

3 Captives of Care—Prisoners to the Palsy?

Resisting Confinement from Within

Most prisoners foresee a time when they will get out. Here we know there is no way out, only down, little by little, till death do us join with whatever comes next, if only dust to dust. Hope is one thing of which we are deprived.

— May Sarton, *As We Are Now*

May Sarton's novel *As We Are Now* (1973) is one of many literary examples that illustrate the fear, hopelessness, and despair commonly associated with nursing homes. Such portrayals usually represent the home as a prison from which death is the only escape. This chapter will focus on the nursing home as a fictional space that expresses the peripheralization of old age, its physical limitations, and the restricted mobility often associated with it—what Shakespeare's Edmund of Langley aptly calls being a "prisoner to the palsy" (*Richard II* 2.3.124–25). Extending Susan Braedley's concept of the "ruling metaphor," I argue that the prison metaphor serves as a powerful discursive framework that guides all social interactions. The texts demonstrate isotopies of confinement, repeated themes, images, and motifs that reinforce the experience of restriction, even incarceration. Helen Small discusses this as part of what she terms *care noir*, a "broad and inventive mode of perverse imaginary in which the institution looms all powerful and 'care' provides the thinnest of covers for licensed abuse" (Small 179). Within this framework, the nursing home is depicted not as a place of comfort and support, but as an oppressive institution that isolates and infantilizes its residents, stripping them of agency and dignity (179).

While portraying the institution as a bleak space of confinement, many texts also offer powerful counter-narratives of resistance to imprisonment. As this chapter will show, these counter-narratives bear witness to the protago-

nists' individual agency, independence, and growth, and help to deconstruct stereotypical notions of old age as merely a time of dependence, decrepitude, and disease. The protagonists presented in this chapter struggle against abuse, homogenization, and infantilization from *within* the confining walls of the care home, thereby challenging the nursing home specter and the ruling metaphor of imprisonment. Such narratives have the potential, as Sally Chivers puts it, to "revise cultural scripts that attempt to hold elderly characters firmly in place" ("On" 204), and contribute to ongoing debates of what long-term care should ideally be.

As Chivers points out, "[t]he popular press focuses on nursing homes as contemporary 'gulags,' sites of increasing use of chemical restraints, places of abuse and violence, and locations of tragedies that reveal high levels of neglect" ("Blind" 134–35). Such representations function as powerful and pervasive metaphors for the experience of old age in "heterotopias of deviation" (Foucault, "Of" 24). But texts that portray old people as "appropriately contained" (Chivers, "Road" 213) in long-term care institutions can also have a negative impact on the social and cultural construction of aging. Both literature and film play their distinctive, but interrelated, roles in deconstructing stereotypes, myths, and established assumptions with regard to aging and old age as a state of containment. The analysis of fictional narratives and their subversive power is crucial to our understanding of what it means to grow old in institutional care—and, of course, to its possible re-imagination.

This chapter offers a close reading of four texts, May Sarton's famous novel *As We Are Now*, Leslie Larson's novel *Breaking Out of Bedlam*, John Mighton's play *Half Life*, and Margaret Atwood's short story "Torching the Dusties," four works that show how the homes' residents/inmates, each in their own way, rebel against their confinement from within. Written at a time when few texts employed the care home as a setting,¹ *As We Are Now* is one of the earliest texts exemplary of the genre, which as it begins in the 1960s and early 1970s, depicts the home as a dreadful place. Four decades later, *Breaking Out of Bedlam* (2010), *Half Life* (2005), and "Torching the Dusties" (2014) still represent the home as a place of docile dependency. These representations are still rooted in the collective memory of the institution's history, as discussed in the introductory

1 Among them are John Updike's *The Poorhouse Fair* (1959), Margaret Laurence's *The Stone Angel* (1964), Alice Munro's short story "Spelling" (1978), and Edna Alford's short story collection *A Sleep Full of Dreams*. While Alford's collection appeared only in 1981, individual stories already came out in 1976.

chapters, and continue to conjure up the “nursing home specter” to which Betty Friedan dedicates a whole chapter in *The Fountain of Age*: “In ten years of my research, no data has emerged to counteract my impression of nursing homes as death sentences, the final interment from which there is no exit but death” (510), Friedan maintains, perpetuating the discourse of the home as horror in her influential work. “Even at their very best, nursing homes,” she continues in an interview in 2002, “remove people from the society of the living. [...] It’s just assumed they are no longer people. Too often they are treated as helpless children, sedated or put in restraints” (Luddington 151).

Topics such as abuse, infantilization, and sedation feature prominently in Sarton’s *As We Are Now*, Mighton’s *Half Life*, and Atwood’s “Torching the Dusties.” Even if Larson’s *Breaking Out of Bedlam* does not feature physical violence, residents are still infantilized and homogenized. In all four texts, the protagonists struggle, fight, and find means and ways to undercut (even if not always entirely successfully) the authoritarian regimes that interpellate them into their roles as patients. The protagonists of Sarton’s text escape institutional confinement only on an imaginary level through sexual fantasy (Standish Flint) and death (Caro Spencer), and even though one of the protagonists in *Half Life* manages to repeatedly break the door code in order to leave the home and go drinking, his escape plans are always frustrated within a few hours. Larson’s text seems to rewrite the journal that Sarton’s protagonist wrote forty years earlier; while Caro Spencer dies within the confining walls of the home, Cora Sledge manages to “break out of Bedlam,” and the novel ends just as she is about to move back into her old house. In Atwood’s “Torching the Dusties,” the last story analyzed in this chapter, the heterotopian nursing home becomes a death trap for all but two characters, when a group of young people wearing baby masks burns down the home.

3.1 Embodying Imprisonment

Before analyzing these texts, I would first like to elaborate on the figure of confinement as a metaphor and on the nursing home’s synecdochical significance, a recurring guiding theme across the representations discussed. Representations of aging often closely intertwine notions of body, identity, and home, and the following section explores these connections in detail. Indeed, the aging body itself can be interpreted through Bakhtin’s concept of the chronotope, as it embodies the passage of time. The visible changes in the aging body reflect

the accumulation of lived experiences, memories, and personal histories. The body can therefore be read as a spatiotemporal narrative, physically manifesting an individual's life journey and serving as a tangible representation of time itself. In line with Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope, physical limitations in old age can be interpreted as a spatialization of time, concretely illustrating how the aging body itself becomes a site of imprisonment.

Kontos observes that older persons frequently describe illness or disability as imprisoning an "imprisoning of their inner youthfulness" ("Multi" 34), suggesting the aging body acts as a constricting, confining space. Similarly, Featherstone and Wernick argue that "for those who are in deep old age, who are weak, frail or disabled, the body is not only a masking device which conceals and distorts the self which others interact with, in addition the lack of mobility and functioning capacity may make the body seem to be a prison" (11). This resonates in Edward Hays's impressive depiction of aging as incarceration, where the body's decline metaphorically strips away identity, autonomy, and dignity—an experience that embodies the intersection of space (the body as prison) and time (the loss of memories, capacities, and selfhood). I cite it here extensively because it illustrates the abject character old age can assume in an extreme manner:

One day you awake to find yourself behind barbed wire fences as a prisoner of an escape-proof concentration camp—old age. You have been seeing all the warning signs of your dreaded deportation in the mirror and knew soon you would be next. [...] The essence of entering prison is loss. The possessions of those entering are confiscated. As they are stripped of clothing, lost too is their dignity. Elders experience this confiscation of dignity as well by examinations in doctors' offices and in various medical procedures. These losses increase as they age, as slowly hair color goes, and for some, hair itself. Bodily strength and agility are taken away, then teeth, eyesight and hearing. Painful losses of later years can include the fabulous freedom achieved at 16 of having a driver's license. At any time in aging comes a profoundly dreadful confiscation—loss of memory. When memories of loved ones, dear friends, adventures in life, one's work or profession are taken, the elderly are stripped naked to the bone. (Hays n.p.)

In addition to Hays's shocking comparison of old age with a concentration camp (a comparison that May Sarton also uses in *As We Are Now*), this passage reveals several negative assumptions about what it means to grow old. Hays interprets old age to be an external threat that strikes a person at a certain

point in time, and often seemingly unexpectedly during the night. He generalizes the experience of loss, decline, and illness—or what he simply calls terror—as universal. Yet, at the same time, he argues that there is a kind of miraculous agency in trying to “turn old age’s prison into a time of forgiveness and gratitude,” as the title of his article suggests. Regardless of Hays’s moralistic attitude, his essay is an example of the metaphor of old age as an imprisonment, which prevails in many cultural representations, including most of the long-term care narratives discussed in this book, and especially those presented in this chapter.

Don Fidencio, for instance, the 91-year old protagonist of *Amigoland* who escapes a care home to travel to Mexico and die there in peace, expresses his frustration about the futility of his escape: “He had escaped one prison only to discover that there was no way of escaping his own failing body” (Casares 285). Don Fidencio sees his decrepit body as an oppressor to whom he is hostage, and his comments can be likened to those of the Duke of York in Shakespeare’s *Richard II*, who describes himself as “prisoner to the palsy” (Woodward, “Instant” 55). Likewise, Joan Barfoot’s *Exit Lines* presents George, who is angry at his own body for failing him after he suffers a stroke: “Pathetic. It’s not just lost words and leftward vision that frustrate, it’s a body that won’t let him whip around to check what’s behind him. . . . A man shouldn’t be so defenceless” (35).

This oppositional relationship to one’s aging body is based on a Cartesian dual perception of the self and the body, which is often experienced as alienating, as Kathleen Woodward contends in her theory of the “mirror stage of old age”. She develops this theory with reference to Jacques Lacan’s concept of the mirror stage of infancy:

It is not surprising that the image of the mirror should dominate literary representations of the aged body. The horror of the mirror image of the decrepit body is the inverse of the pleasures of the mirror image of the youthful Narcissus. As we age we increasingly separate ourselves—what we take to be our real selves—from our bodies. We believe our real selves, that is our youthful selves, are hidden inside our bodies, not commensurate with them. Our bodies are old, we are not. Old age is a state in which the body is in opposition to the self and we are alienated from our bodies. (“Instant” 55)

Woodward’s observation has been confirmed by several literary accounts of the experience of old age. The alienation that occurs when the body is no longer experienced as self, but as other, enables the use of the metaphor of the body that

both houses, and hides, the self. In *The Portrayal of Old Age*, Heather Gardiner writes that “the image of the house of the ageing body as a form of confinement is common in the literature of old age” (26–27). Gardiner also sees the nursing home as a metaphor for the fears and feelings that growing old and dependent evokes:

Old age is frequently expressed in literature in the language of confinement and imprisonment. Either imprisonment is portrayed literally, such as confinement in a nursing home or other limited space, or the process of building a “stone house” of self-imprisonment is suggested, one whereby the elderly protagonist carefully orders and controls what he or she chooses to present to the outside world. (24)

One of the examples that illustrates Gardiner’s point is Alice Munro’s short story “Spelling” in which Rose, a young woman, visits the Wawanash County Home for the Aged and is shown an old woman who is confined behind the bars of her crib. This old woman’s language is reduced to “spelling” occasional words; she is otherwise unable to speak. Gardiner argues that the “description of her imprisoned in her crib and the focus on her speech suggests the caging of another language in old age” (27).

Another example Gardiner’s analysis led me to discover is that of David Waltner-Toews’s short story “A Sunny Day in Canada” (1980), which portrays an old married couple, Prometheus Koslowski, the narrator, and his wife Rachel, who lives with dementia. They are confined in a nursing home to a “two-bed inescapably pastel-pink room. Nursery, nursing home, the choice of names is no accident” (Waltner-Toews 240). Prom, while observing a fellow resident who fantasizes about having an affair with one of the nurse’s aides, focuses on his body: “His body had a stroke on the left side, his big fat quivering body. He does not admit inhabiting that body. He lives in another body, young and muscular. A body that will go with Betty, the chubby blonde aide, to the lake this weekend” (243). Like Munro’s “Spelling,” Waltner-Toews’s story also describes the failing language of the oldest old: “We progress, in this place, from long sentences to short phrases to a few key words and finally to silence and eternal peace. The staff help us in this unlearning of language, this progression which is the reverse of childhood. By now, most of us here speak in simple sentences” (241). Prom’s observation, which also contains a critique of the taciturn nature of the staff, is based on a narrative of decline and reduction. As Gardiner observes, “[n]ot only does confinement of the old occur in smaller and smaller spaces, but

the body shrivels in its space and, as the old man points out, so does language” (30). She underlines the difficulty of adequately representing the experience of old age with this statement.

Prom describes his old body in spatial terms, not only by using the cultural narrative of the circle of life, but also by describing how his body is placed, and “tucked in a cave” that resembles a womb:

Let me tell you about my body. My body is a skeleton wrapped in parchment. The orderly discovers this archaeological artifact every morning, tucked into a cave of white sheets and woollen blankets: bald as a plucked chicken, the legs bent up towards the chest, twisted around each other. Doctor Toews says the body is reverting to fetal posture, which just shows how far removed from the womb he is. (Waltner-Toews 241)

Waltner-Toews describes the experience of the end of life as a preparation for a final birth—which is death—that closes the circle of life. Prom knows that Rachel will soon be released from the confining space of the home and her own body, and he visualizes the end of their life as a journey to heaven (which is also mirrored in the collection's title, *One Foot in Heaven*):

But her lightness, that is what I love. One morning, she will lift up through the window like a kite, up, up, growing smaller and smaller into the blue prairie sky. I shall be holding the string. When she arrives up there, she will give a little tug, and I too will be pulled loose. I shall float up after her, unstuck from earth. (Waltner-Toews 241)

The story ends with Rachel's death, and rests on Prom's hope that he will soon be able to follow her. The nursing home in this story is presented as a waiting room for death, a *pars pro toto* for the “foreign country of old age,” as Sarton puts it (23), or the “banished existence in the land of the fourth space” as Haim Hazan theorizes it (“Beyond” 91).

The physical limitations that are experienced by an aging person are also described by Gardiner in her analysis of *Redwork* (1990), a children's book in which Michael Bedard describes the restricted world of old Mr. Magnus: “The house Mr. Magnus lives in no longer has its own shape, but has taken on the shape of the old man, now in his nineties, ‘sett[ing] around him like a second skin’. The movements of Mr. Magnus are limited to this house, where a ‘few sad rooms’ become an ‘old man's world’ and ‘horizons’ are reduced to ‘walls’ (178)”

(Gardiner 27). May Sarton has Caro Spencer describe her situation in a similar way in *As We Are Now* (1973). Caro feels entrapped both in her own aging body and the dreadful, prison-like nursing home: “I am walled in” (111) she describes her situation, “[t]he walls close in on every side. I do not remember things very clearly” (115).

The body as spatial entity is also foregrounded in Margaret Laurence’s novel *The Stone Angel*, where Hagar Shipley is afraid of the care home: “Is it a mausoleum, and I, the Egyptian, mummified with pillows and my own flesh through some oversight embalmed alive?” (96). She leaves her own home, and escapes to a village on the beach, but instead of the summer house she remembers, she only finds a dilapidated ruin in which she seeks shelter, sick and exhausted. Heather Gardiner connects Hagar’s aging body with its surroundings:

By placing the ninety-year-old Hagar in a deteriorating building next to the ocean, Laurence presents the image of an old woman with a failing body sitting on the edge of the formlessness of eternity, far removed from the security of the bodily house which has offered her shape and form for most of her life. [...] Hagar’s sense of identity is closely tied to the house she lives in. At Shadow Point, Hagar is separated from her house and the “shreds and remnants of years” (36) it contains, and new voyages into realms away from physical objects remain the only possibility. (86–87)

When Hagar, after her long and exhausting escape from Silverthreads, the care home in which she was placed, is hospitalized at the end of the novel, and moved from the geriatric ward to a semi-private room (281), she remarks that “the world is even smaller now. It’s shrinking so quickly.” The next room will be “the smallest of all,” with “just enough space” for herself (282), Hagar says, anticipating her own death.

