time's passage. The shades they have taped shut over their windows make it difficult to tell day from night (Letts 10). Their irregular hours and mealtimes disrupt a sense of daily routine. Their heavy drinking and Violet's drug-taking further alienate them from regular temporal practices. The play's rural setting, Mohler notes, may contribute to a sense of being "caught in time," particularly for the play's original urban audiences (133). Divorcing themselves from quotidian reminders of the passage of time helps Violet and Beverly ignore their failure to achieve the narrative of progress associated with the American Dream. In "Well-Being and Time," J. David Velleman describes the essence of the progress narrative. He argues that most people strongly prefer the story of a life that constantly

improves or becomes increasingly successful with time, over a life of equal cumulative success that is not incremental, or a life that is more stable but less fulfilling. He also suggests that in such a narrative structure the possibilities for achieving “a good life” narrow significantly in middle age (156). By avoiding objective time, Beverly attempts to ease the pain of his failed career. Violet strives to escape the bodily experience of decline accelerated and emphasized by her cancer. Refusing objective time also helps them to disavow the number of years they have languished in their dysfunctional relationship and their family disappointments. Their drive toward atemporality is in tension with the inevitable passage of time, which they resist, and yet, at times, feel intensely. Beverly begins the play with the line “Life is very long . . .” (Letts 10), a reference to T.S. Eliot’s poem *The Hollow Men* (Eliot 87-90). Similar to the poem’s “hollow men” Beverly feels that there is no meaning or purpose to his existence. He is trapped in a life that both seems endless and in which too much time has passed to salvage a good ending. In terms of age, these juxtaposed time structures create a narrative accentuating fear and shame of aging, and the need to conceal decline, or escape it through death.

Beverly hires Johnna in the Prologue essentially to help them observe objective time. Her jobs include getting Violet to appointments, cooking meals, cleaning, and keeping the house in order. Her role, then, through observing normal circadian rhythms, is to keep the Westons connected and in touch, as much as necessary, with the temporality of the society around them. However, Mohler asserts that Johnna is “not quite temporally suspended in pre-modern times” (136). According to Mohler, the character of Johnna derives from historical narratives that “romanticiz[e] America’s geographical vastness and bounty” and that homogenize and mythologize Native Americans as a simple, natural people. Mohler argues that such narratives have been used to validate both “civilization” of the frontier and Native American containment

(136). Despite the fact that the character of Johnna gestures toward these narratives, Mohler contends that she serves as a productive contrast to the Westons: “she is calm when they are turbulent, strong when they are psychologically and physically weak, and spiritually grounded as they curse and damn one another” (136). Through her difference and the process of ironized nostalgia, Mohler asserts, “Johnna’s presence construes an imagined time when the white American family unit was safe, when white identity was secure, and Others remained on the borderline, or in the attic, but visible long enough to reflect white cultural hegemony” (137). Johnna prompts audiences to recall the past, but to be reflective and critical of it, contends Mohler (140). Similar to Mohler I maintain that Johnna’s embodiment and preservation of cultural and familial traditions across time highlights the dysfunction and failures of the Weston family and consequently the American Dream. However, I argue that this is in part due to Johnna’s sense of temporal thickness—a sense of time often obstructed in the play’s other characters.

Beverly contemplates deep connections with the past. By citing ‘the great poets’, he seems to seek affiliation with them. But in referring to the works of T. S. Eliot, John Berryman, and Hart Crane, Beverly emphasizes their immortality (through their writing), and in doing so highlights his own artistic failure—he never wrote anything substantial after his first successful book of poetry (Letts 46). The content of the poems he recites (Eliot’s *The Hollow Men* and Berryman’s *The Curse*) also foregrounds negative attitudes about time and age including life as continual decline, age as loss, and the despair of a lengthy existence (Berryman 275-276; Eliot 87-90). Beverly, in focusing on diachronic connection with the great poets, and in altering his experience of time through drinking, neglects his own family and fails to make synchronic connections through which he otherwise might have achieved continued duration through



generational continuity. His inability to achieve deep time or immortality seems to be a factor in his choice to commit suicide (end time).

Johnna, by contrast, carries with her a sense of generational perseverance and ancestral time through interactions with the material objects she possesses (e.g. her birth necklace, the wedding photo of her parents), through her personal embodiment, and through her recounted memories. While she is a positive example of generational continuity in this regard, critically in terms of age, the youngest adult character is shown to display temporal thickness and generational continuity, while the older characters (who actually have a far longer personal history) are unable to do so. Aging and older age, then, are associated with dysfunction and an ageist perspective through the time structures embedded in the older characters. Violet and Beverly's suspended time and backwards focus prevent them from nurturing generational continuity, while Johnna through her temporal orientation is allowed to be successful.

Although Beverly and Violet try to evade objective temporality and exist in a near atemporal sphere, their experience is also one in which time exerts a strong pull to the past. Indeed, Fifer claims that in *August* "The parents' backward gaze reveals a past neither fully accepted nor resolved. The isolated figures of Beverly and Violet recapitulate the insular nature of the lives of Mary and Tyrone [of Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night*], cut off from the next generation and from other families who might give comfort" (184). We see few instances of characters offering care, passing on meaningful family memories by sharing activities, objects, or space, or teaching each other new skills in the present. Fifer also argues that family members "rely on memory to fill the emptiness of present time" (185). Memories recounted by the older characters in *August* are mostly negative and painful. They are not retold to pass along positive examples, or even to act as useful cautionary advice. Most are stories of

injustice and abuse. For example, in Act 2, Violet recounts a story of being assaulted as a child: “(*Points to Mattie Fae*) This woman came to my rescue when one of my dear mother’s many gentlemen friends was attacking me, with a claw hammer! This woman has dents in her skull from hammer blows [. . .]” (Letts 94). The purpose of the tale is to invalidate her younger family members’ feelings and problems. Mattie Fae, too, focuses on past wrongs and failures, especially those of Little Charles. When these two mothers consider the future, their outlook is often clouded by past events, which prevents them from nurturing any positive connection or continuity across generations in the present. For example, in Act 3, scene 1, Mattie Fae, reveals to Barbara that Beverly was Little Charles’s father, saying “I made a mistake, a long time ago [. . .] I’ve paid for it. But the mistake ends here” (114). Mattie Fae’s belief that she has been punished over time, leads her to offload responsibility for divulging the truth onto Barbara, an act that neglects Mattie Fae’s own relationship with Little Charles, and ultimately, irreparably fractures Barbara’s kinship with Ivy. Violet’s future outlook, too, is clouded by her past. As previously mentioned, in Act 3, scene 1 when Barbara asks how she can help, Violet rejects her offer:

VIOLET: I don’t need your *help*. I’ve gotten myself through  
some . . . (*Stops, collects herself*) I know how this goes: once  
all the talking’s through, people go back to their own non-  
sense. I know that. So don’t worry about me. I’ll man-  
age. I get by. (109)

Violet sees little possibility that the future will diverge from the past. Beverly sees no viable future and kills himself. Charlie is the one member of the older generation in *August* whose temporal orientation is not mired in the past. However, we also learn little about his history or his future plans. Because he lacks temporal thickness and relative character depth, his potential as a role model is limited.

The younger generations in *August* are more aware of objective time than their elders, as well as more oriented to the present and future which puts the generations out of synch. As a result, characters often miss opportunities to create new experiences across generations in the present. For example, despite complaining to Barbara in Act 1, scene 1 that she never gets to see Jean (Letts 38), Violet only speaks one vicious line to Jean for the rest of the play, humiliating her in front of the family for jokingly calling Barbara a liar: “Y’know . . . if I ever called my mom a liar? She would’ve knocked my goddamn head off my shoulders” (91). Jean, for her part, is more interested in orchestrating future plans to watch movies and smoke pot, than in interacting with Violet, or listening to stories about the past. Although the younger characters, especially Violet’s daughters, attempt to plan a better future, they are mostly trapped in learned behaviors and cycles of abuse that thwart their efforts to change. As they are drawn into their parents’ retrograde focus and unstable sense of time, history repeats itself. Karen expresses this poignantly: “[. . . ] before you know it you can’t move forward, you’re just suspended there, you can’t move forward because you can’t stop thinking backward, I mean you know . . . years!” (59-60). Despite Karen’s conscious efforts to discontinue her subservience in romantic relationships, she ends up choosing to persevere in her relationship with the cheating, pedophilic, arms dealer Steve, just as Violet chose to stay with Beverly despite his years of cheating, drinking and verbal abuse. Likewise, Ivy and Little Charles’s hope for a lasting relationship is forestalled by the

revelation that they are half brother and sister. The past actions of the older generation return to ruin their children's happiness through implicating them in deep cultural taboos. In terms of the middle generation of children, then, we are shown the possibility of a better future that is then revoked. The backwards pull of their parents proves near futile for the children to resist.

However, this middle generation does not simply acquiesce to being dragged into the past and adopting their parents' sense of time. Violet's daughters resist and flee from her temporality. Ivy and Karen grasp for objective time in their efforts to escape. Ivy proclaims she plans to leave for New York with Little Charles "in weeks if not days" (Letts 105). Karen also affirms her future schedule, as she bolts from the family; "Come January . . . I'll be in Belize" (121). Barbara, perhaps, finds the temporal dissonance most troubling and has the most difficulty dislodging from Violet's temporality. Awakened to time's corporeal nature by the task of identifying Beverly's deceased body, she attempts to force a material sense of time onto Violet by making her sober up. Barbara commands a drug raid, hoping to align Violet's temporality with her own, in an effort to gain continuity. She achieves only temporary and partial success. Violet's preference for a-temporality and a backwards focus, rooted in her desire to escape the pain of both Beverly's death and her own illness, mean that she is only "moderately clean" of drugs by the end of the play (128). Barbara's focus on gaining temporal alignment with Violet also disrupts her own continuity with Jean. As Bill leaves with Jean to take her home to Colorado after Barbara has slapped her, he reminds Barbara of the future "You and Jean have about forty years left to fight and make up" (122). Still Barbara is further drawn into Violet's temporal suspension. In Act 3, scene 4 she cannot remember how long ago Bill departed, saying: "No, he left a few days ago. A week ago? Two weeks ago. Two weeks ago? [. . .]" (126). In the next

scene, Barbara appears at dinner time in her pajamas, as does Violet. Circadian rhythms for Barbara are beginning to dissolve.

In the end, however, the temporal dissonance between Violet and Barbara is too profound for any sense of generational continuity to last. Fifer contends that in *August* “the past’s hold on the present dictates the parents’ fierce grasping for money and security, which erodes their emotional ties to their children” (193). Violet’s only plans for the future include rescuing the safety deposit box before reporting Beverly’s disappearance, ensuring that her children agree that everything be left to her despite the official will stating otherwise, and planning to divest herself of all her belongings including selling (rather than giving) some of them to her children. She shows an intense self-focus that obstructs her ability to foster connection and create and preserve meaningful memories through time with her children and grandchild. Ironically, Violet’s revelation of the chronology of Beverly’s disappearance and death, an act in which she shows a surprising awareness of objective time, snaps Barbara out of temporal suspension. It causes Barbara to refocus her own sense of temporality toward the future, and presumably toward the welfare of her child. As Barbara leaves we see no hope for her relationship with Violet.

The final moments of the play, when contrasted with the ending of Act 2, bring into sharp focus the play’s disruption of generational time and its associated sense of loss. Following Sherriff Gilbeau’s news that he believes Beverly’s drowned body has been found, Act 1 closes with Violet delivering the following speech as she “*separates invisible threads in the air*”:

And then you’re here. And Barbara, and then you’re here,  
and Beverly, and then you’re here, and then you’re here, [. . . ]”  
[“and then you’re here” repeated many times] (Letts 55-56).

This seems a plea for the presence and closeness of husband and daughter. By contrast, after the confirmation of Beverly's death, and the subsequent antagonisms, conflicts, and relationship disintegrations of Acts 2 and 3, the play ends after Violet's daughters have all departed in strife. Alone, Violet crawls to the attic room where Johnna remains. Violet repeats her last line "and then you're gone" until the curtain closes, as Johnna holds her and continuously recites "This is the way the world ends" (138). Violet, finally oriented to the present, realizes what she has lost. The contrast of "here" and "gone" emphasizes the temporal and generational rupture. There will be no continuity between Violet and her daughters; this is the play's tragic end and Violet is blamed. Despite the complexities of the relationships over generations that contributed to this outcome, it is Violet, the play's oldest remaining character, who is given the actions which bring about the family's final destruction. Johnna, with her greater temporal thickness and sense of ancestral time, perhaps points toward a different, more positive model for intergenerational relationships and family continuity as we see her comfort Violet. But again, with respect to age, the youngest adult character serves the function of rescuing the oldest. Aging is linked to self-destruction, while youth is positioned as heroic. Here, as earlier in the play, the message about culture obfuscates the message about age. In addition, Johnna's final line once again quotes Eliot's *The Hollow Men*, conjuring up of a world of despair in which the souls of the poem, unable to choose between good and evil, "exist in a state in-between, a state in which their failure to make a decision causes an utter lack of hope and joy or pain" (Van Aelst n.p.). Violet's known world is ending, and she is left alone, imprisoned in her suspended temporality, with no family to share memories of the past, preserve her heritage, or care for her across time. The unspoken completion of the line, "not with a bang but a whimper" (Eliot 90) further emphasizes that without stewardship Violet's life will end without notice or meaning, linking older age to

insignificance. The citation also reminds us of patriarchal values (symbolized by the canonicity of white male poets like Eliot) that dominate and dictate our social imaginaries around age in ways that often denigrate aging, and especially diminish older women and blame them for familial dysfunction.

#### **5.4.2 Time in *4000 Miles***

While Letts interweaves structures of time in *August* that do not favour generational continuity and create abject older characters, especially older mothers, in *4000 Miles* Herzog uses time schemes to establish quite contrasting messages about relationships across generations and older age. Like Violet in *August*, Vera in *4000 Miles* is also out of synch. She exists in temporal slowness, at a different speed from the fast-paced objective, chronological time of society's calendars and schedules. While for Violet being out of sync is the result of drug use, for Vera it is primarily due to her advanced age. The play's script makes reference to Vera's slow movement (Herzog 25, 31), the amount of time she goes without seeing other people (61), and the fact that she experiences one day to the next as longer than the play's younger characters (26). In performance, this slowness would be emphasized by the stage time it takes Vera to carry out certain stage directions such as opening the door (25) or entering the room (31). Western audiences' habituation to more rapidly paced stage movement would foreground her slowness, as would her contrast with the movement styles and pace of other three younger characters. In *Learning to be Old: Gender, Culture, and Aging* Cruikshank argues that slowness can be a sign of positive adjustment:

To be old and psychologically healthy in a society marked by destructive impulses requires great equilibrium and balance. In supportive groups, older women could perhaps come to regard moving slowly not as humiliation but as a chance to tap into the life force that is unnaturally suppressed by speed and fragmentation. As for life stories, elders who take time to reflect on their own stories and share them with others participate in an ancient ritual of most other cultures across time. (7)

Herzog constructs Vera as an example of a woman whose life force is enhanced by slowness in the way that Cruikshank describes. Vera's slowness allows her to pay attention to detail, show sensitivity to her surroundings, and have time for connection with others. It allows for her to have a sense of deep presence. This is particularly evident in scene 7 in which she listens at length, in stillness, without interrupting, as Leo reveals the tragedy of his friend's death (Herzog 53-55). For Leo, Vera's temporal slowness creates a place of refuge from habitual, objective time.

Leo's own sense of time is one cued into seasons and natural cycles. During his bike journey across the country with his friend Micah, they embraced a sense of natural, geological time. In scene 7, Leo recounts this bike journey in a monologue, describing the landscape, the season, the weather, and the daily cycle of the sun (Herzog 53-54). When Micah was suddenly killed on this trip, Leo experienced extreme temporal dissonance. Not only was time out of joint because Micah died unexpectedly and before his time, but also the event interrupted Leo's experience of natural time and thrust him instantaneously into objective time. In recalling Micah's death, Leo knows the exact date, July 3rd (53). He knows it took "forty-five minutes" to attempt to rescue Micah (55). Leo describes how he was required to fill out reports and call



relatives, all details related to objective time. His response was to resist time's passage and avoid the future. He got back on his bike and continued his journey without communicating further with anyone. Leo did not attend Micah's funeral, he avoided family and friends, and he did not complete the bike trip by dipping his tire in the Atlantic. Leo's flight from objective time also led him to Vera.

Vera provides a refuge for Leo. Her slowness supports his need for temporal suspension. During the course of the play's action, we see Leo, through his experience and relationship with Vera, transform from a character avoiding his future to a young man with forward-looking plans and dreams. He gets a job and organizes his trip back across the country (Herzog 66-67). He also shows concern for Vera's future. In scene 9, Leo suggests to his sister, Lily, that she come and live with Vera and take singing lessons in New York (62). Recognizing Lily and Vera's mutual need for support, Leo encourages generational continuity beyond his own circumstance. With Leo's influence, Vera also shifts from holding onto aspects of her past life with her husband, to increasingly valuing her own independent identity in the present.

Vera's time is also one of extensive temporal thickness. In fact, even the younger characters in this play all display considerable temporal thickness; it is an important aspect of the dramaturgy. We learn much about Vera's past and see readily how it weights her present experience. For example, the play describes how Vera's embrace of Marxism bonded her with her husband (Herzog 28), challenged her relationship with Jane (22), and rooted her friendship with Ginny (17). Now, Vera's Marxist beliefs are shown to connect her ideologically with Leo (21, 28). Vera's politics and history influence her material possessions (her political books), and interactions (e.g. sharing her money and properties with Leo). Not only does Vera carry a sense of the past, but she looks to the future too. This is embedded in her daily activities. While her

plans are not elaborate, we see her planning ahead in actions such as freezing pastries to eat later (18), not locking the top lock because she has trouble opening it (25) and saving the arts section of the newspaper to share with her friend, Ginny, everyday (16). In terms of aging, this future orientation and temporal thickness provide a resistance to the decline narrative, a narrative that is reinforced in *August* by Violet and Beverly's preference for looking backwards and avoiding objective time.

However, at the same time Vera looks to the future in *4000 Miles*, she is aware of the limited time she has left to live (she is 91 years old). In scene 10 she reveals her sadness and disappointment with Leo's plans to leave saying, "You'd think at my age I'd know better than to get used to anything" (Herzog 68). Vera's sense of limited time makes us aware of the urgency, and also the challenge, of establishing generational continuity near the end of the life course. Her awareness of time's limits is rooted in her frequent experience of time as measured by the body, not by the clock. When Vera refers to objective time, she almost always connects it to a corporeal experience, emphasizing her orientation towards time's materiality. For example, the following exchange occurs with Leo when he arrives at her door in the middle of the night:

VERA. [. . .] Are you high?

LEO. What? No.

VERA. Well, it's three o'clock in the morning so I'm just asking. Have you eaten anything in a while? (10)

Vera also foregrounds bodily time in describing her checking-in ritual with her neighbour, Ginny: "But we have an arrangement where she calls me one night and I call her the next, and

that way if one of us turns up our toes it won't take until we start smelling to figure it out" (16). For Vera, the bodily experience of time encompasses gradual physical degeneration, but this exists in tension with her future orientation and temporal thickness, both of which support generational continuity and resist the decline narrative of aging.

In contrast to Vera, the character of Bec is oriented primarily toward external, objective time. She frequently refers to schedules, calendar events, and clocks. In both scene 4 and scene 10 in which she appears, she is anxious about getting to class on time (Herzog 34, 67). The temporal disharmony between Vera and Bec is partly responsible for their difficulty relating to one another. Bec's focus on objective time also puts her at odds with Leo. Conversely, Vera's awareness of bodily time, and its limits, creates a crossroads where she and Leo meet in terms of their temporal experience. Leo understands bodily time as a result of the physical demands of his bike journey across the country. Vera feels the physical challenges of aging and is aware of the nearness of her end-of-life. Both characters have recently experienced the death of friends, and thus have heightened awareness of the present moment and their physical experience within it. Together, their understanding of time as a bodily experience means that they value the present and resist being entrenched in the past. This allows room for them to mutually nurture generational continuity, often through interactions with space and objects as I have previously described.

