2 Hospital, Hotel, or Home?

Renegotiating Identity at the Nexus of Public and Private

"See the number on your door, the big 14 here?
That's how you'll know this is your room when you're coming back."
From meals. Games. TV movies. All the promised fun.

— Joan Barfoot, *Exit Lines*

The ache for home lives in all of us. The safe place where we can go as we are and not bequestioned.

— Maya Angelou, *"All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes"*

Home is a place that offers security, familiarity and nurture.

— Yi-Fu Tuan, "Home"

A liminal space at the intersection of private and public, the care home has been compared to the hospital, hotel, prison, concentration camp,[1] or heterotopic spaces such as the luxury hotel, the cruise ship,[2] and even the airplane: "Airplanes are flying nursing homes," Dorothy Pringle states, emphasizing that both of these places are heavily managed in terms of time and space, restrict

1 As Margot O'Neill writes on ABC NewMail, "Mistreated nursing home residents 'better off in a concentration camp'" (M. O'Neill). May Sarton in *As We Are Now* (9) uses the same comparison in a disturbingly inappropriate manner.

2 See Lerner et al., as well as Lindquist and Golub.

and allow certain behaviors, and involve routine and ritual (Andrews et al. 110). Pringle's comparison of airplanes to nursing homes highlights the drawbacks of residential life by depicting the restrictive and often uncomfortable nature of both environments:

> Not having a choice of whom one sits besides and risking that this seatmate may smell, slurp food, chatter endlessly or refuse to participate in even occasional exchange of pleasantries; […] eating on the schedule imposed by the airline not when one is hungry and, moreover, having little choice over what one eats; having to use and wait for communal facilities, such as bathrooms and not being able to get to the toilet when needed […] having television sets turned on regardless of one's interest in watching them; having to wear a restraint to protect against the rare possibility of injury; and having nothing to do and nowhere to go. Arguably, relationships with staff can vary considerably and can either dramatically improve or detract from the overall experience. Notably, the quality of service can also depend on one's ability to pay. (Andrews et al. 110)

Just as air travel confines passengers in a tightly regulated space for the duration of their journey, care homes structure the daily lives of residents within a framework that prioritizes efficiency, safety, and institutional control. A crucial distinction between the two settings, she maintains, is "that passengers are allowed to leave airplanes at the end of their journeys, whilst residents of nursing homes often live out the rest of their lives in these settings" (110). Andrews et al. use the image of the airplane to evoke empathy: while many can relate to the frustrations of air travel, far fewer can truly imagine the experience of long-term institutional living. Regardless of whether one agrees with the analogy, it undoubtedly invites deeper reflection on the nature of institutional environments and the limitations they impose (110).

As the comparison of a nursing home with an airplane or a hospital shows, it seems difficult to think the institution as "itself," without resorting to familiar concepts such as a hotel, holiday resort or—as shown in Chapter Three—a prison. Susan Braedley reflects on this issue in her article "Reinventing the Nursing Home: Metaphors that Design Care," thinking about these concepts as "ruling metaphors" that "have come to dominate the everyday life of many nursing homes, bringing in the material realities and social relations of private households, hotels as commercial enterprises and hospitals as places of medical practice" (57). These metaphors, she states, shape not only physical design

but also social relations, care practices, and institutional policies. However, she argues that

> the resulting environments are often disappointing when assessed for conditions of equity, dignity and respect for residents and for those who care for them, yet also have some benefits. They produce Baudrillardian environments, approaching but never realising fantasies that dependence, frailty and dying can be cured in a hospital, evaded by luxurious hotel living or escaped through the familiarity of something "like home." (Braedley 57)

These metaphors, she notes, reinforce existing social inequalities, rather than creating genuinely new and equitable care models. Even if we managed to break out of these guiding frameworks, it is difficult to come up with models that do not operate within capitalist structures that undervalue care work and reinforce gendered expectations: "In industrialised countries, few people have extended experiences of collective living that could offer a prefigurative metaphor for collective caring" (57). In this chapter, I will investigate these metaphors that shape the care home as a synecdochical space.

Hospital, Hotel, Holiday Resort, or Home?

The care home, it is often stated, is an institution that lies at the intersection of hospital and hotel. Due to its history of long-term care, its architectural plans with double-loaded corridors and linoleum floors, and its focus on caregiving, the association of the care home with a hospital is probably the most obvious one. Yet there is one fundamental difference: like tourists, who will leave the airplane, hospital patients will eventually be discharged. As Kearns and Andrews claim, "even against the odds, people are expected to graduate from hospital into greater independence, but the reverse prevails in the nursing home: it would be counter-intuitive to graduate into anything but greater dependence (e.g. a geriatric ward)" (15). In other words, hospitals are supposed to enable people to live independently after being discharged, whereas care homes are usually seen as a final destination.

To downplay the institutional character, architectural firms, designers, funders, researchers, advocates, and operators "have been reimagining the nursing home, working to escape its poor reputation through design. They have adapted the architecture, furnishings, décor, spatial and social arrangements of familiar environments with positive associations, such as 'home', 'hotel', 'village' and 'hospital,' to produce new forms of nursing home care"

(Braedley 45). They increasingly emphasize the hotel-like aspects of care homes, designing them as spaces of relaxation, entertainment, and comfort. Sterile, cold hallways are now softened with carpeting and warm lighting, shifting the focus away from the facility's institutional nature and toward aesthetic appeal. Care homes designed under the "hospitality" model feature light-filled corridors, courtyards with lush, green gardens, gyms, cafés, hair and nail salons, bars, and shops, all intended to emulate a hotel lifestyle "suggesting places of consumption and active leisure" (Buse et al. 1446). Such amenities with their emphasis on "luxury" and "elegance" insinuate that care homes can be places of enjoyment, presenting "a vision of life that is implicitly classed and remote from institutional models associated with welfare and need" (1446). As intended, the impermanence suggested by such "non-places" (Augé 110) may, as architect Annmarie Adams and Age Studies scholar Sally Chivers maintain, "make the transition to care easier for many residents" (Adams and Chivers, "Architecture" 144). Yet, these design choices shaping the expectations of future residents frame the facility as a temporary place. "It is always understood […] that even those residents who are 'permanent' will only last so long" (144). No matter how carefully curated the aesthetics, the reality of institutionalization can hardly be masked.