In her analysis of “Ageing in the 21st Century,” Catherine Du Toit analyzes the metaphor of shrinking space by means of the aging body:

Contraction or shrinking is another recognizable figure of ageing which is adapted to contemporary conditions. Brought about by the physical inability to move, the reluctance to abandon a familiar setting, the decay of the senses or the progressive loss of contact with the world outside, the ageing subject finds himself in a shrinking space. [...] The ageing body itself is also subject to physical contraction. Degenerative diseases such as osteoporosis cause shrinkage in height. In Alzheimer’s disease, parts of the brain atrophy

as neurons and synapses die. This “process of reduction”, as Philip Roth calls it in *Everyman* (92) transcends the physical, and the experience of ageing, whether accompanied by physical suffering or not, is often expressed as diminishing and belittling. (285–287)

All these examples, including parts of Du Toit’s explanation, define aging as illness, loss, and decline and are part of a cultural narrative of aging. Faced with such limitations, the protagonists in the novels discussed here respond by creating an escape world for themselves in their imagination, challenging the confining structures of old age and the care home, which serves to illustrate these limitations in other ways. “Writing can be construed as an attempt to root oneself in the present, in other words, to confirm one’s continued presence in the world by creating an existence that will allow a certain appropriation of time [and space] through the iterative remembering the reception of a text brings about,” Du Toit argues (294).

3.2 Writing Against Confinement: May Sarton’s *As We Are Now* and Leslie Larson’s *Breaking Out of Bedlam*

Do not go gentle into that good night,
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

— Dylan Thomas, “Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night”

As We Are Now (1973) and *Breaking Out of Bedlam* (2010) each present an old woman’s struggle against institutional confinement through the act of journaling. Writing in their diaries, Caro Spencer, the protagonist of *As We Are Now*, and Cora Sledge, the protagonist of *Breaking Out of Bedlam*, chronicle their lives, hopes, and fears in secret diaries that are only made public after their deaths. For both women, writing becomes an act of defiance, a means of reclaiming their voices and resisting the inhumane treatment they endure in long-term care. Their pens serve as sharp weapons, wielded in protest and revenge against the institutions that seek to silence them. More importantly, the women’s journals help them overcome traumatic experiences, and enable them to reclaim personal freedom and agency—each in their own way. *As We Are Now* and *Breaking Out Of Bedlam* present two women’s creative acts of

writing that lead to a “composing [...] of the self” (Woodward, “May” 111). Both novels can be read as *Reifungsromane* (Waxman, *From* 2). The similarity between the protagonists’ names as well as other parallels in the stories may be coincidental, but as the following analysis will show, *Breaking Out of Bedlam* parallels *As We Are Now* on several levels, and can be read as a modernized, re-written version of Sarton’s more than fifty-year-old novel. Albeit with very different style and tone, the novels offer proof of the two old women’s resilience, and their search for self in institutional long-term care.

As We Are Now records the last days of 76-year old Caro Spencer, who is taken to “Twin Elms,” a “Dickensian nursing home” (Woodward, “May” 118) in rural New England by her older brother and his young wife after having suffered an incapacitating heart attack. Caro, a former high-school math teacher, is a single, educated woman determined to fight against the ageist treatment she experiences in the small, unkempt, privately owned place. When she feels she finally cannot bear the humiliating treatment any longer, she sets fire to the home, killing all its residents, including herself. Her diary is found hidden in a fridge, as is indicated in the afterword, which, although it first looks like a meta-text, is actually part of the fictional world of the novel: “AFTERWORD: This manuscript was found after the fire that destroyed the Twin Elms Nursing Home. In a letter found inside the cover, Miss Caroline Spencer requested the Reverend Thornhill to have it published if possible. This has been done with the permission of her brother, John Spencer” (134). Caro writes down her testimony to warn others, and raise awareness regarding the marginalization of the old, frail, and sick: “Perhaps if this story of despair could be published it would help those who deal with people like me, the sick in health or mind, or the just plain old and abandoned” (112). She calls it “The Book of the Dead” (10), her “*memento mori*,” (10) not only to hint at her own finiteness, but also to raise the readers’ attention to the fact that her fate may also be ours as we age (Maierhofer, *Salty* 328). As Maierhofer also writes, Caro places herself in a larger social and inter-generational context for which the novel’s title is also significant: “As you are now, so once was I; Prepare for death and follow me” (Sarton 5) the epigraph reads from which the title is adapted. She finishes the journal while thinking of her intended audience: “Only one thing, THE important thing I must manage to do is place all the copybooks in the frigidaire. To you who may one day read this, I give them as a testament. Please try to understand” (133).

While Caro Spencer addresses her wish to shed light on the horrible conditions of institutional care to anyone who will find her journal after her death, Cora Sledge in *Breaking Out of Bedlam* addresses primarily her children (and

readers) to whom she intends to reveal the secrets of her traumatic past, begging them for their understanding, and inviting them to reevaluate her story:

I'm going to take all three books, seal them in an envelope, and write OPEN UPON MY DEATH on them. I'll put them in my linen closet where I keep all my best pillowcases and towels, things that's too nice to use. When I die and you come to clean out my house, you'll find them. You can do whatever you want. I've pictured you reading them and finding out the truth. If you see any mistakes—spelling or wrong words—you can fix them. You have my okay. (Larson 310)

Cora, an 82-year old feisty widow, initially documents in her journals her suffering in The Palisades, an assisted living institution in Phoenix, Arizona. Deciding that because she has “nothing to lose” (4), it was now time for her to tell the truth about her life, she begins to write down her story: “I hope those that put me in this place read it when I'm dead—which I have a feeling won't be long. Maybe then they'll see” (Larson 4). At first, her writing is also an act of revenge. She is furious at her three middle-aged children, who decide that she can no longer properly take care of herself in her own home where she had lived with her late husband, Abel. Actually, since his death, Cora has become addicted to pills and junk food, cannot walk but a few steps at a time, is forgetful, depressed, and has become heavily overweight. Her children's concerns about their mother's well-being seem justified. Cora has been excluded from any decision-making process regarding her future, and feels that her citizenship rights are being violated in an ageist manner: “My mistake was thinking an adult could make her own decisions. Thinking I was still an American citizen with rights that couldn't be taken away. [...] They talked to lawyers and looked at places to put me. They got everything in order. I was the last one to know” (Larson 7).

In a tradition of literary self-reflection, Cora, like Caro—also begins writing a diary. Her writing becomes a routine that keeps Cora alive amidst the institution's “droolers,” who are “wheeled along or plod like zombies” (Larson 9). In her tell-all journal, she interweaves two narrative strands, past and present, that reflect and explain each other. While the strand narrating the present provides her with a means of catharsis in, subversion of, and resistance to her current situation in the care home, the strand that chronicles her memory enables her to make a “life review” (Butler). This allows her to come to terms with past conflicts, and to reevaluate and re-narrate them in order to integrate them

into a positive life course narrative. While Caro Spencer in *As We Are Now* finally burns down the home and commits suicide, *Breaking Out of Bedlam* ends with Cora leaving the home, and moving back into her old house after the two narrative strands, past and present, have been connected to create a future for Cora.

Hellish Total Institutions

In this context, the ambiguity of the novel's title needs to be mentioned: "Bedlam" is the nickname of Bethlehem Royal Hospital in London, the oldest psychiatric institution in the world (founded in 1247). The hospital's website refers to its history:

From Shakespeare's time onwards the word "Bedlam" has been widely used to conjure up images of "turmoil, confusion and cacophony." Unfounded myths about the hospital's early history include claims that exorcism was used to treat some patients, and that up until the late nineteenth century as many as 96,000 people visited "Bethlem" each year, and paid to see patients being "exhibited" on Sundays. (South London and Maudsley NHS Foundation Trust n.p.)

While these myths may be "unfounded," the conditions were certainly far from humane. In colloquial, modern English, "Bedlam" has come to stand for chaos and madness. The novel's title refers to both meanings of the term—the very structured, rigid institution Cora is sent to, and the chaos of her life prior to her institutionalization.

Cora lives in an assisted living wing of "this hell they call The Palisades" (Larson 49), but fears that she will eventually have to live "in B Wing, locked up in bedlam with those lunatics and half-deads" (158). Even though she is not "state," i.e., relying on Medicare support like some of the poorer people who share wards, where "more than half the bare fluorescent lights were out, and the ones that *were* working sizzled and flickered like a scene from hell" (91), the room she inhabits is small and impersonal. Her view includes only chains of laundry carts and daily truck deliveries, and she feels choked by the fumes: "My room even has a number, 136, like a motor lodge or a doctor's office" (49). The home is run by "Bigbutt and her henchmen" (233), as Cora calls the head nurse and her helpers, and is described as a "place that's no more than a warehouse, a storage bin where people are tossed until the next shipment comes in" (49). Several times she refers to the "disinfectant smell" that "didn't cover up that piss stink" (80) and the "nasty plastic dishes [...] covered in chewed up food and cold

gravey” (79), “half hospital, half prison” (296)—“except you got to break the law to end up in there and here your only crime is you lived too long” (37). Institutional life lacks dignity:

[F]luorescent lights in the hall reflect on the floor that’s white, too, everything white, but a dirty white—like snow that’s piled up beside the road. You see one horror after another walking by the open doors of people’s rooms. Nobody pays any mind to decency. I’ve seen bare-ass old men with their balls dangling down to their knees, and tattered dog-ear tits like socks with rocks in the end. It’s enough to turn your stomach. (50)

During the first months after her institutionalization, Cora seeks comfort in her sleeping pills: “The first few months I was here, I didn’t want to come out of my room or see anybody or even get out of bed. I could not get my mind around what happened to me. I took whatever pills I could get my hands on and half the time I didn’t know my own name. Then I got pneumonia. Good, I thought. I finally found a way to die” (37). At least, Cora would have had a role in her own death.

Caro Spencer in *As We Are Now* describes her institutionalization in a similar way, but without the irony and sense of humor that reveal a certain distance to what is going on around Cora. Caro Spencer is at best bitter and cynical. “I am in a concentration camp for the old, a place where people dump their parents or relatives exactly as though as it were an ash can” (9), May Sarton has her protagonist complain, also using the over-exaggerated and inappropriate image of the concentration camp² to express her extreme frustration about the poor standards of the home and her treatment, but also, and more importantly, with her suffering in the foreign and forgotten place.

2 In *Understanding May Sarton*, Mark K. Fulk explains that Sarton frequently uses the Holocaust as a subtext in her writing (49; 98; 101). This comparison seems particularly out of place because Sarton refers to concentration camps in other contexts throughout the novel, making it clear that she is well aware of the abject horror of such places. While such comparisons are not uncommon (Shapiro 237; M. O’Neil) and extend back to 1930, they are clearly questionable.

Writing as Self-Defense

Sarton calls *As We Are Now* “her ‘J’accuse’”³ (Springer 48) in which she articulates her indictment of society’s inhumane treatment of dependent elders. Caro Spencer’s diary is equated with an open letter that rebels against the inhumane conditions under which old people are forced to live in nursing homes. Her journal is a “life-testimony” that she wants to use to reach out to the world, bringing the perpetrators to trial, as Shoshana Felman theorizes the act of witnessing with regard to the act of writing and reading. “A ‘life-testimony’ is not simply a testimony to a private life, but a point of conflation between text and life, a textual testimony which can *penetrate us like an actual life* [...] something crucial takes place which is of the order of a *trial*” (Felman 1). Caro Spencer appoints herself as a witness, and speaks for others to others (Felman 3).

Caro Spencer’s home Twin Elms is run by an authoritarian nurse, Harriet Hatfield, and her daughter Rose, depicted as two overweight and uneducated women. Harriet leaves no doubt as to who has the upper hand: “She has been trained to treat the inmates as inferiors to be ordered about, controlled in every possible way. I escape the control simply by being myself. However meek I am, I am still myself. This, I presume, is what has to be destroyed” (Sarton 95), Caro writes in her diary. Kathleen Woodward reads the relationship between the nurses and Caro as follows: “Spencer is abandoned to die. Worse, at Twin Elms, [...] she is initiated into evil. She confronts the corruption seemingly inherent in the relationship between master (the administrator) and slave (the patient)” (“May” 120). The text here resonates with Goffman’s description of a person’s entry into a total institution. Goffman (using only male pronouns throughout the text) writes that a person

comes into the establishment with a conception of himself made possible by certain stable social arrangements in his home world. Upon entrance, he is immediately stripped of the support provided by these arrangements. In the accurate language of some of our oldest total institutions, he begins a series of abasements, degradations, humiliations, and profanations of self. His self is systematically, if often unintentionally, mortified. He begins some radical shifts in his moral career, a career composed of the progressive changes that

3 The term “J’accuse” is attributed to French writer Émile Zola who wrote an open letter in 1898 in the newspaper *L’Aurore* in the context of the Dreyfus affair (Essig 173).

occur in the beliefs that he has concerning himself and significant others. (*Asylums* 14)

Caro Spencer rebels against the institutional pressures that threaten, as Goffman expresses it, her moral career. In fact, many passages in the novel can be read as descriptions from the inside of a total institution, as if to illustrate Goffman's case studies further: "There is a connection between any place where human beings are helpless, through illness or old age, and a prison. It is not only the heroic helplessness of the inmates, but also what complete control does to the nurses, guards, or whatever" (Sarton 49), and "[i]f keepers are corrupted by having absolute power, what about those they keep? We learn to ingratiate ourselves [...]. So if I am punished, I deserve it" (74–75). She has already internalized her guilt—she is guilty of being old.

From the first week of her institutionalization on, Caro tries to defend her sense of self against the humiliating mortification she experiences in the home. Once, after speaking up against the nurses' inhumane treatment of a fellow resident, she is locked in a dark room, which is a devastating experience for her: "They shatter me. I am not worthy, a leper—an old woman without control over herself" (Sarton 42). She is well aware of the processes that endanger her identity ("Don't let them steal your mind," 29) and tries to resist being mortified (Goffman, *Asylums* 14) by writing down her thoughts and experiences as best she can in her little book:

I am forcing myself to get everything clear in my mind by writing it down so I know where I am. There is no reality now except what I can sustain inside me. My memory is failing. I have to hang on to every scrap of information I have to keep my sanity, and it is for that purpose that I am keeping a journal. Then if I forget things later, I can always go back and read them here. (Sarton 10)

Caro knows she cannot fully trust herself: "The borderline between reality and fantasy is so thin in this confined, dreadfully lonely place" (26). It also becomes clear to the reader that Caro is not always a reliable narrator, and that she oscillates between reality and imagination, rationality, and senility (Maierhofer, *Salty* 331). Whether her narration is an accurate description of the nurses' sadistic dictatorship or if this is how Caro conceives and interprets what could merely be sloppiness and carelessness on the nurses' part is not important. What is more important is that the novel reveals the significance of

her maintaining integrity in that she maintains her identity in life and death and counteracts the fragmentation of self (Maierhofer, *Salty* 331).⁴

Caro's journal serves as her map (a repeated image) that allows her to navigate the borderland between rationality and imagination: "So, in this way, this path inward and back into the past is like a map, the map of my world. If I can draw it accurately, I shall know where I am" (Sarton 10). I agree with Woodward, who reads this passage of knowing "where I am" as a "rejection of paternalism and the adoption of a conscious political position" (Woodward, "May" 122). By locating herself on this map, Caro Spencer strives to make the horrible conditions of her existence at Twin Elms, but also the way old people are treated in general, accessible to the public. Caro equates her experience of oppression to that of the African Americans' resistance: "I have my own ideas of what those beyond the pale do—the blacks, for instance. They finally come to see that violence is the only answer to oppression. They make bombs" Caro states (Sarton 107). Her diary "leads to an act of *guerilla warfare* inside the closed world of Twin Elms and, Spencer hopes, may have an influence outside it," Woodward notes ("May" 122). Not death itself is horrible, as Maierhofer puts it, but a life without dignity preceding death, and this is why Sarton argues for a dignified way of aging in spite of physical and mental restrictions (*Salty* 328).