Vera and Leo, then, meet at the intersection of time's slowness, thickness and materiality. This is evident nowhere more than in the final scene of the play. In scene 10, the two prepare to go to Ginny's funeral, an event which itself foregrounds time's materiality (Herzog 65-71). As Leo appears wearing Joe's suit, we feel the depth of the two characters' shared family history. Leo's willingness to wear the suit, as well as his preparation of a speech for Ginny's funeral, are

evidence that he honours the past and wants to remember it, in order to carry it forward into the future. Although Leo did not know Ginny, he chooses to attend her funeral with Vera instead of finishing his bike trip with Bec; he prioritizes generational continuity. During the scene, we feel objective time encroaching—the funeral start time, Leo’s departure the next day, Bec’s appearance and her usual tight schedule. However, Leo and Vera resist objective time’s pull in order to fully experience the present moment, in slowness, as Vera insists they rehearse Leo’s funeral speech. Leo’s address highlights temporal thickness, by remembering Ginny and spotlighting the value of her long life. As Leo and Vera together decide on an ending for the speech, Leo remarks that Ginny’s apartment was “like a forest” (71). Vera then speaks the final line of the play: “[. . .] That woman could make anything grow” (71). Together these lines link old age to the growth of trees in a forest, giving value to slowness, taking time, investing in activities that are long-term, and the importance of cycles of growth and regrowth. Through their converging temporal experiences of slowness, thickness, and materiality Leo and Vera cultivate continuity across generations. Both take time to attend to each other, listen to each other, learn from each other, and provide support for each other. Their willingness to recall and learn from the past, but also to imagine the future, allows them to share connections across time and space. The play’s duration represents an overlap in their lifelines in which they mutually perform age across generations – together, as a dyad, they represent generations ahead and behind.

## **5.5 Conclusion**

This analysis of *August* and *4000 Miles* highlights how narratives of age, aging, old age, and intergenerational continuity or rupture can be constructed on stage through character interactions with dramatic space, stage properties, and structures of time. In *August*, engagements

with space show Violet to be self-involved, injurious, deceptive, and oppressive in her fight for agency. Likewise, interactions with props overwhelmingly create a narrative of generational rupture in which the older mothers, especially Violet, are constructed as responsible for family dysfunction by possessing destructive objects, selfishly dealing with objects, belittling younger family members for not accepting or for breaking objects, and for instigating violence involving objects. Suspension of objective time and a backward focus prevent Violet from making family connections in the present or planning positively for the future. Her children are unable to escape the cycles of abuse that prevent forward motion in their lives. In addition, temporal dissonance between younger and older characters interrupts generational continuity. The play's youngest adult character, Native American Johnna, models more positive, functional interactions across generations through her engagement with space, props, and time and through acting according to a worldview that stands apart from and is more hopeful than the play's other characters. However, this positive representation of her culture also serves to veil some of the play's negative narratives about aging and old age, particularly with respect to older mothers.

While authors such as Blatanis, Kochman, and Mohler all independently make compelling arguments about how the play challenges master narratives within American culture, such as the valorization of the American Dream and the nuclear family, I maintain that master narratives of aging and old age are not fully exposed or contested in *August*. They are reinforced, often in subtle ways, through interactions with dramatic space and stage properties, and embedded in structures of time. These interactions construct narratives of generational rupture that position the older characters at fault, particularly the older mothers. They also function to yoke aging to a narrative of decline, loss, and lack of agency. The play fails to convincingly expose the American Dream itself as hostile to the process of aging through its insistence on

continual progress as a mark of success, and as inhospitable to generational continuity through its emphasis on individualism. In moments when age narratives are foregrounded, Letts rarely offers us a useful way forward. The message of the play becomes that old people (especially older women) are destructive and should be avoided. The play's title references a poem of the same name by Letts's mentor Howard Starks, which presents a deeply contrasting and much more favourable view of aging, old age, intergenerational relations, and death.<sup>1</sup> However, I contend that this gesture is far too subtle for most audiences to grasp. The force of the narratives presented on stage overwhelms this understated motion toward a different social imaginary of generational continuity and old age.

By contrast, *4000 Miles* uses space, objects, and time to create strikingly divergent narratives about age, aging, old age, and generations. It depicts characters across generations sharing, learning from each other, and mutually caregiving. While Vera's space in part represents her isolation in old age, it is also a source of pride and agency. She uses it to nurture, shelter, and teach. Leo too invests in generational continuity through his interactions with space and landscape. Both Vera and Leo use objects to preserve knowledge and memories across generations, and to resolve conflict. Through their overlapping temporal schemes of slowness, thickness, and materiality Leo and Vera cultivate continuity across generations. Both characters value the past for its history, experiences, and learning opportunities, but also appreciate the present and imagine the future.

The comparison of these two plays highlights how narratives about age, aging, old age and generations can exist beyond explicit dialogue and broad textual themes. Letts's depiction of aging across generations through interactions with space, props, and time in *August* is dominated by the long-familiar cultural tropes linking old age with decline and culpability for generational

rupture. By contrast, the way that Herzog mobilizes dramatic space, stage properties, and dramaturgical time structures in *4000 Miles* resists the decline narrative, especially the tendency to blame older female characters for family discord and dysfunction. It offers a narrative of generational continuity that links female old age to reciprocal learning, caregiving, and open-mindedness. Critically, the playwright accomplishes this through manipulation of space, props, and time. Reading these plays together affords an opportunity to consider how staged spaces, properties, and time structures can reinforce age stereotypes or transform social imaginaries of aging.

## **Chapter 6: Utopian Performativity and Autobiographical Performance: *Sonic Elder* Offers Hope for Reconfiguring Age Expectations**

While the previous chapter examines how playwrights mobilize aspects of a play's dramaturgy (specifically stage properties, dramatic space, and time structures) to shape narratives of aging, old age and intergenerational relations, this chapter centres on a particular live performance event. While dramaturgical choices remain important, my arguments here focus on the intersubjective experience between audience and performers, and how this interaction can contribute to sculpting age narratives and expectations. I take for my case study the production *Sonic Elder*, a collaborative creation developed and produced by Vancouver's The Chop Theatre. Billed as live autobiographical "onstage documentary," this production featured six lifelong musicians over the age of sixty, all with professional experience playing music. During the show they performed as a rock band and reflected on the role of music in their lives over time. Immediately after the final performance of this show I wrote the following reflection:

At Vancouver's storied 70-year-old Penthouse Nightclub singer Joni Moore, also in her 70's, proclaims "We sure had a good time didn't we? And we're still having a good time!" Today, during the final moments of *Sonic Elder*'s closing performance, the audience bursts into enthusiastic applause, the band starts to play, and members of the crowd rocket to their feet to dance. Soon the room is pulsing to the beat. A pair of women, who look like mother and daughter, laugh and rollick near the stage. The show's director, his wife and two infant children spin joyfully on the far side of the dancing crowd. The music is tight, and the band members seem particularly present. Many of



those who remain seated groove to the rhythm in their chairs. I am struck by a sense of time (in the bodies, in the place, in the music's tempo, rhythm, lyrics)—time dragged from past into present, expressed through bodies and instruments, stretched back and forward across generations, and bonding the musicians together through the glue of unique temporal experience. It feels like today, especially, both audience and band together are sure “having a good time!”

The above impression captures a moment of what Jill Dolan theorizes as the “utopian performative” (*Utopia* 5). For Dolan, such moments involve a deep intersubjectivity between performers and audience members, one that offers an affective rehearsal of what utopia could *feel* like, and in doing so engenders possibilities for emotional, spiritual and/or sociocultural transformation (5-6). The aesthetic impulse guiding the development of *Sonic Elder* was the creation of such moments, especially in order to counterbalance dominant cultural narratives that equate aging and old age with decline and loss. The show also avoided problematic inspirational images of aging that tether successful aging to youthful ideals through virtuosic performances of fitness, sexuality, and fashion.

This chapter allows me to draw together several concepts introduced earlier in this dissertation. Analysing the case of *Sonic Elder*, I revisit concepts of time, age performativity and embodiment, and generational continuity, as well as the relevance of feeling to theatrical experience. I also connect these ideas to theories of autobiography and performance, and Dolan's notion of utopian performativity. Ultimately, I argue that in *Sonic Elder* the autobiographical nature of the performance, the specificity of the venue, and the style of dramaturgy allowed for performances of age that offered moving and hopeful glimpses of how it could *feel* to embrace

more positive, expanded, and non-deterministic age expectations. Through this analysis, I aim to demonstrate the value of Dolan's theory of the utopian performative to age studies. I also propose age as a productive point of intersectional analysis for Dolan's theory.

## 6.1 Methodology

Like others who have sought to understand the utopian performative, in this analysis I have relied on the analytical tools of phenomenology which privilege personal, conscious responses and thick description. Knowles argues that utopian performative moments are recognizable through their "phenomenological *frisson*" ("Documemory" 56), or rather, the "powerful synaesthetic transfer of energies between the audience and the stage" ("Documemory" 61). From this perspective, then, I considered the various live performances of *Sonic Elder*. I first saw *Sonic Elder* at Performance Works for its premiere single performance as part of Club PuSh in the Vancouver PuSh International Performing Arts Festival on 29 January 2015. The Chop Theatre also provided me with archival video of this performance. I attended Vancouver's annual Jessie Richardson Theatre Awards ceremony on 27 June 2016 at the Commodore Ballroom where the *Sonic Elder* band played as the closing act. I also attended three performances during the show's 2016 run at Vancouver's Penthouse Nightclub. These took place on Tuesday, 27 September (opening night, 7pm), Thursday, 29 September (7pm), and Sunday, 2 October (closing matinee, 2pm). While all performances factored into my analysis, most central were the three performances at The Penthouse, as the show's director and the production's dramaturg both considered this version of the show the most complete and fully realized. This was also my opinion having attended all versions of the piece.

Like Dolan, I paid attention to the material conditions surrounding the show that created the potential for its moments of utopian performativity. To this end, I engaged in critical scrutiny of the show's publicity and press by means of examining the following: newspaper and web-news pre-publicity and press releases, ticket sales websites, The Chop Theatre website, PuSh website, PuSh blog site's Club PuSh curatorial statement, newspaper & blog interviews with the artistic management of The Chop Theatre regarding the show, and a live CBC news interview with the artistic directors of The Chop Theatre.

The Chop Theatre also provided me with a written copy of the script which aided me in recalling specific details of the performances. It especially assisted me in analysing rhetorical strategies and devices used within the production, for example those contained in songs. In *Health and the Rhetoric of Medicine* rhetorician and age studies scholar Judy Z. Segal argues that, "Rhetorical criticism identifies the persuasive element in the discourse of health and medicine and asks, "Who is persuading whom of what?" and "What are the means of persuasion?" (2). I am guided by Segal as I analyse rhetorical strategies in *Sonic Elder* (especially those related to health) that contribute to shaping the show's messages about aging and old age.

In order to gain more detail about the material conditions surrounding the show's development and production, and to learn about the phenomenological experience(s) of creating the show, I conducted interviews with key members of *Sonic Elder*'s creation and production team. Specifically, I interviewed the show's director, Christie Watson, the show's dramaturg and the co-artistic director of the Chop Theatre Company, Anita Rochon,<sup>li</sup> and one of the performers, Buff Allen. All performers were invited to participate, but only Allen consented and was able to schedule an interview. These interviews were organized, recorded, and transcribed in accordance

with procedures approved by University of British Columbia's Behavioural Research Ethics Board (certificate number: H16-000429). The letter of initial contact, consent form and sample questions are included in Appendix A of this dissertation (p. 304-7).

## **6.2 Utopian Performativity and Autobiography**

Given its centrality to my argument, it is important to clarify my understanding of Dolan's utopian performativity, especially as it applies to autobiography, and to establish how it pertains to an age studies approach to theatrical analysis. Jill Dolan asks the question "How can performance, in itself, be a utopian gesture?" ("Performance, Utopia" 455). She argues that people are attracted to live performance because it "can move us toward understanding the possibility of something better, can train our imaginations, inspire our dreams and fuel our desires in ways that might lead to incremental cultural change" ("Performance, Utopia" 460). For Dolan, the utopia she seeks takes place, not in the future, but in the now, "in the interstices of present interactions, in glancing moments of possibly better ways to be together as human beings" ("Performance, Utopia" 457). Dolan elucidates utopian performativity in her book, *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theater* by emphasizing its power to elevate audiences emotionally and collectively:

Utopian performatives describe small but profound moments in which performance calls the attention of the audience in a way that lifts everyone slightly above the present, into a hopeful feeling of what the world might be like if every moment of our lives were as emotionally voluminous, generous, aesthetically striking, and intersubjectively intense (5).

In terms of age, then, a gesture of utopian performativity might involve performance that provokes audiences to experience how it could feel to reshape social imaginaries of aging against prevailing ageism. Dolan is not proposing a “real” utopia, or even a theatre that describes such a perfect place (“Performance, Utopia” 459). Rather, she believes that theatre can create flashes of utopia in the present that guide us toward a more just and equitable common future (*Utopia* 13). Dolan argues that theatre’s liveness is what idiosyncratically evokes this type of experience. She writes, “The very present-tenseness of performance lets audiences imagine utopia not as some idea of future perfection that might never arrive, but as brief enactments of the possibilities of a process that starts now, in this moment at the theater” (*Utopia* 17). Live performance creates opportunities for intersubjectivity between performer and audience and amongst audience members. Thus, theatre not only can express utopian ideas through its content, but more importantly, the live performer-audience exchange can inspire “usefully emotional, expressions of what utopia might *feel* like” (“Performance, Utopia” 456; emphasis added) and in doing so “provoke affective rehearsals for revolution” (*Utopia* 7).

Borrowing from David Román, Dolan argues that utopian moments are sparked by instances of critical generosity. Román’s concept of critical generosity describes “a mode of criticism that is neither adversarial nor polemical” (xxvi). It goes beyond critique or qualitative analysis to recognize that “criticism can also be a cooperative endeavor and collaborative engagement with a larger social mission” (xxvi-vii). Dolan suggests that in the performances she analyzes, critical generosity exists in the performers open-heartedly sharing their emotional, physical, intellectual and political perspectives (“Performance, Utopia” 475), and the audience fortifying the performers by responding with interest, knowledge of their work, and devotion to providing it with a “committed cultural context” (“Performance, Utopia” 468). To express this

experience of radical intersubjectivity in a different way, Dolan also draws on the work of anthropologist Victor Turner and his concept of “communitas,” describing it as follows:

[. . .] moments in a theater event or a ritual in which audiences or participants feel themselves become part of the whole in an organic, nearly spiritual way; spectators’ individuality becomes finely attuned to those around them, and a cohesive if fleeting feeling of belonging to the group bathes the audience (*Utopia* 11).

According to Dolan, intense romanticism can set the stage for communitas and utopic illumination since this form of affective address, she argues, “gives us a glimpse of what it means to live at the height of our emotional and experiential capacities” (“Performance, Utopia” 472). Romanticism, says Dolan, “creates moments of magic and communion in performance” (472). She suggests that, amongst expressions of romanticism, utopia may be felt in moments of relief (475). She describes performances of stillness and rest following failure or catastrophe, and wonders if the act of “taking a moment,” in its “exquisite vulnerability” (476), can play a role in upending existing order. Perhaps, Dolan contemplates, “[. . .] performative moments of loss, despair, grieving, absence, might, in fact, herald the new” (476). According to Dolan, then, “Utopian performatives spring from a complex alchemy of form and content, context and location, which take shape in moments of utopia as doings, as process, as never finished gestures toward a potentially better future” (*Utopia* 8). I am interested in how these factors worked together in *Sonic Elder* to create moments of deep intersubjectivity that gestured toward reimagined, non-deterministic age expectations.

Since *Sonic Elder* was autobiographical in nature, I turn to the writing of Knowles who takes up Dolan's ideas and applies them further to the dramatic form of live autobiographical performance; he is especially interested in performed autobiographies of minoritized groups. As of 2016, elders (defined here as those over the age of sixty as per the inclusion criteria for this show) make up 22.9% of Canada's population (Government of Canada "Statistics Canada: Population by Sex and Age Group"). *Sonic Elder* performers, then, belong to a minority group in Canada (although one that is rapidly expanding), and also a group that is marginalized as a consequence of age discrimination. Therefore, Knowles' ideas are fruitful to consider.

What Dolan describes as Turner's "spontaneous communitas" (479), Knowles also calls "phenomenological *frisson*" ("Documemory" 50)—instances that produce "powerful synaesthetic transfer of energies between the audience and the stage" ("Documemory" 61). Knowles believes that communitas and human inter-reliance are deepened because of the *form* of autobiographical performance ("Documemory" 52). Most performed autobiography, he notes, relies on the audience's knowledge that the body they are watching is the same body to which the events portrayed happened ("Documemory" 56). Key to Knowles's argument is Susan Bennett's work on the role of the body in autobiographical performance. Bennett asserts that liveness accentuates the function of the body in performed autobiography. The body therefore exists "along an axis of two orders of signification" (35). First is the signification of identity, or rather the identity(ies) produced by the body's exterior. These may be the identities that the performer claims on behalf of his/her body, or the identities ascribed to the body by virtue of its appearance. For example, an audience may attribute the identity of elder to a performer based on the presence of gray hair and wrinkles regardless of that person's self-perceived age identity.

Bennett's second order of signification she names "the body as archive" or "the literal vessel of a somatic history" (35). This bodily persistence of a somatic history is what Knowles speaks of as "embodied memory" ("Documemory" 56)—the marks or memories of life history that live on in and are (often subconsciously) produced/performed by the body. For example, the shape of a woman's breasts and abdomen, and her subtle ways of moving can often reveal that she has had a child, though this may not be disclosed or may even be denied in the spoken story. According to Bennett "When there is a coincidence between the subject of the autobiographical performance and the body of the performer for that script, then the frenzy of signification produced along the axis has, for audiences, an unusually strong claim to authenticity" (35). The performer's embodied memory and emotion are seen as authentic sources of aesthetic experience and can give rise to the intense, sincere romanticism that Dolan suggests beckons us toward an affective experience of utopia ("Performance, Utopia" 476).

However, Knowles argues that there also can be potential for utopian reconciliation when there is a productive tension between the body of the performer and the script (the autobiographical self as constituted through embodiment versus the self as composed through language). Knowles asserts that embodied memory, habit, and social ritual can be mechanisms of survival in the face of repression ("Documemory" 56). In other words when language is suppressed, the body can preserve certain individual and cultural memories through a performativity that resists spoken content.

Knowles coins the term "documemory" to describe performances whereby "[. . .] the 'marked' (see Phelan)<sup>lii</sup> performing body as archive serves up embodied traces—scars—as documents of both individual and cultural memory [. . .]" ("Documemory" 57). For example, a World War II veteran marches in a Remembrance Day parade; his body still holds engrained



memory of military foot drills and also displays a slight limp from a war injury. The performing body, here, represents both an individual and cultural history, and reveals a story of survival. Knowles is concerned with how “[. . .] the continuities of embodied memory might be understood to replace misrepresentation [. . .]” (“Documemory” 57). He is also interested in what he names “autobiology,” or “performances of the social and cultural assemblage of the body becoming itself” (“Documemory” 57).

Building from Knowles’s arguments concerning how the body becomes itself within and across time, I would like to link his term “autobiology” to Basting’s depth model of aging (*The Stages of Age* 140-46) which I explore in Chapter 2, since any performance of a particular identity, is also, intersectionally, a performance of age identity. To review, according to Basting, when we experience a performance of age in life or on stage, we are not witnessing an enactment of age belonging to an isolated point in time. The performance can also be received as an accumulation of the performer’s former aged-selves and a projection of their future aged-selves, and is linked through time to generations past, present, and still to come. A performance of age in temporal depth, then, can be seen as an accrual of performances of age from across the life course and across generations.

While Basting is suggesting a model of interpretation, I believe the framework can also encompass conscious performances of age and therefore account for intersubjectivity between audience and performers. Drawing on both Knowles and Basting, I propose the concept of age-autobiology. A conscious autobiographical depth performance of age would draw on a performer’s awareness of and search for simultaneous embodied connection between moments across his/her life course. Reception of a performance as one in autobiographical temporal depth might involve seeing the performance as strongly rooted in embodied memory and as an assemblage of

performances of age across time. Autobiographical depth performances of age, then, contribute to the formation of age identities that are not rooted in linear time and are independent of fixed life-stage expectations.