In another article, "Home Pages: Domesticity and Duplicity in Images of Architecture for Ageing," Adams and Chivers critique the unoriginal hospitality approach often taken in care home design:

> In North America, long-term care (LTC) architecture has traditionally been the work of mediocre architectural firms. Highly constrained by governmental regulations, the design of the places where most of us will age and die is far from inspired, and marked by a remarkable conservatism. Many LTC buildings look like hotel chains and are sited like strip malls, forming undistinguished backdrops to unremarkable thoroughfares, designed more for cars than for people. Rarely do the top students in architecture schools take on long-term care buildings for their thesis projects, perhaps because of this reputation for design constraints rather than innovation. ("Home" 82)

The traditional nursing home, as Peter Uhlenberg describes it, is constructed as the opposite of what is commonly understood as "home," a notion that is based

on the ideal of the family model.[3] He writes, "No one who lives in a nursing home could possibly confuse it with a home. Sharing a bedroom with a sick stranger, being served institutional food on a fixed schedule, having no control over the design and furnishing of your room, and being cared for by indifferent aides contradicts the idea of home" (73). Most care home ethnographies and analyses by gerontologists who study place attachment among old people seem to perpetuate, for a variety of economic and ideological reasons, the idea that the domestic, familial space is the ideal place where old people wish to remain, or where they wish to return to at the end of their lives. It "symbolizes all the positive associations we have with hearth and home," Jennifer A. Parks explains in her critical feminist study of home health care. "Whether or not patients are *actually* better off in their own homes, […] home care symbolizes a 'kinder, gentler' form of health care delivery where patients can remain in the bosoms of their families" (Parks 11).

Aging in place is not always the ideal solution it is often portrayed to be. Websites offering advice to adult children caring for aging parents frequently present it as a blessing to all involved, but the reality is often far more complex. Parks' research on the home health care industry highlights its highly exploitative nature, affecting not only workers but also families and patients, while raising significant ethical concerns (9). Although a majority of individuals, she writes, "invariably prefer home-based to institution-based care" (3), this preference is often rooted in an idealized vision of "home" rather than the actual ability of family members to provide adequate care. A recent Gallup and Robinson poll in the United States reflects this contradiction: when adults aged 35 to 64 were asked whether they would take in an aging parent, 53 percent answered yes. But when older adults (65+) were asked whether they would want to live with their children if they could no longer live independently, only 25% said they would (Span n.p.). These findings suggest that while aging in place may seem desirable in theory, the practical and emotional realities for both older adults and their families often tell a different story.

The juxtaposition between idealized conceptions of home and the true reality in the context of long-term care institutions has been reviewed in detail

3 For an extensive overview of the symbolic meaning of "home," see Linda McDowell, who theorizes the notion of "home" and "domesticity" from a gendered perspective, drawing upon the works of David Harvey, Martin Heidegger, Gaston Bachelard, and Pierre Bourdieu, to develop a feminist reading of home, place, and identity (71–95).

by Roger Fay and Ceridwen Owen in their article "'Home' in the Aged Care Institution: Authentic or Ersatz," in which they observe that "one of the strongest criticisms of aged care homes is the tendency towards romantic and stereotyped meaning of home for elderly people" (35). This ideal of familial domesticity seems to be trivializing and sentimentalizing the notion of "home" vis-à-vis the institution which, due to its developmental history, has always been portrayed as its opposite. Although personal relationships are central to a person's "feeling at home," the concept of "home" is highly complex and multilayered. "Home," as Elaine Caouette states, is related to control over one's own environment, and assures a sense of security: "It offers freedom of action and expresses its resident's ideas and personal values. The experience of home establishes a state of permanence and continuity, which provides a sense of belonging. Home permits us to develop and secure our relationships with family and friends. […] Home is an indicator of social status" (Caouette 254).

In traditional institutions of long-term care, "homelikeness" is usually not placed in the foreground—on the contrary. Many of aforementioned ethnographic or sociological accounts of life in residential care institutions portray the care home, which is usually based on a medical model, as an anti-domestic, homogenizing space in which all the qualities that are stereotypically ascribed to the family home, such as continuity, relationships, control, or social status, are overturned (Börjesson and Torgé; Fleming et al.). Environmental gerontologists Graham Rowles and Habib Chaudhury describe this opposition between home and institution as a dialectic, and contend that nowadays, "long-term care facilities strive to create a homelike physical and social environment within an organizational/institutional framework" (15). A trend to design modern long-term care institutions with the home aesthetic in mind has begun in the past decades, creating spaces that can be adapted and personalized. The "homelikeness" is often fostered by allowing residents to bring their own furniture and personal objects, acknowledging that the transition from home to institutional care can pose a threat to personhood for many older adults (Rubinstein and Medeiros 59). These familiar belongings are intended to minimize the ruptures and discontinuities such a move might introduce, helping residents maintain a coherent life-course narrative, preserving autobiographical continuity, and reinforcing a sense of belonging even in institutional settings. They still remain Baudrillardian hyper-realities, "approaching but never realizing fantasies that dependence, frailty, and dying can be cured in a hospital, evaded by luxurious hotel living or escaped through something 'like home'" (Braedley 57).

As James Krasner observes, "The elderly home is more like a fictional world than most spaces, because every path and every object is likely to be 'storied'" (*Home* 50). This highlights the interconnection between home and memory, suggesting that personal spaces are not just physical environments but also repositories of identity, history, and selfhood, making empty space into place. This link between memory and home is represented in Margaret Laurence's *The Stone Angel*. As has also been observed by Kathleen Woodward (*Aging* 146), the novel highlights how a person's sense of self can be connected to the place they inhabit, and how care homes can be of "debilitating sterility" (Woodward, *Aging* 142).[4] Hagar Shipley, the ninety year old protagonist who is struggling against being moved into a care facility, resists the sale of her house. She experiences her home as an extension of her identity, with each object anchoring her to her past: "My shreds and remnants of years are scattered through it [the house] visibly in lamps and vases. […] If I'm not contained in them and in this house, something of all change caught and fixed here, eternal enough for my purposes, then I do not know where I am to be found at all." Hagar's memories are stored in each object, in the house itself. This passage aligns with Gaston Bachelard's concept of "topoanalysis," which he defines as "the systematic psychological study of the sites of our intimate lives" (8). Bachelard describes this phenomenon as a "memory of the body," emphasizing that "the house we were born in is physically inscribed in us. It is a group of organic habits" (14). In other words, our homes shape not just our memories but also our embodied experiences, becoming an integral part of our identity.