Cora Sledge's writing in *Breaking Out of Bedlam* is also an act of "guerilla warfare," with her new pen used as a weapon in the fight, sharp as a knife: "You might notice I'm using a new pen. [...] It writes small and pointy, so I can fit more on the page. [...] I feel like I'm using a needle, or a knife, when I'm writing with it—like I'm ready to get down to business. [...] The black ink is good, too. Makes everything I write look important" (Larson 111). Hoping that their pen may be mightier than a sword, both Cora and Caro fight for self-determination. Finding words to write and re-write their life-course narratives is extremely important for them. Cora, especially, indulges in the process, and describes the act of writing with an expensive new fountain pen she finds in her drawer as an almost sensual pleasure. "It's beautiful: a deep wine color with a gold nib. The ink is *brown!* When you write, it looks like a treasure map" (Larson 111). In fact, her writing, like Caro Spencer's, maps out her life in front of her and shows her the way to a hidden treasure: her own life story, her identity. This metaphor recurs in the chapter "A Way Out" when Marcos, the gay Latino

4 „Deutlich wird im Roman, dass es vielmehr darum geht, die Integrität der Identität im Alter und im Tod zu bewahren und der Fragmentarisierung des Selbst entgegenzuwirken" (331).

technician who comes daily to bring Cora her inhaler (before secretly smoking cigarettes with her, a paradoxical visit), gives her a “big book of maps from the Day Room” (159). Cora, black and blue after a fall, has to stay in bed and puts it across her knees, using it as a writing table to state, “I’m making the best of it and catching up on my story” (159).

Cora also uses the pen to practice writing her own name, which is printed in the novel in what looks like her handwriting to emphasize the importance of this sensual act. “Coral Spring,” she writes her maiden name, and below it “Cora Sledge,” and finally “Mrs. Cora Kovic” (112). The names not only trace the development of her past marital status but also map out a future pathway; Kovic is the last name of Vitus, an Eastern European fellow resident with whom she has fallen head over heels in love. She secretly dreams of getting married to Vitus, who literally embodies life, and who encourages Cora to change hers. A very active and good-looking charmer, Vitus also seems to fancy Cora, and pays her frequent visits in her room. But Vitus Kovic is also presented as a trickster with a certain uncanny and mysterious aura around him. His handsome appearance makes him stand out from the other men in the home. There is no obvious reason why he would be in an assisted living facility since he is very fit, active, and healthy. He appears and disappears in unexpected places, and Cora can hardly ever locate him when she wants to see him in his room. When she does try to visit him, she gets lost in the home’s hallways:

There were little square plaques with the room numbers beside each door, odd on one side, even on the other. They could have been milestones for as long as it took me to get from one to the other, but I just kept plodding along, taking it one step at a time. I could feel that group behind be watching. Seemed like I was disappearing down a tunnel that kept getting darker and darker, and the smell got worse, too—the pee so shrill and strong it made my scalp tingle. (Larson 93)

The imagery used to describe her path is uncanny, and the description reads as if Cora were going further and further towards a forbidden place. The exhausting walks Cora undertakes in the home parallel the wanderings of her mind into her past; while she initially gets continuously lost, she manages to walk a little further every day, and the farther she gets, the closer she comes to being able to verbalize her repressed memories so they can find their way into her journal. On her first exhausting walk, she eventually manages to find Vitus’s room, but he is not there. She keeps helplessly wandering about until

she is exhausted and collapses into a wheelchair. “That mean nurse, Tanya” (97) eventually finds Cora in the hallway and pushes her back where she belongs. With her last remaining energy, she gets out her key to open the door (she had locked it because a couple of things had recently been stolen from her room), and finds Vitus sitting there, watching TV, eating her trail mix, and grinning. “You left it open,” he says (98).

Social Death: Feeling Out of Place

Similar to Cora Sledge, Caro Spencer is also lost and “out of place” in the small, rural facility of Twin Elms. In contrast to Cora Sledge, she is the only woman resident among several men. Also, she is the “odd one out” because of obvious class differences: “It is terrible to have to admit that even here, one does not change one’s class. I am a snob. I went to college, taught school for forty years, come of gentle people. [...] I have no peer, no one I can talk to” (Sarton 17). The nurses notice the difference as well, and ridicule her sophistication: “Of course she’s a lady and we are a bit rough and ready for someone like her” (18) they contest, making it clear to her from the beginning that she should not expect special treatment (18). Caro cannot find any allies in the other residents, and feels isolated: “I look at them from very far away as if they were in the distance, across a wide river. We have nothing in common. Why pretend that we do?” (82). Her loneliness is particularly hard to endure, and the constant threat and paralyzing pressure put on her by the head nurse makes her life almost unbearable. This leads to what Haim Hazan has called “social death”—a death that precedes biological death: “A person begins to lose social roles and cultural identity prior to the termination of biological existence. The interval between social death and physical death may span a period of many years, and it is one of the fundamental elements of our culture in relation to the aged,” Hazan states (*Old Age* 69). Caro writes in her diary to prevent herself from suffering a “social death,” but her efforts to resist and keep a “social life” become more difficult every day.

After a few days, she has already internalized the institutional gaze in the panoptical world of surveillance: “After a short time, even a very few days here, one begins to feel like an animal in a cage. Even if the door were open, one would not dare move” (Sarton 22). The novel mirrors what Michel Foucault writes in *Discipline and Punish* when he describes the effect of the panopticon “to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power [...] in short, that the inmates should be caught up in a power situation of which they are themselves the

bearers" (*Discipline* 201). Caro is constantly aware of the surveillance, which makes it difficult for her to communicate with her only ally, Mr. Standish Flint, a retired farmer who is almost deaf and suffering from cancer and bedsores, but who is appreciative of Caro's clear mind and resistance. Despite his lack of hearing, Standish Flint is as angry as Caro, and rebels against the nurses Harriet and Rose by hiding his tranquilizers, refusing food, and offending them by shouting obscenities at them. Rose is particularly offended by Flint's "expatriat[ing] on their enormous bums and breasts" and his "repertoire of dirty jokes" (Sarton 26). Waxman (*From* 151) interprets the narration of Flint's survival tactic ("his chief escape is sexual fantasy," Sarton 26) as a deconstruction of the stereotype that sexuality and senescence are mutually exclusive, an interpretation that Woodward, in her interpretation of Sarton's text, reads as part of "a critique of our cultural devaluation of elders" ("May" 115, also quoted in Waxman, *Hearth* 151).

While sexuality is an integral component of their very being for both Caro and Standish Flint, it is an absolute taboo in the institution. Flint's dirty jokes make Rose cry, Caro, on the contrary, finds them "quite funny" (Sarton 26), but regrets that she cannot tell him about her life in return: "I suppose he imagines I am an old maid—I could tell him some things but they are not to be shouted. [...] The conversational opportunities here are certainly at a minimum" (Sarton 26). Sexuality has always been an important aspect of Caro's life; for instance, in the journal she narrates how she followed her secret (married) lover, Alex, to France. But because Standish Flint needs to be shouted at, developing any closer friendship is difficult; the walls seem to have ears. She can hardly talk to him openly as "there is a house law that doors must not be closed. The two women are always in and out of every room, and one never knows when they are listening" (18). The panoptization of the inmates transforms them from human beings into subjects, and creates their "otherness," as Caro asserts: "We are talked about always as 'them,' as if we were abandoned animals thrown out of a car" (16).

When Standish Flint dies lonely "in the ambulance among total strangers" (70), Caro is depressed and feels guilty for having betrayed him; after all, it was she who initiated a medical inspection of the facility through a comment to Reverend Thornhill. The inspectors take Mr. Flint, who wants nothing but die in peace, to hospital against his will. "His battle to die with dignity in his own way was lost" (70), she writes, and her description of the dehumanizing procedures to which dying Mr. Flint is subjected is evocative of psychiatrist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's famous book *On Death and Dying*, in which she empha-

sizes the importance of “interpersonal human relationships” (9) at the end of life through which the fears, anxieties, and hopes of a dying person can be expressed.

Twin Elms defies all such principles, and undermines all human relationships. After her only ally’s death, Caro feels extremely lonely. The nurses, she believes, punish her for triggering the home’s medical inspection, and prevent Reverend Thornhill’s daughter Lisa from visiting her, arguing that a visit would not do Ms. Spencer any good. Caro had been looking forward to the young girl’s visit, which she sees as a lifeline to the world outside. “The door that had opened a crack is being slammed shut,” Caro writes (77). She craves the Thornhill family’s visits because they are the only meaningful communication she receives. “The fact is that I am dying for lack of love. Exactly as though the oxygen in my lungs were being slowly diminished” (116).

Reclaiming Agency

For Cora Sledge, Vitus is the bearer of meaning. The more she sees of him, the more she feels alive: “When I’m around him, my whole body feels like it’s covered with little mouths sucking in fresh air” (139). She here uses a similar metaphor—that of breathing—which connects love to life. Cora craves Vitus: “I can hardly contain myself. Vitus is like a new place I got to go” (173), she writes. She wants to discover his body, and indulges in sexual fantasies. As in Caro Spencer’s journal, sexuality also plays an important role in Cora’s. Not only does she narrate her past sexual life, but also focuses on her strong desires in old age. She notes down her fantasies very explicitly, and once even manages to push Vitus onto her bed, but is disappointed. He escapes, excusing himself politely, and leaves Cora wondering whether his impotence has to do with her obesity or his age. In her journal, Cora expresses her sexual wishes, and merges her present urges with past memories, emphasizing that her old age and physical weakness have nothing to do with her sexual desire.

Together with her sexual activity, which serves as a catalyst, her wish to live a full life again is reinforced by Vitus. With the help of her diary she develops a three-step plan: “Before I get too far in this book, here’s a list of things I want to do: 1. Wean myself off these pills. [...] 2. Get to walking [...]. 3. Get me some new clothes” (117–18). Cora’s cutting down on pills initially allows her to go cold turkey:

I wake up in the middle of the night with the sweat pouring off me and the feeling that I been chased up and down dark alleys by an army of zombies.

Sometimes the terror in my chest is so strong I have to curl up like a cutworm and pull the blankets over my head. I been that far from pushing the panic button. [...] There are times when [...] my head is a storm of black water swirling like a whirlpool. (116).

In contrast to the feelings of terror that assail Caro Spencer, Cora knows that the nightmares she endures actually are indicative of progress. She gets better and better, starts a short walking routine, and loses weight. Soon, her children begin to congratulate her on her rejuvenation, as does the home's doctor: "Mrs. Sledge, according to these records, you've lost sixty-one pounds in six months. Your blood pressure has dropped twenty points. Your heart rate is down over 10 percent and you haven't refilled your prescriptions for tranquilizers, antidepressants, or sleeping aids" (Larson 190). Her diary helps her to recuperate even further, and soon she is ready to work through her buried and partially repressed memories:

I wish I could see everybody's faces when they lay eyes on all these pages, every one of them covered with words I wrote myself, with no help from anybody. I marvel at it myself. Sometimes I flip through just to see all that ink. I can't help but think how miserable I was when I started that first book, the one with the lavender on the cover. I would just as soon have died as go on living. What a whole different world it is now. Still, with all that's happening here right now and so many things to think about, I got in the back of my mind that other story, the one that happened so long ago. It's with me night and day, in my dreams, in my every waking moment. I'm getting that story straight for the first time in my life. I'm *letting* myself see what happened, watching myself like I was in a movie. Sounds crazy, but for the first time I see a person who was struggling, groping in the dark. (Larson 196)

Cora Sledge prepares to confront herself with her past, and the process of writing is a conscious one: "It feels so strange to write this down. To pick the words and set them down next to each other [...] when all those years I've only seen it in pictures" (227). Up to that point, she had had no words for her trauma. Cora goes through a phase of abjection and panic, but finally manages to say her dead baby's name again: "Alice. I haven't let myself say that name for so long, much less write it. Shape it, writing the mountain of that first letter, lifts the corner on a whole world of sorrow" (225). Cora recounts the story of how she found her first baby, Alice, dead in the crib, and how she has blamed herself for Alice's death, believing it happened because she had not wanted the baby

when she first learned of her pregnancy. Alice's death, her subsequent guilt, and nauseating self-hatred lead to Cora's panic attacks and almost lethal depression. However, she also recounts how Abel always stood by her, and never mentioned that Alice, for whom he also grieved, was not his child. Neither he nor Cora ever told their younger children about their half-sister—a secret she anticipates that they will learn while reading the journal.

The thought of Abel comforts Cora, although narrating her trauma pulls her back into the past: "Writing about Alice plunks me right down in the middle of those tormented times" (232). Cora is comforted by Abel's ghost who begins to appear, rushing to her help whenever she needs him, just as when he was still alive: "You might think this part was a dream, too, but you'd be wrong. [...] I could tell without him saying a word, that he'd come to take care of me [...] I felt such comfort having him there" (234). Cora is able to remember more and more details of her repressed past. As Larson obviously pays attention to her characters' names, it could be argued that just like Vitus makes Cora come alive again, Cora's memories of Abel make her "able," in a way he always had.

Cora resumes writing, and recognizes it as an act of creativity: "I love the look of these books, every damn page covered with my writing that I labored over sitting alone here in this room, casting my mind back to all them places, recalling things I didn't know I remembered. The books are thicker when I fill them than they are when they're brand-new. The pages suck up my life and get fat with my thoughts" (235). As her story gains weight, and she loses weight, her books take up more and more space, and so does Cora herself:

Ever since that night I walked up to Vitus's room, I found out how far I can go by just putting one foot in front of the other one. Let me tell you that seeing the people around here, people with their legs swollen up, or missing altogether, or dangling like limp noodles from their bodies—not to mention the ones stuck in wheelchairs parked in a puddle of piss—has convinced me that, hard as it is, I got to keep moving. They'll never let me out of here if I can't get around, so every day I go a little farther, even if it's just a few steps. I stop and rest whenever I need to, but I'm finding out that I can do more and more. I walk out there in the courtyard, down the hall, even out to the lobby. (117)

The only danger she now fears is that the brown ink stemming from the new pen might get her into trouble. As a lot of things have recently gone missing from residents' rooms, including Cora's, and the administration accuses her of having stolen the beautiful pen. As a matter of fact, the thefts have been going

on for quite a while, and when Cora's crystal, a very important talisman, goes missing, it slowly becomes clearer to the reader that Vitus may have had something to do with the thefts. Cora has to get rid of her journal and the pen, and just when she is about to throw both items into the dumpster, Abel suddenly appears, and advises her to tape the pen to the underside of her nightstand, and to put the book under the rug by her bed to conceal it, saving her memories, her past, her present, and her future.