Embodied memory, encompassed by Knowles' concepts of documemory and autobiography, is also intimately linked to place. Deirdre Heddon's work on autobiography and performance is instructive in this sense. Heddon is interested in the interrelation of place and identity. She suggests that places "map or spatialise lives", but also "that mapping simultaneously renders place" (89). A self, she claims, is inseparable from a place (14). According to Heddon "Bodies are [ . . . ] raced and gendered (and differently abled, and variously aged...) and some bodies will find that they are out of place. However, place is as conditional as self and they are intimately related" (14-15). Places, then, generate and activate embodied memory, which helps to define selfhood, and both embodied memory and sense of self work to establish place. According to Heddon "[ . . . ] the 'specificity' of any site is dependent on the specific bodies that inhabit it, and vice versa, since the relationship between identity and place is one of mutual construction" (90). She coins the term *autotopography* to describe "writing place through self (and simultaneously writing self through place)" (91). This concept is particularly relevant to my reading of *Sonic Elder* because the place of performance (the Penthouse Night Club) played an explicit and critical role in the autobiographical age identities staged.

### **6.3 Performance History**

Dolan believes that the place of performance and the other material conditions surrounding particular works are integral to their ability to foster a sense of radical intersubjectivity ("Performance, Utopia" 462). I therefore expound on *Sonic Elder*'s performance

history and development process in order to understand the conditions that ultimately led to its expression of utopian potential in performance. *Sonic Elder* was originally conceived of by Tim Carlson, artistic director of Vancouver's Theatre Conspiracy, the company that commissioned the show for Club PuSh at Vancouver's International PuSh Festival. In his curatorial statement for Club PuSh, where *Sonic Elder* was first staged, Carlson describes the origins of the idea.

In the final few years of his life, I visited my father at an assisted living joint where I'd sometimes find him at an afternoon sing-along in the rec room. I cringed to think what might be on future playlists, where I'm a regular [. . .] but I also wondered about the place of music in these people's lives—they were youth when music was first sold as teen culture—and how they reflect on their experiences as an elder today. (PuSh Festival par. 1)

Carlson commissioned The Chop Theatre to create the show for the 2015 iteration of Club PuSh. Club PuSh is a musical cabaret of experimental performances curated since 2009 by Theatre Conspiracy as part of Vancouver's PuSh International Performing Arts Festival. The Chop Theatre was chosen, in part, due to its history of developing shows with aging themes, such as *Kismet One to One Hundred* and *How to Disappear Completely*.<sup>liii</sup> The company's experience meant that the artistic management was already sensitized to issues of ageism and invested in challenging them. In a CBC television news interview about *Sonic Elder* (22 September 2016), Emelia Symington Fedy, co-artistic director of The Chop, stated that the company is not particularly interested in working with actors, but rather favours developing shows with "real people." Thus, this project fit their mandate and desired way of working.

Watson cast, developed, and directed the show through a process aimed at incorporating and showcasing the talents of a group of long-term musicians and conveying their continued and unique value as aging performers. The performers were assembled from current and former professional musicians from across the Lower Mainland. They were a mixed-race group of five men and one woman, aged sixty-two to seventy-six. The particular performers were Billy Butler on guitar, Ron Kosaka on bass guitar, Bill Sample on keyboards (also the band leader), Joni Moore and Harry Walker on vocals, Carlos Joe Costa on drums (first version), and Buff Allen on drums (second version) [see Figure 7]. Rochon served as dramaturg.



**Figure 7: *Sonic Elder* Band, from L to R, Harry Walker, Bill Sample, Joni Moore, Billy Butler, Ron Kosaka, and Buff Allen. Photo by Anita Rochon.**

*Sonic Elder* was first performed at Club PuSh for one night on 29 January 2015 at Performance Works on Granville Island in Vancouver. Rochon described the reception of this first version of the show:

It totally sold out, and the audience was this mix of younger people and peers of the performers in the cast. It was amazing to see the collective draw of those six band members, the friends they had. (Lu par. 3)

Based on this positive response The Chop Theatre applied for and successfully secured funding to develop and produce the show again, this time in association with Holding Space Productions (Watson's production company). The program from this second version of the show lists funding sources as "the British Columbia Arts Council, City of Vancouver Cultural Services, the Vancouver Foundation and the Hamber Foundation" (n.p.). Watson explained in a personal interview that the funding was acquired based on the goals of reaching a different, even more mixed-age audience than the first version, and of self-producing a "community-engaged" show. In a personal conversation Rochon explained that because the company had spent most of its time over the past five years touring nationally and internationally, it now wanted to do a show that spoke particularly to a Vancouver community. This time the production ran for six days, from Tuesday, 27 September to Sunday, 2 October 2016 at The Penthouse Night Club located on Seymour St. in downtown Vancouver.

The Penthouse version of *Sonic Elder* was The Chop Theatre's first entirely self-produced show. Previously they had made it a priority to be presented by other organizations such as theatre festivals in order to focus their attention on play creation rather than on

producing. However, Rochon noted that they chose to produce *Sonic Elder* themselves because “We began to feel like there is a lot of artistry and impact to be found in creating the event around it [a show]” (personal interview). The fact that the company, whose artistic management is made up of individuals under the age of forty, chose *Sonic Elder*—a show that challenged age expectations—as their first entirely self-produced show, was a factor in the moments of utopian performativity that it generated.

## **6.4 The Creation and Development Process**

As Dolan describes, moments of utopian performativity need not be restricted to performances but may take place as part of the rehearsal and development process (“Performance, Utopia” 458). The roots of the utopian performativity evident in *Sonic Elder*’s stagings can be found in some surprising choices made during the play’s development. To begin, The Chop Theatre was committed to sharing the musicians’ autobiographical details and involved them as co-creators of the show. While the power to make artistic choices was uneven across the artistic team with Watson and Rochon holding ultimate decision-making power, each of the musicians had control over what they chose to disclose about their lives and what music they felt comfortable performing. The development process for *Sonic Elder* was an important component in forming the ultimately utopian gestures of the final production.

### **6.4.1 Casting**

To cast the show, director Watson found performers by word of mouth. He tracked down leads and met with potential musicians. In a personal interview he described how he came across Walker, Kosaka and Moore:

[ . . . ] I got a tip on this guy, on Harry Walker. And at the time Café Roma on the Drive was doing these open mike soul blues things. And so I went there, [ . . . ] and I waited and then saw Harry sing. [ . . . ] So he introduced me to Ron who was an old friend of Harry's. Ron and I sat down and Ron seemed interested in it. And then Ron introduced me to Joni. He hadn't seen Joni in years and years and years. And so then I talked to Joni.

These three performers, as well as Billy Butler, were all involved from the outset of the project through to the show's final run at the Penthouse. There were several personnel changes during the course of the show's development which were made based on both performer availability and artistic choices. The original band leader, Henry Young, left and was replaced by Bill Sample before the original PuSh version opened. Carlos Joe Costa was the band's drummer in the PuSh version; in the Penthouse run Buff Allen took over this role. The PuSh version also featured a young woman named Caitlin McCarthy, who was also the production's associate producer. She hosted a question-and-answer segment of the show during which she asked the musicians impromptu questions and then she opened the floor for the audience to ask questions. The original intent was for this segment to add an intergenerational element to the show. However, this content was eliminated in the Penthouse version as the artistic team felt that it did not work well. Instead of showcasing intergenerationality, the segment had the effect of highlighting youth/age binaries. It also failed to access interesting life stories, and it slowed the pace of the show (Watson, personal interview). Content changes from the original to the final version, to some degree, reflected changes in casting. Carlos Joe Costa and Buff Allen are both unique personalities with original histories, so the stories included in the show, and consequently some of its focus, shifted as a result of this casting change. For example, Costa spoke about the 1960's

American civil rights movement, while Allen shared his experience with new learning as a senior musician. Further, Bill Sample's late addition to the Club PuSh version meant that his autobiographical details were more integrated in the Penthouse version.

#### **6.4.2 Dramaturgical Approach**

*Sonic Elder* was created through a series of interactive theatre development activities, personal interviews with performers, review of the singers' musical repertoire, dramaturgical work on structure, storyline, style and timing, experimentation with content, and lots of repetition in rehearsal. In the first version, all of these activities were headed by Watson; in the second version Rochon joined him as the show's dramaturg. Both Watson and Rochon noted in personal interviews that, since the performers were not experienced actors and had not before been involved in creating a theatre piece, it was a process of trial and error to find the right approach. This involved educating the participants about what kind of information was valuable and interesting beyond factual information about the music. Rochon describes the approach:

There was a process of discovery over what kind of information was actually interesting, that they were telling us. So that was a give and take, in Christie figuring out what kinds of questions would be the most evocative and might yield interesting results and the artists involved understanding that we weren't looking for information that was just going to help us assemble a music review.



The process also involved Rochon and Watson letting go of preconceived ideas about content that did not emerge organically from the performers' experiences or fit within their comfort zones. Watson described this:

I think Anita and I had kind of imaginings of this time [the second iteration of *Sonic Elder*] [. . . but] it was a show about them ultimately, so it didn't, it was not, I didn't feel, a good use of my energy to keep trying to make this idea of something that I had, it was you know, okay you are the people in the room. We'll make the show that we make with you.

As a result, the process allowed the performers a large degree of input into the content from the outset, and, most importantly, complete freedom to withdraw content if they felt uncomfortable. Watson noted "whereas in another situation I might go into a conversation with somebody about [whether sensitive content could be included], with this group a 'no' is a flat out no" (personal interview). Performer Buff Allen, in a personal interview, expressed his comfort with the process and noted Rochon's and Watson's respectful approach:

Well they tried things out. Some things worked better than others. They'd change it. [. . .] Sometimes one of us would have a request, if they interpreted our words differently, or maybe that it might be a little uncomfortable we asked if that could be changed. [. . .] Things like that! [. . .] So they just, they kept revising it as they went. [. . .] They'd see how we did with it and how we felt with it. And they'd revise it. And they even said we could improvise a little within the boundaries which was great.

Watson's and Rochon's desire to represent the performers respectfully meant that the creation process involved developing a style of dramaturgy and performance that highlighted and honoured all performers' talents and made the best use of their stories and skills. The resulting dramaturgy, I call *dramaturgy of assistance*.<sup>liv</sup> I will describe this approach further in the ensuing analysis of utopian performativity.

The final version of *Sonic Elder* was about one hour and twenty minutes in length. Rochon, in an interview with *the Daily Hive*, described the show as “not a musical review and it's not a play . . . it's these incredible individuals talking about their experiences and about how music has shaped their lives” (Lu par. 4). *Sonic Elder* incorporated a mixture of scripted dialogue, monologues, improvised banter, and live music ranging from skiffle, old R&B, and show tunes, to torch songs, early rock, and 1960's protest songs. The performances of shared life- and musical-history were unique, autobiographical, and particular to the musicians' performing bodies.

### 6.4.3 The Venues

Choice of venue is integral to a show's overall aesthetic, including how it organizes its audience. In autobiographical performance, particularly, the function of place in defining self and self in defining place is significant (Heddon 91). In the case of *Sonic Elder*, the venue change from the first to the second version of the show had a profound impact on the audience's phenomenological experience of the performance.

The Club PuSh venue at Performance Works on Granville Island was a popular setting for new works and experimental theatre but was less personal to the performers involved. This wheelchair accessible building hosts many annual events such as the PuSh Festival, Vancouver

Fringe Festival, Vancouver International Children's Festival, Vancouver International Jazz Festival, Vancouver Writers Festival, and Vancouver International Puppet Festival. It can also be rented by independent theatre companies and other organizations. On the night of the *Sonic Elder* performance, this "multifunctional flexible black box theatre space" (Performance Works par. 1) situated the back and sides of the house with tabled cabaret seating; the centre had rows of seats. Between the rows and the side tables was a fairly wide aisle which invited dancing later in the show. The stage ran across the front, raised slightly. At the back of the theatre was a bar. The venue supported the review-type nature of the show. The audience was enthusiastic, and, based on applause, a certain percentage seemed familiar with the performers. However, the impermanency of the spatial configuration, and the fact that few of the performers previously had played at this venue meant that the performers lacked the personal connection to the place that was so affecting in the second venue.

The Penthouse Night Club, used for the second version of *Sonic Elder*, is the last remaining of the original Vancouver nightclubs where all the *Sonic Elder* performers got their start. Before canned music, these nightclubs used to hire live bands to play music for the strippers. Younger musicians would play the graveyard shifts (for example 1am to 5am), while better-known musicians would play the evenings. The practice allowed young musicians to gain experience while making a living at the same time. Most of the *Sonic Elder* band members had played at The Penthouse, some worked there on a regular basis for years. The current Penthouse is not only the last of the original nightclubs, but it remains largely unchanged from its early days. It is still owned by the Filippone family who opened it in 1947 (Sonic Elder Artistic Team 6). The venue holds an audience of approximately 90 people, and consists of cabaret seating with tables and chairs, and has booths to one side. A raised stage backed by a red velvet curtain is

situated in front of the seating area with a runway into the audience [See Figure 8]. Mounted from the ceiling, to either side of the stage, are television screens that can project images. Down a few steps running almost the length of the venue opposite the side with booths, is a bar and a floor area that can be used for dancing. During performances the bar was open, and table service was also provided. A double flight of stairs leads in through the main entrance of the club; this fact was highlighted for me when a number of audience members with canes and walkers attended the final matinee performance of the show and required assistance getting in and out of the building. A side entrance with fewer stairs can be used to enter the club, and a ramped



**Figure 8: *Sonic Elder* Performers on the Penthouse Stage. Photo by Tom Kosaka.**

entrance is accessible from the back alley and leads in through the backstage area. In the main entrance-way images of exotic dancers stand out, but inside the walls are hung with signed black and white photos of well-known performers who had played there. For example, there are photos of Louis Armstrong, Nat King Cole Trio, Ray ‘Sugar’ Robinson, Sammy Davis, George Liberace, and Carmen Miranda [See Figure 9]. This, along with the dim lighting, gives the venue a nostalgic feel.

For this particular event the Chop Theatre created a lobby display with information about the show, as well as biographies and both past and current photographs of the performers [See Figures 10 and 11]. Rochon noted that the company hired a photographer, Jimmy Jeong, to take photos with “personality and style,” but that were not conventionally glamorous, because they wanted to represent the uniqueness of the musicians. Placing these photos in the box office area of the lobby along with the performers’ biographies was key to situating the performers as



**Figure 9: Photos of Famous Performers Line the Penthouse Walls. Photo by Julia Henderson.**





part of the place. They helped form the audience's initial impression when entering the lobby, and the performers' identities were involved in shaping our understanding of the venue. The photographs were like a prelude to the images of famous performers we encountered further inside, and this helped position the performers as belonging to a particular generation, and as integral to the Penthouse's history.

Inside, the Chop Theatre had customized the performance space by adding its own lighting, removing the stripper pole from the stage runway, and covering the floor where the pole inserted with a round rug for both safety and aesthetic reasons. Photographs of the band members from various points in their careers were projected onto screens hung from the ceiling on either side of the stage. The stage itself was set with instruments: a *Sonic Elder* sign decorated the drum kit upstage centre [See Figure 12]. Alongside the instruments, the stage contained a variety of simple chairs. Watson, explained in an interview that the chairs were all different and chosen to suit each performer's personality, style, and performance needs. For example, Moore's centrally located chair was slightly more delicate than the others and low enough that, with her small stature, her feet easily reached the ground, while Butler's chair was a high stool with a back that better facilitated his guitar playing and allowed him to be seen behind Moore. The Chop also brought its own sound system to amplify and maximize the sound quality of the music played. The simplicity of the set meant that it harmonized with the style of the night club, further contributing to the sense that the performers and the venue belonged to and shaped each other. As I hope to demonstrate, this sense of belonging ultimately contributed to the feelings of utopian potential that the show generated.



**Figure 12: *Sonic Elder* Stage. Photo by Anita Rochon.**

## **6.5 *Sonic Elder*'s Utopian Performativity**

My analysis of *Sonic Elder*'s utopian performativity focuses on the three performances of *Sonic Elder* that I attended during the Penthouse run of the show in 2016. As a whole, this iteration went into more autobiographical depth than the earlier version of the show, and also more directly addressed issues of aging, old age, and ageism. There were many moments in this performance that were funny, moving, instructional, and poignant. I have chosen to focus on three remarkable instances that I believe engendered a sense of deep intersubjectivity demonstrative of both Turner's *communitas*, and Dolan's utopian performativity. These moments seemed to create a fleeting feeling of what it might be like to shift social imaginaries to be more affirming and supportive of aging and old age.



### 6.5.1 The First Moment – Temporal Depth, Body as Archive, Rhetoric of Lyrics

In this production instances of utopian performativity often formed through an accrual of previous moments. The first occurrence, I argue, took place during the opening scene of the show and hinged on a combined effect of the audience's first encounter with the embodied presence of the actors, in conjunction with the repeated lyrics of the first song, and certain personally revealing elements of the spoken script. In this case it was the accretion of these factors throughout the scene that led to the experience of utopian intersubjectivity I will now describe.

After band leader Bill Sample on keyboard, accompanied by Buff Allen on drums, acknowledged the traditional, ancestral, unceded First Nations' lands on which they performed,<sup>lv</sup> the rest of the *Sonic Elder* band entered. Joni Moore, Harry Walker, Billy Butler and Ron Kosaka entered from behind the upstage curtain to join Sample and Allen. As noted above, the audience already had seen photographs of band members performing music in their younger years projected on screens to either side of the stage during the pre-show. Now they encountered the live performing bodies for the first time on the central stage. The musicians all entered with energy, charisma and purpose. They all appeared present and vital—a feeling enhanced by the juxtaposition of their live older bodies with the photographic stills of their younger days. Whereas the black and white pre-show images depicted the performers in different periods of retro dress, their current style was contemporary, individual, and classy. Director Watson described the costuming style as a mix of vintage, contemporary, and “post moderny hodge-podge” (personal interview). He noted that they tried to do versions of how the performers normally dressed “but heightened and more stagey.” The result was that the musicians seemed comfortable, fashionable, and individual. The band took up their instruments and began their first

song, “Gimme Some Lovin’” (Winwood). As the instrumentalists played a tight and energetic accompaniment, singers Moore and Walker belted out the notable repeated chorus lyrics:

I'm so glad we made it, I'm so glad we made it  
Gimme some lovin' (gimme some lovin')  
Gimme some lovin' (gimme gimme some lovin')  
Gimme some lovin' every day

Although I learned in interviews with Allen and Watson that Moore was hesitant to sing this song, not feeling that it was her style, her lead vocals gave no indication of this. At each performance I was surprised by this first introduction to her rich, full rock voice with its power and flexibility. The lyrics she delivered, backed up by Walker and the other band members, suggested a journey in and across time through the line “we made it”—a journey that in retrospect the “we” of the song claims to have been worth taking (“*so glad* we made it”). The performance of the lyrics also suggested a journey that continued. Moore, at times, added the word “now” at the beginning of the repeated “gimme some lovin’” chorus line, emphasizing the present moment (“*Now*, gimme some lovin’”). The inclusion of the lyric “every day” at the end of the line’s last repeat, suggested that the journey also would continue into the future, day by day.

To reinforce the idea of a journey through time, Moore’s first line following the song was “Good evening everybody! We’re so glad you made it. And we’re glad we made it too!” This offered a foundation for intersubjective understanding that built throughout the scene. With this line Moore, on behalf of the band, acknowledged the audience members’ shared experience not

only of their journey to the theatre that day, but also of their journey through life to that point in time. This rhetorical framing suggested that aging is a *mutual* experience of travelling in and across time—past, present and future. This acknowledgement of collective experience reinforced Dolan’s belief that “[. . .] live performance provides a place where people come together, embodied and passionate to share experiences of meaning making and imagination that can describe or capture fleeting imitations of a better world” (*Utopia 2*). It grounded the lyrics of the song in shared experience so that when the song reprised later, it inspired *communitas*.

Following Moore’s welcoming line, the band members introduced each other, offering a few particulars of each of their lives, both past and present. For example, Moore introduced Butler: “I’d like to introduce, on guitar and vocals, a man who moved to Canada from London, England in 1972. He lives in a co-op on Commercial Drive and recently celebrated the birth of his first great grandchild, Gavin. Ladies and gentlemen, the dashing Billy Butler!” Cheers of recognition from the audience confirmed that many knew or knew of these performers.

