Introduction: Unnatural Aging

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In "Cheating Death", an article about the medical advances that promise to expand average longevity during the next couple of decades, The Economist tells us that as life expectancy increases, it is conceivable that the elderly will feel emboldened to make nonstandard late life decisions like finding a new partner or taking up a new profession. In the future, the newspaper suggests, life might thus become "more a series of new beginnings than one single story". Summed up, someone's life would look somewhat like a collection of correlated but not organically integrated fragments.

Although similarly sceptical of so-called "decline narratives" which naturalize the idea that old age inevitably denotes physical and/or mental deterioration, Aging Studies (henceforth AS) scholars nonetheless believe that alternative discourses about aging have useful cultural work to do in the present and that discussions of this nature need not be subordinated to the progress of science and medicine. In the view of these scholars, the well-being and social lives of elderly people might be improved if we attend to and tackle certain stereotypes and assumptions about old age. American literary critic Kathleen Woodward, for example, claims that pervasive "gerontophobia" has led to a "relative lack of ambiguity in our representation of aging" (1999: 284), the paucity of research done on late life creativity being particularly notorious. Responsible for this, according to behavioural scientist Martin Lindauer, is the widespread belief that "nothing really new happens in the later decades

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when there are no fundamental changes comparable to youth" (2012: 5). In reality, says Lindauer, "creativity diminishes with age for some, is left unaffected for others and for a few emerges for the first time in late life" (2012: 21), the cognitive loss normally associated with old age being often related to manageable lifestyle habits and psychosocial forces. On a different note, literary critic Heike Hartung explains that accounts of old age generally follow a tragic formula that disregards how certain late life events, even painful ones, can transform someone's life trajectory in ways that are not always strictly negative. Taking a cue from Mary Russo, who advocates for the "inclusion of risk and randomness" in scholarly studies of old age, Hartung observes that a "focus on contingency makes it possible to incorporate illness, mourning and death, as well as […] acting against one's age and other departures from normative ideas of aging into narratives of life" (2015: 15). Rather than see life in terms of progress and decline, notions rooted in a rigid understanding of ability and strength, one might, Hartung notes, attend to its unpredictability as a series of potential turning points.

AS has focused predominantly on realist, confessional and (auto) biographical fiction, so much work remains to be done about genres that seek to challenge our views of reality, rather than mirroring or describing it. The central claim of this book is that experimental writing, science-fiction and fantasy (henceforth SFF) "denature" aging, proposing strange images of the body, the self and the lifespan that configure non-standard, but nonetheless normal, modes of embodiment. They complicate so-called "decline narratives" in various and oftentimes contradictory ways, critiquing naive fantasies of immortality and adaptability without lapsing into technophobia or a refusal to think beyond the boundaries of "the natural", too often conceived, in aging studies, as an immutable category used to describe the limits of (mortal) humans, who must inevitably age and die.

For their part, experimental works that dwell on the topic of aging often challenge the idea that old age is a time of recapitulation, reconciliation and resignation. Experimentalism excavates and shakes up the symbolic and ideological foundations upon which mainstream conceptions of the "normal" are based. Avant-gardists like those whose

work we discuss here position themselves against a poetics of summation, sobriety and depth, highlighting instead the importance of immaturity, incompleteness, skepticism, error, forgetfulness, plasticity, playfulness and everydayness for literary prospection and late life well-being. Their work is, most importantly, fully rooted in the present and retains the prospective and future-oriented tendencies that characterize experimental projects.