Caro Spencer in *As We Are Now* also briefly learns how love can change her life, and the bleakness of the institution is relativized. A lifeline is cast to her when a new nurse, Anna Close, whose name suggests intimacy and care, substitutes for Harriet, who goes on holidays for a fortnight. For the first time during her stay at Twin Elms, Caro feels understood and truly taken care of: "It is being cared for as though I were worthy of care. It is being not humiliated but treasured" (92), she writes in her journal. Anna, the "angelic person" (82) is "pure human goodness" (100), and Caro literally flourishes along with her surroundings: "The rose has opened during the day. I have lain here for an hour really paying attention to it. And now I think I'll go and sit outdoors" (84). She allows herself to expand her radius of action and leave the house to sit in the sun outside. Her change of mood is triggered solely by Anna's understanding of Caro's situation. "These are wonderful days. [...] I do not really want to die at all these days. I am avid for life" (92). Her narrative is a clear expression of the intertwining of identity and place; as her mood changes, she also describes her surroundings in a drastically different way. Caro is overwhelmed by the way Anna treats her, stating, "[s]he seems to understand me in a way I have needed for years. The room feels airy and clean when she has been there with her magic touch" (92). "We can read this politically," Woodward argues, "a temporary alliance with a trusted, honorable half-member of the administration is possible. Sisterhood can be sustaining" ("May" 123). Caro's bond with Anna intensifies during the brief period, and she falls in love with her.

Soon, the walls again seem to close in on Caro, because Anna's departure approaches. "I am about to die," Caro writes, "Harriet comes back on Saturday [...] When Anna told me this morning, [...] I was falling through space in a state of uncontrollable panic" (Sarton 97). She cannot stop crying because she is aware of the fact that the institution's structure will inevitably reassert itself (Woodward, "May" 123). Caro can no longer sit outside—the sun has disappeared, and it is too cold (Sarton 103). Caro's mood is expressed metaphorically through the weather, the surroundings, and the light. She feels the threat of slipping back into the uncanny empty space, devoid of communication: "I en-

dure in a vacuum" (102) she writes after Harriet returns, reinstalling her hellish regime (100). Thinking of Anna, she states, "she is 'outside,' safe. I am inside, in danger of despair and madness" (103). In order to stay "close" to Anna, she writes her a letter that she copies into her diary. Harriet, wanting to control her residents, reads Caro's journal, and exposes her relationship with Anna. She humiliates her, accusing her of being a lesbian, and calls her a "dirty old woman": "'This is no place for queers,' she said. 'We'll have you in the State Hospital'" (106). By threatening to send them to the State Hospital, the administrator keeps her residents under control. Homosexuality, in the head nurse's eyes, needs to be punished; it is seen as a "stigma" (Goffman, *Stigma* 13), as is frailty or dementia. If the amount of care required by a patient increases, or if they misbehave, they can no longer stay at Twin Elms. In a traditional American narrative expressing fear of state institutions, the State Hospital is represented as even worse than Twin Elms: Caro knows that going to the State Hospital, where Standish Flint was also sent, means entering a kind of limbo state, the "banished existence in the land of the fourth space" (Hazan, "Beyond" 91). There, she fears she would be drugged, "put to sleep, [...] kept in a state of lethargy" (Sarton 107). Caro is aware of the mortifying practices of the institution, of her impending social death. Annette Leibing's work resonates with this passage. She draws on Giorgio Agamben's concept of bare life—a body stripped of personhood (Agamben 4)—to describe a "space without rights located between life and death, [...] a frightening no man's land" (Leibing 249). Someone who inhabits this space, she explains, becomes a "living dead" person, leading what Agamben calls "a life devoid of value" (Leibing 249). Caro expresses this state in her diary: "I have been murdered. Murdered in the most cruel of ways possible. [...] I do not address myself any more as Caro. Caro is dead [...] that person has ceased to exist. Someone else, mentally ill, tortured, hopeless, has taken over my body and my mind. I am in the power of evil" (107–09), she writes in her journal. Twin Elms, Caro begins to understand, may never become a place where she will be allowed to die in dignity. She also suffers because what she ultimately learns from this experience is that "it is virtually impossible to make oneself whole and die intact, uncastrated, in this institution" (Waxman, *From* 151).

Epiphanies of Self-Determination

With this awareness, her frustration reaches a peak, and turns into pure anger. "The institution's systematic repression of the positive, uniting forces of love necessarily generates an equal and opposite force that eventually erupts in vi-

olence,” Woodward asserts (“May” 123). While the first part of Caro’s diary is dedicated to her wish to reach wholeness, to grow mature, and ripen towards death, the second half is given over to an expression of anger and frustration. It culminates in a moment of epiphany after Anna’s departure: “But with it came a flash of insight. [...] It was that things can be changed here, but only by violent action. If I lose my temper I will be put in the dark again. But if I burn the place down some day I can open this locked world. [...] I was staggered by the flash of what I conceived” (Sarton 89).

This moment of epiphany, during which Caro Spencer decides to burn Twin Elms down with cans of lighter fluid, is mirrored and distorted in Larson’s novel as Cora Sledge’s “eyes lit on the gasoline” (114) in the garden. While Sarton’s Caro talks about death, Larson’s Cora comes alive. She sits outside in the sun, watching the gardener take the lawn mower apart, with the gasoline can beside him:

You’ve seen them—they’re metal, about the size and shape of a toaster, bright red. I don’t know how long I’d been looking at it when my breath caught in my throat. My chest heaved, my chin wobbled, and before I knew what was going on, I was sobbing. Tears streamed down my face like a river. You know why? Just that goddamn color. *Red*. The red of that can was the purest, brightest red I’d ever seen. I’d forgotten that color, and right then it all came rushing back to me. [...] (Larson 114)

A wave of the memories about the color red sweeps over Cora, among them memories of her mother’s lipstick and a candy apple from Halloween, but most importantly the “frost of blood that covered my little angel the very first time I laid eyes on her. [...] All that. And me, too. The stone I’m named after. Coral” (115). Her daughter’s birth is equated with her return to life:

I hadn’t seen a color like that in years. That’s when I realized, plain as day, that them drugs was leaving me. I was waking up from a long sleep. I sat on that metal chair still as a statue, my eyes fixed on that red can, while I thought about all the things I’d missed living in a world with colors as bleached out as a faded snapshot. [...] The sun shifted and a breeze came up. It played in the hair on my arms and the back of my neck. It tickled the creases of my arms and the corners of my eyes like God himself breathing on me. The branches of the trees quivered, the leaves twirled, the clouds slipped across the sky. Everything around me moved and breathed. I was in the middle of it, sitting in the metal chair.” (Larson 116)

As opposed to the home in *As We Are Now*, Cora is not mortified by the institution. On the contrary, her “social death” had occurred at home, while the institution provides the framework that enables her to rejoin life. Although the home is—perhaps as a matter of convention that is determined by the genre of the nursing home novel—portrayed as a panopticon in terms of its floor plan, described as a “half prison, half hospital” (296), and the surveillance (“They slept with their doors open. Maybe it was a rule,” 307) is depicted as a number of debatable institutional safety regulations enforced in the nursing wing, Cora Sledge is aware of the fact that she was lost, and is only now finding herself while in the home. *Breaking Out of Bedlam*, the novel’s title, can, thus, be read as not only a description of Cora’s liberation from the home, but as her escape from her own mental turmoil. Cora finds keeping her journey extremely painful, but she sees her time in the home and the journal she keeps as a way to complete her life, and to complete herself:

I was a stranger to myself, somebody I hardly recognized. I try to figure out when I lost track of myself. Must have been my late twenties, early thirties. Now that my brain is clearing up, I’m getting to know myself a little now. Thoughts passing through my mind, they’re new to me. Feeling things, seeing things. Like a newborn baby. It scares the living shit out of me. You might wonder, Why now? and believe me, so do I. Something happened to me is all I can say. Vitus is part of it, and coming to this place. Getting to this age of my life. Thinking I got to the end and finding there’s still a way to go. It’s only these flashes I have, flashes of remembering myself like I used to be, that make me feel that some part of me is still out there somewhere, alive. (Larson 117)

Cora’s relationship with Vitus serves as a catalyst for her self-determination. Although she knows hardly anything about him, and despite her children’s warnings, she agrees to marry him. He proposes to her while giving her an emerald ring—a ring she feels she cannot wear because something is wrong with it, but the prospect of getting married, and moving back into her own house together with Vitus changes her life entirely. She does not think that she will stay in The Palisades until the end of her life anymore, and asks her daughter to tell the lodgers living in her house that they will have to move out because she is coming back: “I ain’t senile and I ain’t crippled! For all you know I could live twenty more years” (Larson 212).

Cora's children are alarmed and mistrust Vitus. As the novel soon reveals, they have a reason to do so. Larson here plays with a motif frequently employed in nursing home novels—parents fighting against staying in the home, and children fighting against new relationships that could endanger their inheritance. In this case, Cora's children are presented as having no choice. Vitus is a crook who has been to jail, he has been married to three wives and, as is soon revealed, is the thief that the home's administration has been looking for. The necklace, emerald ring, and fountain pen, which were Vitus' gifts for Cora, have all been stolen. Cora is devastated when her children finally manage to convince her that she has been tricked by Vitus. The worst disappointment occurs, however, when she learns that Vitus had been officially blaming all the thefts on Cora in order to conceal his homosexual relationship with Renato, a twenty-year old Filipino nursing student, whom he had also been supporting with sales of the stolen goods.

Cora is shattered and withdraws into her room for five days, numbs herself with sleeping pills, and prays that she will never wake up again. But on the sixth day, she knows she will not give up: "Not yet. I am not ready to go away yet" (291). She runs a bath and lies down in the hot water—literally and metaphorically cleansing herself, and rethinks her relationship with Vitus. "When I was clean and dry, with fresh clothes and combed hair, I felt light, like those astronauts floating around in space" (291). She finds Vitus and confronts him. When he tells her that he is leaving, she sees him "walking out of [her] life forever" (295). "I had just the tiniest bit of breath in my lungs. 'At least I loved you true,' I said as he walked past. 'Everybody makes mistakes.' Without turning around, he raised his hand and twiddled his fingers good-bye" (294).

The next two chapters of the novel, named "The Key" and "The Hole," finally weave the two narrative strands together and reveal the last details of Cora's secret. Instead of being devastated and heart-broken, she realizes that she has managed to find her own strength, a strength that is not dependent on anybody else. Cora does not see her love for Vitus as having been a mistake. Rather, she now knows that she is capable of true feelings again. "I loved him pure, and no matter what he did or didn't do, that feeling made me well. It brought me back to life" (304). She is happy to have met and loved Vitus: "It was so simple, I laughed. Vitus, I thought. He gave me the key. He might not have known what he was doing, but he set things in motion, bought me my ticket out of here" (297).

After Vitus leaves for good, Cora sleeps well for the first time in years, and talks to Abel, who keeps appearing as a ghost. "It ain't over, Toad," he said. "You

got things to do.' [...] I never meant for you to be shut up in a prison. It ain't right. Don't let them kids jerk you around, Toad. Take matters into your own hands. Do what you need to do" (296). Cora's decision to move back into her old house provides the last piece of the puzzle, which fills a gap in her memory. "The Hole" narrates how Abel and Cora buried a baby, Alice. "Nothing in my life could have prepared me for the sinister sight of that gaping pit. Seeing a wood box lowered into the ground with your own child inside is something you can't fathom unless it happens to you," she writes in her journal (299). "Two days later, here I was. A different person in a different world" (299). Cora verbalizes the shame, guilt, and love that she felt for Alice. After the funeral, Alice becomes a secret that neither Abel nor Cora ever speak about, and Cora states, "This is what I'm starting to realize as I write all this about Alice, like my eyes have slowly been opening" (300).

Talking about Alice has been like burying her all over again, but this time I feel like I'm putting her to rest, like she can finally sleep. She can stop this feverish living inside me and go be with her own kind, go to that other place and leave me be. Now that I have told my story, it's like I was looking down on myself from up above, like there's no ceiling to my room and from the sky I saw me in the middle of this cinder-block square, sitting here in this chair with my book in front of me. It has been my lifeline, the rope pulling me back to myself. Cora Sledge, I forgive you. I pity the girl you were and the shame you've suffered. I'm not feeling sorry for you like I've done year after year. I'm opening my heart to the sorrow I feel. Though the tears are sluicing down my face and I'm rocking back and forth here in my chair, I feel a calm because I forgive you. A space is opening in my heart. I didn't know how much pain there was until now, when it melted away and peace came in to take its place. (300)

In this passage, Cora calls out to herself, names herself, and forgives herself, which can be read as a process of re-claiming of her own identity. She has learned to accept herself, which has been a painful struggle that has now come to conclusion, leading her to a peaceful wholeness from which she can start anew. This passage shows that even in old age (Cora is 82) reclaiming one's identity, and re-narrating the course of one's life is possible. As she says to her daughter Glenda, "[f]or all you know I could live twenty more years" (Larson 212).

As Glenda is reluctant to let her mother move back into her own house, Cora needs to find her own way to take care of things. In a final act of revenge

against “Poison Ivy,” the table mate she hates so much, Cora wears the emerald ring Vitus had given her. She knows by now that it has been stolen from Ivy, but displays it, glittering, on her finger in the dining room. Ivy furiously reports Cora to the administrator. Cora is called into the head nurse’s office, but denies having had anything to do with the theft. Soon after, Glenda phones Cora to tell her that she has to come and pick her up. “The little click when she hung up sounded like a key unlocking a door” (304), Cora writes, enjoying her newly won freedom. Almost nostalgically, she walks towards the Day Room she had hated so much. “I’m proud of myself for coming out the other side,” she states. During her tour, Cora suddenly feels that she needs to go to Vitus’s room:

It wasn’t until I got inside and the door slid closed again that I wondered what in the world I was doing. There I went again—down, down, down, to the bowels of the earth, even though it was one floor up. When the door slid open, I’d traveled back to the time when lunatics were chained to the walls of deep, dark dungeons. The empty corridor stretched out in front of me. A dark echo clanged in my ears. The smell of piss and sweat was thick. Down toward the end of the hall someone yelled, the icy sound of a nightmare. I stepped out in the hall and started walking. (306–07)

In a setting that resembles hell, she finds Vitus’s empty room, and is magically drawn towards his bed and dresser. This journey into the “dungeons” is comparable to a psychological journey into the underworld of Cora’s own psyche. Only by fighting the demons there (she has to get past Vitus’s roommate, Daniel, who looks like a vampire with his apnea sleeping mask: “His skin was the color of skim milk. He flashed his fangs at me,” 308), can she overcome her sense of fragmentation, fear, and self-loathing. The space of the care home is metaphorically used to emphasize Cora’s journey. Opening all the drawers, she finds her crystal, the rock her father gave her before she married Abel, in the bottom one. It had always represented a treasure to her, and was a thing she could hold on to, which gave her strength. She was devastated when it was stolen from her room, and is now filled with happiness as she regains it. Finally finding the crystal makes Cora whole, so that she can prepare to leave the home.

The book ends with “My Prayer,” the final chapter, in which Cora waits for Glenda to pick her up. “Can you picture me sitting at my own kitchen table, drinking coffee out of my own cup? [...] Climbing into my own bed at night and in the morning stepping out on the porch and looking out across the yard?” she

writes as one of the last entries (310). “There are some blank pages left in this book, clean and white without a thing written on them. I got no more use for it. I am going home” (310). The journal has fulfilled its function: Cora is making peace with her life. “Now I have a prayer,” she ends the journal, “Heal my heart. Please, I ask. Calm its pain, soothe its scars. Keep it open, Lord, despite everything—reaching for life, ready to love” (311).