Although the lobby display suggested the performance was an “on-stage documentary” and hinted that the performer’s personal experiences were incorporated, it was in this moment that audience members became aware experientially (or became certain) that the performance was autobiographical, and that the bodies on stage were the actual bodies that had experienced the events described— the real bodies that had “made it” and continued to demonstrate “making it” by persisting and thriving before us. Exhibiting Bennett’s “body as archive” (35), these bodies told a story of endurance through time. Their challenge to the decline narrative was profound. The rhetorical construction of the song’s lyrics which enfolded notions of a past, present, and future journey through the life course (a journey being a performative act), *in conjunction* with the projected images, enhanced the cast’s embodiment of depth performances of age.

The effect of Marvin Carlson's theatrical ghosting here was also particularly strong and contributed to reception of these performances of age as existing in temporal depth similar to the way I theorize in Chapter 4. In this case, the audience had just seen projected photographs of the performers at younger ages. Since they had appeared so recently, these images were strongly ghosted in the live performing bodies and layered onto present performances of self. In addition, for many audience members who were contemporaries of the performers, the projections enhanced the flood of personal memories of these musicians, and these memories were also now ghosted in the current live performances. As per Bennett, the live performing bodies were already scripted by their somatic and performative history prior to their current subject matter (35). The performance of future selves is more challenging to perceive as individuals do not possess embodied memory of the future. However, I agree with Basting who claims that a "rough sketch" of future selves is enough (*The Stages of Age* 141). She writes, "The important thing is not to polish the details, but to acknowledge the almost certain (barring tragedy) links between youth, adulthood, old age, and all categories in between" (141). Here, the song's repeated lyric "every day" allowed the audience to glimpse an image of the performers' future selves in the present through picturing a journey that would continue day by day. This layering of past, present and future can be thought of in terms of Elizabeth Grosz's discussion of duration, which she describes as follows:

. . . duration entails an open future, it involves the fracturing and opening up of the past and the present to what is virtual in them, to what in them differs from the actual, to what in them can bring forth the new. This unbecoming is the very motor of becoming, making the past and present not given but fundamentally ever-altering, virtual. (4-5)<sup>vi</sup>

Ghosting helped to locate the performers in duration and thus opened up possibilities of future selves.

It is possible that ghosting had one other effect in challenging age stereotypes here. Lipscomb contends that when a younger role-type is ghosted in the performance of an older actor, the incongruity between the performing body and the age stereotypes associated with that role “creates space for commentary on the nature of the aging self and the ageism associated with those expectations” (*Performing Age in M.D.* 177). It is possible that to an extent the disjuncture between the performing bodies of *Sonic Elder* and traditional visions of “the rock musician” (i.e. someone young and rebellious) made room for subversion of stereotypes and challenged decline. However, the show highlighted the persistence of these particular musicians across their life courses, and did not capitalize on rock stereotypes, which themselves are changing as many famous rock musicians continue to perform past midlife.<sup>lvii</sup> Therefore, while the ghosting of a young rock star archetype in the older bodies to some degree may have provoked productive tension in this show, I believe it was less of a factor in shaping the audience’s reception than the other ghosting effects that I have described. Instead, because these performers were performing themselves rather than taking on a recognizably separate character, the performance highlighted a continuity of self by ghosting the performers’ former selves at various ages. In summary, elements of the *Sonic Elder* script, the bodily archives of these performers, and the ghosted memories they evoked, aligned in a manner that resulted in a significant disruption to the narrative of decline, and that further laid the groundwork for utopian potential.

In contrast to my discussion in Chapter 3 of Simon Webb’s performance of temporal depth when playing King Lear, in this case the bodies on stage had the added authority of being

the actual bodies to which the events described had happened. As the musicians introduced each other with details of their lives (both past and present), they began to establish not only their own individual age identities, but also a group age identity as Vancouver musicians of a particular era, as well as a generational identity—a generation that “made it” by surviving the after-effects of WWII, the Vietnam war, the Cold War, challenges to civil rights, 1960’s cultural revolution, and various economic recessions. This survival or continuation was evidenced in the bodies on stage as Ron Kosaka went on to deliver a humorous account of the group’s combined health, relationship, and performing experiences:

So between the six of us we’ve:

Played 34,500 shows,

Been married 12 times,

Have 20 kids,

Have smoked 107 pounds of weed...

We’ve got Shingles, Bell’s palsy, gout, mumps, ecoli, broken ribs, a torn ACL, pleurisy,

skin cancer, prostate cancer, failing memory, insomnia, diabetes, failing memory....

...We are 427 years old....

...and tonight we’re gonna ROCK you! (*Sonic Elder* Artistic Team 3)

The choice to reveal these details as an aggregated story contributed to establishing the group's identity; the performers shared being musicians, partners, parents, non-conformists, and survivors. The numerical magnitude of the experiences commanded respect. Especially layered with the performers' live presence, this text solidified their group identity as people who have endured challenges (especially to their health) and continued to engage in and enjoy music and share it with audiences. It also positioned them as part of a group that is gaining an increased cultural presence as it ages into the future. As a result, when the band reprised "Gimme Some Lovin'," the words were particularly poignant.

This time as Moore sang "I'm so glad we made it, Gimme some lovin'," and the other band members repeated these lines as backup vocals, I felt a deep connection with the musicians. Their performances of age and self spanned past, present, and future, and their strong claim to authenticity, by virtue of being the actual bodies to which events described happened, meant that they produced a moment of what Knowles calls "phenomenological *frisson*" ("Documemory" 50), or heightened intersubjective experience between audience and stage. I was flooded with gratitude and respect for the musical offerings these musicians had given over time, with joy in the moment of experiencing the music, and with hope that a different theatre of age was being proposed through this performance. I felt an exceptional desire to give them "some lovin'" in the form of engaging with the performance from the perspective of Román's critical generosity, or a willingness to meet their work with collaborative, cooperative engagement (Román xxvi-vii) and provide it with a cultural context committed to changing age relations. It felt like a moment of promise in which group perspectives toward age could be envisioned anew. In this sense, this reprise of "Gimme Some Lovin'" evoked Dolan's utopian performativity for me—a glimpse of a

changed future. The strength of the applause and overall audience engagement following this number suggested that the rest of the audience felt it too.

### **6.5.2 The Second Moment – Embodied and Relational Identities, and Dramaturgy of Assistance**

The next striking moment that prompted intersubjective utopian potential did so by virtue of its accentuation of both relational and embodied selfhoods. Relational selfhood refers to the self that is “formed through interaction with others” (Basting “God Is” 79). Embodied selfhood is a perspective of self that “foregrounds pre-reflective ways of being-in-the-world” and “stresses the active and acted upon nature of the body” (Kontos and Martin 291). These constructs were both emphasized by and central to the show’s dramaturgy that converged during a particular musical number,<sup>lviii</sup> and that were key to the moment’s potency. I use the term *dramaturgy of assistance* to describe *Sonic Elder*’s dramaturgy and I define this term as follows: *dramaturgy of assistance* is a dramaturgical approach designed to involve and support performers with varying degrees of age-related memory loss, including more severe memory loss. In a variety of ways, the approach’s dramaturgical techniques facilitate performers’ recall of musical and spoken content and physical blocking and allow for participation that does not require memorization or only rely on recall of fixed reminiscences. It allows for malleable and creative memories to emerge. The dramaturgy particularly capitalizes on performers’ embodied and relational selfhoods. Director Watson described the choice of this approach in an interview:

They all agreed on a degree of memory loss [. . .] it was an issue that wasn’t going to go away. It was pretty much the night before [the first version of] the show, a mentor of



mine called Nadia Ross who has a company called STO Union, [. . .] said “make it a feature of the show”, [. . .] like it’s the thing that everybody’s thinking about, it’s the thing that everyone is scared of, and how terrifying it is to stand there and not know where you are or what you’re supposed to say, or maybe who you are or where you are. So that was a good shift for me, because I was still in the space of like okay, well I have to, I have to make them appear to, I have—, [. . .] actually that’s okay, that sort of, that *is* the show. That is where they’re at. And so I went in the next day and that was really all I talked to them about. I didn’t give them any notes about anything really, just said, you know, it’s really okay when you don’t remember. It’s really, we’re fine as an audience when you don’t remember. And if you don’t remember you can say “I don’t remember”, you can ask your friends on stage to help you out. And that’s, that’s going to be our big strength, so how do we use- the thing that kept coming to me through the whole process- like how do we use it, this, as an asset.

The way that *Sonic Elder* made memory loss an asset was to make visible the performers’ shared supportive memory strategies, and in so doing, emphasize their relational and embodied selfhoods.

According to Basting, people with significant memory impairment are extreme examples of selves that are relational (“God Is” 79). Heddon describes the relational self: “The ‘self’ [is] not only a historical and cultural construct but is imbued with, and indeed is inseparable from, others. [. . .] Our actions and experiences are never isolated; our stories are intertwined” (124). If a person with significant memory impairment writes a traditional autobiography, elaborates Basting, she may borrow the autobiographical form to strengthen a sense of self, but will often

end up masking the intensity of caregiver relationships and obscuring the relational quality of selfhood, in order to tell a coherent narrative (“God Is” 79). *Sonic Elder* consciously employed techniques that made use of and thus foregrounded, rather than masked, relational selfhood.

First, the show highlighted memory loss as a group experience by making it a running joke in the opening segment’s description of collective ailments (“We’ve got [. . .] failing memory, insomnia, diabetes, failing memory”). The degree of memory loss amongst cast members varied. Presenting the experience in this shared way added levity and meant that no individual was othered. Next, Watson cast the show mostly with individuals who were previously friends and/or colleagues. Kosaka, Moore, and Walker had known each other since high school (over 40 years) and played together many times. Allen and Sample had also worked together for many years. Butler had less shared personal history with the other cast members but had participated in the two-year period of the show’s development with all cast members except Allen (who joined the cast for the Penthouse version). As previously discussed, all the performers shared a generational history and an identity as Vancouver musicians of a particular era. Having mutual history meant that the performers could support each other’s memories in the telling of events and experiences.

The script was structured to include improvised sections, as well as scripted lines, that revealed the performers’ inter-relations through banter in a spontaneous way. For example, in an early scene all band members recalled the names of clubs in Vancouver where they used to perform. The script states “*The rest of the group contributes venue names . . . This section is ‘popcorn style’*” (6). Popcorn style refers to performers improvising brief contributions as they come to mind with no predetermined order as to who speaks. In other sections, performers prompted each other to reveal or expand on memories by asking questions or making comments

(often based on their own memories). The musicians performed with scripts which not only eliminated the need for memorization, but also allowed them to see each other's parts and to assist if someone got lost or diverged from the script.

The show's style allowed for performers to acknowledge if they were lost or missed a line and ask for help. The script also avoided a linear narrative and instead jumped around in time and memory (or even future imaginings), so memory 'blips' or non-preplanned topic transitions were not out of place. Performatively, the cast members appeared comfortable with this and often laughed if they made a mistake. One of my notes recorded while watching the first performance read, "They have obviously decided on strategies to cue each other should they miss cues or lose lines, but it is okay because they don't get flustered, they are easy with themselves." One of the primary scripted techniques for eliciting content was for one performer to ask another a direct question. The shared and seemingly taken-for-grantedness of age-related memory loss in this performance possibly could be construed as simply conceding to a narrative of its inevitability. However, the show was careful to construct memories as variable, memory-loss as not always permanent, and selfhood as established through means beyond conscious memory. As such, age-related memory loss was divorced from a sense of shame and social disenfranchisement.

While the strategies benefitted all group members, it was evident in each of the Penthouse shows that the memory scaffolds were established to assist one performer in particular, who I will name "Performer A." The strategies enriched the sense of *communitas* between performers and, as I will demonstrate, highlighted Performer A's deep, valued and unwavering musical ability. The dramaturgy provided this performer with both content and blocking cues. Watson describes the ethic of this dramaturgical approach: "he becomes the star

of the show through his lack of ability to [. . .] remember or be present all the time [. . .] We're not hiding him at all, we're not hiding that idea at all" (personal interview).

One important memory cue was that another performer would usually introduce a song and its performers; for Performer A it aided him to know his role in each piece of music. Often in spoken segments one of the other performers would ask a question to prompt his response; usually this would draw on their shared experience so that the other performers could continue to support improvisationally in the telling of the story, demonstrating the relational qualities of their selfhoods. The written script also made clear that in most cases any response this performer gave was desirable (his "lines" were recorded as "(*Performer A improvises answer*)" or "PERFORMER A: (*answers*)"). In performance his responses varied considerably from one day to the next, but in each case, they emerged from his demonstrably valuable artistry and humour. This valuing of "answers born of creativity," is a technique Basting promotes when working with people with memory loss through her extensive and innovative *TimeSlips* project ("God Is" 89).<sup>lix</sup> In terms of autobiography, then, *Sonic Elder*'s creators' willingness to acknowledge that even personal stories/memories are not fixed and are, in fact, constructions of a particular moment in time and relational telling of the story, had utopian potential.

*Sonic Elder*'s dramaturgy also capitalized on what Pia Kontos has described as the embodied selfhood of the performers. Kontos, an age theorist, health researcher, and dementia expert, extends a theory of identity that "captures the ways in which selfhood is embodied and reproduced nondiscursively through our corporeal actions" ("Musical Embodiment" 1). Kontos argues "that selfhood, at the most fundamental level, must be understood as inhering in the existential capacity of the body to engage with the world" (9). Bodily agency, she claims, stems from both primordial (natural, inherent) and sociocultural sources (8). This perspective

understands selfhood as not reliant on cognition, and therefore considers selfhood to persist even in the face of significant memory loss. Spontaneous expressions of musicality demonstrate “corporality as a source of agency” (Kontos and Martin 294), and therefore reveal embodied selfhood.

The resilience of musical expression can thus be understood in terms of embodied know-how and practical sense, that is, a perspectival grasp of the world from ‘the point of view’ of the body [. . .] musical intentionality [. . .] is distinct from the self-transparent activities of a reflexive subject. Musical engagement then is not the function of a cognitive form of consciousness that carries the body to a given space by way of a strategic plan formulated beforehand. It is a bodily form of consciousness, [. . .] the body’s prereflective ability to direct itself toward the world” (Kontos “Musical Embodiment” 11).

The prominence of live music in *Sonic Elder* highlighted the embodied selfhoods of all performers—their deep implicit understanding of musicality and musical form, strengthened by their years of practice with this type of embodiment. For Performer A especially, this element of the dramaturgy of assistance drew on his strengths and facilitated expression of his identity. Watson explained that in choosing the musical numbers for the show, they went through Performer A’s repertoire and picked the numbers that he knew in a deeply embodied way: “[. . .] with Performer A it was like, okay we’re just going to go through all of your music and the numbers that are there, that you lock into right away, those are the choices” (personal interview). This recognition and valuing of Performer A’s (as well as all cast members’) potential for

expression through embodiment, meant that *Sonic Elder*'s creators devised a dramaturgical platform to support what Kontos describes as "coherent and spontaneous expressions of musicality"("Musical Embodiment" 8) independent of conscious, reflective memory.

Returning to Dolan's concept of utopian performativity, it was with the backdrop of having experienced *Sonic Elder*'s dramaturgy of assistance that the audience arrived at the particular moment in *Sonic Elder* when Performer A was featured in a musical number. I contend that the transparency of dramaturgical techniques used in the preceding segments of the show created the conditions for Dolan's utopian potential in this moment. Performer A received both an introductory musical cue and was further supported by a line that let him know it was his turn to be featured. He readied his instrument and proceeded to deliver a beautiful, touching, sensitive rendition of the song. The other band members' connection and mutual reliance in creating the music were highlighted in this moment and demonstrated the relational selfhoods required to perform the music. The segment then continued with musical underscoring as another performer spoke a monologue about enlisting in the navy as a fifteen-year-old, and through this experience discovering skiffle music and learning to play the guitar. When the monologue was over, Performer A reprised his featured musical role when the appropriate musical cue occurred (again showing embodied musicality).

At the end of the number, another band member invited Performer A to sit. As an audience member, I was captivated by this scene. I was delighted by the sensitivity of this moment, by the sense of inter-reliance it conveyed, and flooded with respect and admiration for Performer A's talent. The emphasis on relational and embodied selfhoods was a natural extension of the inter-reliance and relationality required to perform together as a band. In this case, because the dramaturgical strategies were exposed (through repetition and transparency), as

an audience member, I could both recognize them and at the same time *feel* their value through the moving performance Performer A delivered. I believe this moment, enhanced by the emotionally affecting quality of the music, is an example of the deep utopian romanticism that Dolan describes (“Performance, Utopia” 472), prompting intersubjective connection between audience members and performers. It disrupted our profound cultural terror of age-related memory loss and the corresponding belief that aging risks a disappearance of selfhood. Again, the audience’s focused attentiveness during this segment, and their energetic applause at its completion, suggested to me that the intensity of my experience was shared by others.

### **6.5.3 The Third Moment –Nostalgic Romanticism, Autobiology, Autotopography, and Shifting Moral Geography**

The third instance of utopian performativity that I will discuss involved Moore’s delivering a monologue about becoming pregnant at the age of seventeen. It took place within a larger scene that was based on an interplay of rhythmic and personal stories. Watson highlighted this scene as one of his favourite parts of the show: “That as a chunk really worked for me because [ . . . ] there was structure, there was these different characters, there was a running theme, running idea. It built to something that was a twist, right?” (personal interview). I learned through Watson that the scene was based on transformational moments in the performers’ lives that he had uncovered in personal interviews: “Joni’s [Moore’s] particular experience of that [being a parent] was [ . . . ] I think the most defining for her and being a single mother in the 60’s was something interesting” (personal interview). The utopian intersubjectivity of this moment was created through Moore’s autobiographical depth performance of age—a performance enhanced

by scripted reference to and enactment of both her mother and herself as a child, by her own body as archive, and by her generosity in sharing this personal story.

In an earlier scene, Moore had described her first memory as that of her mother singing to her while bathing her in the kitchen sink. As Moore then sang a verse of the song, “My Melancholy Baby” (Burnett and Norton), we could both envision this as a portrayal of her mother and imagine Moore as a young child. Later in the same scene Moore disclosed that her mother started getting her “gigs” when she was about four years old. She introduced one of the songs she used to perform, entreating us to conjure up an image of her as a child: “So picture me, 7 years old, up onstage in front of a big group of people in a long red dress, with a big hat and a cigarette holder.” The invitation to “picture her,” inspired us to envision Moore’s 7-year-old age-self, as well as the young adult self she was performing, layered onto her 70+ year-old age-self as she performed the song “The Oceana Roll” (Denni). Therefore, when we arrived at the scene in the script titled “Changes, Surprises, Upsets & Victories” (20), we were already predisposed to receive Moore’s performance as a depth performance of age spanning both her own life course and across generations. In the “Changes” scene, while Allen played a rhythmic backup beat, (earlier in the scene he had described how the drums set the feel of a moment), Moore delivered the following monologue about her teen pregnancy:

You know, back then a lot of us girls got pregnant when we were young. I was only 17. No one talked about birth control, we just didn't know. My parents wanted me to give her up but no way I was going to do it. They hid me for nine months. I was a single mom, I had to work 6 or 7 nights a week, I worked until 5 in the morning on weekends and did



all the clubs and hotels, like the Penthouse... Music got me through - it paid the bills and I just loved singing. (*Sonic Elder* Artistic Team 20)

Moore's monologue was the first moment in the play to reveal a personal trial. In describing moments of crisis in autobiographical performance, Jenn Stephenson writes the following:

The reiterative performative enactment of personal history brings that crucial problem into the present, inviting a reflection, but also significantly instigating an embodied second experience of crisis. Emerging out of the catalyzing crisis, the 'apple fritter moment' [fictional re-performance of a seminal action] represents the turning point of the autobiographical performative journey, melding the past with the present to open a window into the future. (*Performing Autobiography* 112)

In the case of Moore, then, the choice to reveal and re-perform a life-changing personal crisis from her past inspired a depth performance of aging. In re-performing and re-embodying the past in the present, she evoked a utopian glimpse of a changed future. Her emotional generosity and vulnerability as she shared her story were compelling. Focused in a pool of light, she spoke from a seated position of stillness, looking at individual audience members as she told her truth. Her story seemed rooted in a place of personal struggle, and her voice expressed a gentle, poignant conviction. As she spoke, a hush fell over the audience, and I could sense others leaning forward in their chairs. Moore's presence, openness, and generosity contributed to the moment's intersubjectivity and utopian potential.