SFF and experimental art offer us perspectives on aging that are strange, speculative and sometimes downright unrealistic, which might make it seem like they have little to contribute to the discussion about a sensitive topic like that of old age. The latter is, nevertheless, often treated with exaggerated caution and seriousness, reinforcing stereotypes and limiting the array of social roles available to older people. Some research has been done on how aging is represented in experimental writing: for example, Kathleen Woodward's study of how Eliot, Pound, Stevens and Williams reached a more detached style in old age, Scott Herring's defense of Djuna Barnes's poetics of endless revision in her late phase or Elizabeth Barry's work on Beckett and his idea that loss of memory and concentration in old age actually made his writing more true-to-life in its vagueness and fragmentariness. Aging in SFF is also not a new area of study: we have, for example, Amelia DeFalco's article about how caregiving robots can become intimate companions or Ulla Kriebernegg's analysis of Margaret Atwood's apocalyptic "Torching the Dusties", a "burden story" about the segregation of the old), our aim is to take this research further, as well as to compile and synthesize, in a single volume, perspectives from multiple genres which are often seen as unrelated but nevertheless equally offer us perspectives on aging that undermine expectations of credibility and seek to expand the horizon of possibility. Rather than focus on the everyday challenges of the elderly, the works we explore here intentionally concentrate on seemingly otherworldly issues like immortality and monstrosity (for example, Ohm's chapter on Tolkien and Silva's chapter on Lispector and the abject), or they force us to reimagine what it means to be normal, healthy and creative (for example, Davidson's chapter on the life-affirming aesthetic/formal innovations William James, William Carlos

Williams and Merce Cunningham derive from their disabilities – or alternative abilities, if one sees them, as Davidson suggests we do, as other-abled rather than deficient vis-à-vis a standard model of bodily and cognitive competence).

By focusing on aging in SFF, this project also answers the call of aging studies veteran Kathleen Woodward for scholars in the field to turn to other aesthetic traditions and genres, highlighting "speculative and posthuman fiction" as modes of writing that allow us to inhabit other worlds with different youth-age value systems. Our aim will thus be to assess how the representations of aging we find in SFF differ from those provided by mainstream fiction and other marginal forms, like avant-garde literature. In spite (or precisely because) of their strangeness and irreverence, SFF provide us, we will argue, with important perspectives about aging that have thus far received little academic scrutiny.

There is a clear connection between Queer Studies' alternative views on time and the literary genres we propose to explore. Scholars like Cynthia Port and Linda Hess have done important work on the way queer theory can productively be used to make sense of the contradictions of old age, a time that is normally seen as unproductive and past-oriented (whereas heteronormativity is, according to Lee Edelman, for example, mandatorily future-oriented). In her essay on Benjamin Button, Port draws upon Edelman's critique of modernity's fascination with the redeeming features of youth and futurity to point out that "older adults whose economic, physical and/or cognitive resources are compromised may well find themselves outside mainstream temporal structures" (2012: 3). Like queer subjects, older people often put conventional ideas of progress to the test, either because they require vital but unproductive forms of care or are "preternaturally" active and creative. Queer Theory might also allow us to harness the creativity of SFF for the purposes of Aging Studies. In Queer Universes, Pearson et al. argue that, at its most progressive, science fiction is a genre that is particularly effective at conjuring up vistas of "a future that opens out, rather than forecloses, possibilities for becoming real, for mattering in the world." They point out that, for science fiction writers, "life does not remain static; what we know today may be entirely different tomorrow." In other words,

the pleasure we derive from science fiction partly stems from the way it "denatures" the world we know, challenging inevitabilities and probing the kinds of futures that are possible and desirable. Taking a cue from Tzvetan Todorov, Eugene Thacker notes that fantasy too is a genre that invites us to rethink the categories of the possible and the natural. "Aging Experiments" carries out an unprecedented survey of these two genres, our aim being to find and scrutinize SFF (science fiction and fantasy) texts that focus on aging and old age, as well as, whenever pertinent, the adjacent topics of life-extension, rejuvenation, immortality, body enhancement and time travel. SFF texts pose difficult questions about the inevitability of death, the desirability of immortality (or a very long life), the digitization of the self, the plasticity of one's lifelong talents, or the idea that one must try to lead a (long) healthy life. Our key assumption, based on a cursory overview of these genres, is that there is a vast array of relevant texts that have received little attention from the AS community.