Similar to Cora Sledge’s narration, *As We Are Now* can and has been read by age critics such as Waxman (*Hearth*), Woodward (“May Sarton”), and Maierhofer (*Salty*) as a provocative narrative of an old woman’s search for identity. It is through the creative act of writing, they argue unanimously, that Caro’s strength and resistance manifest themselves. Even when she portrays herself as a helpless old woman, she impressively counteracts society’s treatment of old people. The same holds true for Cora in *Breaking Out of Bedlam*. For both women, the creative act of writing leads them to acts of self-composition, and “serves to critique our cultural devaluation of the elderly” (Woodward, “May” 146). Whereas at the beginning, Caro Spencer still sees the home as “the house where I have to come to terms with everything, sort it all out, accept it all, I think that it might be salvation, a rock in which to stand at least” (Sarton 24), the salvation takes on a different shape than she had expected. Like Cora Sledge, she sees her time in the home and the journal she keeps as a way to complete her life, to complete herself: “There are things I have to do inside myself before I can die. And I have the belief that [...] we ripen toward death, and only when the fruit is ripe may it drop” (19).

Ripening and Liberation

Barbara Frey Waxman uses this image of maturity in her definition of the genre of the “novels of ripening,” “I call this genre, in a feminist literary critic’s act of naming, the *Reifungsroman*, or novel of ripening—, opposing its central tenet to the usual notion of deterioration in old age. The name is inspired by septuagenarian writer May Sarton’s optimistic concept of ‘ripening towards death in a fruitful way’” (Waxman, *From* 2). Both *Breaking Out of Bedlam* and *As We Are Now* are novels of ripening that emphasize aspects of growth in their main characters. Through the creative act of writing the journal, Maierhofer argues with reference to *As We Are Now*, Caro confronts herself with her own identity and her finiteness (*Salty* 329). Like Cora Sledge, Caro Spencer writes, “I am interested in me. I am a long way still from the fulfillment, the total self-understanding that I long for now. I remain a mystery to myself. I want to get right down to the core, make a final perfect equation before I am through, balance

it all up into a tidy *whole*" (Sarton 24). She sees fulfilment as a goal. She expresses this through the use of spatial terms ("a long way," "to the core"), terms that suggest that after investing an effort, she might arrive at the goal, which is both a spatial and temporal expression. As soon as she realizes that the institution does not facilitate, but blocks her attainment of this goal, a moment of epiphany reveals new insights to her: "I have believed since I came here that I was here to prepare for death, but I did not yet know how to do it. [...] I see, now that death is not a vague prospect but something I hold in my hand, that the very opposite is required from what I thought at first" (Sarton 126). It is Caro's own responsibility—she can locate her life and death, again spatially, herself. In other words, to reaffirm her integrity and to liberate herself, as Waxman contends (*From* 156), she must take control of her own life—through suicide and collective euthanasia, which she understands her act of burning down the home to mean. From this perspective, the two novels are fundamentally different, although both advocate personal agency. While Cora opts for life, Caro chooses death—the most radical form of agency. By controlling her own death, she becomes "ripe or fully mature at the end of her life" (*From* 156). Disengaging herself from any relationships, Caro describes her liberation from her worldly existence:

It is strange that now that I have made my decision I can prepare for death in a wholly new way. I feel free, beyond attachment, beyond the human world at last. I rejoice as if I were newborn, seeing with wide-open eyes, as only the old can (for the newborn infant cannot see) the marvels of the world. [...] Everything mundane falls away. (Sarton 125–26)

She also liberates herself in terms of spatial confinements ("beyond the human world"), placing herself deliberately outside the symbolic order. The association she draws between her newly achieved freedom and that of a newborn invites a Lacanian reading of her identity development. Kathleen Woodward has masterfully expanded the Lacanian concept of the mirror stage of infancy to old age. In "The Mirror Stage of Old Age" she argues, "[i]n the mirror stage of infancy, the infant enters the imaginary. In the mirror stage of old age, the subject enters the social realm reserved for 'senior citizens' in the western world. But the point is that the subject *denies* this identification rather than embraces it. The mirror stage of old age is the inverse of the mirror stage of infancy" (*Ageing* 67). The infant perceives the image of his or her body as a harmoniously whole and ideal unit, simultaneously experiencing the body as uncoordinated.

The mirror stage of the infant is a stage prior to socialization, and the mirror stage of old age is its exact opposite; it is a stage during which the *image* is experienced as fragmented, threatening, and alienating:

Alienation characterizes the mirror stage of old age (alienation is embedded in language, of course) but in a different sense as well, and the terms are reversed: the harmonious whole resides within the subject, and the *imago* prefigures disintegration and “nursling dependence.” If the infant holds his mirror image in an amorous gaze, the elderly person resists it. The narcissistic impulse remains—it imposes itself upon all our desires—but it is directed against the mirror image. (Woodward, “Instant” 60)

In Sartre's text, Caro Spencer experiences herself as whole, but perceives the image of her face in fragments:

Can this worn-out, haunted old body be me? My eyes used to be so blue, but now they have faded. And my mouth, rather stern at best, looks thin-lipped. Deep lines pull it downward. My neck anyway is pretty good for an old bird—none of these scrawny tendons showing. My pearl choker hides the wrinkles. But time at a mirror is worse than wasted time, Caro. It makes you feel depressed. Better turn the mirror to the wall. (Sartre 29)

As the child passes through the mirror stage, he or she becomes a social being, but the old person dissociates him- or herself from society during this stage, which may “precipitate the loss of the imaginary,” as Woodward writes. “Where would we then be located? Outside the mirror?” she asks (*Aging* 69). Here, Woodward makes it explicit where old women are, in Kristeva's terms, located; they are pushed beyond the symbolic order—outside the social body, rendered “abject” (Kristeva 4). Sartre argues against this abjection of old people, who are hidden from sight in nursing homes. As she planned in the beginning of the book, Caro now arrives at the core of her existence, albeit in a different way than she had expected. As Caro feels her soul will not be able to grow in the dreadful institution (“I treasure my soul as something given into my keeping, something that I must keep intact—more, in a state of growth and awareness whatever the odds,” 19), she realizes that she can only find fulfillment by preparing for her own rebirth through death: “Impending death is the catalyst that makes Caro appreciate life and brings her to fruition,” Waxman observes (156). Her act of setting fire to Twin Elms can be seen as an act of social criticism, Waxman continues to write:

[It is] a moral gesture of resistance to its evil and her humiliating treatment there, a gesture asserting her humanness, courage, integrity, and self-completion. In cleansing the place, she also acts as a social critic, sounding the clarion against society's cruel treatment of the dependent elderly: Caro "transforms her death into an indictment of society's attitudes toward the aged and the infirm" (Bakerman 21). (Waxman, *From* 156)

She symbolically and literally incinerates the home, and therefore has the power to act; her agency is not undermined by the symbolic order or by institutional rules and regulations, and the panoptical structure she observes still cannot prevent her from rebelling against ageism, "a nod to Foucault's insistence that the possibility of resistance and revolt are embedded within disciplinary discourses of power," as Gravagne puts it (46).

In 1973, Sarton's novel touched a nerve with regard to institutional eldercare. It was written at a time when nursing home inspections had just become mandatory. After the change in Social Security Laws (1950), which required the establishment of a standard-setting or licensing agency that would set minimum standards for nursing homes (Garvin and Burger 54) and also reinforce them, inspections became more frequent. The first official accreditation program for nursing homes was created in 1966 by the Joint Commission on Health Care Organizations (JCAHO), an organization that has long been known for accrediting hospitals (Stahl). These standards included fire prevention mechanisms, such as sprinklers, which were previously not common in homes. Garvin and Burger in their book *Where They Go to Die: The Tragedy of America's Aged* dedicate a whole chapter to nursing home fires: "The deadliest place in America today is not the highway or the slums of Harlem—it is the nursing home," (97) they contend. It can claim all the superlatives (98): "During the sixties, a reportable nursing home fire has occurred at an average of more than one a day. [...] Nursing home fires have increased—with a sudden upsurge in 1961 starting the trend" (98).

Because many newspapers reported nursing home fires that occurred in the late 1960s and early 1970s, it is very likely that Sarton's book drew inspiration from these events. While the majority of fires were reported to have been started accidentally, for instance by cigarettes, after a patient smoked in bed and fell asleep, as Garvin and Burger point out (99), Caro Spencer's deadly rebellion goes a step further: it is an act of rebellion performed to catch attention from society.

Sarton's story strongly urges for a reform of eldercare. Caro Spencer's identity, as Maierhofer claims (*Salty* 337), is not endangered by the threat of death, but by the inhumane treatment she experiences in old age. Although she is at her caretakers' mercy, she manages to write a manifesto of her identity, hoping it will reach a large audience of all ages. The book, Maierhofer contends, is an angry demand for an adequate place in society for old women as well. Equating strength and power with sickness and death might initially seem contradictory, but the text itself proves that such equality is possible (337).

The different versions of the book's cover that appeared when it came out in 1973 and 1992, respectively, also highlight the re-interpretation of the novel in terms of the protagonist's individual identity. While the first edition's black-and-white cover made by Penguin in 1973 shows a gray, wintery landscape against which a tall, old tree and parts of the façade of a small brick house in the countryside stand out, which emphasize the aspects of space and place, the later version (Norton 1992) graphically supports an approach that focuses on the protagonist's life-course narrative. Maierhofer points out the difference between the two covers in *Salty Old Women* (338): the newer version contains various items that are colorfully arranged in what looks like a scrapbook. A picture of a young woman looking straight at the camera has been placed in the center; a clock face; several dried leaves and roses; some postage stamps; a delicate necklace with little hearts; several matches (both burned and unused); and some singed pages from what looks like a journal, hinting at the novel's plotline ("a lapis lazuli pin, a faded rose petal, once pink, slipped into the pages of this copybook" (121) are displayed. The change in the design of the covers not only supports a different reading experience, but also points out aspects of social development with regard to the way women's aging is interpreted (Maierhofer, *Salty* 338). Maierhofer particularly emphasizes the importance of a women's search for self during old age. Sarton's protagonist, she maintains, is a "salty old woman" (a term also used by Waxman), who refuses to adapt to social norms. By consciously emphasizing these aspects of the novel, Maierhofer argues, we as readers can overcome one-sided interpretations of such stories, and open up to new methods of interpretation in order to do justice to the female protagonists with regard to their dignity and integrity, with all the inconsistencies this entails (*Salty* 338–39).

Sarton skillfully employs the nursing home as a setting of a fight for justice. Twin Elms serves as a spatial metaphor that localizes the horrors of a life deprived of social and cultural recognition, through the "othering" of old age. It literally represents the social and cultural "metaphorical black hole" of the

fourth age, the “shadowlands of disability, diminishment, and death” as Peter Laslett describes the “fourth age” in *A Fresh Map of Life* (Gilleard and Higgs, “Aging” 126). Haim Hazan’s concept of the “fourth space” resonates with Caro Spencer’s existential crisis. Caro finds herself in danger of being drawn into the “fourth space” when she writes, “[a]mong all the other deprivations here we are deprived of *expression*. The old men slowly atrophy because no one asks them what they feel and why. Could they speak if someone did?” (Sarton 82). Caro Spencer, however, fights against being colonized, as Hazan expresses it, by writing her diary.

While *As We Are Now* takes a political stance, *Breaking Out of Bedlam* primarily focuses on an individual’s traumatic past. Larson’s text also advocates for a woman’s individualism, self-determination and agency in old age. In this sense, both novels can be read as powerful narratives that overcome the confinement and challenge the borders of the “unknown country of old age,” as Sarton famously spatialized this experience.

3.3 Sentenced to *Half Life*

The setting in John Mighton’s play *Half Life*,⁵ which won the prestigious Canadian Governor General Award in 2006, is an old fashioned, prison-like facility, and its residents are treated as inmates rather than as patients, clients, or residents. In fact, the play, like Sarton’s novel, can be read as a portrayal of a “total institution.” It tells the story of Clara and Patrick, two octogenarians who live in a nameless Canadian home for veterans and their families and form a romantic relationship. While Clara is developing dementia, Patrick’s identity as a veteran is linked to national memory (Goldman 118). Whether they had actually been lovers earlier in their lives or whether they only imagine having had a wartime love affair becomes increasingly unimportant throughout the play. What counts is that they now enjoy each other’s presence. Although their relationship seems to give meaning to their lives and makes them very happy, their love is seen as intolerable by both the institution’s management and their respective children.

Patrick’s 40-something year old daughter, Anna, an artist, finds it only a little less difficult than Clara’s son, Donald, a psychology professor and expert

5 I am referring to the original script, not a performance.

in artificial intelligence, to cope with her feelings about her father having an affair with Clara. Especially Donald is immensely concerned about his mother's and Patrick's "misbehavior" and prefers to ignore the fact that his mother is actually very happy. Donald's relentlessly scientific worldview (he works on a project on artificial memory in machines) makes him unable to understand how his mother's apparent loss of memory which enables her to live happily in the moment makes her more human, not less (Scotten 9). He is determined to prevent the old couple from getting married.

In the meantime, Patrick's daughter Anna seems to have understood what the romance means to the old lovers. "He is taking his medication regularly for the first time in his life. He hasn't tried to escape or go drinking since he came here. He's even started to talk to me. He's told me stories about his childhood and the war that have made me see him differently," Anna argues in favor of her father's marriage plans (Mighton 63). But she only tries half-heartedly to convince Donald, who has power of attorney over his mother, to support the couple's engagement ("You may not understand it, but it means something to them. It's his last chance to share a life with someone" (62)). Donald, however, does not even think about changing his mind. When Patrick learns about Donald's decision, he rebels by breaking out of the home and drinking, but is soon apprehended. Donald, who comes to visit his mother, finds him tied to a chair with restraining straps and with a large bruise in his face. He refuses to untie him, also to underline his decision not to let him marry his mother: "I wouldn't be living up to my responsibilities as a son. She is not fully herself," he maintains (65). As a result, Patrick further provokes Donald's anger by telling him how he had made love to Clara. Anna, having learned about her father's recent escape and drinking, now also turns against him and agrees that he be moved permanently to the closed ward ("They have decided he's a danger to himself" (67)), keeping him from seeing Clara. The play here critiques the disindividualization of care home residents by foregrounding the power struggle between the institution (to which Donald and Anna also belong), on one hand, and its old residents on the other. As in many care home narratives, the struggle is resolved by means of spatial separation.

In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault talks about the effect of the panopticon to "induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power" (210). As residents of the nameless Canadian nursing home, Clara and Patrick have become "docile bodies" (Foucault, *Discipline* 135) that are subject to a panopticon-like "institutional gaze" (174), and are supposed to behave according to the rules and codes imposed by

an institution that patronizes and infantilizes them. The play showcases numerous examples of ageist practices such as elderspeak, elder abuse, and the continual invasion of the residents' privacy in their own rooms.

The institution exerts its power on the level of space: "Patrick," Nurse Tammy warns him, "if anyone finds out you've been going out to buy cigarettes, they'll lock you upstairs!" (Mighton 43). Being moved to the upper-floor closed ward is used as a constant threat, and even in the residents' rooms, no guarantee of privacy is given. This lack of privacy is one of the prime and most frequently criticized characteristics of care-giving facilities. As opposed to "home," the quintessential private space, institutions are semi-public spaces inhabited by medical staff and care-takers with the right to enter their clients' rooms. In the play, however, Clara is stripped off her privacy and agency not by the medical staff and not only due to her early-stage dementia, but by Reverend Hill, a character who literally embodies institutional power. Although he is not a care-taker, he seems to have access to the home and any of its rooms at any time, exposing Clara to an asymmetrical and omniscient institutional gaze.