One example that illustrates the garage-like "unhomeliness" of the nursing home appears in Thomas Edward Gass's report, *Nobody's Home: Candid Reflections of a Nursing Home Aide*, which begins by Gass describing the setting of the care home as a storage unit for the old: "Let me walk you through this little world that thrives within our sealed people-container. The economy of the building, with its flat metal roof and concrete block walls spread out low and

4 In *Aging and its Discontents*, Woodward uses *The Stone Angel* as a "counter text" illustrating her point, but not interpreting it separately. As one of the first Age Studies scholars, she reminds us in a footnote that "In the last two decades several novels have appeared in the United States which portray the life of the elderly in nursing homes as debilitating, of which I mention four: May Sarton's *As We Are Now* (New York: Norton, 1973), Ellen Douglas's *Apostles of Light* (Boston: Houghton, 1973), John Updike's *The Poorhouse Fair* (New York: Knopf, 1969), and Hilda Wolitzer's In the *Palomar Arms* (New York: Farrar, 1983)" (222).

long, is void of ambition or pretense. Like an industrial complex or self-storage unit, it is clean, efficient, and functional" (Gass and Vladeck 1). In the foreword, Bruce Vladek describes how the institution Gass works for resembles a "mini-hospital" (xii) governed by "rules and regulations meant to preclude the worst sorts of abuse or disaster or embarrassment, not by an effort to create especially sensitive or responsive environments for lonely, frightened, frail old people" (xii). The care home, he writes, is "managed clinically by nurses" and "operated predominantly by entrepreneurs who can survive economically only by squeezing nickels and speculating in real estate" (xii). Gass describes how the residents he cares for are "in a continual state of identity loss and reclamation, due to dementia and to the nature of institutional life" (Krasner 130). The title of Gass's memoir, *Nobody's Home*, expresses the "distortions of identity for both patient and caregiver," as James Krasner observes:

> The phrase seems to be a truncated version of "the lights are on, but nobody's home," which would apply to many of the nursing home residents. But it also reminds us that the facility is no kind of home; nobody would ever choose to live there, as it cannot sustain any sort of authentic domestic life. As a result, it becomes the home to a sequence of nobodies—both residents and aides exist in a twilight world of social marginalization and indeterminate identity. (Krasner, *Home* 130)

Krasner's analysis highlights the problems of isolation and the loss of identity experienced in nursing homes. The bleak environment is not only unpleasant for residents, but also for everyone working and visiting. This "aesthetic deprivation" (Moss and O'Neill) can have effects on the quality of life. As Moss and O'Neill note,

> Of course, health-care professionals also suffer from aesthetic deprivation. If the health-care settings in which they practise are poorly designed, aesthetically barren, and polluted by noise it is not surprising that such an environment may have a negative influence. Aesthetic enrichment is likely to have an impact on staff wellbeing and empowerment, and might also promote a clinical framework that rises above task and technique-oriented health care. (1033)

What is often overlooked in analyses such as Krasner's is the fact that long-term care institutions in fact have multiple functions, including a medical one; most residents live there because they can no longer cope by themselves, or

have special care needs that cannot be taken care of in their own homes. Californian health care designer and architect Gregg Maedo points out the pitfalls of dysfunctionality such design concepts can create when translated into reality:

> Making a Nursing Home more like a hotel and mimicking the aesthetics does theoretically create a more inviting atmosphere. Unfortunately, this approach is a mistake. Even though conceptually, a Nursing Home and a hotel may have similarities in terms of balance between public vs. private space, the hospitality design lacks the underlying medical support that composes the actual function of a Nursing Home" (Maedo n.p.).

Just as the notion of home is multi-dimensional and complex, as Fay and Owen pragmatically state (41), so is that of the institution. "Contemporary well-designed nursing homes do provide aspects of home while at the same time providing the resources required of an institution that cares for people in a state of physical and cognitive decline," they assert (41). The design concept of a "homelike" environment may differ from good institutional design:

> This acknowledges the true purpose of these facilities—the support and wellbeing of people experiencing the ageing process not only through the design of the physical landscape of the building and exterior spaces, but also through the relational everyday practices and social connections—and may more readily support the privacy, autonomy and selfhood that are fundamental to making home. Furthermore, many aspects of these facilities will necessarily respond, through design, to the practical necessity of addressing the very real needs of people who are frail and ill—not all of which are compatible to the idea of being "homelike". The provision of a home is only one aspect of that purpose. (Fay and Owen 41)

Fay and Owen note that increasing care needs may necessitate adopting a more medical model in nursing homes, since, unlike retirement communities or assisted living settings—which prioritize a homelike atmosphere—nursing care may require additional space and higher hygienic standards to effectively manage residents' complex health conditions. In a more medicalized environment, residents may have complex health conditions requiring specialized equipment, treatment spaces, and rigorous infection control protocols. For instance, rooms might need extra clearance for mobility aids, beds must

accommodate medical equipment, and areas need to be designed for efficient sanitation.

Culture Change: Can We Find New Models?

Despite these arguments that support the medicalized model, long-term care began to change towards more homelike atmospheres beginning with the Culture Change Movement in the 1980s (Gaugler 430). Recent innovative long-term care models, Gaugler explains, are the Butterfly Approach, the Eden Alternative, the Green House Project, the Wellspring model, or the Hogeweyk Village, a long-term care residence in the Netherlands designed for individuals with dementia but, "comprehensive culture change in nursing homes has proceeded slowly" (431).

Among those who challenge conventional approaches is Peter Whitehouse, who explores future models of care in his article "Long-Term Care for the Future: Just What is Real Anyway?" featured in our edited collection *Care Home Stories*. In his piece, Whitehouse offers a critical perspective on his visit to the Hogeweyk Dementia Village, which he found less impressive than anticipated. Drawing on his firsthand research in both Canada and the Netherlands, he calls for a fundamental reimagining of long-term care. He maintains that intergenerational learning should be at the heart of this transformation, fostering resilient communities capable of addressing the complex social, economic, and ecological challenges ahead.