It should be noted that, because some of the books in question engage with technoscientific fantasies about life-extension, this does not mean that they do so uncritically. They would otherwise not merit the close analysis that we here propose to undertake. Our goal is not, after all, to reinforce the prevailing culture of "juvenescence" nor to promote unrealistic and unjust ideas about how one can "age successfully", an endeavor that is always already constrained by race, class and sex inequalities that are often not taken into account. Like Pearson et al. point out about queer science-fiction, the texts of that genre we wish to examine here "are narratives that extend . . . cognitive estrangement precisely to those areas which a focus on the science of science-fiction tends to elide: the very world in which science takes place, the world of bodies and social systems" (2008: 3). The novels in question do not, that is, take the merits of science for granted. Crucially, however, they also do not reject science (or magic, in the case of fantasy) wholesale, choosing rather to pose provocative questions about the nature of necessity, progress and the good life.

As Michael Drout points out in his lecture series about these genres, SFF are immensely popular genres, topping sales charts not only in lit-

erature but also in other media like film and videogames. This not only means that these genres have a significant impact on mainstream discourse but also that they take up problems that speak to a vast array of people, much as the epic literature of the remote past used to do. One of these fundamental problems is that of death and immortality, which has fascinated the popular mind at least since the epic of Gilgamesh. Both genres create speculative worlds in which abstract concepts can be externalized (as fantasy does with its immortal elves, for example) or possible future scenarios be tested. Although informed by scientific debates, science-fiction, for one, does not merely follow the lead of science. Rather, it drives discovery and frames how we talk about the future, posing questions about the many paths human culture can take. Fantasy, for another, is not merely about romanticizing and escaping to some sort of ideal past. Rather, it gives us a glimpse of worlds that are oftentimes better than our own and empowers us to think and act in the here and now with a renewed perspective. In short, SFF offers us what realism can't: imaginary worlds and alternative social systems that allow us to put our mundane reality in perspective.

Such perspectives are readily available to us in such critically acclaimed novels as Larry Niven's Ringworld (1970), which sees his 200-year old protagonist, physically healthy but bored with ordinary earthly affairs, embark on a recon mission to the eponymous planet, home of an ancient civilization; Robert Heinlein's Time Enough for Love (1973), about the 2000-year old Lazarus Long, object of a life-extension experiment who, putting a spin on the Arabian Nights' premise, agrees to not commit suicide for as long as a relative keeps listening to his stories; Dan Simmons's Hyperion (1989), structured, like The Canterbury Tales, as a series of stories told by fellow pilgrims, in this case on their way to a planet in which time flows backwards, a phenomenon that makes one of the characters, who had already been to the planet on a research mission, to become progressively younger and gradually lose her memories; Tim Powers's Expiration Date (1996), which pits a young boy and a middle-aged man against a pair of elderly antagonists who seek to attain immortality by ingesting ghosts; John Scalzi's Old Man's War series (2005 – present), which centers on a vast array of old

characters that enroll in a mass recruitment program set up by the US government to fight aliens and colonize other planets, giving old people their youth back in exchange for a life-long commitment to the war; Robert J. Sawyer's Rollback (2007), which narrates the drama of a husband and wife who both undergo a rejuvenation treatment but end up following different temporal trajectories, the first regaining his youth but the second (due to the therapy's ineffectiveness) staying on course towards a progressively older age.

Throughout this collection we explore works that interrogate the concepts of flexibility, longevity and immortality, but we also wish to discuss how the genres in question foreground risk, vulnerability, disability and nonstandard forms of embodiment. Taking a cue from Stephen Katz, we acknowledge that the notions of flexibility and risk, undoubtedly valuable for the experimental approaches to aging we wish to explore, need to be clarified with due caution and responsibility in an age of increasing fragmentation and precarity. Above all we are interested in perspectives on aging that challenge the predominant narratives of decline as well as the equally prevalent fantasies of invulnerability and eternal youth. Our goal is ultimately to plumb and promote alternative conceptions to the good life as defined by neoliberal notions of health, able-bodiedness, agency, self-improvement, progress, plasticity and productivity.

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