As the following situation shows, Clara's autonomy, privacy, and personal freedom are constantly undermined, not by doctors or nurses, but by visitors who intrude on her private space without allowing her to decide whether she wants to allow them access. "Knock-knock. I hope everyone is decent," Reverend Hill says as he enters Clara's room, just as she finishes bathing and puts on her dressing gown (50). "I'm just putting Clara to bed," nurse Tammy explains, demonstratively looking at her watch to indicate that he is not welcome. Tammy is generally not very friendly towards Reverend Hill. She does not approve of his morals, is critical of his sermons ("No wonder you're losing your congregation" (52)), and defends the old couple's affair against him as best she can. Although she is generally very understanding, she still represents the institution and has to keep with its rules. Straightening Clara's sheets and sighing, "My goodness, Clara, your bed is a mess. Have you been having an affair?" (51), Tammy, in an absurd interchange, scolds Clara in front of the Reverend. "I don't believe in sex before marriage," Clara retorts. "Then you'll have to get married," Tammy says. "Aren't I too old to get married?" Clara asks, upon which Reverend Hill states, "I am not sure Clara is ready for marriage quite yet. She would have to ask permission from her son. He has power of attorney" (52). Tammy, enervated by Reverend Hill's comments, cuts this conversation short by stating "It's past Clara's bedtime" (52). Clara, who does not have much to say during this conversation, is infantilized in this scene. When Patrick suddenly

shows up in Clara's room, Tammy again says that they could, and should, be left alone. "They're adults," she argues (53). Reverend Hill, however, points to the strict house rules but agrees to let them have a little time together, provided he and Tammy stay in the room. Tammy then takes a tape and cassette deck out of her bag and encourages the couple to dance, which they enjoy. She seems to be the only person who understands Clara's and Patrick's love, but is quite unexpectedly replaced by a new nurse, Diana. A conversation between Donald and Anna indicates that Tammy's sudden disappearance has to do with the fact that she has broken more rules than just those of keeping Clara and Patrick apart: Donald suspects her of stealing money from his mother. Whether or not this accusation is accurate cannot be verified, but Tammy seems to spend Clara's money on clothes that she buys for the old woman without being asked to do so, and without producing any bills and change for her (50).

In the play's final scene, the new nurse, Diana, comes to put Clara to bed. Clara is slightly confused because she has never seen Diana before. Diana explains that she usually works upstairs and tells Clara, who says that she wants to go there, that it is actually a very sad place that people would prefer to leave. Alluding to Patrick, whom Diana does not yet know, she says, "There's one old gentleman who stands by the door all day asking if he can go out. [...] He's a drinker. No one will let him out [...]" (75). Patrick, however, does know how to leave, because he was a mathematician and worked as a code breaker for the Special Services during World War II—useful skills that enable him to return to his love. In fact, soon after Diana leaves, he enters Clara's room. Diana, returning, is surprised to see him:

DIANA: Hello, Patrick. What are you doing here? You're on the wrong floor.

Pause

How did you get down here?

PATRICK: I broke the code.

DIANA: You're very naughty. Now we'll have to change it. (79)

Diana asks another nurse to take Patrick upstairs again. Her evaluation of the situation is based on the space he inhabits, and she misinterprets Patrick's escape from the upper floor as mental confusion rather than capacity: "I'm sorry, Clara, I don't know how he got down here. He seemed very disoriented" (79). Clara tells nurse Diana that she did not have to show Patrick out ("I didn't mind. We're married" (80)). Because she does not yet know Clara very well and tries to keep the conversation going while putting her to bed, Diana plays along,

asking whether he was a good husband, which Clara confirms (80). An instant later, however, when the nurse leaves, Clara again shifts to her past: “I knew a Patrick once during the war...” (81). The play ends with Clara repeating incoherent childhood memories to herself. The lights fade with Clara gratefully reminiscing what a nice day she had had with the children’s choir visiting.

The play’s ending leaves open whether Patrick will again be able to break out to see Clara, but what has become clear is that by resisting institutional rules, he has finally been separated from his beloved Clara. The “system,” represented by Donald and the home, cannot tolerate the fact that Patrick will not allow himself to passively slide into quiescent old age: he refuses to be just another old person abandoned by the rest of society. He has decided to fight for what he wants, and in the end this is what separates him from Clara (Scot-ten 10–11). The two older characters’ happiness is not important to the “system” represented by Donald, Reverend Hill, and the institution as a whole. His fight against institutional power is represented as futile.

The care-facility, with its rigid rules, as presented in this play, can be seen as a prototype of Goffman’s “total institution” (xiii). Entering such institutions results in “role dispossession,” Goffman argues, as the “self is systematically, often unintentionally, mortified” (14). Life within the limits of the institutional space is, as the title of the play indicates, only a “half life;” the nursing home is a world separated from the outside, where different rules and regulations apply, and contribute to interpellating individuals into their roles as patients, stripping them of personal freedom and choice. This is illustrated by the following humorous episode involving Agnes, another resistant patient:

AGNES: Where is Mrs. O'Neill? Why isn't she here?
 TAMMY: She died last night.
 CLARA: Oh, that's terrible.
 AGNES: How did she die?
 TAMMY: She died very peacefully and quietly in her sleep.
 AGNES: At least she doesn't have to do crafts anymore.
 (Mighton 44)

In this brief scene, Agnes expresses her discomfort with the institutional schedule to which she must comply. Desiring more personal control, she asks the nurse whether she can go to her room rather than doing crafts. Her frustration with the confinement in the home becomes evident as she recounts how as a child, she enjoyed her freedom: “I was one of the children

who would disappear and find a hill somewhere just outside of town. I'd spend the day writing stories in my head" (45). Here, she uses spatiality to critique the confinement and dependence she now experiences in old age.

The care home's separation from the outside world and its realities are expressed not only on a spatial, but also on a temporal level. The first scene already addresses the difference with regard to frames of reference and aspects of space, time, and experience between the inside and outside of the home:

ANNA picks up a paper and starts reading.

ANNA: Oh my God!

DONALD: What is it?

ANNA: Three hundred people died yesterday. In Nepal.

DONALD: You should check the date on the paper. It's two years old.

ANNA: Oh.

(Mighton 4)

The irony expressed in this scene, which in the play serves as comic relief, indicates that real events do not have much, if any, impact within the microcosm of the home. This may especially be the case for some residents, such as those who have dementia. In relation to aspects of memory, the term "half life" acquires another meaning, that of the disintegration and decay of memory. Donald, in particular, as an expert in artificial intelligence, finds his mother's increasing memory loss extremely hard to accept. Daniel Brooks, who directed the play at Toronto's Tarragon Theatre, says in the production notes:

John Mighton's *Half Life* is a play about memory—or more precisely—forgetting. The central idea is that we are defined as much by what we forget as we are by what we remember. And given that identity is contingent on what we remember, how does the loss of memory affect identity? Under investigation is the following: What is it that constitutes self, and what might be this thing we call the soul? (Jones 1)

The themes of memory and forgetfulness are central to the play. Social practices defining the nursing home in *Half Life* contribute to the way the characters renegotiate their identities through an ongoing dialogue involving the past, present, and future. The system does not allow for Patrick's and Clara's life course narratives, which are constituted not by what they are actually able to remember, but what they are able to imagine. Especially for a scientist like Donald, who believes in the existence of an absolute truth and has little tol-

erance for ambiguity, a reconstruction of his mother's life course narrative is unacceptably threatening. The couple's wish to create a new joint narrative in which they belong together and share happiness is not compatible with Donald's, Anna's, and institution's agenda, and is consequently rejected.

3.4 The Chrono-Heterotopia of Old Age in Margaret Atwood's "Torching the Dusties"

We face a threat more grave and certain than those posed by chemical weapons, nuclear proliferation, or ethnic strife: the "age wave."

— Peter G. Peterson, former chairman and CEO of Lehman Brothers

In this chapter, I examine the care home as a paradoxical space of exclusion, designed less to provide genuine care as a safe space for the protagonists (Snaith 122) than to contain the perceived "burdensome" aspects of old age. Using Michel Foucault's concept of heterotopia, I explore the marginalization of old age and ageism manifested through spatial segregation in Margaret Atwood's apocalyptic short story, "Torching the Dusties," the concluding tale in her 2014 collection *Stone Mattress*. The story explicitly engages with a chronotopic structure through its apocalyptic and dystopian setting, aligning precisely with Elizabeth Barry's interpretation ("Glut"). She states,

The discrete locations of older-age care as they are described in these stories are not only an indictment of the marginalisation of older people, however, but also the occasion for a particular aesthetics that makes creative play with the tensions between inside and outside, private and public, care and control. I read these spaces here in line with the logic of Mikhail Bakhtin's *chronotope*, which as noted earlier is a feature of narrative that brings time and space into explicit relations; where, in Bakhtin's words, time "thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible" (84). The spaces of the stories in question institute and impose their own temporal laws and rhythms. (Barry 146)

Arguing that Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope emphasizes how temporal and spatial dimensions intersect within narrative form, generating meaning, Barry analyzes how in Atwood's narrative, the compressed, crisis-driven temporal frame—marked by imminent catastrophe, economic distress, and gener-

ational hostility—directly mirrors the limited temporal horizons experienced in old age. “Old age seems to serve in this context as a metaphor for a contemporary society on the brink of financial implosion or environmental extinction,” she states (“Glut” 145). The old and frail protagonists are trapped spatially (within the retirement home) and temporally (awaiting inevitable violence), evoking a sense of imminent, collective ending. Thus, the story’s dystopian setting becomes a chronotope embodying contemporary fears—such as environmental collapse and economic instability—that intersect specifically with anxieties surrounding aging populations. Barry’s reading highlights how the short story form itself encapsulates this convergence, reflecting how old age is symbolically situated within broader social anxieties about diminished futures and societal collapse. In short, Atwood leverages the chronotopic fusion of temporal crisis and confined, heterotopic space to dramatize intergenerational tension and the cultural narrative of aging as part of an approaching apocalypse.

The narrative follows Wilma and Tobias, two companions trapped inside Ambrosia Manor, an upscale, gated retirement community that is besieged by a violent mob—an anti-old age movement called “Our Turn.” Members of the movement operate internationally in large numbers (“They say millions are rising up,” “Torching” 245). They gather at nursing homes, wearing baby masks, with the intention to literally “torch the dusties” (256). They set care homes on fire all across North America, seeking, they announce, to clear away “the parasitic dead wood at the top” and “the dustballs under the bed” (256). Public discourse here has shifted towards a normalization of the old as “other.” The role of the media in perpetuating this attitude is witnessed by the story’s focalizer, Wilma, as she listens to a panel discussion on a radio show: “There is rage out there, and yes, it’s sad that some of the most vulnerable in society are being scapegoated, but this turn of affairs is not without precedent in history, and in many societies – says the anthropologist – the elderly used to bow out gracefully to make room for young mouths by walking into the snow or being carried up mountainsides and left there” (257). The talk show pits young against old as the anthropologist and an economist debate the actions of Our Turn. Remarkably, it is the student of humanities who argues that geronticide might be a solution because the older people are “eating up the health-care dollars” and the economist who interrupts him/her to observe “that is all very well, but innocent lives are being lost” – to which the anthropologist counters: ‘that depends on what you call innocent...’. At this point, ‘the host announces that they will now take calls from their listeners’” (257). As in Atwood’s other work, her

use of sarcasm as a means of social critique is evident. Her tale problematizes the way in which old age is “othered,” stigmatized as useless, inefficient and burdensome in a society that is based on production and consumption—and the solution portrayed in the story is radical. Old people are being constructed in Atwood’s tale as a new target group against whom injustice is gradually becoming discursively legitimated.

Even though Atwood’s dystopic story is fictional, age studies scholars such as Margaret Morganroth Gullette have emphasized that the othering of social groups, including the old, can indeed lead to extreme forms of violence. Gullette dedicates her latest book, which bears the telling title *Ending Ageism, or How Not to Shoot Old People* (2017), to the problematic issue of the scapegoating of old people. The work fights against “increasingly grave instances from the array of ageisms. [...] [for example] glaring neglect in private or public life, grossly hostile speech, abusive images, cruel practices, threats, incitements to self-harm, or violence” (xxii). As Gullette explains, “People tend to distance themselves from individuals or groups that frighten them. Fear can be taught, heightened, or redirected: after World War II, against communists; after 9/11, Muslims; today, immigrants. Social-identity and terror-management theories, informed by age theory, explain how fear can be manipulated against old people. A handy new group to target” (Gullette, *Ending* xxi).

Atwood’s text deals with exactly this process and carries it to the extremes: the old become a new target group of a life-threatening form of ageism culminating in geronticide. They are seen as an economic and social challenge—what is commonly described as a “burden” on society. Atwood’s tale problematizes the way in which old age is “othered” and stigmatized as unproductive, emphasizing the way old people are seen as “parasites expensive to maintain” (Cruikshank, *Learning* 25) in a society that is based on production and consumption. It highlights the relationship between the space and identity of the aging body as it is increasingly isolated from social interaction. As this analysis will show, “Torching the Dusties” resonates with Haim Hazan’s concept of “social death” (*Old Age* 69).

“Torching the Dusties” illustrates the corporeal and spatial dispossession of nursing home inhabitants. Ambrosia Manor has become a Foucauldian heterotopia—a place which excludes the old “within the social fabric they inhabit,” as Stanka Radović writes in a different context.⁶ The tale invites a reading of

6 Radović analyzes the heterotopia of old age in Beryl Gilroy’s *Frangipani House* in her book *Locating the Destitute. Space and Identity in Caribbean Fiction* (2014).

the exclusionary space and its effect on identity. As Radović asserts, “[a]s a site of spatial alterity, heterotopia connects to Lefebvre’s theorization of the spatial effect of the body, namely its ability to produce difference. [...] When it emerges as disruptive, as in the case of old age, the body is certainly one such excluded social element, radically other and thus capable of mobilizing and reappropriating otherness as a form of spatial practice” (Radović 132). With reference to Lefebvre, Radović claims that “the excluded body is thus reflected in the spatial function of the heterotopia, itself an excluded space” (132)—it is open but at the same time isolated, with controlled access and exit (132). Lefebvre states, “[d]ifferences endure or arise on the margins of the homogenized realm, either in the form of resistances or in the form of externalities (lateral, heterotopical, heterological). What is different is, to begin with, what is *excluded*” (*Production* 373). The burden narrative of old age is part of the discourse of exclusion, which manifests itself in the heterotopic space of Ambrosia Manor. The story highlights the relationship between the space and the identity of the aging body as the aging person is increasingly isolated from social interaction owing to the body’s discursively constructed otherness. This aspect of the story invites a Foucauldian reading. In his essay “Of Other Spaces” (1986), Michel Foucault focuses on the spatiality of cultural production, on the way cultural norms and social practices are revealed through space. In this sense, the space of the nursing home is narrated as a heterotopia of deviation, an example of

those [spaces] in which individuals whose behavior is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm are placed. Cases of this are rest homes and psychiatric hospitals, and of course prisons; and one should perhaps add retirement homes that are, as it were, on the borderline between the heterotopia of crisis and the heterotopia of deviation since, after all, old age is a crisis, but is also a deviation since, in our society where leisure is the rule, idleness is a sort of deviation. (Foucault, “Of” 25)

Like the “vagabond” and “unproductive” people identified as political problems in seventeenth and eighteenth-century European societies addressed in Foucault’s other work (Katz, *Disciplining* 19), Atwood’s characters can hence be read as “excluded bodies” that are housed in the heterotopic site of the care home.