The confluence of a number of other factors also sparked the moment's utopian performativity. First, Bennett's notion of the body as archive, in part, explained how Moore achieved this autobiographical depth performance of age. Moore's body that we saw live before us was the "literal vessel" (35) that had carried her child. As such, Moore seemed simultaneously to embody the 17-year-old pregnant girl who had performed here while being hidden by her parents from the rest of the community, the mother who had continued to work in this place to support her child over time, and the now-mature woman who had survived and continued to sing. Her body's evident temporal depth was movingly credible and disrupted a simplistic decline narrative of old age.

Utopian performativity also drew on what Carlson describes as theatrical ghosting, particularly that associated with a "haunted house" (131) such as the Penthouse in *Sonic Elder*. Carlson writes:

[. . .] theatre spaces, like dramatic texts and acting bodies, are deeply involved with the preservation and configuration of cultural memory, and so they also are almost invariably haunted in one way or another, and this haunting of the space of performance makes its own important contribution to the overall reception of the dramatic event (131-32).

We knew of Moore's experience performing at the Penthouse from an earlier scene where she described it as ". . . the place to see and be seen in the Fifties and Sixties." She told us about how she used to sing late-night sets on the very stage where she now stood, joking that she got paid "fifteen bucks and a meatball sandwich." As I watched Moore, many associations I had with the Penthouse of a former era were ghosted in her performance. This was enhanced by photos of her

performing at a younger age that were displayed in the lobby and projected on screens during the pre-show. It helped to create a sense of Moore's personal and generational identity and continuity across time and gave rise to a feeling of *communitas* through the nostalgia it inspired.

According to Heddon, "Nostalgia (like autobiography) is also a means of engendering a coherent and continuous identity as we remind ourselves in the present of who we were in the past" (95). Both Stephen Katz ("Music, Performance, and Generation") and Joseph A. Kotarba address the nostalgic power of rock 'n' roll music and its connection to boomer identity.<sup>lx</sup> Citing the influential 1979 work of Fred Davis in *Yearning for Yesteryear: A Sociology of Nostalgia*, Kotarba argues, along the same lines as Heddon, that "Nostalgic experiences help the individual maintain the sense of continuity in self-identity always threatened by changes occasioned by life-cycle events" (91). Davis defines nostalgia as follows:

The nostalgic feeling is infused with imputations of past beauty, pleasure, joy, satisfaction, goodness, happiness, love, and the like, in sum, any or several of the *positive* affects of being. Nostalgic feeling is almost never infused with those sentiments we commonly think of as negative—for example, unhappiness, frustration, despair, hate, shame, abuse. (14)

These characteristics of nostalgia, I argue, are aligned with utopian imaginings. In terms of musical nostalgia, Kotarba contends that music is a resource that helps us locate ourselves in extended duration (93). A song can freeze a specific moment in time, and a musical style can evoke longing for an era or period of time and "eliminat[e] the need to know actual dates, years, and other precise markers implicit in the idea of a decade" (92). It can also help establish

personal and generational continuity across time. Rock music in particular, Kotarba contends, continues to help boomers “become” themselves across the life course (8-10). Katz elaborates that the *performance* of listening to or playing rock music exceeds the music itself; it can “catalyze generational identities, tastes, narratives, and memories” (“The Greatest Band”). The nostalgic qualities of rock ‘n’ roll, then, are intertwined in identity formation, continued growth, and intergenerational bonding beyond the commercialized culture of rock nostalgia (Katz “Music” 99).

When we consider place in relation to nostalgia, Heddon argues that performing a past place need not be a gesture of return, but rather “[ . . . ] the moving of self to a new place, or even the moving of (past) place to a new place (in time)” (98). Nostalgia can be thought of, then, as “an active ‘resistance’ to the present, rather than simply romanticism of the past” (98). I propose that the resistant nostalgia of both Moore’s monologue and the music framing it were not “simply romanticism of the past.” Rather they were aligned with Dolan’s notion of a romanticism that creates utopian potential through the sense of communion that it arouses in the present (“Performance, Utopia” 472). Through her romantic affecting address, underscored by the rhythm of the drums (reminiscent of a fetal heartbeat, or the singer’s own heartbeat persisting across time), Moore brought forth a nostalgic longing for The Penthouse of a former era. She located it as a place of possibility, opportunity and happiness reminiscent of an era of promise. Preceded at the end of the previous scene by Moore’s rendition of the Beatle’s *Come Together* (Lennon and McCartney) (which according to the show’s director and several audience members was the most original and evocative musical interpretation in the show), here her monologue constructed the Penthouse of the 1950’s as almost heroic in nature, poised at the cutting edge of the cultural revolution through its support of sexual liberation and promotion of rock music. The

audience was compelled to experience a yearning for this transformative time and place. The nostalgic sense of revolutionary space (and the defiant woman who existed within it) was dragged into the present, through the content of the monologue and the music surrounding and underscoring it and served to highlight the resistant possibilities of Moore's current performance of self and place in terms of challenging ageist stereotypes.

Heddon's concept of "autotopography" helps to make sense of how the Penthouse venue generated utopian potential in this moment:

[. . .] autotopography is writing place through self (and simultaneously writing self through place). Autotopography, like autobiography, is a creative act of seeing, interpretation and invention, all of which depend on where you are standing, when and for what purpose. [. . .] This sort of mapping also allows you to 'write' the unknown or unrecognised route. (91)

During Moore's monologue, the audience became aware of how The Penthouse had shaped her identity as a singer and mother over time. Like the many musicians pictured in images on the venue's walls, Moore, across time, has helped to create this place—an enduring Vancouver entertainment venue, and a place that supported the careers of many musicians. She now continued to define this place as a venue that was willingly staging a new theatre of aging, and she was, in turn, defined (in part) by this place as a performer with influence in shifting age expectations.

Heddon suggests that place functions as a moral geography (111). According to Heddon, "Places, like the bodies located in them, are embedded within and produced by historical,

cultural and political vectors” (112). Place demarcates who belongs and who does not. What was utopic, then, in Moore’s monologue was that through her autobiographical depth performance of age, she shifted the moral geography of The Penthouse. The venue was and is a strip club, which has many moral associations, especially for female performers. Moore’s performance in this moment, and the *Sonic Elder* production as a whole, exposed the venue’s role in aiding Moore and many other musicians to get their start. It facilitated their careers and helped shape their identities as Vancouver musicians of a particular era. For Moore, it was key to her independence and made possible her role as a single mother at a time when this was socially stigmatized. It was striking that a venue such as this, often considered morally problematic in terms of the display of female performers’ bodies, provided a place of acceptance and livelihood for Moore. Here she had been valued for her musical talent without censure over her young pregnancy. Moore’s performance in this moment, then, helped construct the Penthouse as a place where notions of morality as related to aging, old age, and age identities were being reshaped. Through her autobiographical depth performance of age, and the function of theatrical ghosting and autotopography, Moore’s monologue not only resisted decline, but created a sense of utopian performativity through the *communitas* engendered by her generosity and nostalgic romanticism. As I watched Moore in this moment, I noticed that I was holding my breath so as not to miss anything. The hush of the crowd told me others were captivated too. This moment of communion, then, was utopic because audience and performer shared a utopian glimpse of moral acceptance in which deterministic age expectations were dispelled.

## 6.6 Obstacles to Utopian Performativity

The transformative possibilities of autobiographical performance are many. Heddon contends that autobiographical performances of personal narratives have the potential to do the following:

[. . .] bring hidden, denied or marginalized experiences into the spotlight, proposing other possible life paths . [. . .] make more complex our historical knowledge or bring the past into the present as a means to inform our futures. [. . .] enable us to imagine different selves [. . .] enable new insights into the relationship between experience and structures of power, between identity and its formation (and reformation) . [. . .] allow a connection between the performer and the spectator, encouraging the formation of a community or prompting discussion, dialogue and debate. (157)

However, Heddon stresses the word “might” here. She is concerned with the ethics of autobiographical performance and suggests that the dangers of such performances include, “problematic essentialising gestures; the construction of limiting identities; the reiteration of normative narratives; the erasure of ‘difference’ and issues of structural inequality ownership, appropriation and exploitation” (157). Despite the transformative promise of *Sonic Elder*, then, there were aspects of the show that stood in contrast to the moments of utopian performativity I have described. These are important to address because they demonstrate the challenges of resisting and reshaping dominant age ideologies.

First, in interviews, Watson, Rochon, and Allen all noted that the performers often did not feel comfortable sharing stories that were extremely personal, especially negative

experiences. As a result, there was bias in favour of the inclusion of positive content in the final production. The performers' choice to exclude negative or dystopic stories meant, then, that the show's sense of hopefulness regarding experiences of aging likely was exaggerated. Because the performers were playing themselves and telling personal narratives, and because the show advertised itself as a "live documentary," to the audience the story seemed authentic and reliable. This was heightened by the fact that the performers were not trained actors. According to Stephenson, in community-engaged performance contexts such as this "performers often exhibit fewer traditionally-recognized performance skills than professionally trained actors and so seem even more actually like themselves than a mimetic representation of themselves, no matter how adept" ("Please Look" 220). In the case of *Sonic Elder*, although the performance generated a strong claim to authenticity, the story, like all performance and all autobiography, was a fiction—a highly selective and partial story. In this case it was one that tended to favour more positive stories of aging and omit negative encounters.

In addition, in order to avoid othering within, the production chose to present certain experiences (e.g. health concerns) as an aggregated group experience. In doing so, the production risked representing a more essentialized and limited set of identities (Heddon 157) than was actually present within the group. Stephenson writes,

. . . the risk [is] of too easily extending the presentation of a single marginalized experience into a generic understanding of all similar persons. [. . .] the potential for this essentializing interpretation is unfortunately heightened in autobiographical performances that feature a collective rather than an individual, where the kaleidoscopic presentation of



individual difference within the group is in competition with the essentializing tendency to perpetuate the sameness of the group as a group. (“Please Look” 219)

The risk here, then, is that *Sonic Elder* universalized its members’ aging experiences in order to establish group identity, to the exclusion of issues such as discrimination, poverty, isolation, frailty and other more extreme or stigmatizing health challenges such as dementia. This concern, however, was partially mediated by aspects of *dramaturgy of assistance* that foregrounded the variability of memories and stories. The effect of universalizing the issue of memory loss, importantly, served to enfranchise and include the performer with more extreme challenges. It highlighted Performer A’s relational selfhood as an interconnected member of this group, and in doing so worked to reduce stigma.

Further troubling the sense of utopian potential were the concealed power relations intrinsic to the show’s creation. Because Watson and Rochon, respectively the show’s director and dramaturg, had much more theatrical experience than the musician/performers, the two took on a greater role in making decisions about and shaping the piece. This meant that the younger generation was in a position of greater power in terms of controlling the process and content of the show. They also completely controlled the show’s casting and publicity. Despite Watson’s and Rochon’s powerful roles in shaping *Sonic Elder*’s narratives, their input was not acknowledged in the script or revealed in performance. As a result, although the musicians’ identities were represented as relational with respect to each other, the role of Watson and Rochon in shaping the representation of the performers’ identities was not transparent. In *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality* Sarah Ahmed writes that “When the reflexive ethnography presents the native informant as equal co-author, it conceals the relations

of force and authorization embedded in the desire to know (more) about strangers” (63).

Expanding on Ahmed in terms of autobiographical performance, Stephenson writes that when the supportive labour of creating a show is invisible it results in an “epistemological unsettling” (“Please Look” 234); we wonder what precisely has been omitted through the unequal creative partnership. In the case of *Sonic Elder*, the invisibility of Watson and Rochon’s roles in shaping the autobiographical narratives meant that the power relations inherent in interactions between artistic management and performers, as well as between younger and older generations, remained opaque.

Another troubling element of this overall progressive show was the persistence, at times, of a residue of ageist values. For example, one of the songs in the show was a hit written by Harry Walker in 1961 titled “Mean Old Woman Blues.” The lyrics of this song repeatedly state “I’ve got a mean old woman,” also calling her a “nasty old heifer.” The lyrics are not only ageist, but profoundly sexist. In performance, Walker revealed that he wrote the song about his grandmother, a surprising twist that highlights a relationship across generations. The fact that the song represents a child’s perspective about an adult authority figure (rather than being the perspective of a man talking about his partner, which was my first impression) helps to temper the misogyny of the song. However, the song still creates a remarkably negative image of female aging. This number was selected because it was a hit and demonstrated Walker’s success as a musician. However, it felt out of place in this otherwise age-positive show.

Sometimes cultural expectations and norms around theatre-going can present dystopian conditions for various marginalized groups including the elderly; I am referring to both performers and audiences here. In the case of *Sonic Elder*, the time of day of performance was relevant. For adults, it is standard in the theatre and music performance industries to play most

often in the evenings. Audiences expect this, and venues tend to be staffed and available primarily for evening performances. In the Penthouse run of *Sonic Elder* the first five shows were at 7pm. The last show was at 2pm. The performers' focus, wittiness, reaction speed, and memory were markedly improved at the earlier 2pm show. The greater proportion of older audience members at the 2pm show was also notable. The theatre convention of evening performance, then, arguably frustrated utopian potential for both the performers and older audience members.

While I have discussed at length the very important role of the Penthouse venue in creating resistant autobiographical depth performances of age, the inaccessibility of the venue, especially considering that many audience members were contemporaries of the musicians, was problematic. I saw several people require assistance getting into the venue due to the stairs, stumble over obstacles in the dimly lit room, and have difficulty accessing the washrooms with a walker. I only saw seemingly able-bodied, and mostly young to middle-aged people access the dance floor. Despite the dystopian leanings of the venue's architecture, the Chop Theatre's artistic team were concerned about access and instituted all measures they could to compensate for the venue's physical barriers. They had ramps on hand in order to let people into the space at the rear of the building. They also listed on the ticket website that access was available and provided Rochon's personal phone number so that patrons could make arrangements prior to the performance. The Chop had a volunteer stationed by the door every performance in case there were any patrons who needed extra help, and volunteers were instructed to show patrons with mobility issues the easier way into the space that had fewer stairs and bypassed the box office set up (Rochon, personal communication). Thus, while the venue challenged the show's utopian

potential, the company took significant measures to try to accommodate patrons' physical needs and compensate for the obstacles of the space.

Finally, Stephenson writes that a recurrent criticism of community-engaged autobiographical performances such as *Sonic Elder*, in which audiences encounter "strangers" with unique experiences, is the suggestion that audiences attend in order to gape:

[. . .] this fabricated meeting that has been specially marketed to sheltered elites is an inferior substitute for real, personal, engaged experience . [. . .] problematically, performance is always enmeshed in the power imbalance of ostention [sic] and the gaze. At best, there is an educational profit in the second-hand exposure to another life; at worst, it is an exploitive freak show, offering a "weird" Other for vicarious, touristic consumption." ("Please Look" 220-21)

In the case of *Sonic Elder*, the "weird Other" is not so much the show's older musicians, but the Penthouse venue and its regular performers. Based on my observations, I would suggest that most audience members did not frequent the Penthouse. While on the one hand, as I have discussed, *Sonic Elder* worked to challenge and reimagine the moral geography of the Penthouse, it is also possible and important to recognize that one aspect of the audience's drive to see the show might have been a touristic curiosity to see the venue in a context more socially acceptable to "sheltered elites." This exploitative impulse stands in contrast to the show's utopian possibility.

## 6.7 Conclusion

As Heddon writes, “[. . .] autobiographical performances are *possible* performances of possibility; even that possibility cannot be taken for granted” (2, emphasis in original). As I consider the moments of utopian performative potential in *Sonic Elder*, I do so cautiously, recognizing the various aspects of the show that act in opposition to this gesture. I take into consideration Stephenson’s assertion that autobiography does not simply produce “socially progressive illumination,” but rather requires us to “admit and bear witness to the impossibility of knowing strangers” (“Please Look” 234). However, Dolan’s utopian performativity is not so much interested in *knowing* the details of another’s life, as in catching a fleeting *feeling* of what transformative change might be like, and in doing so giving us a felt experience of a better future.

In this chapter, I have described only three of the many, varied instances of deep intersubjectivity or phenomenological frisson between *Sonic Elder*’s performers and audience—sample moments that I believe contributed to the production’s overall feeling of utopian performativity. These moments relied on an accrual of factors that built throughout the scene in which each took place. I argue that the utopian possibility of these moments was achieved in part through autobiographical depth performances of age in which elements of the script, staging, set, and performance worked together to create non-essentialist performances of age, rooted in embodied memory, and not yoked to linear time. I also contend that the dramaturgical style of *Sonic Elder*, which I name *dramaturgy of assistance*, contributed to utopian possibilities by capitalizing on relational and embodied selfhoods of the performers, and thereby resisting our cultural fear of age-related memory loss. Finally, I assert that autobiographical depth performances of age were enhanced by Carlson’s theatrical ghosting, and Heddon’s notion of autotopography.

These functioned, along with the nostalgic qualities of rock music, and the performers' generosity, to create a sense of nostalgic romanticism that inspired utopian potential, especially by shifting the moral geography of place.

While certain aspects of *Sonic Elder*'s development and production were essentializing, troubled by structural inequality, and reiterative of dominant age expectations, I argue that the show also offered unique, uncommon, and valuable glimpses of what formulating new, progressive age-affirming social imaginaries might *feel* like. It provided the "complex alchemy of form and content, context and location" (*Utopia* 8) that Dolan believes shapes utopian possibilities in live performance. This consideration of *Sonic Elder* demonstrates the utility of Dolan's theory of utopian performativity to the field of age studies as a unique and productive lens through which to analyze performances of age. It also broadens applications of Dolan's theory in the fields of theatre and performance studies by proposing age as a productive point of intersectional analysis. Again, as in Chapter 3, I cite Hurley to argue that we go to the theatre because feeling matters. She writes, "We attend the theatre to feel *more* [. . .]. We go to experience an expanded, more expressive, and nuanced range of feeling imaginatively and viscerally with the aid of another person or agency" (77). Like Hurley, Dolan believes in the power of feeling. It is my hope that as audience members glimpse moments of utopia related to aging and old age in productions like *Sonic Elder*, they will be inspired to work generously and thoughtfully toward improving future age relations and social conditions.

## Chapter 7: Conclusion

VERA: And I'm old and closed-minded, is that it?

LEO: You're old, but you could choose not to be closed-minded. (Herzog 30)

Our age narratives become our age realities. Certainly, whichever accounts you and I find ourselves living with and seeing the world through make a fundamental difference to the quality of our lives, starting with our willingness or reluctance, at any age, to grow older. (Gullette *Aged by Culture* 11)

Early on in the process of my PhD, as I debated topics for my dissertation, my mother came to visit and help my husband and me with our son. She had been a first-grade teacher, and remained now, as she always had been, imaginative, fun, generous, and really good with children. One night, I watched my son (then still quite small), as he sat on her lap and looked with enchantment into her eyes, exclaiming, “tell me another story Grandma!” My son and my mother have always had a remarkable bond, as I had with my mother’s mother—a continuity across generations. I had been thinking (since I had been reading Gullette), that my mother’s life stories were so much more interesting and valuable than most of the scenarios about aging that I was used to seeing or hearing in various media. So, when my son uttered those words, I thought, yes, he wants to hear *another* story. Of course, I knew he wanted my mom to recount another tale because she is a brilliant storyteller, but it struck me that maybe he also wanted a different, better story about what it means to be old, a story that corresponded with how he, through his unfettered eyes, saw my mother. He had no conception of decline—he saw her as loving, kind,

safe, funny, and a great playmate. In that moment, my mother and my son demonstrated to me why I needed to go searching for other story forms of aging. And so, my dissertation topic was born.