One more recent example I would like to mention here is the *Dagmarsminde Method* that was popularized in 2021 through a documentary movie, *It Is Not Over Yet* (Denmark 2021, dir. Louise Detlefsen). It refers to a small Danish nursing home, Dagmarsminde, which is a "'Care Oasis' for people with severe dementia," as the website[5] states. It was established in 2016 through the private initiative of nurse May Bjerre Eiby who, after witnessing her own father's lonely death in a nursing home, wanted to create a new way of caring that actually resembles and modernizes Florence Nightingale's initial ideas of holistic care and the importance of the environment. Eiby describes her concept and tells the success story of her home in her book *Living Normally With Dementia: One Care Home's Story and How to Make It Yours* (2022) (Eiby and Kyhn). Most importantly, the "Dagmarsminde Method" consists of de-medication: "Dementia changes the way we are human. That's why the solution is human, not medical," she states (Eiby). In addition, she believes in person-centered care and

5 https://www.dagmarsminde.dk

home-like, pleasant surroundings: Dagmarsminde, the home's website reads, "is designed in every detail as a 'care oasis', prioritizing a sense of nature, well-being, closeness, and equality." With regard to the aesthetics of the home, the website mentions that "art, lighting, furniture, acoustics, temperature, green plants and fresh flowers, pets, fine table settings, essential oils, music, tone of voice and the food we serve are some of the important components to create the right atmosphere" ("Interior Design"). Dagmarsminde provides a caring environment for twelve residents experiencing varying stages of dementia and frailty, with staffing actually being equal or even lower than in other Danish nursing homes. This care model does not distinguish between different care levels and is accessible to anyone in need; but as demand is high, there are extensive waiting lists.

In this chapter, I engage in a discussion of the "production of space," as Lefebvre calls it, in textual representations of care-giving institutions. I do so to explore and deconstruct the binary opposition of "home" and "institution." As will be shown in my analysis, "feeling at home" is not necessarily linked to careful design, but can take various shapes. It can, for instance, be linked to a place that offers the possibility of rewriting one's life-course narrative in a potentially different, but meaningful way. Such a place, as the texts analyzed will show, can also be found in the care home, regardless of its design. These texts illustrate the difficulty of renegotiating identities in institutions of long-term care, not only for patients/residents, but for all individuals involved. Most importantly, this difference points to the function of the care home as a metaphorical and metonymical space when used as setting.

Renegotiating the Self: Fictional Representations of the Nexus of Hospital, Hotel, and Home

In Edna Alford's *A Sleep Full of Dreams*, the first text analyzed in this chapter, readers encounter Calgary's Pine Mountain Lodge primarily through the focalization of Arla Pederson, a young nurse struggling to reconcile herself with the demands of her challenging profession. The narrative problematizes the tension between Arla's tendency to perceive the old women as "other" and her simultaneous identification with them. This conflict is expressed on a spatial level; the homogenizing power of the care home is embodied by both the institution and Arla, and is especially at work in the institution's public areas. It is counterbalanced by her acknowledgement of her charges' individuality, which is expressed through Arla's caring relationship with them in their private rooms.

The second book discussed is Caribbean-Canadian author Shani Mootoo's novel *Cereus Blooms at Night*, which tells the turbulent life-story of Miss Mala Ramchandin through the narrative of Tyler, a homosexual male nurse at Paradise Alms House. In the secure place of the nursing home, Tyler and Mala develop a friendship that changes both their life-course identities, and allows them to find new meaning in their lives. The story tells a progress narrative of old age that is only made possible through good and nurturing institutional care.

While the first two texts emphasize the role of the care-givers, the third text, Joan Barfoot's novel *Exit Lines*, focuses on the alliance of four residents living in the Idyll Inn, a luxurious hotel-like retirement lodge. One resident, Greta, sets her suicide plans aside after realizing that friendship and solidarity have made her life meaningful. Finally, the short film *Rhonda's Party* introduces the character of Rhonda, a care-home resident who has spent months planning her best friend's Margaret's 100th birthday party, much to the dismay of the institution's administrator. When Margaret dies on the eve of the celebration, Rhonda must overcome her loneliness in the care home and decide whether the party will go on. What unites the narratives discussed in this chapter is that they all represent long-term care institutions as a place where characters (both nurses and residents) renegotiate their sense of self.

2.1 Care, Concern, (Dis-)Connection: Edna Alford's *A Sleep Full of Dreams*

In her 1981 short story cycle *A Sleep Full of Dreams*, Edna Alford depicts everyday life in a Canadian nursing home by introducing eleven old women and presenting their individual relationships with Nurse Arla Pederson. While John Keats in his poem "Endymion" talks about "a sleep / Full of sweet dreams, and health, and quiet breathing" (Keats 65), Alford's elision of the word "sweet" in the title "leav[es] readers to question the nightmare that 'a sleep full of dreams' may involve" (Chivers, *From* 72). In fact, unlike Keats's poem, the ten vignettes in the book are not set in joyful, paradisiac Elysian fields, but walk readers from room to room in Pine Mountain Lodge, a nursing home in Calgary, Canada.

In an interview with Alan Twigg, Edna Alford states, "I see *A Sleep Full of Dreams* as being a book about compartmentalization. It's there in the form. You will go into another room and into another room. It was suggested at some points that I might want to write a novel out of the stories. But I was absolutely

determined that it be presented in this form" (A. Twigg 3). The cycle's compartmentalization not only reflects the reality of the architecture of many nursing homes, but also underlines the individuality of each of the women Nurse Arla deals with. Sally Chivers notes, "[o]verall there is a stark disjunction, reflected architecturally, within the nursing home. The contrast between the individual stories of the characters as located in their personal rooms and their uniformity in the dining room and common areas crystallizes the conflict between homogeneity and individuality that inhabits the institutional settings of any nursing home" (*From* 69). The very same conflict burdens Arla, who oscillates between perceiving the old characters as a homogeneous mass of bodies ("old women who lined the porch walls like assorted house plants on window sills," 57), and seeing them as individuals each with their own life story, women with whom she develops personal relationships and a certain level or trust.