While the public in the story’s radio show hotly debate the issue of the old as a social, financial and political danger, evidencing the normalization of “the old” as a “burdensome hazard” (Biggs and Powell 10), Ambrosia Manor’s residents are slow to notice what is going on around them. They remain oblivious to

the threatening developments, like the frog in the famous experiment where it sits in increasingly hot water, even when, unchallenged by the police, the mob outside the gate grows larger and louder every day. Atwood cleverly instills a doubt in readers' minds, suggesting that the repeated assertion that "help is on the way" (267) is a lie, while simultaneously making clear that resistance on the part of the residents will be futile. At the beginning of the story, incidents such as a laundry van or food delivery van being blocked by the increasingly aggressive group at the gates are received by the residents with curiosity rather than apprehension. Wilma, a widowed resident in her eighties, cannot "pin-point exactly what it is that she's feeling. Not despair, not at all. And not hope. She only wants to see what will happen next. It certainly won't be the daily routine" (255). At least it gives the residents something to talk about over meals: "They say they want us to make room. They want us to move over. Some of the signs say that: *Move Over*.' That means *die*, I suppose,' says Wilma. 'Are there any rolls today?' Sometimes there are the most delicious Parker House rolls, fresh from the oven" (244). Wilma observes that another inmate, Tobias, actually seems to be enjoying what is going on: "This turn of events has energized him; he is almost humming" (241). But he soon begins to be more concerned than anyone else in the residence, and, using Wilma's binoculars and her window as a lookout, keeps her informed about the latest developments. In sum, while some of the residents slowly begin to show signs of concern, others see Our Turn's gathering as a welcome change from their daily, boring routine. Living in the heterotopic world of the nursing home, where even Internet access is strictly limited (242), the residents have limited access to the developments happening outside.

The Burden Narrative of Old Age

The "burden narrative" of old age is not a recent phenomenon. The title of Andrea Charise's discussion of the "barely conscious figurative language that serves to construct perceptions of an aging population" (2), "Let the Reader Think of the Burden," is taken from Anthony Trollope's *The Fixed Period* (1882), the starting point for her account of the narrative from the nineteenth to the twenty-first century. Charise notes convincingly that metaphors such as "the silver tsunami" or the "rising tide" are part of a discourse that positions old age as a peculiar kind of "other": "This ominous rhetoric of rising, swamping, tides, and disease – amplified by the authoritative tones of medical and health policy expertise – conceives of population aging as an imminent catastrophe. Conceived en masse, the elderly are naturalized as a liquid cataclysm whose

volume exceeds the nation's ability to contain, or even guard against, an abstracted human burden" (Charise 3).

Stephen Katz has argued that the origins of this discourse of a "crisis of capacity" (Charise 1) can be found at the moment in the nineteenth century when "the elderly population was constituted as a subject of knowledge and politics through a discourse of alarmist demography" (Katz, *Disciplining* 127). According to Katz, "[t]he creation of the elderly as population must be seen against the historical background of demographic discourse itself. And demographic discourse is inseparable from the Malthusian-tinged, alarmist debates of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries that accentuated the growing number, neediness, and poverty of elderly persons as a primary social problem" (Katz, *Disciplining* 72). This discourse of crisis and burden produces "the older population" as a distinct group that threatens social and economic stability.

Heike Hartung draws on the same novel to show how the burden narrative has both promoted and criticized "euthanasia and eugenics as possible solutions to the problem of old age" (Hartung, *Ageing* 35). In Trollope's satirical science-fiction novel, the law of the "Fixed Period" is introduced by the youthful Assembly of the fictive British colony of Britannula requiring that all citizens reaching the age of 65 move to an idyllic college called "Necropolis," where they are to spend one year of honorary retirement before being executed at the age of 67.5. As John Neverbend, the novel's first-person narrator, tells us, the Fixed Period law "consists altogether of the abolition of the miseries, weakness, and fainéant imbecility of old age, by the prearranged ceasing to live of those who would otherwise become old" (Trollope 9). Neverbend supports his argument with modern science:

Statistics have told us that the sufficient sustenance of an old man is more costly than the feeding of a young one,—as is also the care, nourishment, and education of the as yet unprofitable child. Statistics also have told us that the unprofitable young and the no less unprofitable old form a third of the population. Let the reader think of the burden with which the labour of the world is thus saddled. [...] But for whose good are the old and effete to be maintained? (Trollope 10–11)

While the satire in *The Fixed Period* may be obvious to us, Hartung notes (*Ageing* 30) that it was not always so in the course of the development of early twentieth-century medical discourses on old age. According to her, in his influential study of old age, *Senescence* (1922), G. Stanley Hall treats the Fixed Period law "not from

a readerly position of distance provided by satiric exaggeration or the temporal remove of the science-fiction setting but treats euthanasia as a possible future solution to the problem of old age” (Hartung, *Ageing* 30). Such an interpretation is only possible, Hartung observes, because the burden narrative of old age had become a normalized discourse in early gerontological literature.

This discourse continues to be prevalent in current anti-aging research. For instance, Aubrey de Grey, author of *Ending Aging*, explains that “it’s very expensive indeed to be elderly. [...] [\$200B/year is] how much it costs just in the USA alone for keeping the elderly going in the frail and decrepit state that a large proportion of them are in for that extra year or two” Grey n.p., 02:20–02:35). De Grey, whose radical ideas have provoked harsh opposition from critical gerontologists, has come to occupy a central position in the field of anti-ageing studies, as I have pointed out elsewhere (Kriebelnegg 64). The costs de Grey presents (without quoting any sources) amount to a sum too large for a life not worth living, as he suggests. However appreciative he may be of the wisdom of the old (another commonplace), de Grey perpetuates the stereotype of the old as “parasites expensive to maintain” (Cruikshank, *Learning* 25). As opposed to a worthless life of decrepitude and frailty, a worthy life is one of youth and agility. As de Grey presents them, the old are threatening creatures, the “other” that stands outside of what he considers “normal” life; they embody decay, disease and death—conditions that need to be kept at bay as they evoke panic.

This discourse of old age as a social problem is central to “Torching the Dusties.” As in *The Fixed Period*, there is a strong satirical undercurrent in Atwood’s bitter and dystopic interpretation that portrays the possible consequences of ageism when old age is expressed in metaphors that link it to natural disasters such as the often-mentioned “silver tsunami,” the “grey flood,” the “agequake,” or the “age wave,” as Peter G. Peterson calls it in his book *Gray Dawn: How the Coming Age Wave will Transform America – and the World* (1999). Peterson, former CEO of Lehman Brothers, Secretary of Commerce and Chairman of the New York Federal Reserve Bank, worries about demographic change and equates the alleged threat of an ageing society to natural disasters: “Leaders have been willing to convene summits to discuss global warming. Why not global aging, which will hit us sooner and with greater certainty?” (Peterson). He predicts a further chasm: “By the mid-2020s, will the contrast between North and South be better described as a contrast between Young and Old?” (Peterson). His reliance on the traditional burden narrative of old age is clear also when he claims that “[g]lobal aging could trigger a crisis that

engulfs the world economy. This crisis may even threaten democracy itself. [...] At the top of the list is the impact of the age wave on foreign policy and international security" (Peterson). Peterson does not offer a solution but warns of turmoil, disaster, and international social instability, fears that are at best exaggerated, as a 2011 study by the Canadian Institute for Health Information confirms.⁷ Craig Karpel echoes these sentiments in *The Retirement Myth*, and in 1995 had already predicted that medical care would be rationed, which he terms "gerontocide." He stated that by 2015, homeless shelters would be filled with "dumpies" (destitute unprepared mature people (Karpel, qtd. in Parmelee 57), a term that resonates with Atwood's "dusties."

In Atwood's story, Peterson's predictions have become reality. Yet, the young group's aggression in "Torching the Dusties" is also motivated by their rage against the carelessness with which previous generations used to treat nature and natural resources. In an interview, Atwood explains,

"It's a logical outcome of where our demographic is going. [...] Let us put it this way," she continues. "No life form can exist beyond its exhaustion of its food supply. No life form can exist beyond its exhaustion of its oxygen supply, and no life form can exist beyond its exhaustion of its fresh water supply, and all of those things are finite." At that point, she says, "Things usually get unpleasant." (Williams)

The ecological concerns even more inherent in Atwood's later dystopic, eco-critical work are prevalent also in this tale, where, exactly as Peterson has predicted, "the young" are pitted against "the old" in terms of resources. The old are positioned as scapegoats for the disastrous state of the world. As Tobias reports of *Our Turn*: "They say it's their turn," says Tobias. [...] "Their turn at what?" "At life, they say. They say we've had our turn, those our age; they say we messed it up. Killing the planet with our own greed and so forth" (Atwood 243–44). According to Tobias, the young activists wear baby masks to highlight their own innocence: "Chubby, smiling babies. Some say Time to Go.' Time to go?' says Wilma. 'Babies? What does that mean? This isn't a maternity hospital.' About the opposite, she thinks caustically: it's an exit from life, not an entrance"

7 The 2011 report by the Canadian Institute for Health Information states that: "The common belief is that an aging population will lead to greater demands for health care services and accelerated growth in health spending. Contrary to common perception, population aging has been a very modest cost driver overall. Population aging contributed an annual average growth of only 0.8%" (vi).

(238), hinting at the spatiality of the life-course. The baby masks, impressively featured in Marlene Goldman's 2019 film adaptation (Marlene Goldman and McKee), serve to highlight the binary opposition between young and old that the story presents as another normalized discourse.

In contrast to the baby masks, which are put on voluntarily to emphasize the group's common identity as the "youth," Ambrosia Manor residents metaphorically wear what Mike Hepworth refers to as the "mask of old age" ("Images" 20), a mask created by a "subjective sense of distance between the inner or private self and the outer or physically observable social self" (20). This is a result, Hepworth argues, of the public imagery of old age as a social problem. He explains the "mask of old age" as follows:

Coupled with the traditional Western belief in old age as a condition of geriatric disengagement from full active social life, the image of the physiognomic body creates a trap or prison that constitutes an effective barrier of communication with the wider world (Hepworth, 1991). This is the mask of old age: an image that reflects the subjective experience that many older people describe as being constrained by the expectations of others (often younger people) into wearing a mask or disguise of physical aging that, unlike the actor at the close of a theatrical performance of old age, they cannot remove and leave behind in the dressing room. [...] All of the world's a stage, but when it comes to old age, some roles are for real. ("Images" 20)

Soon Ambrosia Manor residents, who cannot take off their "masks," are made to feel that their roles are real. Our Turn begin to block access to and from the home and ask employees to leave, interpellating all inhabitants into their role of "the old"—the "other"—through an unfavorable "geriatric gaze" (Hepworth, "Images" 12), which literally traps them in the home. The contrast between young and old is established as a natural difference which manifests itself on the level of space:

"They have blockaded the gate," Tobias announces. "They refuse to let anyone in." [...] "Are they letting anyone out?" [Wilma] asks Tobias. "Through the blockade." [...] "Only the staff," says Tobias. "They are more or less ordering them to go. Not the inhabitants. We have to stay. So they appear to have decreed." [...] "We could disguise ourselves," says Wilma. "To get out. As, well, as cleaners. Muslim cleaners, with our heads covered up. Or something." "I doubt very much that we would pass unchallenged, dear lady," Tobias says. "It is a question of the generations. Time leaves its markings." (253–255)

Old Age as a Liminal Stage Between Life and Death

The care home, Ambrosia Manor, serves as a heterotopic spatial metaphor that localizes the horrors of a life deprived of social and cultural recognition through the “othering” of old age. It represents the metaphorical “black hole of the fourth age,” the “shadowlands of disability, diminishment, and death” (Gilleard and Higgs, “Aging” 121). The residents in “Torching the Dusties” are not only excluded from any social participation in their secluded heterotopic space, but are extremely vulnerable to violence, as the authorities have given up protecting the care homes from *Our Turn*. In this manner, Ambrosia Manor becomes a literal waiting room for death. The irony of the name is painful. Whereas in Greek mythology Ambrosia, as Abel notes, is “a celestial material exclusively the possession of the Olympian deities” and signifies “immortality” (15), the manor that bears its name instead marks a loss of identity. The association becomes more pointed when considering that Ambrosia is also the name of an invasive weed, a plant regarded as dangerous and therefore targeted for removal and destruction.⁸ As a species that must be eradicated, it underscores the shift from divine nourishment to harmful weed, from value to devaluation. In this sense, the story resonates with what Agamben describes as “bare life” (4): a body stripped of personhood, excluded from political participation, subjected to sovereign violence, and ultimately “devoid of value” (88). Watching the aggressive mob gather in front of the gates puts the aged residents into a state between life and death. This liminal condition is depicted in the story with a certain cynicism when Atwood describes Wilma and Tobias watching a brace of paramedics hurrying in and out, and then exiting “at a more leisurely pace, wheeling a shape on a gurney. You can’t tell from here, says Tobias as he peers through the binoculars, whether the body is alive or dead. ‘Maybe you can’t even tell from down there,’ he’s been known to add as a sepulchral joke” (235).

Tobias’s supposedly humorous comment serves to emphasize the otherness of old age, where the body is anonymous (“a shape”), denied personhood and not even clearly alive or dead. The loss of identity in the fourth age is also illustrated by Wilma’s increasing macular degeneration, which makes it difficult for her to see herself in the mirror: “The most worrisome item during her morning preparation is her face. She can scarcely make it out in the mirror: it’s like one of those face-shaped blanks that once appeared on Internet accounts when you hadn’t added your picture” (229). Small things such as putting on make-up

8 I am grateful to Miriam Haller who added this perspective in our discussion of the story.

have become a problem; misapplied lipstick, for instance, may have severe consequences: “if you look demented they’re more likely to treat you as if you really are,” and it would only be a short time until “you dwindle to nothing” (230). Wilma knows that her make-up, usually applied to conceal age, might make her look older than she is. She directs us as readers to look beyond the façade, also that of the care home. She is performing age deliberately, knowing how signs are being interpreted and knowing how she has to interpret the world of the care home.

Wilma experiences Charles Bonnet Syndrome, an eye condition characterized by visual hallucinations—in her case manifesting as what her eye doctor calls “Chuckies,” tiny ornately dressed figures who parade through her room, accompanying her almost all day. These tiny mannequins converse among themselves but ignore Wilma entirely. Although Wilma, who is an excellent observer, recognizes that they are merely symptoms of her condition, the bizarre apparitions confront her with the harsh reality of losing both her vision and autonomy, as they appear unpredictably and beyond her control. The description of the characters wearing elaborately crafted “red velvet costumes, richly textured and patterned in gold” (266) performing an “airy dance” in which the men and women gracefully nod, curtsy, come together, and then move apart again (266) evokes imagery reminiscent of Renaissance court dances. This depiction can be interpreted as an intertextual reference to Elizabethan drama, particularly texts from that period addressing aging as a societal burden, such as the 17th century play *The Old Law* (Middleton et al.). In this tragicomedy, co-written by Shakespeare’s contemporary Thomas Middleton, the title itself references the Elizabethan Poor Law of 1601. The play’s edict mandates the execution of women at sixty, men at eighty, and anyone exhibiting “second infancy,” a euphemism for cognitive decline or senility (Middleton et al. 1334), meaning “senility.” These older characters are portrayed as burdensome and obsolete to society. In contrast, Thomas More explicitly rejected the idea of geronticide in his *Utopia* (1516), advocating instead for compassionate and dignified state-supported care, though he condoned voluntary euthanasia for those suffering severe pain or weakness. Middleton’s play, influenced by More’s earlier arguments (Schotland 161) can be read as satirical commentary—a critical stance also reflected in Atwood’s text. The ruthless killing of old people in “Torching the Dusties” intensifies the clash between generations even more radically than in *The Old Law*, where older characters are ultimately spared (Kainradl and Kribernegg).