This dissertation has been a critical exploration of how contemporary Canadian professional theatre contributes to constructing what it means to age and be old in our culture. More specifically, it has been a response to Gullette's call for audiences to deliberately "go hunting for other story forms of aging" as a means of conscious cultural intervention against injurious stereotypes and negative narrative tropes regarding aging and old age (*Aged by Culture* 13). It also has been a reaction to Lipscomb's assertion that theatre has lagged behind other branches of the arts and humanities in its critical explorations of aging and old age ("Age in M." 193). Through analysing six plays staged by professional Canadian theatre companies in recent years, I have considered ways in which five of them challenge, influence, and potentially shift problematic cultural narratives about aging and old age. I have been especially attentive to how they redress the pervasive narrative of decline, but I also have been interested in ways that these plays challenge other stereotypes of aging and old age including negative representations of aging female sexuality, the archetype of the bad parent or monstrous mother so frequently blamed for intergenerational discord, and problematic inspirational images of exceptional aging (or more accurately, images of compulsively remaining youth-like).

I also have identified and discussed ways that theatre artists can unwittingly reinforce ageist narratives, even at the same time that they work to dismantle them. Through engaging with major topics of relevance to the field of age studies such as age performativity, embodiment, age-identity, temporalities of aging, aging female sexuality, age-related memory loss, intergenerational relations, and autobiography, this work has sought to identify



dramaturgical and performance strategies and techniques that professional Canadian theatre incorporates to offer new narratives about aging and old age. As such, most of the plays that I have studied demonstrate interventions that work toward shifting Canadian social imaginaries away from repressive, deterministic understandings of aging and old age, and toward more expansive and socially enfranchising meanings. In order to engage in this work, I have pursued the following central research question: In what ways do five Western plays produced professionally in Canada in recent years challenge, complicate, and/or offer alternatives to the simplistic, stereotypical decline story of aging, as well as denaturalize other stereotypes and negative narrative tropes concerning aging and old age, through aspects of their dramaturgy and/or production? Through a combination of close readings of play scripts and performance analyses, as well as review of archival video, critical press, and interviews with the artistic team of one of the plays, I have applied the theoretical perspectives of age studies, as well as theatre and performance studies, to address the above question in terms of four objectives.

My first objective was to articulate some of the primary cultural messages at the intersection of aging, old age, gender, memory, intergenerational relations and other forms of relationality embedded in contemporary drama and theatrical performance with themes explicitly related to aging and old age. To this end, I first examined dramatic examples from across the history of the Western canon that have constructed aging and old age in a negative light, and I discussed the theatrical stereotypes and stock figures that support such representations (for example the *senex iratus* and *senex amans*). In particular, I have shown a variety of ways that the narrative of decline has been realized and still persists in theatrical productions. For example, I have discussed the recurrent disparagement of woman past mid-life who have sexual interests, and the more typical depiction of aging women which limit or erase their sexuality. I also have

explored the recurring stereotype of the angry, obstructive, older parent (and especially the monstrous older mother) and how such characters are often depicted as the root of family dysfunction and generational rupture (for example, Violet in *August*). Finally, I have discussed the cultural terror of age-related memory loss and given examples in which theatre has participated in constructing profound age-related memory loss as both pathology and loss of self. More specifically, I have analysed in depth the play *August* as an example of negative stereotypes and ageist narrative tropes to contrast with the other plays I study. This play denies sexuality and beauty in its older women, constructs them as angry, irrational, critical, obstructive mothers who are responsible for dysfunction and intergenerational rupture. It further yokes aging to physical and mental illness, addiction, and loss of agency.

The primary focus of my study has been to explore the ways in which the chosen contemporary plays and productions resist and reimagine these negative narratives through aspects of their dramaturgy and production. The resultant cultural messages promote more socially and culturally progressive meanings about aging and old age. With the exception of *August*, the plays studied resist decline in a variety of ways. They all depict (to varying degrees) resilience throughout the process of aging. Intergenerational reciprocity and continuity are revealed most strongly in *4000 Miles*, but they are also explored in Honest Fishmonger's *King Lear* through the acting and staging of Lear's and Cordelia's relationship in ways that emphasized their enduring commitment and mutual love across generations. The play *Moo* opens up the possibility of representing aging women as interested and active participants in their own sexual lives, and *4000 Miles* also depicts an elderly woman willingly discussing her sexual experiences. Both *4000 Miles* and *Sonic Elder* link aging and older age to generosity, enduring relationships, engagement with valued activities, and continued learning. In both of these plays

older characters are shown to have future plans and hopes, and to be flexible and open to change. In addition, *Sonic Elder* shows older age as linked to experience and expertise, without employing more typical inspirational images. Continued interest in providing care for others is promoted in *4000 Miles*, *Ten Ways* and *Sonic Elder*. Moreover, aging and older age are associated with an unwavering sense of humour in *Ten Ways*, *4000 Miles*, and *Sonic Elder*. Finally, although varying degrees of age-related memory loss are represented in all plays studied, in *Moo*, *Ten Ways*, *4000 Miles*, and *Sonic Elder* this memory loss is not constructed as pathological. *Moo* and *Ten Ways*, in particular, question the inevitability of age-related memory loss by exploring the role of subjectivity and social environment in understanding decline.

Beyond identifying the primary messages about aging and old age at the heart of these plays, my second objective has been to analyse ways in which theatrical productions illuminate understandings and create meanings of aging and old age through choices related to their direction, design, and marketing. Although I have described many such choices throughout this dissertation, here I highlight and summarize several key examples of how my research has achieved this objective. In Chapter 3, I discussed age-related casting and how it functioned according to reviews of prominent early productions of the play *Moo*. I argued that the relationship between the chronological age of performing bodies and the age of the characters, along with the play's particular dramaturgy which juxtaposed ages (often of the same character), highlighted age performativity and denaturalized the idea of fixed age-stage characteristics. Casting was also key to my Chapter 4 analysis of *King Lear*, in which I argued that the skill and charisma of the particular performers playing Lear (Simon Webb) and Cordelia (Katherine Gauthier) contributed to their ability to portray age in temporal depth. In addition, the acting and staging choices within this production led to performances of age which defied stereotypes.

In Chapter 5, although I did not study specific productions, I explored each play's design requirements, particularly in relation to the spaces and stage properties described in the scripts of *August* and *4000 Miles*. Each playwrights' demands concerning dramatic space and props were key to my analysis of interactions across generations and the ways these contributed to narratives of generational continuity or rupture, and related narratives of aging and old(er) age. I also explored the relevance of the production site in my analysis of age narratives in Chapter 6's *Sonic Elder*. It was a key directorial choice, as well as an important element of the production design and marketing. I argue that the particular choice of venue was integral to constructing progressive representations of aging. The performers' unique and positive age identities were shaped by the venue (Vancouver's Penthouse Nightclub) and their history with it, and the performers also helped to establish The Penthouse as a place that was actively staging a new theatre of aging. The casting of *Sonic Elder* was also central to its ability to capitalize on the performers' relational identities, and thus transform representations of age-related memory loss. The use of sound in this show, specifically the musical choices and performances, generated a sense of nostalgia that was fundamental to achieving the deeply affecting moments within the production.

In addition to analysing aspects of production that helped construct age narratives, my third objective was to demonstrate how a play's dramaturgy can be organized to shift the meaning of aging and old age and thereby challenge negative cultural attitudes and stereotypes about the experience of aging and being old. To this end, in Chapter 3 I focused on Canadian playwright Sally Clark and her plays, *Moo* and *Ten Ways*, each of which stages a central aging female character. I explored how Clark perverts typical Western character and plot construction through the use of achronicity, disruption of rising conflict toward a single climax, intratextual

polyvocality, ambiguous endings, and humour. The resultant dramaturgy worked to resist, and at times reimagine entrenched narratives of aging and old age that link aging to physical and mental decline and limit the expression of aging female sexuality.

Further in Chapter 5, I analyzed the dramaturgy of *August* and *4000 Miles* to reveal how the playwrights marshaled their characters' interactions with dramatic space, stage properties, and structures of time to create narratives of intergenerational continuity or rupture, and how these were implicated in constructing messages about aging and older age. Lett's use of interactions with space, properties, and structures of time in *August* results in narratives of generational rupture that position the older characters at fault, particularly the older mothers. It also yokes aging to decline and loss. By contrast, in *4000 Miles*, Herzog uses interactions with dramatic space, stage properties, and time structures to depict characters across generations sharing, learning from each other, and mutually caregiving. The comparison of the two plays highlights how *August* reifies longstanding ageist stereotypes through these aspects of its dramaturgy, while *4000 Miles* mobilizes the same dramaturgical elements (dramatic space, stage properties, and time structures) in different ways to challenge stereotypes of old age and value the older generation for its knowledge, experience, and actions. This dramaturgical analysis also shows how narratives about aging, old age, and generations can exist beyond textual themes, often in more subtle elements of performance.

In Chapter 6, I analyzed *Sonic Elder's* unique dramaturgical style, which I named *dramaturgy of assistance*. This dramaturgical approach was designed to embrace and support performers with varying degrees of age-related memory loss, including more severe memory loss. In a variety of ways, the dramaturgical techniques facilitated cast members' recall of musical and spoken content and physical blocking and allowed for participation that did not

require memorization or only rely on recall of fixed reminiscences. This dramaturgy, which emphasized the embodied and relational selfhoods of the performers, facilitated participation of one performer with considerable age-related memory loss by highlighting the strength of the performer's relationships and his enduring musical talent. The dramaturgical approach also provided a foundation upon which moments of intersubjective connection or *communitas* amongst audience members and performers were built.

Additionally, in terms of dramaturgy, across the chapters I have been particularly interested in the relationship between dramatic time structures and what they say about age. I have argued that achronicity and chronological jumbling in *Moo*, and a sense of cyclical time in *Ten Ways*, serve to break up linearity and thus interrupt the depiction of age as a steady, inevitable process of decline and loss. With respect to *King Lear*, I have discussed how contemporary productions of this play often interpret it through a chronometric lens and emphasize the steady losses of aging, despite the fact that Shakespeare's time structures focus away from chronometric time, and Shakespeare is not wholly negative toward aging and old age (Charney 11, 32). By applying Basting's performative depth model of aging (*The Stages of Age* 140-146) to a specific production of *King Lear* by Honest Fishmonger's Co-op, I have demonstrated how choices related to staging and acting in this production promoted performances of age in temporal depth in which characters could be seen performing an amalgamation of ages from across the life course and across generations. These performances, in conjunction with Shakespeare's dramatic time structures, served to resist a narrative of pure decline by performatively highlighting connections across the life course, and thus supporting a postmodern poetics of the aging body that still acknowledged time's effects. Similarly, in *Sonic Elder* depth performances of age disrupted decline and also helped to create moments of Dolan's

utopian performativity in which deterministic age expectations were suspended. The dramaturgy of this piece encouraged such depth performances of age by avoiding linearity in its overall structure, including visual images of performers at previous ages, drawing on nostalgia through live musical performance, and incorporating discussions of the past and future.

I have explored time structures in *August* and *4000 Miles* and their relationship to narratives of age and intergenerational relations by employing Wagner's approach which focuses on the unique qualities of time as they function within the theatrical event—specifically temporal dissonance, thickness, and materiality (2). Arguing that *August* interweaves time structures that do not favour generational continuity, I have demonstrated how temporal dissonance between the older and younger generations, as well as the older generation's retrograde focus and avoidance of objective time prevents positive connection across generations and learning in the present. By contrast, I have argued that in *4000 Miles* Vera's bodily experience of time encompasses gradual physical degeneration but exists in tension with her future orientation and temporal thickness, both of which support generational continuity and resist the decline narrative of aging. Vera and Leo meet at the intersection of time's slowness, thickness and materiality, and at this crossroads cultivate generational continuity. Application of Wagner's approach to these plays also demonstrates its usefulness beyond analysing the plays of Shakespeare (which was Wagner's intended purpose for the model).

My fourth and final objective was to illustrate how embodied performances of age inform our understanding of age performativity and how they influence age narratives in both canonical scripts and original works. In Chapter 3, in which I analysed the play *Moo*, I provided support for Lipscomb's claim that rapid shifts in stylized performance of age, in which the same bodies play multiple ages across the life course in quick succession, require audiences to confront the

physical transformations of age (“Putting on Her White Hair” par. 14). This once again challenges the inevitability of decline. Positive reviews of various productions of *Moo* demonstrate that audience members (as represented by the reviewers) were able to recognize performances of age despite the fact that the physical body of the actor did not always match the chronological age of the character. They were also able to recognize a character despite the character’s shifting age and the fact that some actors played multiple characters at varying ages. This supports the concept of age performativity— that is, that age is a system of beliefs and behaviours mapped onto the bodies of the actors. We can take from this that potentially controllable aspects of performance (nuance in movement, facial expression, vocal tone etc.) play a role in constructing age, but also that certain aspects of performative age identity remain consistent over time contributing to a continuity of self.

In order to explore embodiment and age performativity further, in Chapters 4 and 6, I analysed the live, embodied performances of aging and old age in contemporary Vancouver productions of *King Lear* and *Sonic Elder*. In these analyses I applied Basting’s performative depth model of aging (*The Stages of Age* 140-146). In Chapter 4, which focused on *King Lear*, in addition to arguing that performances of age in temporal depth foregrounded more positive textual narratives rather than emphasizing decline, I also extended Basting’s model by drawing connections with Carlson’s theory of theatrical ghosting and Gullette’s discussion of the default body (*Aged by Culture* 161). Ghosting, I have argued, influences reception of the performance of a character’s age, and I have proposed that it is influenced by the time span and the range of ages over which an actor has appeared before the same audience in the past, as well as the age ranges of other actors who have been seen (or heard of) playing the same or similar roles. This is especially relevant for well-known actors, as is often the case with older actors who have had



long careers. Building from Lipscomb's argument that disjuncture between an older actor and the role type, when combined with the effects of Carlson's ghosting, can produce productive tension and have transformative potential (*Performing Age in M.D.* 177), I have argued further that embodied depth performances of age, enhanced by ghosting, can produce deeply moving and transformative portraits of age by means of their intersubjectivity. In the case of *Sonic Elder*, I have asserted that depth performances of age built to moments of utopian performativity of the kind theorized by Jill Dolan ("Performance, Utopia"; *Utopia*).

In addition, in Chapter 6, I have expanded Basting's model by proposing how depth performances of age can function within autobiographical performance to contest age stereotypes. By blending Basting's depth model with Knowles's and Heddon's theoretical perspectives on autobiography and performance, I have proposed the concept of autobiographical depth performances of age. Drawing on Knowles's idea of autobiology, or "performances of the social and cultural assemblage of the body becoming itself" ("Documemory" 57), I have defined age-autobiology as performances of age that are strongly rooted in embodied memory, and that can be thought of as an assemblage of performances of age across time. Autobiological depth performances of age contribute to an age identity that is not rooted in linear time and is independent of fixed life-stage expectations. Both Heddon's concept of autotopography, or the writing of place through self and the simultaneous writing of self through place (Heddon 91), and Carlson's ghosting, particularly the idea of the haunted house (131), helped to explain in part how deeply affecting autobiographical depth performances of age were achieved in the production *Sonic Elder*. These autobiographical depth performances of age functioned, along with nostalgic qualities of rock music, the performers' generosity, and the particular choice of venue, to inspire utopian potential, especially through shifting the moral geography of place.

## 7.1 Significance, Contribution, and Potential Applications

At a time when aging populations in Canada are growing rapidly and continue to be affected by cultural narratives concerning aging and old age, an age studies analysis of narratives and representations of aging and old age in Canadian professional theatre seems particularly timely. To date there have been few theatre studies that analyse plays scripts or performances with a focus on aging and old age. Neither has there yet been a full critical mass of theatre research that addresses the idea of age performativity. My work builds on the important contributions of the limited number of authors whose research takes such an approach, most specifically Basting (*The Stages of Age*), Fuchs (“Estrangement”; “Rehearsing Age”), Gullette (*Aged by Culture*), Lipscomb (*Performing Age in M.D.*), and Mangan. To date, no broad, comparative studies of representations of aging and old age in Canadian theatre generally, or Canadian professional theatre more specifically, have been conducted. While my work has gained significantly from the few studies that consider representations of aging and old age in Canadian theatre, my work is distinct in that it addresses a range of plays, playwrights, performances, and Canadian professional theatrical contexts.

I offer new perspectives by bringing into conversation the theoretical and methodological approaches of age studies, theatre studies, and performance studies. I suggest and demonstrate ways that age as a point of intersection can be incorporated into theatre studies research. I explore, for example, the relationship between a play’s dramaturgy (such as structures of time, characterizations, themes, use of stage properties and dramatic space) and its narratives of aging, old age, and intergenerational relations. I also consider the effects of casting on age narratives. From the point of view of performance studies, this dissertation contributes to theories of age performativity by expanding on Basting’s performative depth model of aging. It also finds a new

context for theorizing Dolan's utopian performativity by proposing autobiographical depth performances of age as moments that can provoke utopian potential and *communitas*. Here I further Knowles's application of Dolan's theory to autobiographical performance ("Documemory" 49-71).

In addition to bringing age studies approaches to theatre and performance studies, this research also contributes new methods to age studies by offering theatrical and performative examples of representing and understanding age, aging, and old age. For example, my analysis of interactions with stage properties and their relationship to narratives of generational continuity and rupture could enhance research on aging and objects, possession motives, and the material convoy (Ekerdt). Another potential contribution comes from my examination of the role of space and place in constructing narratives of aging and older age. In Chapter 5, I consider interactions with dramatic space and landscape, and how these construct narratives of older age and intergenerational relations. In Chapter 6, I discuss Heddon's autotopography and the idea that identity and place are co-constructed (91). These critical reflections might add new perspectives to discourses and research on *aging in place*, a concept that means "living safely and independently in your home and community for as long as you wish and are able" (Government of Canada "Plan Your Future Today"). This concept is widely applied by disciplines such as healthcare, sociology, social policy, geography, and urban planning. My research also supports and develops the concept of age performativity which is one of the four critical approaches within the field of cultural age studies (Swinnen and Port). Beyond cultural age studies, this research could also contribute critical perspectives and creative approaches to health care disciplines, especially cultural gerontology. Most importantly, it suggests ways of considering age, aging, and older age from outside a medical model in ways that do not privilege pathology.

Within the practice of theatre, this research could be mobilized to provide guidance for developing theatre projects that seek to represent aging and old age in non-ageist ways, instructional content to theatre courses, and programming advice to the theatre industry that could reduce ageism. By raising awareness of age as a point of intersectionality, this research also promotes inclusion of the issue of age in discussions about equity in theatre. Current expert panels typically include representatives on race, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, and ability; to date I have never seen age acknowledged or represented as part of such initiatives. Incorporating considerations of age, aging, and older age would add much to the Canadian theatre industry, especially in regard to improving working conditions and representation for older actors.

## **7.2 Strengths and Limitations**

While this research has unique value, it also has limitations. It has been beyond the scope of this dissertation to compare representations of aging and old age based on the gender of the author, or the age of the playwright when writing the script. While the latter of these two is a contested field (Hutcheon and Hutcheon), both are indeed fascinating and expanding areas of future research.

This study has included only English-language plays. Since English is the author's first language, this allowed for greater depth of analysis. French Canadian works, works by Indigenous Canadian playwrights, or plays by and about other ethnic minorities are not included as part of this research. Canada is an officially bilingual, multicultural society whose arts and cultural sectors have been profoundly shaped by official multicultural policy (Knowles *Performing the Intercultural City*). It is also a country whose many Indigenous peoples have their own range of philosophies, values and customs—ones that have continued to grow and

flourish despite extreme adversity and that shape distinctive Indigenous worldviews and social imaginaries. This means that generalizations about the potential influence of professional theatre's age narratives on larger Canadian social imaginaries about aging and old age are certainly incomplete. However, I still believe that the age narratives and representations contained within professional Canadian theatre, whether inclusive or not, have an important impact on cultural ideas and values, and therefore are important to analyse and understand if we are to gain knowledge about theatre's role in promoting messages about aging and old age. This dissertation represents a contribution to the early stages of critical engagement with age narratives in Canadian theatre. It is a start. We have much to learn from the full range of ethnic and cultural perspectives this country offers. If we are to mobilize theatre to shift negative, derogatory, or other problematic narratives about aging and old age (or any age), then more research and understanding of age narratives produced by the full range of Canadian theatre artists is needed. Apart from seeking equitable study of ethnic and cultural work, it also will be important to look beyond professional theatre to explore amateur theatre, senior theatre, intergenerational theatre, theatre being performed in educational institutions, theatre being used therapeutically with older adults, and arts-based theatre research with aging populations. It is my hope that the field of age and performance studies in Canada will continue to grow, fostering study of this broader complement of theatrical activity and discerning more socially empowering age narratives.