The stories are linked through a single narrator's perspective, mostly Arla's, which is refracted in an indirect, sometimes omniscient third-person narrative. *A Sleep Full of Dreams* traces Arla's personal development and her difficulties finding a voice of her own, while coming to terms with her ambivalent feelings towards her exhausting job as a nurse and the stigma that caring for the dying involves. She feels that "just by working with these old women, she carried some kind of curse, some contagion, some odour" (19). Like her charges, Arla is part of institutional regimes, rules, and discourses. The narrative successfully portrays her struggle to find an answer to her boyfriend's question "[i]f you're so upset about it, Arla, why don't you leave?" (21). As is typical of the genre of the short story cycle, "the emphasis in most of them is on transition and the experience of change," as Maria Löschnigg points out (260). She observes that the short story cycle is "episodic in nature, allowing for glimpses of significant moments in the lives of the protagonists" (258–59). In fact, the book centers on Arla's development at a particular stage in her life. The narrator's perspective changes in only two stories that are set outside of the nursing home to that of an old woman resident, Tessie Bishop ("Half-Past Eight") and Harold Simpson, an old man in the bingo hall ("Under the I"). Löschnigg describes this narrative organization as a "Munrovian pattern"—a monovocal homodiegetic structure, "i.e. the narrative voice remains more or less constant throughout the whole cycle" (257). Although each vignette can be read as a separate story, the space of the nursing home and its effects on the individuals living and working there creates a certain sense of unity.

Pine Mountain Lodge is represented as a threatening place to the old women's individual identities, but it also challenges Arla's sense of self. She is

conscious of the processes and power games at work in the institution, and through her encounters and relationships with the individual old women, she begins to critically reflect on her own life. Through her growing engagement with the women, she finds it increasingly difficult to deal with the central aspects of a nursing home: old age, dependency, and death. Arla's identification with her patients leads her to the painful discovery that she, too, is aging and might one day end up in a similar situation. She questions her own norms and values, both in her capacity as a nurse as in her private life, especially her relationship with her boyfriend, David. As readers, we follow Arla's inner conflicts and personal development until one day, at the end of the book, she decides to quit her job.

Despite Arla's personal development, Jeremy Lalonde cautions against reading *A Sleep Full of Dreams* as Arla's *Bildungsroman* as "one would expect Arla to be a more fully developed character" (87). Although Arla is the prime focalizer, and does undergo personal development, I agree with Lalonde's argument that the book is not a Bildungsroman in the classical sense. This supposition is supported by Edna Alford when she states in an interview that "[t]he vignettes are not narrated to portray a story of Arla's development and progress, [...] but to depict life in an institution" (A. Twigg 2). Maria Löschnigg emphasizes the difference in genre between short story cycle and *Bildungsroman* when she writes, "I would be careful about labels which again imply the conventional concept of a totalizing form which these authors have tried to undermine or escape" (258). *A Sleep Full of Dreams* corresponds to Löschnigg's description of the short story cycle:

> [t]he meaning of the incidents which are recalled by the narrator and around which the stories are built often lies in the fact that they signify processes of transition and transformation with regard to the protagonist. The narrative process appears as disjointed, as it offers a series of segments which—even if put together—resists the pattern of the linear and coherent life story which is typical of the *Bildungsroman*. (259)

As readers, we only share a small portion of Arla's life. The cycle, beginning in spring and ending after Christmas, comprises merely about one year of her work at the Pine Mountain Lodge. The book does not offer a happy or romantic ending that leaves readers satisfied with the insights Arla has gained. Rather, it contains a series of snapshots of Arla's life. Understanding and interpreting

Arla's development happens through the creative acts of reading and synthesizing the individual stories and their ambivalences. Sally Chivers observes:

> Although Alford writes in the third person, Arla's continued presence encourages the reader to evaluate and relate to her constantly changing and developing perceptions of the older adults she attends. Arla's assumptions are continually undermined, whether she begins a story with a negative opinion that some new knowledge thwarts or starts out full of optimism that is debunked. Accordingly, readers can accompany Arla through this third-person, partially omniscient narration in her continual reevaluation of her job, Pine Mountain Lodge's residents, and her own thoughts on aging. Alford subtly and gradually alters the seeming neutrality that the third person sets up by introducing various Pine Mountain residents. (*From* 69)

In the following interpretation of the individual vignettes, I focus on the spatial context of the nursing home as an institution located at the intersection of public and private, hospital, and home. As a bearer of meaning in its own right, the setting impacts the development of the protagonists' identities and interpellates them into their individual roles; Edna Alford's relatively unknown text represents one of the rare examples of care home narratives that grant visibility to the "fourth age." It provokes existential questions by portraying the challenges of coming to terms with death and dying—and indeed life itself. I deliberately decided to exclude three vignettes, "The Visitor," "Poll 101," and "Under the I" because they do not significantly engage with spatial dynamics or add any new perspectives.

Read in Bakhtinian terms, Pine Mountain Lodge can be seen as operating as a chronotope of stagnation, representing temporal suspension within institutionalized aging. Residents' pasts remain inaccessible or misunderstood, trapping them in perpetual present isolation. The vignettes' spatial-temporal dimensions reveal how personal histories and identities are disregarded or suppressed by institutional routines. The Lodge emerges as a chronotopic space where time is static, defined by repetitive routines, surveillance, and gradual erasure of individuality, further intensified by institutional control and neglect.

In terms of the spatiality of aging, Lefebvre's idea of contradictory and contested spaces comes into play. His argument that space is socially constructed, encompassing power relations that shape and are shaped by social interactions is rendered visible in the care home described by Alford. Pine Mountain

Lodge is a perceived space through its spatial practices; its dimly lit corridors and regimented routines symbolize the confinement and isolation. It is also a conceived space as its institutional logic constructs the home as a controlled, panoptical environment. Finally, in Lefebvre's terms, it is a lived space or space of representation where dominant discourses of aging, vulnerability, and dependency are materially and symbolically inscribed.