Helen Snaith has an insightful explanation for Wilma's vision loss. She claims that "[r]eading' the final tale through the failing eyes of Wilma also becomes critical in engaging with broader issues around an ageist society. [...] It stands to reason that our understanding of the issues, much like Wilma's understanding, is limited. Therefore, Wilma's failing sight becomes analogous to our own limitations and ability to 'see' the potential failures of society in life outside of fiction" (Snaith 122). Despite the dystopian setting, she contends that Atwood's narrative strategy of the "persistent centering of Wilma's voice [...] as interpreter of events [...] [is a] deliberate subversion of narrative" (124) that counteracts the "double standard of aging" (Sontag). Goldman's movie adaptation can be read to highlight this, as she reverses the roles and has Tobias experience visual impairment while Wilma sees clearly. Yet, the film seems to center more strongly on presenting his perspective, which again underscores a more traditional narrative.

In the story, the narrative of decline, which reflects a common discourse on aging as lack, loss and decrepitude and makes aging entirely bodily (Gullette, *Aged* 7), is reinforced by olfactory imagery, such as the "acid, stale odour of aging bodies so noticeable when all the Ambrosiads are assembled in the dining room, their base note of slow decay and involuntary leakage papered over with applied layers of scent – delicate florals on the women, bracing spices on the men, the blooming rose or brusque pirate image inside each of them still fondly cherished" (Atwood, "Torching" 232). Wilma becomes aware of the fact that, as a human being, she cannot be separated from her body—a body that she feels is betraying her:

You believed you could transcend the body as you aged, she tells herself. You believed you could rise above it, to a serene, nonphysical realm. But it's only through ecstasy you can do that, and ecstasy is achieved through the body itself. Without the bone and sinew of wings, no flight. Without that ecstasy you can only be dragged further down by the body, into its machinery. Its rusting, creaking, vengeful, brute machinery. (252)

Her aged body is giving up, experienced as the "other" of the mind, disloyal and letting her down. In addition, Wilma links her sense of having lost her physical and sexual attractiveness to her advanced age. This influences her relationship with Tobias, a suave Hungarian gentleman. Although he frequently compliments her on her looks, his boasts of earlier sexual adventures make her feel inferior. She secretly compares her old body with the beauties Tobias tells her

about, and decides against a sexual relationship with him. Because of her visual disability, the heterotopic exclusion is even worse for Wilma, and Tobias is her last chance, even if a meagre one, to imagine at least a connection with a world outside:

We have to be kind to one another in here, she tells herself. We're all we have left. The bottom line is that Tobias can still see. She can't afford to be annoyed by physical attractions of stale-dated stunners as long as Tobias can look out the window and tell her what's going on there in the grounds outside the imposing front door of Ambrosia Manor. She likes to be kept in the loop, insofar as there is one. (227)

At Ambrosia Manor, the residents are denied access to information from the outside world; they are forbidden to have private computers, and those in the Activity Centre have control software to limit access, “as for prepubescent children” (242). Through Wilma we become aware too of their lack of control over their time and, ultimately, their bodies, resonating with the concept of the “total institution.” Residents are not treated as independent individuals but are deprived of their autonomy.

Wilma's distance from the world outside is not only due to Ambrosia Manor's heterotopic exclusion. The narration reveals that her two daughters and son do not count as a lifeline to the outer world, as her relationship to them is also distant. She complains that they are too busy to visit her, a procedure that would be tiresome anyway, as she convinces herself while observing the reluctance exhibited by other people, bearing a potted geranium, during their visits; they arrive “hauling a young, reluctant grand-child, summoning up false cheer, hoping to get this rich-old-relative thing over with as soon as possible” (235). She refers to only one of her daughters, Alyson, by name—the one who manages her ample funds—and barely remembers the time “back when she had family” (233). She only calls Alyson out of duty, finding these calls as tedious as her grandchildren, who are usually forced to say hello to her, must. Her other daughter and son are only mentioned as uncaring offspring; her daughter, because she keeps sending slippers of which Wilma now has “a glut” (234), and her son, because he still writes her postcards and “doesn't seem to grasp that she can no longer read his handwriting” (234). Their father, Wilma's late husband, is also only mentioned in passing and without a name, revealing her distance from the life she had before she entered Ambrosia Manor. Tobias is Wilma's only companion, and he helps her with her activities of daily living

such as cooking breakfast or eating, as “she can no longer aim the spoon with accuracy” (233). Despite his devoted help, she does not trust him (nor anyone else in the residence for that matter). His answers seem sly and evasive, and he resembles the charming Eastern European trickster figure of Vitus Kovic in Leslie Larson’s *Breaking Out of Bedlam*. Wilma “enjoys re-asking questions because the answers are sometimes the same, sometimes not. Tobias has had at least three birthplaces and has attended four universities, all at once. His passports are numerous” (248). Whoever Tobias was in his former life, he now seems to take good care of Wilma in Ambrosia Manor and is a loyal friend, and Wilma seems to appreciate this most of the time. The distance and caution expressed by her comments may stem simply from a sense of self-preservation. The representation of Wilma’s distrust in “Torching the Dusties” illustrates the spatial and corporeal dispossession of nursing home inhabitants.

Ambrosia Manor is an upscale (and, as such, in its own way “exclusive”) retirement facility with two wings, the “Early Assisted Living wing,” which Wilma and Tobias inhabit, and the ironically named “Advanced Living” wing, where “things are different,” but Wilma “hasn’t wished to imagine exactly how different” (233). Wilma is afraid that she will soon be moved there against her will: “They don’t really believe she’s able to function on her own; they’re just waiting for an excuse to slot her into Advanced Living and grab the rest of her furniture and her good china and silver, which they’ll sell to support their profit margin. That’s the deal, she signed it; it was the price of entry, the price of comfort, the price of safety. The price of not being a burden” (239). She is excluded and alienated from social participation and confined to the heterotopic parallel world of the home, but, even there, she is at risk of further spatial segregation because of perceived decline. Atwood draws attention to the commodification of care to further emphasize the heterotopian dimension of the nursing home, within which residents amount to social refuse produced by practices of spatial exclusion, as Radović argues in a different context (147). Wilma is aware that there are public care homes which do not offer the same hotel-like luxury she enjoys at Ambrosia Manor. She recognizes that: “Ambrosia Manor isn’t cheap, and the relatives would not take kindly to ulcerating rashes on their loved ones. They want their money’s worth, or so they’ll claim. What they most likely want in truth is a rapid and blame-free finish for the old fossils. Then they can tidy up and collect the remnants of the net worth – the legacy, the leftovers, the remains – and tell themselves they deserve it” (238).

Old people are no longer chased out into the wilderness or put on ice floes as they may have been in the past; instead, “innovative services and goods are

developing that seek to capitalize on the “silver dollar,” as Anne Karpf (SR9) put it in her *New York Times* article on gerontophobia. Wilma knows that she is taken care of in a humane way because she pays large sums for it and keeps the nurses happy with little tips and presents. When the mob forces staff members to leave, her caregiver Katia comes into Wilma’s room with a guilty conscience, weeping and apologizing because she needs to leave her. Ironically, it is Wilma who comforts Katia, telling her she will be all right and asking her to calm down. Wilma reacts to Katia’s sobbing by giving her all the cash she has left in her purse, as well as her expensive wrapped floral-scented soaps. She still seems unaware of the threatening situation she is in herself. It seems more important to her to please and care for Katia, one of the few people she has at least some trust in. Knowing how comparatively fortunate she is, Wilma describes Ambrosia Manor as a surrogate home. However, the home’s staff and its amenities, such as the silent hands at work behind the scenes who fold her nightgown and put chocolate on the pillow during dinner hour (253) do not provide her with the same feeling of comfort and extravagance she would enjoy in a hotel. Ambrosia Manor, a “shrine to past wealth” (Barry 154), has a “fountain with a replica of a famous Belgian statue, a naked angel-faced boy urinating into a stone basin” and a wall with “two ostentatious, depressed-looking stone lions” (234). While these decorative elements are, as she points out, fake, “the high brick wall, the imposing gateway with its overhead arch (234) are real, and remind her of a prison or hospital rather than a luxurious hotel. This duality highlights how “ruling metaphors (Braedley) converge in the story and are also expressed through Wilma’s unhappiness in the luxury world. But, as Elizabeth Barry points out, Atwood’s critique of capitalism remains ambiguous because the aging residents actively participate in this materialism. Barry notes, “The ‘little world’ of the residential home enshrines, memorialises and replicates a history of privilege, from the tiny feudal characters dancing at the edge of Wilma’s eyeline (her visual hallucinations) to the figure of domestic service (explicitly costumed as Victorian in Marlene Goldman’s film of the story)⁹ to the fine-grained late capitalist differentiation of luxury foodstuffs” (153–54).

9 While Elizabeth Barry argues that the costumes are Victorian, Marlene Goldman asserted during a 2019 conference discussion about her film adaptation that she interpreted them as referencing the Newfoundland tradition of Mummering. As stated earlier, I contend that Atwood might employ intertextual references to the Renaissance play *The Old Law*.

The End of the Mansion

After all the staff have left the premises, as the more able residents are obliged to care for the less able, they begin to regain agency, assigning meaning to their lives and experiences and producing a new kind of institutional space for themselves. Some women take over the kitchen and make soup: "Isn't this something?" [Noreen] says. 'Everyone's just rolling up their sleeves and pitching in! It's like summer camp! I suppose they thought we couldn't cope!'" (261). Once *Our Turn* takes over, however, there is no help for the people of the "fourth age" who are housed in "Advanced Living:" the connecting doors are locked, telephone lines cut, and computers and even TVs no longer work as they are consigned to their fate. Tobias has started to stock up on food and water for Wilma and himself, as part of his secret escape plan. But when a group of Ambrosia Manor inhabitants plan to march out the front door, claiming that the press has arrived, Tobias remains skeptical. He believes that even "with the world watching" the mob would never let them pass: "The whole world has an appetite for ringside seats at such events. Witch-burnings and public hangings were always well attended," he observes (262). Nonetheless, his fellow residents are not greatly concerned: "'I'm going to have a nap first,' says Noreen. 'Gather my strength. Before we march out. At least we don't have to do the dishes in that filthy kitchen, since we won't be here much longer'" (262). Noreen's plan, however, soon proves inoperable, and a violent incident occurs which causes the few courageous inhabitants who tried to march out to return to the house. In the meantime, the mob outside has begun to light fires in oil drums, and Wilma can hear them chanting, "*Time to Go. Fast Not Slow. Burn Baby Burn. It's Our Turn*" (265). It is clear that the agency and power briefly afforded to the residents as they take over the space of the home cannot last.

The conclusion of the story further emphasizes how difficult it is to challenge spatial segregation and the discourse of the old as burden. After dark, Tobias shows Wilma a way out through the storage area, which is populated by rats, and past the trash bins. In Marlene Goldman's film adaptation, they use a laundry bin to escape through the dark hallways, emphasizing the prison escape narrative, as Barry also points out (155). Wilma has to rely entirely on Tobias's guidance, and her narration once more reveals her loneliness and the difficult conditions of being helpless and dependent. She finds herself questioning her friend's motivation: "'What if he's a thrill killer', she asks herself, wondering if he 'has made everything up', and the chanting a recording or a student group he has hired" (266). Her panic only ebbs when he guides her to one of the gazebos in the garden where he has prepared blankets, food, cof-

fee and her binoculars: “Grandstand seats. We’ll be quite comfortable here,” he says, feeding her peanuts just as Ambrosia Manor begins to burn” (266). Wilma’s feelings of ambivalence about Tobias are underlined once more while she worries about the others who are still inside: “There is nothing I can do for the others,” says Tobias. [...] ‘It was always that way,’ he says mournfully. ‘Or is it coldly?’” (267). Throughout the story, he never fully gains her trust, and even after his attempt to rescue her, she finds it difficult to establish a trusting relationship with him. She can hardly trust herself, or her own body: “She’s clutching – she notices – her own hands. They feel like somebody else” (267). Caught between dependence on Tobias and dependence on Ambrosia Manor, Wilma is left vulnerable and unable to connect not only with others, but also with her own body and sense of self. The story ends with Wilma and Tobias watching the bright flames consuming Ambrosia Manor. They wonder why there are no fire trucks and, hearing their fellow residents’ fading screams, hope that they will have a quick death (268). Once more, Wilma, just as at the story’s beginning, is accompanied by the “little people”—as grotesque as the murderers outside the gate—who blend in with the flames, “Look! Look! They are singing!” (268). As always, they show no compassion. Just like the general public, they seem to be enjoying the event. The little Chuckies can be read through Bakhtin’s idea of the carnivalesque, where laughter mixes comedy with violence and turns death into a spectacle (cited in Russo 54). The residents are shown as disposable, their pain treated as entertainment. As Marta Dvorak points out, Atwood often uses grotesque humor in a “subversive carnivalesque tradition” that highlights cruelty rather than renewal (114). She notes that Atwood’s “tall tale strategies generate the laughter that accompanies incongruity” (115), and the little Chuckies act like tall-tale figures—exaggerated, absurd, and out of place in such a dark scene. The mix of horror and play creates uneasy laughter. The story’s “subdued carnival” (Atwood, “Torching” 247) becomes a parody of carnival, a bleak spectacle where laughter goes hand in hand with geronticide and old age is seen as disposable.

It remains open whether Tobias and Wilma will be able to escape after Our Turn has left the scene. Wilma and Tobias are tossed into a space beyond the heterotopia of the care home, they are the “living dead” who are no longer even discursively allocated a territory. What Andrea Charise has noted with regard to Anthony Trollope’s *The Fixed Period* can also be applied to Margaret Atwood’s tale. It “clarifies” for our day “how demographics and aesthetics conceive of older age as a potentially catastrophic force and, subsequently, how the rhetoric of capacity can be used to disaffiliate the aged from a privileged, non-

old social body” (Charise 2). With nursing homes under attack, readers are left to wonder where Wilma and Tobias could go next, stuck in the liminal world between the care home and the city. Even the outside world is in “shambles, both economic and environmental” (257). “Torching the Dusties” lets “the reader think of the burden” (Trollope, 2008 [1882]: 10; Charise, 2012: 1)—but, as Barry contends, “images of ending can be enlivening. Atwood imagines in the Manor’s destruction not the sweeping away a troublesome older generation but the putative end of an unequal system itself” (156) because, she observes, “the crisis is not located in the dystopian spaces of commercialised ‘care,’ but in the larger system that creates them” (160). “If these authors’ stories reflect the dominance of the idea of looming closure as the defining chronotope of the contemporary short story, it is not so much that they have older characters as it is that the world they are writing about is facing the prospect of its own imminent ending. The older protagonists are simply waiting to see “what will happen next” (Atwood 255)” (Barry, “Glut” 161). As the smoke clears, Wilma and Tobias remain trapped within a heterochronotope, suspended between the displaced reality of the care home and the crumbling city outside, uncertain which version of the future—if any—they might enter next.