Another limitation of this research is that, because it focuses on how Canadian professional theatre might influence *current* Canadian social imaginaries of aging and old age, the study is quite tightly temporally focused. With the exception of Sally Clark's *Moo*, it includes only plays produced in Canada since 2000. In addition, in my discussion of stereotypes

and negative narrative tropes in the Western canon, I am relying on histories of representations of aging and old age in theatre from outside the Canadian context (because no Canadian histories exist), and these histories are partial and incomplete. I am making the jump to suggesting that these histories have informed Canadian social imaginaries of aging and old age, and more specifically have influenced representations of aging and old age in Canadian theatre. Although we know that there have been many variations in the way that age has been represented and understood throughout Western history, and that what can be received in a certain way by one society can be interpreted quite differently by another with different sensibilities (Mangan 103-104), there have still been certain ageist stereotypes, stock characters, and narrative tropes that have recurred over and over throughout Western theatrical history in a wide range of places and time periods. In addition, many of the historical plays that include such ageist figures and tropes are still produced in Canada. I therefore think it a reasonable leap in logic to assume that they influence current Canadian social imaginaries of aging and old age, particularly by means of the processes of theatrical ghosting (Carlson). However, I recognize that more complete histories of representations of aging and old age in Canadian theatre are desirable and a requisite focus of future research.

This dissertation highlights the importance of considering age as a point of intersectionality. However, it is limited in the other points of intersection that it includes. While in certain chapters this research considers differences in gendered performances of age, and addresses intersections of age and heteronormative female sexuality, as well as age and ability (specifically with respect to memory), it has been beyond the scope of this dissertation to explore the intersection of age with other identity categories, such as ethnicity (as discussed above), race, or class. Because research at the crossroads of age studies and theatre studies is still emerging,

there is a limit to the amount of new territory this study can explore. However, these important areas of research need further investigation and theoretical development, both in my own future research and in the field of age studies as a whole. I would like to expand on this research, most specifically, by studying aging and memory (and differences of gender, race, and class in representations of age-related memory loss) in much greater depth.

### 7.3 Summary

This research offers theoretical perspectives from theatre and performance to the field of cultural age studies as fruitful lenses through which to view performances of age. It also broadens applications of age theory by proposing age as a productive point of intersectional analysis in theatre and performance studies research. The critical analysis of age narratives in contemporary professional Canadian theatre makes important contributions to our cultural understandings of what it means to age and grow old in our society. Theatre's complex relationship with liveness means that it can evoke immediate responses in shared spaces and times with audiences, and thus construct and influence age narratives in distinct and idiosyncratic ways. Dolan describes the power of performance:

We can't measure the effectiveness of art as we can a piece of legislation, or a demonstration, or a political campaign for candidates or for issues. But I do believe that the experience of performance, and the intellectual, spiritual, and affective traces it leaves behind, can provide new frames of reference for how we see a better future extending out from our more ordinary lives. Seeing that vision, we can figure out how to achieve it outside the fantastical, magical space of performance. (*Utopia* 20)

My goal and hope are that this dissertation exposes ways that contemporary, professional Canadian theatre offers glimpses of a better future for those aging past midlife. Most of the performances I have analysed point to new frames of reference by which aging and old age can be approached, perceived, and understood within our culture. Building from these kinds of performance practices, theatre has the potential to improve age relations and reduce ageism.



## End Notes

<sup>i</sup> Some readers may recall, for example, Bette Midler's 2017 Broadway performance of Dolly Levi in *Hello Dolly* at the age of 70 (Brantley), or British salsa dancer, Paddy Jones who, with her partner Nico, finished ninth overall in the 2014 *Britain's Got Talent* competition at the age of 80 (Strang). Both of these performances of virtuosity are outside the realm of typical ability, let alone 'normal' successful aging.

<sup>ii</sup> In the introductory chapter of her book *Learning to be Old: Gender, Culture and Aging*,

Margaret Cruikshank critiques the concept of "successful aging." According to Cruikshank,

When "success" is proposed as an aging model, [. . .] a business and competitive standard is used to measure a complex human process, and a white, male, middle-class professional outlook is taken for granted . [. . .] "Successful aging" overlooks the very important role class plays in determining not only how healthy we are in old age but even whether we get to be old. The phrase is prescriptive. (2-3).

Cruikshank argues that the term "productive aging" is also problematic as it valorizes individualism and implies that aging depends mostly on our own efforts (3). It overlooks "elements of luck and mystery," as well as barriers to social engagement such as "poor health, heavy caregiving responsibilities, and the ways choice is limited by inequalities in class and gender" (3). "Successful aging" also sees late life through a lens of economic usefulness and social conformity (4). Unsuccessful aging, then, becomes viewed as a moral failure (3).

Although popular for its positive connotations, Cruikshank summarizes that "[t]he concept of 'successful aging' [. . .] is simplistic and its promise of mastery is false" (4). She prefers the term "aging comfortably" because "it emphasizes ease rather than external measurement [. . .] because we can judge for ourselves whether or not we are comfortable," and because "[it] has a more

neutral or non-judgemental opposite” (4). Further critical responses to the idea of “successful aging” can be found in the works of (Liang and Lou; Martinson & Berridge; Rowe and Kahn).

<sup>iii</sup> A version of the following two paragraphs on the decline narrative appear in my article titled “‘I’m an old fucking woman as of today’: Sally Clark’s Dramaturgies of Female Aging” which is currently in press with *Age, Culture, Humanities: An Interdisciplinary Journal*. no. 3, 2018, <http://ageculturehumanities.org/WP/preview-issue-3/>.

<sup>iv</sup> Moore’s essay “Depth, Significance, and Absence: Age-Effects in New British Theatre” was winner of the 2013 Graduate Student Essay Contest in the inaugural issue of *Age Culture Humanities: An Interdisciplinary Journal*.

<sup>v</sup> To following texts are examples: Maurice Charney’s *Wrinkled Deep in Time: Aging in Shakespeare*; Thomas M. Falkner’s *The Poetics of Old Age in Greek Epic, Lyric, and Tragedy*; Jeffery Henderson’s “Older Women in Attic Old Comedy,” Valerie Barnes Lipscomb’s “‘Old Gentleman’: Age Differences as Plot Subversion” (in the works of Shaw); S. Ramaswamy’s “Geriatrics: The Treatment of Old Age in Tennessee William’s Plays”; and Tamar Rapoport’s “Self and Style: The Development of Artistic Expression from Youth through Midlife to Old Age in the Works of Henrik Ibsen.”

<sup>vi</sup> Toronto’s Estelle Craig ACT II STUDIO is part of Ryerson University’s G. Raymond Chang School of Continuing Education. It is a theatre program and creative drama centre that provides training and performance opportunities for adults 50 and over. ACT II’s mission is as follows: “To provide training and performance opportunities for adults 50 plus to nurture their creativity and develop their skills in the dramatic arts, and to serve the community by developing and presenting theatrical projects which increase awareness and challenge stereotypes about aging, health, and other social issues” (The Estelle par. 4).

<sup>vii</sup> GeriActors and Friends is an intergenerational theatre company in Edmonton, Alberta that produces original plays based on stories and issues from the participants' lives. The company also offers outreach programs to seniors throughout the city. (GeriActors par.1)

<sup>viii</sup> The play *Cracked: New Light on Dementia* written and directed by Julia Gray, is based on the research of Drs. Sherry Dupuis of University of Waterloo, Gail Mitchel of York University, Pia Kontos of University of Toronto, and Christine Jonas-Simpson of York University. All are health researchers who specialize in the areas of aging, dementia, and research-based drama. (University of Waterloo)

<sup>ix</sup> My choice of plays also reflects scripts that have been produced in a range of professional theatre contexts in Canada. I include a script that has been produced by an independent theatre cooperative at a fringe festival (*Ten Ways to Abuse an Old Woman*), a performance staged at a large international performing arts festival based in Canada (*Sonic Elder*), a play produced frequently by both independent theatre companies in small theatre contexts and by large theatre companies on major stages (*King Lear*), three other works that have been produced on major stages in Canada (*August: Osage County*, *1000 Miles*, *Moo*), and a work produced in a site-specific venue (*Sonic Elder*).

<sup>x</sup> Vancouver's Western Gold Theatre Society, Canada's only professional senior theatre company, is a non-profit company established in 1994 by Joy Coghill. It was run from 2003-2009 by Anna Hagan, Pamela Hawthorn and Don Mowatt, and since 2012 by Anna Hagan as sole artistic director. While originally founded in response to the dearth of roles for professional senior (55+) actors in the Vancouver area, "the company now includes younger actors with senior performers in many shows" (Western Gold Theatre). The company explicitly states its drive to reach a broader range of ages with its work, as evidenced by its mandate: "Western Gold

Theatre Society is a senior professional company of theatre artists committed to producing plays of the highest quality and relevance to audiences of all ages. As part of this mandate Western Gold also mentors emerging younger professional artists by including them in many of our productions” (ibid).

<sup>xi</sup> Western Gold Theatre Society is a notable exception.

<sup>xii</sup> In 2010 the European Network in Aging Studies or ENAS was formed (European Network in Aging Studies). The North American Network in Aging Studies or NANAS followed in 2013 (North American Network in Aging Studies). The first joint international conference of ENAS, NANAS and Cultural Gerontology took place in Graz, Austria, 27-30 April, 2017. Important initiatives have also developed in Canada such as Concordia University’s SSHRC-funded Ageing + Communication + Technologies (ACT) Project which brings together researchers, students, and community and institutional partners from around the world to investigate “the transformation of the experiences of ageing with the proliferation of new forms of mediated communications in networked societies” (ACT). At University of British Columbia an interdisciplinary group of researchers of which I am a part, gathered under the research project title “The Re-Imagine Aging Research Cluster,” recently received one of three Grants for Catalyzing Research Clusters as part of the Research Excellence Clusters Initiative. Including humanities and social science approaches to aging is an important objective of this project.

<sup>xiii</sup> In “What Is Age Studies?” Stephen Katz adeptly draws parallels between the field of age studies and the comparable fields of women’s/gender/sexuality studies. His proposal that we imagine a situation in which these other fields were treated similarly to the current institutional attitudes toward age studies, demonstrates the surprising lack of support for age studies within universities and centres of teaching, learning, and advocacy (par. 1-2).

<sup>xiv</sup> The *Playing Age Symposium*, hosted by University of Toronto's Department of Literature, took place 27-28 February 2015. It was convened by Dr. Marlene Goldman and Dr. Lawrence Switzky and featured Dr. Elinor Fuchs and Margaret Morganroth Gullette as keynote speakers.

<sup>xv</sup> Classical and medieval scholarly thinking about senescence, for example, was dominated by the Galenic theory of the four bodily humors and by "ages of man" models (Ellis 4).

<sup>xvi</sup> A version of this chapter's section on Age Performativity is in press in the author's article in *Age, Culture, Humanities: An Interdisciplinary Journal* (see Henderson "'I'm an old fucking woman'").

<sup>xvii</sup> Wald specifies that she draws on the work of Elin Diamond, Marvin Carlson, Elaine Aston, Alisa Solomon, Erika Fischer-Lichte, and Anthony Kubiak, and shares in their assertion that "the theatrical performance offers a particularly apt arena to reflect on and possibly provoke an alteration of the workings of (gender) performativity because of its double consciousness" (Wald 17).

<sup>xviii</sup> Restoration comedies focused on the erotic desires and intrigues of wealthy, young (usually urban) central characters and emphasized the values of an emerging generation. Skepticism about royal authority during this time period inspired mistrust of traditional familial authority and meant that ageist stereotypes flourished (Mangan 95).

<sup>xix</sup> According to Jeffrey Henderson, in Attic Old Comedy youth was ridiculed more often than old age, social status for women increased with age (particularly related to achievement of the maternal ideal), and older women were portrayed in positive roles such as nurses, housekeepers and doorkeepers (108, 123, 127).

<sup>xx</sup> In their study Berman and Sobkowska-Ashcroft classify attitudes of plays' authors toward the elderly into the following categories: concerned, derogatory, deterministic, hopeful, mostly

negative, negative, objective, optimistic, pessimistic, positive, respectful, satiric, sympathetic, tendentious, and understanding (6-8).

<sup>xxi</sup> A version of this chapter is in press as an article by the same title in *Age, Culture, Humanities: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, no. 3, 2018 (see Henderson “‘I’m an old fucking woman’”).

<sup>xxii</sup> Clark has held writers’ residencies at numerous professional Canadian theatres (Crew “Sally Clark” par. 8), and ten of her plays have been produced professionally and published. A film version of *Ten Ways to Abuse an Old Woman* that Clark directed won the Henri Langlois International Short Film Festival Special Prix du Jury in 1992 (Ratsoy 315). *Moo* won a 1989 Chalmers Best Canadian Play Award and was nominated for a 1989 Dora Award and a 1991 Governor General’s Literary Award (Crew “Sally Clark” par. 4). Sherrill Grace, D. A. Hadfield, and Robin Whittaker (“Feeling Around”) have all individually authored academic journal articles on Clark’s plays. Whittaker’s unpublished MA thesis (*Narrativizations*) also focuses on Clark’s work.

<sup>xxiii</sup> *Moo* is anthologized in Jerry Wasserman’s *Modern Canadian Plays, 4<sup>th</sup> Edition, Volume II*; *Ten Ways to Abuse an Old Woman* is included in Ginny Ratsoy and James Hoffman’s *Playing the Pacific Province: An Anthology of British Columbia Plays, 1967-2000*.

<sup>xxiv</sup> The entry concerning Clark in *The Oxford Companion to Canadian Theatre* locates her among a wave of feminist playwrights of the 1970’s and 1980’s who dealt with issues of “family politics, stereotypes, madness, violence, sexuality, and reproductive rights” in a “more directly feminist way” than previous Canadian playwrights (Benson and Conolly 204). According to D. A. Hadfield, however, “Clark’s feminism is not easily classifiable. In fact, her own feminist politics as it emerges in the media describes something more like post-feminism, a tacit

assumption that feminism has already achieved a balance of power, and we no longer live in a culture that perpetuates a binary gender system of dominance and submission” (124-25).

<sup>xxv</sup> *Ten Ways* was first produced at Toronto’s Buddies in Bad Times Rhubarb! Festival in 1983 (Ratsoy 319). *Moo* originally premiered at the NovaPlayRites ’88, Alberta Theatre Projects’ festival of new plays coproduced by Victoria’s Belfry Theatre (Wasserman 258). Its eastern premiere was the 1989 Toronto production at the Factory Theatre (Crew “Historica” par. 3).

<sup>xxvi</sup> In this chapter I offer close readings of *Moo* and *Ten Ways* that are primarily concerned with Clark’s dramaturgical choices for character and plot construction. Although I support this analysis by considering other performance elements as they are described in reviews of the premiere performances (such as casting and actors’ performances), this chapter focuses more on the texts than on the plays’ respective production histories. As a result, my analysis of how design elements such as stage properties and lighting function to construct age narratives centres on Clark’s stage directions. I do not offer a complete accounting of the various ways these plays have or might yet be realized in performance.

<sup>xxvii</sup> Act 1, scene 1 of *Moo* consists of stage directions only: “*A man, standing, is holding a gun. A woman enters, stops, stares at the man. The man raises the gun, points it at the woman and fires. Black.*” (13). The only blackout of the play follows this scene and sets the scene apart as a framing device for the play. In the author’s preface Clark writes,

According to family lore, one of my great aunts had the misfortune to fall in love with a rotter who [. . .] ruined her life. I could never quite piece together the tragic image of the betrayed lover with my garrulous aunt who shocked and confronted everyone within range. I began to wonder [. . . if] he got more than he bargained for (11).

Exploring this type of character is Clark's project in *Moo* and the first scene, separated by a blackout, sets the stage by indicating the power dynamic against which Moo wrestles throughout the play. The blackout creates the effect that subsequent scenes stand in stark contrast to this first encounter and highlight Moo's resistant and rebellious nature.

<sup>xxviii</sup> It is beyond the scope of this dissertation to summarize these authors' analyses, but readers are invited to follow up by exploring the following: Harpin's analysis of Bryony Lavery's *A Wedding Story*, which features an older woman with Alzheimer's (77); Moore's exploration of Nick Payne's *One Day When We Were Young* in which one character (Leonard) experiences changing mental capacity as he ages (par. 16); Kontos's analysis of *Making An Exit* by Elinor Fuchs, based on transcripts of the author's conversations with her mother who had Alzheimer's ("Alzheimer Expressions" 7-11); Basting's descriptions of her own *TimeSlips* project, which engages people with dementia in storytelling workshops, some of which were used to create a professional play ("God Is"); and Mangan's analysis of *Autobiographer*, a play by Melanie Wilson about a woman (Flora) experiencing dementia (145-149), as well as his analysis of Charlie Higson and Paul Whitehorse's radio drama adaptation of *Ancient Mysteries*, by David Clegg, a collection of memories of people with Alzheimer's (144-145).

<sup>xxix</sup> A version of this chapter was first published in *Theatre Research in Canada* (see Henderson "Challenging Age Binaries").

<sup>xxx</sup> Basting saw the performance on October 30, 1993 at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis.

<sup>xxxi</sup> The number and names of the particular stages of age (as viewed chronologically) can vary depending on the theorist. The stages described here are the most common and shape popular understanding of the life cycle.



<sup>xxxii</sup> Play examples include the following: descent into illness—Morrie in *Tuesdays With Morrie* (Hatcher & Albom); descent into madness—Mary Tyrone in *Long Day's Journey into Night* (O'Neill); descent into dependency—Daisy Werthan in *Driving Miss Daisy* (Uhry) & Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman* (Miller); about to experience death—Big Daddy in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (Williams) & Beverly Weston in *August: Osage County* (Letts)

<sup>xxxiii</sup> [...] The sixth age shifts

Into the lean and slipper'd pantaloons,  
With spectacles on nose, and pouch on side,  
His youthful hose well sav'd, a world too wide  
For his shrunk shank, and his big manly voice,  
Turning again toward childish treble, pipes  
And whistles in his sound. Last scene of all,  
That ends this strange eventful history,  
Is second childishness and mere oblivion,  
Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything. (Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, 2.7.157-66)

<sup>xxxiv</sup> *Juliet and Her Romeo* by Tom Morris and Sean O'Connor premiered at the Bristol Old Vic in 2010 directed by Tom Morris (Clapp). *A Tender Thing* by Ben Power was commissioned by the Royal Shakespeare Company and first produced in 2009 (Morrow). It has recently been staged in Canada at The Belfry Theatre in 2013 directed by Peter Hinton with Peter Anderson and Clare Coulter as Romeo and Juliet, and at Soulpepper Theatre in 2014 directed by Michael Shamata with Joseph Ziegler and Nancy Palk as Romeo and Juliet (Nestruck). *The Last of Romeo and Juliet* written and directed by Mitchell Cushman premiered at Talk Is Free Theatre in Barry Ontario in 2014 (Nestruck).

<sup>xxxv</sup> Basting (*The Stages of Age*), Gullette (*Aged by Culture*), Lipscomb (*Performing Age in MD*), and Woodward (“Performing Age”) recognize that age has certain uncontrollable biological and physiological impacts on the body, and therefore cannot be understood as merely performative.

In *Figuring Age: Women, Bodies, Generations*, Woodward argues,

For unlike other markers of difference (gender and race, for example), old age cannot be theorized or understood as a social construction only, one that erases the real changes of the body that can come with aging and old age. There is a point at which the social or cultural construction of aging must confront the physical dimensions, if not the very real limits of the body” (xxii).

<sup>xxxvi</sup> While Woodward rejects postmodern definitions of aging and old age and maintains that the concept of age performativity has its limits (particularly in deep old age), subsequent to *Aging and Its Discontents* (1991) which I cite here, she published “Performing Age, Performing Gender” (2006) in which she discusses age performativity at length.

<sup>xxxvii</sup> Bridie Moore suggests that aside from scriptural elements, casting and staging choices in Frantic Assembly’s production of the play *Lovesong* may have contributed to a failure to inscribe temporal depth on the actor’s bodies in a play that otherwise held promise for re-visioning age by virtue of its disruptions of linear narrative (9).