The Hoyer

In the first vignette, "The Hoyer," Arla Pederson is introduced to the reader as a hard-working young nurse in Pine Mountain Lodge, who is just about to take Miss Bole to the bathing room with the help of the eponymous hoyer. Miss Bole fears this apparatus because she feels it dehumanizes her by making her absolutely defenseless: "Miss Bole glared suspiciously at the apparatus. […] [She] hated the hoyer, regarded it as a sinister and contemptible contraption. Most of all, she was afraid of it. It was unsafe, she maintained, dangerous, and sooner or later it would grab her and, like a madman, mangle her limbs" (Alford, *Sleep* 9). Arla, however, cannot move the heavy woman without the device. She is disgusted by the naked body, which "fat and distorted, lay open to the curious eyes of anyone passing her doorway and to the three old women who also occupied this room" (10). There is no privacy in this degrading procedure, and Miss Bole's dignity and her status as a person, as a prolific painter in high demand, which becomes clear later in the story, is absolutely irrelevant in this situation. She is reduced to her sheer physicality, a body exuding "the unmistakable stench of rotting flesh" (10) due to a "festering bed sore, angry and red at the centre, blue and mud-yellow and running around the outside" on her club foot. An object of disgust without any agency or personal control, Miss Bole's old body is publicly displayed in the aisle of the nursing home on its way to the bath. Arla quickly covers it with a sheet in order not to upset anybody they encounter. Miss Bole's body is, in Julia Kristeva's words, rendered "abject." Kristeva explains the abject as "something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object. Imaginary uncanniness and real threat, it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us. It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order" (4). The abject threatens Arla's sense of self through its dissolution of proper boundaries, and position at the borderline between life and death. Abjection disrupts the identity and order integral to Lefebvre's idea of the conceived space. Miss Bole's body destabilizes the neatly arranged social order symbolized by insti-

tutional spaces. Her body becomes a site of contestation, a lived space where boundaries of self and other, life and death blur.

The hallway and bathing room exemplify spaces where private and public domains collapse, enhancing the visibility of abjection. The hoyer, described as a monstrous contraption, embodies Kristeva's idea of the uncanny boundary violation, simultaneously medicalizing, objectifying, and threatening Miss Bole's identity and autonomy. Thus, the spatial arrangement itself becomes complicit in the production and reinforcement of abjection. The institution as both home and hospital creates inherent contradictions, as personal dignity conflicts with institutional efficiency. Miss Bole's forced visibility—her public exposure—demonstrates how institutional space prioritizes perceived efficiency over lived experiences.

In "The Hoyer," bathing is not a matter of pleasure, stress relief, or even luxury, but is explicitly located within a medical discourse. The "medical gaze" is dominant in the institutional context where authority is exercised over the individual, as Julia Twigg points out in her studies of bathing ("Deconstructing" 221; "Bathing;" *Bathing*). She observes that "[e]quipment both distances the person from direct human contact, putting a barrier between them and the operator, and acts to objectify them by providing the means whereby they are trapped, caged, made subject to the machine" (*Bathing* 25). The story highlights this objectification: Miss Bole is extremely terrified that the machine will not hold her weight, her eyes "black with the fear of what seemed to the old woman uncontrolled and sinister levitation" (*Sleep* 12). Julia Twigg's observation that "sanitary machinery and equipment often have a slightly bizarre and surrealist quality to them" (*Bathing* 25) is confirmed in the story: "Once in the hallway, the machine looked for all the world like a large bird of prey, a vulture or a hawk with a hapless body victim tangled up in its claws. It looked as if it had just swooped off a Bosch nightmare and snatched the fat old woman with the full intent of pecking her to death" (*Sleep* 13). The hoyer is depicted as a fantastic and alienating creature, such as those created by 15th century Dutch painter Hieronymus Bosch, and is experienced as threatening by both Miss Bole and Arla, who is this passage's focalizer. Although both women dread the machine, the institutional context does not allow them to change their daily routines; Arla puts Miss Bole into the contraption, reinforcing the asymmetry of power through the "gaze of youth," as Julia Twigg explains:

> Clients are naked, dependent, and below; workers are clothed, powerful, and above. Bathing subjugates the person in a second sense also. We are accus-

> tomed from Foucauldian and feminist writings to the notions of the professional gaze or the phallic gaze, but there is also a gaze of youth. […] Recipients of help with bathing are literally subject to the gaze of youth in that their old bodies are exposed to the surveillance and view of younger workers. Many older people […] internalize a sense of their bodies as no longer attractive, something that might be distasteful to see or handle; and this contributes to the unsettling experience of body care and to the asymmetrical nature of the exchange. ("Body" 65)

Arla, aware of Miss Bole's shame, observes the old woman in the bathtub, and contributes to the power imbalance by commenting on the process:

> [Miss Bole] absently lifted her sagging, mottling breasts, each in turn. She swiped beneath each with the cloth. Then she swiped at the white, curly pubic hair above her vagina. "You better do that thoroughly, Miss Bole," Arla said sharply, under the guise of efficiency. "You won't be having another bath till next week." That was one way of getting back at her. Ruthless, Arla was aware, but one way. The remark was double-barreled, with the humiliation of having to wash even the most private parts of her body in the presence of another person as well as the threat of next week's bath. (*Sleep* 17)

The asymmetry of power created by this procedure is increased by the juxtaposition of young Arla's crisp white uniform and Miss Bole's naked, old body, a "great mass of white flesh" (11) that is helplessly dangling from the contraption. In these scenes, the focalization shifts between Miss Bole and Arla, so that both perspectives become available to the reader, a narrative technique that also illustrates the power-struggle between the two women. Both of them, each acutely aware of the other's reaction, wish that the routine should come to an end as quickly as possible (Chivers, *From* 69).

Alford challenges the stereotype of the of old woman as helpless by presenting the bathing scene as a power struggle. While Arla takes control over Miss Bole's body via the machine, Miss Bole takes control of Arla's mind through the telling of horror stories during the bathing procedure. In these cruel stories that involve farming accidents and other disasters with people being killed or mutilated by contraptions such as threshing machines, Ferris wheels, or a rope going down into a deep well, Miss Bole's own fears are mirrored while she dangles from the hoyer's arm. The stories do not miss their aim—that of invoking similarly unpleasant feelings in Arla, who "despised this feeling of terror which crept over her every time she bathed the old woman" (*Sleep* 14–15). For

instance, when the hoyer slowly dips Miss Bole's body into the water, she is terrified and recounts a tragic story in a strange and deep-throated, eerie voice. In this story, which took place decades ago, she recounts watching her niece drown after going down into a well with a rope, describing the drowned and accidentally strangled little body in minute and disgusting detail—to create the desired effect: "Arla winced. It was a direct hit" (16). In addition to Miss Bole's festering club foot, the morbid imagery she uses in her violent stories causes a feeling of abjection in Arla: "She despised this feeling of terror which crept over her every time she bathed the old woman. It always rooted itself in her stomach…" (14–15). Looking at Miss Bole's body, and listening to her horrible stories, Arla is painfully confronted with her own fears of aging and dying. These visual and auditory stimuli signify the abject "other" that confronts Arla with thoughts about her own death. She feels disgusted and alienated, and has difficulty concentrating on the machine that could so easily hurt Miss Bole. Arla can hardly control herself, which makes Miss Bole smile, settling the power imbalance in her favor: "Miss Bole knew she had the girl, again" (15). Bathing Miss Bole becomes a dehumanizing procedure for both of them. The hoyer comes to symbolize contested terrain, with Miss Bole reclaiming her power position while dangling in it, but she is aware that she must not go too far with Arla, whom she disindividualizes by calling her "the girl:"

> [S]he always tested only as far as she safely could, never far enough to push the girl over the edge into anger because that was very dangerous. She had observed that when angered, the girl ignored the ladies, prodded and pushed them like lumps of breaddough. The bath could become even more hazardous and painful if the girl became reckless with the machine, raising it too high, lowering it too fast. (11)

When Miss Bole is finally wheeled back to her room, a representative from the Department of Cultural Affairs is waiting for her in the corridor, and she is "obviously embarrassed to be presented to company in such a humiliating fashion" (23). Lyanda Weatherby has come to inquire about Miss Bole's artwork, which she would like to purchase for a permanent collection in the new provincial gallery. The "well-dressed, middle-aged woman" is also uncomfortable when confronted with "the apparition of this sheeted old woman who hung somehow from a sinister metallic machine" (23). In this scene, the liminality of the nursing home's private-public space and the lack of privacy are again highlighted.

While Ms. Weatherby is asked to wait outside until Miss Bole is dressed, Arla begins to feel excited for Miss Bole. Ms. Weatherby's respect for Miss Bole's artwork changes Arla's attitude towards her. Now, back in her own room, Miss Bole is no longer defined as an abject body, but as a person in demand, an individual with whom Arla can relate on a new and different level, thereby also reevaluating her mixed feelings of superiority and guilt: "The young woman felt somehow better about Miss Bole, somehow not so guilty for being young and whole and mobile" (24). The gaze of youth is relativized, and Arla is able to see Miss Bole as more of an equal, a precondition for identification, which is suggested in the story when Arla "looked at her with what felt like different eyes" (25). Here, the feeling of abjection seems to give way to a genuine interest in Miss Bole as an artist. Arla realizes that Miss Bole has a different voice, too, as she has started singing happily, sounding "like a trilling bird, eerie […] completely different from the deep-throated purring voice Miss Bole used to tell her stories. Whoever knows anybody, Arla thought. Everybody is full of secrets" (25). A new image of Miss Bole, now queen-like, is presented:

> Arla could feel the warmth, the happiness. […] She saw Miss Bole nestled comfortably in her wheelchair, resplendent in her quilted autumn robe which covered her club foot, now slippered anyway. She folded her hands in her lap, her whole hand completely hiding the clawed hand. Her eyes appeared to have red sparks at the centres. She looked like a queen prepared to hold court. Arla was proud of her. (25)

This reevaluation, however, is only of very short duration. When Arla leaves the room with the wet towels, Miss Bole reassumes her deep voice, telling yet another horror story about a person's arm being caught and burnt in Pine Mountain Lodge's laundry mangle, this time referring to a recent event, which Arla has been trying hard to forget. Here, the third category established by Lefebvre, lived space, can be employed to analyze how Miss Bole contests her abjection by reclaiming agency through the horror stories she tells Arla. Miss Bole resists and reclaims her dignity as an act of subverting the dominant spatial narrative, despite adverse institutional conditions. Miss Bole succeeds in bringing the terrible accident back to life in Arla's mind. In the last scene, the nurse, pulling herself together, pushes the hoyer out the door and into the hallway.

Sally Chivers concludes her interpretation of the story by stating, "[h]aving followed Arla as an exemplary interpreter of old people and sensed her error in failing to comprehend the significance of Miss Bole's ruthless replication,

readers reevaluate both the stories of the old and the interpretations Arla offers" (*From* 70). As readers, we witness Arla's difficulties to understand Miss Bole's behavior. Arla is shown as ultimately failing to make sense of Miss Bole's stories. She does not understand them to be an expression of the old woman's fear, vulnerability, and discomfort. While identification and understanding on Arla's part seems to be briefly possible while they are in Miss Bole's room, Miss Bole is reduced to her physicality in the public areas of the care home.

For this vignette, Lefebvre's "spatial triad,"—perceived space, conceived space, and lived space, is a helpful analytical tool that elicits how spatial arrangements influence experiences of aging. The perceived space, read as spatial practice, becomes evident on the routines and practices of the care home, such as bathing and the use of the hoyer, that govern the daily rhythms and interactions. Arla's and Miss Bole's interactions with the hoyer exemplify how perceived space disciplines bodies, regulates privacy, and manifests social attitudes towards aging, abject bodies as "problems" that need to be contained and controlled. Lefebvre's second category, conceived space, refers to the conception of the care home as a medicalized space with a high level of efficiency. It is a "care" space, but prioritizes functionality and hygiene, which contributes to Miss Bole's humiliation and objectification. The medical gaze creates a sense of clinical detachment and exerts institutional control, reinforcing power asymmetries based on age, mobility, and authority. The third category established by Lefebvre, lived space, can be employed to analyze how Miss Bole contests her abjection by reclaiming agency through the horror stories she tells Arla. Miss Bole resists and reclaims her dignity as an act of subverting the dominant spatial narrative, despite adverse institutional conditions. Despite institutional constraints, Miss Bole's storytelling creates an alternative space of representation where power is renegotiated. Her narratives disrupt the dominant spatial practice by foregrounding personal histories and fears, at least temporarily challenging the spatial power dynamics of Pine Mountain Lodge.

Mid-May's Eldest Child

In the second vignette, "Mid-May's Eldest Child," Arla's youthful zest for life is contrasted with old Miss Moss's decline. The contrast is reinforced by the setting: Alford juxtaposes the grey, sinister world of the care home to a lush, green park, and a shopping mall, places which are represented in the story as "fit surroundings" for youth, not for old age (Laws, Spatiality 90). The vignette's title again stems from a famous poem by John Keats, "Ode to a Nightingale,"

that Miss Moss, a former high school teacher, had taught Arla. The intertextual reference hints at the central theme of the story: the finiteness of human existence.