<sup>xxxviii</sup> For example, David Stymeist claims that while Shakespeare demystified vagrancy, he still linked it to the decline of old age and loss of family and exploited public fear of the confluence of old age and homelessness to create a successful commercial dramatic product (37-47).

Anthony Ellis argues that aging men in Shakespeare’s time were expected to suppress their desire and that Lear’s repressed desire for Cordelia (as a result of acting out expected age norms) left him stifled, confused, alienated, and tormented (15-39).

<sup>xxxix</sup> Likewise, in her analysis of a production of Nick Payne's *One Day When We Were Young*, Moore describes meta-theatrical techniques (actors applying age makeup and slowly transitioning physically through three stages of the life course while onstage) as creating a performance of age that bridges generations and approaches Basting's performative, depth model of aging (11).

<sup>xl</sup> I choose the term repertoire here in consideration of Diana Taylor's work, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*.

<sup>xli</sup> Gullette gestures toward this idea in a brief discussion of Sarah Bernhardt playing Hamlet in midlife and Carol Channing reprising her 1964 performance of Dolly (a midlife widow) in *Hello Dolly* in 1995, arguing that audiences are looking for some identifiable aspect of stars as they age and allow more leeway for stars to play younger because they have been taught that it is a retort to ageism (*Aged by Culture* 167-68). She does not discuss in any detail the influence of audiences' prior experiences viewing stars perform.

<sup>xlii</sup> The television movie *King Lear* based on Shakespeare's play starring Sir Ian McKellen was directed by Trevor Nunn and originally broadcast in the United Kingdom on More4 on December 25, 2008. It was released in the United States by PBS on March 27, 2009 (*King Lear: PBS Great Performances*).

<sup>xliii</sup> The term "generation" can be defined in many ways. Basting suggests that one way to consider generations is by means of two loosely defined groups (*The Stages of Age* 86). Horizontal generations refer to "widely drawn groups of people born within similar time periods who share formative cultural experiences such as wars, economic shifts, fashion, and popular music/arts" (86). In contrast, "vertical generations refer to one's order in family lineage, such as child, parent, or grandparent" (86). In this chapter I am interested in vertical generations, or what

I am calling “family generations.” In my subsequent chapter on *Sonic Elder* I consider horizontal generational identity linked to baby boomers and Rock ‘n’ Roll. Generations are typically considered to be separated by 25 to 30 years.

<sup>xliv</sup> Kristin Hanson, in her 2006 unpublished doctoral thesis titled “Stage(d) Mothers: Mother-Daughter Tropes in Twentieth-Century American Drama,” argues that in the staging of mother-daughter relationships, mothers (which include but are not limited to older mothers) are frequently portrayed as abusive, domineering, smothering, martyred, or absent.

<sup>xlv</sup> *August* won the 2008 Pulitzer Prize for Drama, as well as the Tony Award, Drama Desk Award, and New York Drama Critics’ Circle Award all for best new play (Choate 105-6). *4000 Miles* was a finalist for the 2013 Pulitzer Prize for Drama and won a 2012 Obie Award for Best New American Play. *August* premiered at Steppenwolf Theatre in Chicago 28 June, 2007 and ran until 26 August of the same year. It opened on Broadway at the Imperial Theatre in NYC on 4 December, 2007, and transferred to the Music Box Theatre 29 April, 2008, where it ran until 28 June, 2009. *4000 Miles* first performed Off-Broadway at The Duke Theater in NYC from 20 June to 9 July, 2011, presented by Lincoln Center Theatre/LCT3, as a Steinberg New Works Program production. It moved to Mitzi E Newhouse Theater at Lincoln Center (also Off-Broadway) opening on 3 April, 2012 and running until 17 June, 2012. (Herzog 4).

<sup>xlvi</sup> LeFebvre describes space in terms of three aspects: *representations of space*, or the conceptualized space of symbols, codifications, and abstract representations; *spatial practices* which involve the specific spatial competencies and performances of a society; and *representational spaces* or the places of lived experience (38-39).

<sup>xlvii</sup> In “Estrangement: Towards an ‘Age Theory’ Theatre Criticism” Fuchs argues, “In the great plays that depict age and impending death not as comic spectacle, but from the inside, as living

experience” (76), the concept of “estrangement” (Fuchs’s coinage, emphasis added)—or the moment when an old character is estranged from her former self and looks back with astonishment on her past limitations—is often revealed through landscape. Landscapes (staged or told) that produce estrangement or exile can reveal to characters the limitations of their own age, but in doing so also can open up new horizons of experience (77).

<sup>xlviii</sup> Mohler summarizes the history of Osage County:

Osage County in particular stands out as location [sic] wrought by treacherous examples of colonial exploitation. By enforcing a series of treaties from 1818 to 1825, the Committee of Indian Affairs took over Osage lands in Indian Territory in order to relocate Indian tribes from the eastern United States, including those known as the Five Civilized Tribes. The Osage were relocated to Kansas, until federal neglect, disease, and hunger brought them to join forces with their traditional enemies, the Cherokees. In 1870, the Osage purchased some 1.5 million acres on the Cherokee Outlet. This would become the Osage Nation and eventually would be incorporated as Osage County (Jones). In the years leading to its eventual annexation by the United States, white settlers continuously encroached upon Indian hunting and grazing lands and pressured the government for property that had been allocated to various Indian nations in exchange for their tribal homelands elsewhere. After decades of unethical and arguably illegal alterations were made to territorial boundary agreements and political treaties, Oklahoma and Indian Territories were united and incorporated as the state of Oklahoma in 1907, ending Native American self-government (Wickett 71). [ . . . ] From the 1870s through the 1930s the United States government attempted to deal with the Indians’ threatening difference first

through containment, and then by enacting various ‘Americanization’ and assimilation policies. In an effort to exert total political control over the land, Native American languages, traditions, religious practices, and rituals were forbidden, assuring white political control and cultural supremacy. (Mohler 134)

In addition, the discovery of oil on Osage lands in 1890s brought an ongoing profusion of conflict and corruption. According to The Oklahoma Historical Society “For many Osage the oil boom unleashed a ‘Reign of Terror.’ Some were cheated by their court appointed financial managers or ‘guardians.’ Others died for their wealth. A series of Osage murders, many unsolved, received national attention during the 1920s” (Oklahoma Historical Society par. 13).

<sup>xlix</sup> In “Noble or Ruthless Savage: The American Indian On Stage and in Drama,” Don B.

Wilmeth argues that many dramas staging American Indians have used the noble savage archetype derived from the writings of Enlightenment philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau (6).

Rousseau believed that man by nature was “free of sin, appetite or the concept of right and wrong, and that those deemed ‘savages’ were not brutal but noble” (The Conversation par. 2).

Wilmeth draws on the work of Burl D. Grose to discuss how the noble savage was given a number of stereotypic attributes, including “total understanding of nature and its secrets, physical beauty and perfect grace, clever, stoic, lack of fear of pain or death, elegant speech, and complete faithfulness to friends, relatives, and loved ones, even to the point of sacrificial death” (Grose 6).

Wilmeth describes the archetype further:

Indeed, the image of the noble savage inherited from Europe is the peak of human virtue of a sort. Living in the forest the noble savage is naturally good, existing in harmony with nature and obeying his impulses; he is childlike in his inability to control his emotions, but has a definitive sense of honor, can endure hardships, and is brave in battle. This

general pattern was perceived as a universal one, applied to all aborigines of North America, with no real distinctions between tribes or their various levels of development.

(41)

<sup>1</sup> Howard Starks's poem, "August: Osage County" (originally published in *Family Album: a Collection of Poetry* by Running Board Press, Durant, OK 1995), describes a family's experience of the final days of an old woman's life. The sixty-line poem presents the woman's temporal thickness and materiality, capturing her past contributions to the world, commenting on her strength and beauty, and valuing her existence through family relationships. (Marin Theatre Company)

<sup>li</sup> The Chop Theatre was founded in 2006 by Anita Rochon and Emelia Symington Fedy who have served as its co-artistic directors since that time. Rochon took the lead on the *Sonic Elder* project; Fedy had minimal direct involvement but was very supportive of the initiative.

<sup>lii</sup> Knowles's citation "see Phelan" refers to Peggy Phelan's 1993 monograph *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*. Phelan is concerned with the politics of representational visibility that for her are central to the politics of identity. By examining photographs, paintings, films, theatre, political protests, and performance art through a feminist psychoanalytic lens, Phelan argues that, "Each representation relies on and reproduces a specific logic of the real; this logical real promotes its own representation. The real partakes of and generates different imagistic and discursive paradigms" (2). Each concept of the real contains within it "a meta-text of exclusionary power" (3)—a binary in which that which is valued is marked, and that which is other is unmarked. Phelan critiques identity politics that focus on visibility because "the binary between the power of visibility and the impotency of invisibility is falsifying. There is real power in remaining unmarked; and there are serious limitations to visual representation as a political

goal” (6). When Knowles (as per Phelan) describes a body that is “marked” he is referring to a body that participates in dominant visibility politics. So, by describing a “marked performing body” he is alluding to a body that actively “reads” is “visible” or is “marked” as other or as minority.

<sup>liii</sup> The Chop Theatre’s *Kismet One to One Hundred*, which premiered at Theatre Centre’s FreeFall festival in Toronto in March 2010, is a piece created by four creator/performers (Emelia Symington Fedy, Daryl King, Anita Rochon and Hazel Venzon) who travelled across Canada and interviewed 100 people, aged 1 through 100, regarding their experiences and beliefs about Kismet, or fate and destiny. The show blends verbatim theatre and the travellers’ own experiences, and its central narrative turns around a character who is 100 years old. The piece has been produced at a number of theatres across Canada and was nominated for two Jessie awards (The Chop Theatre “Kismet One to One Hundred”). The Chop’s *How to Disappear Completely* (text by Itai Erdal with James Long, Anita Rochon, and Emelia Symington Fedy) is a piece lit and performed by Itai Erdal in which he “demonstrates his approach to theatrical lighting while also reflecting on the events that followed his mother asking him to take her life” after she had been diagnosed with terminal lung cancer. The work has toured to multiple locations in Canada, the United States and Britain since 2011. It incorporates film and photographs Erdal took to document his aging mother’s end-of-life experience (The Chop Theatre “How to Disappear Completely”).

<sup>liv</sup> The idea of *dramaturgy of assistance* is inspired by Arthur Strimling’s account of what he calls “choreography of assistance” in *Roots and Branches: Creating Intergenerational Theater* (111). Strimling describes choreographic strategies, such as staging actors in seated positions, or building in ways for actors to assist each other when moving about the stage, in order to facilitate



participation of senior actors with varying physical capacities. He does not develop the theoretical construct beyond this brief discussion. Jenny Sealey, an internationally-renowned disability theatre and performance artist, who has long served as artistic director of Graeae Theatre Company, has referred to a similar approach as “access aesthetics” (Johnston 153-161)

<sup>lv</sup> Most theatre performances in Vancouver are now preceded by an acknowledgement that the land on which the performance takes place is the traditional, ancestral, unceded territory of the Coast Salish First Nations people. The exact beginning of such public land acknowledgements is undocumented, but anecdotally it seems that this practice began about fifteen years ago in activist settings where colonialism was part of the intersectional analysis. The Four Host First Nations central presence in the 2010 Winter Olympic ceremonies in Vancouver brought attention to this practice. It has become increasingly common since the Truth and Reconciliation Commission calls for action. In the Penthouse version of *Sonic Elder* the following statement began the show: “Good evening, Vancouver! Welcome to the Penthouse! This legendary venue sits on the ancestral, traditional and unceded territories of the Coast Salish Peoples, in particular, the Squamish, Musqueam, and Tsleil-Waututh First Nations. Now please put your hands together for *Sonic Elder*” (*Sonic Elder* Artistic Team 1).

<sup>lvi</sup> The idea of thinking about Grosz’ concept of duration, especially in relation to rock ‘n’ roll music and baby boomers, I attribute to Stephen Katz who I heard speak at the conference *Aging: Graz* on 29 April 2017 (Katz “The Greatest Band”).

<sup>lvii</sup> Rock musicians such as Shirley Bassey, Cher, Peter Gabriel, Mick Jagger, Elton John, Paul McCartney, Ringo Starr, Paul Simon, Sting, Tina Turner to name a few, have all continued to perform past midlife and are shifting the archetype of the rock ‘n’ roll star.

<sup>lviii</sup> I am deliberately being non-specific about the performers and the song in this section due to the sensitivity of the subject of memory loss, not because I wish to add to stigma around memory loss, but because of the very real legal ramifications of disclosure. However, I pursue this discussion because I believe this aspect of the show offered a particularly valuable instance of utopian possibility as related to interrupting cultural expectations around aging and memory loss.

<sup>lix</sup> Basting's *TimeSlips* is a creative storytelling project that began in 1998 in Milwaukee, Wisconsin and New York City. It involved extended storytelling workshops with people with Alzheimer's Disease and Related Dementias (ADRD) that did not focus on memories but rather used exercises to encourage participants to make up new stories. In the second phase of the original version of this project a handful of the stories were translated into a professional play ("God Is" 78, 80). The project continues to this day with online training and certification available for facilitators, as well as other resources, that have inspired storytelling projects around the globe (*TimeSlips Creative Storytelling Inc.*). Basting also has headed another major initiative called *The Penelope Project*, which she describes as "a multiyear effort to engage a long-term care community in a retelling of Homer's *Odyssey* from the perspective of Penelope" (Basting et al. 1). The project brought together university arts students, professional artists, and the long-term care community at Luther Manor in Milwaukee, Wisconsin to collaboratively create and perform the play *Finding Penelope*. Unlike *TimeSlips* this project was not limited to participants with ADRD, but rather included a wide range of residents at the long-term care facility. Like *TimeSlips* the project involved collaborative story-telling techniques and processes similar to some of those used in *Sonic Elder*, and valued creativity not rooted in memory. The project is well documented in *The Penelope Project: An Arts-Based Odyssey to Change Elder Care* edited by Basting et al..

<sup>lx</sup> The idea of the ‘boomer’ generation and its associations with rock ‘n’ roll is useful to consider here, because, although several of the *Sonic Elder* performers were technically born a few years before the start of the boomers, as a group the *Sonic Elder* performers hold much in common with boomer identity. The show itself marketed the group as members of “the generation that invented youth culture” (The Chop Theatre “Sonic Elder Program”). Katz defines boomers as follows:

Born between 1946 and 1964, the boomers are defined by the bulging size of their cohort relative to adjacent generations, and by the particular postwar conditions in which they matured: national prosperity, the relative political peace of the Cold War, new media and communication networks, affluent consumerism, and rapid social change. In turn, the populous boomer generation created new lifestyles and forms of expression that dismantled the traditions separating young and old, producing an extendable ‘youth culture’ unfettered by age and identified with rebellion (“Music, Performance, and Generation” 95).

On the one hand boomer discourse homogenizes and stereotypes those it represents, on the other, according to Katz, boomer language fills a discursive void (95). Katz writes that “rock music continues to help boomers make sense of their lives as they age, including their politics, relationships, spirituality, and destinies” (99).

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## Appendix A: Letter of Information and Informed Consent



University of British Columbia  
Department of Theatre and Film  
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### CONSENT FORM FOR PARTICIPATION IN PHD CANDIDATE JULIA HENDERSON'S STUDY, "CREATION AND PERFORMANCE OF 'SONIC ELDER'"

**Principal Investigator:** Dr. Kirsty Johnston  
Associate Professor & Julia Henderson's thesis supervisor

**Contact information:** Dept. of Theatre & Film  
University of British Columbia  
Email: [REDACTED]  
Phone: [REDACTED]

**Co-investigator:** Julia Henderson  
PhD Candidate

**Contact information:** Dept. of Theatre & Film  
University of British Columbia  
Email: [REDACTED]  
Phone: [REDACTED]

Dear [Artist],

In the course of a research project on representations of aging and old age in contemporary Western theatre, Julia Henderson is conducting interviews with the artistic collaborators on the production *Sonic Elder* created by The Chop Theatre. Julia is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Theatre and Film at the University of British Columbia. Under the supervision of Dr. Kirsty Johnston, Julia is researching ways that aging and old age are represented in contemporary North American and British Theatre; this will be the focus of her dissertation. The key research question in this broader study is: In what ways does North American and British contemporary professional theatre deconstruct, complicate, or offers alternatives to the decline story of old age, as well as other old age stereotypes? In the part of the study relating to *Sonic Elder*, Julia hopes to consider how autobiographical performance and experiences with Rock music contribute to particular ways of representing aging and older age.

2016-04-13

1 of 4

Because of your innovative theatre work involving the development and performance of *Sonic Elder*, we would like to invite you to participate in up to two such interviews. The interviews would be conducted by Julia Henderson and would each last from one to two hours; we have included a list of sample questions. We recognize that as someone who participates in professional theatre and musical performance, you may not wish to answer every question and it is important to note that Julia will not ask you to share any information that might disadvantage you in your career development or current workplace. For this reason, please be aware that all information you choose to offer in the course of these interviews is voluntary and may be withdrawn by you without consequence anytime after the interview. The digital record of the interview will be secured and stored on a password protected and encrypted computer and any paper copies will be stored in a secure locked filing cabinet in Julia Henderson's office. The digital and paper records will only be reviewed by Julia Henderson and Kirsty Johnston; they will not be available to others. The record of interviews for this project will be stored for a minimum of five years. When the data is no longer required, hard copies will be shredded and digital files will be deleted. As a volunteer interviewee, you will not be compensated or remunerated for your participation. Please also be aware that the results of this study will be made available to you at its completion. If at any time before or during the study you have questions or concerns, we will answer them to the best of our ability.

The results of this study will appear in Julia Henderson's doctoral dissertation as well as scholarly journal articles and conference presentations. We are aware that confidentiality may be a concern for your participation. Should you desire that your name not be disclosed in the study, Julia will make provisions that prevent disclosure of your identity in any presentation or publication of results. If you have any concerns or complaints about your rights as a research participant and/or your experiences while participating in this study, contact the Research Participant Complaint Line in the UBC Office of Research Ethics at 604-822-8598 or if long distance e-mail [RSIL@ors.ubc.ca](mailto:RSIL@ors.ubc.ca) or call toll free 1-877-822-8598.

**Consent:**

- \* Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary and you may refuse to participate or withdraw from the study at any time.
- \* Your signature on page 3 indicates that you have received a copy of this consent form and all attachments for your own records.
- \* Your signature indicates that you consent to participate in this study.
- \* Unless you indicate below that you do not wish to be identified by name, your signature on page 3 also indicates your consent for Julia Henderson to quote your name and position, as well as attribute information gathered from the interview to you.
- \* Data obtained from this study will potentially be shared in scholarly journal articles, conference presentations and a Ph.D. dissertation to be prepared by Julia Henderson.

I, \_\_\_\_\_, agree to be interviewed by Julia Henderson about my involvement and experience in The Chop Theatre's production of *Sonic Elder*. I have received a copy of this **4-page consent** form.

**I do / I do not (circle one) wish to be identified by name in this study.**

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Place (City, Province): \_\_\_\_\_

Signature \_\_\_\_\_

### Sample Questions for Interviews with *Sonic Elder* Affiliated Artists

1. By what process were the musicians selected and/or the show cast?
2. How were performers involved in the process of developing the piece?
3. What kinds of dramaturgical processes did the company use to generate the final script?
4. Were there any stories that you wish were told that you feel were not? Were there any stories that were told that you wish had not been included?
5. How much was the show scripted versus improvised?
6. In what ways did performance enhance the script?
7. What role did memory play in the production development and performance? (for example, memory required for lines/stories; did memories change as they were rehearsed; were some memories privileged? Whose? Which ones? Why?)
8. What was the production's design process?
9. Do you consider yourself part of any particular generational group?
10. How would you describe your identity? How do you feel your identity is reflected in *Sonic Elder*?
11. In the show there were a lot of references to performers' childhoods but also to having children themselves. Why was this important?
12. Have you ever been involved in developing a show before? If yes, how did the process of developing this show compare?
13. What is your experience of aging in the music industry and does this show reflect that experience?
14. What objectives did you have for the production?
15. The show included a question and answer section with a young woman asking questions. What was the aim of section in terms of the goals of the overall production? Did it yield any surprises?
16. How has your musicianship and live performance changed over time? Was that considered/reflected/incorporated into the show?