The story opens with Arla walking to work, reminiscing how she and David had made love in the spring sun on their balcony the day before. Arla compares the balcony to Miss Moss's "silly bowers," contrasting her romance with David to Miss Moss's imagination of the romance in Keats's work. Keats's poem is also referenced when Arla, crossing a park, basks in the morning sun and enjoys nature with all her senses:

> When she reached the park gates she threw away her sweater, her vinyl purse and her lunch bag on the infant grass and, like a child, raced toward the naked white flag pole. Grabbing hold of it with one arm, the other swinging up and outward like a wing, she flew around and around. […] Quickly dizzy, she let go of the pole and spun outward between a clump of lilacs and a bed of tulips and daffodils, running till she fell, then rolling over and over on the grass, her arms stretched upward, reaching toward the clear young sun. […] Right then it seemed to Arla that anything was possible, probable even—that her future was as brilliant and certain as the leaves. (Alford, *Sleep* 28)

Arla happily immerses herself in nature, displaying a hunger for life and love, lying down in the grass, "her eyes closed, her face relaxed, her lips parted to receive the mythical 'man-of-the-morning' kiss" (28). Nature and sexuality merge metaphorically as she smells "lilacs and daffodils, tulips and columbine all warm between the labia of the earth" (28). When she gets up, she notices a grass stain on her uniform, describing it guiltily as if it came from making love on the lawn. The sunny, lush green park and Arla's youthful vigor are contrasted with the "dim corridor of the lodge" (30) and its inhabitants that await her. The contrasting spaces of the park and the nursing home are distinct, yet connected spaces representing different meanings and practices related to aging and youthfulness. Arla's spontaneous and sensual interaction with the park contrasts with the regulated space of the care home, exemplifying Lefebvre's spatial practice as the enactment of social rhythms and power relations on the physical plane.

On this particular day, she is expected to take Miss Moss, whom the matrons call "an irascible, uncompromising old witch" (29), to the hairdresser's. Arla looks forward to the trip, and slightly bends the institution's rules by plan-

ning to take Miss Moss to lunch and for a walk through the park where she "could see the new flowers and they could share this remarkable spring day. And they could talk" (30). Arla, thinking she understands Miss Moss's love for romantic poetry, hopes to please the old woman by bringing her in contact with nature. She sees this shared "quality time" as an expression of thankfulness on her part for the recognition Miss Moss gives her as a nurse, establishing a bond which allows them to subvert the rigid authority of the matrons. Arla sees something special in Miss Moss, not least of all because she showed appreciation for Arla's poetry recitals.

The story is told in retrospect through Arla's focalization, and Arla's mental listing of what she could have done wrong during the outing indicates that some disagreement must have occurred between the two women. While the narration does not reveal any feeling of guilt on Arla's part, it seems to slow down in pace when Arla—still in third person narration—remembers how she flirted with both the taxi driver and the hairdresser, enjoying their lustful looks at her body. Arla, in hindsight, draws a connection between these situations and Miss Moss's sudden anger and disintegration. Already a few moments after leaving the home, Miss Moss starts to change. When getting out of the taxi, in which Arla had been flirting with the driver, Miss Moss grows dizzy and falters a little, which surprises Arla "who had hitherto thought of Miss Moss as a kind of lady metronome, her gait confident and measured, self-assured along the smooth brown linoleum of the lodge" (35). Outside of the care home, Arla notices that Miss Moss "became progressively more confused and she began to wheeze" (35). At the hairdresser's, both the barber and Arla treat Miss Moss in an ageist way, Arla by speaking for her (noticing in retrospect that it was something "she had never had to do with Miss Moss," 36), and the hairdresser by asking her, "And how will you have it cut, little lady?" (36). The hairdresser "glanced at Miss Moss, then winked at Arla and Arla smiled weakly, knew that he and she were somehow, sadly, on the same side. She felt like a traitor" (37). Miss Moss now seems to break down entirely, with her sudden deterioration also affecting her speech:

> Arla couldn't understand it—this woman who had perfect command of the English language, whom Arla regarded as if she were the high-priestess of poetry, of beautiful, well-formed syllables, all of a sudden could not manage to say anything that made sense. Her speech was splintered, like the speech Arla remembered from the burnt-out old schizophrenics at the government hospital. (36)

The only intelligible words Miss Moss utters after a period of muttering incoherently are an attempt to offend the hairdresser. Taking into account Doreen Massey's insight that public space is highly structured by masculine forms of visibility, power and autonomy, it becomes clear why Miss Moss feels vulnerable in these public interactions. Her difficulty speaking and her embarrassment stem from societal expectations that devalue the aged female body and voice, relegating her to dismissive treatment in public interactions. But she fights back: When he is finished cutting her hair, and hands her a mirror, "She riveted her needle eyes on the mirror and snapped, 'Sir, you are incompetent—but what can you expect—nowadays'" (37). Arla is embarrassed and offended at the same time by Miss Moss's unkind comments, because they also include criticism of her own abilities. She is disappointed by the realization "how important it was for [Miss Moss] to believe the best was in the past, *her* past, that everything was slip-shod now, derelict, renegade, worthless" (37). Her idealized image of Miss Moss gives way to a strong sense of disappointment, and Arla begins to think that her feeling of connectedness with the old woman has been an illusion. Arla can no longer see any common ground, an insight that is expressed on the level of space through the juxtaposition of Miss Moss's behavior in the home and in public.

While in "The Hoyer," Arla developed a sense of connection with Miss Bole, bridging a generation gap that had previously seemed insurmountable, this feeling is completely reversed in "Mid-May's Eldest Child." Arla tries hard to appease Miss Moss, but to no avail. Feeling powerless and sad, Arla still does not give up, hoping that a short walk through the park with its daffodils and tulips would cheer Miss Moss up, "that the new spring growth would revive her, that she might still give a spring recitation" (38). It is now, Arla notices, "more glorious, more opulent, more fragrant" than in the morning, but Miss Moss only "focused her eyes on the dull grey boulders lining the walkway" (38) and does not bother to look up.

Again, Arla's perception of the space around them contrasts with that of Miss Moss's. Arla's last resort is to lead Miss Moss to a circle of moss roses blooming close to the ground. They were "pink and red and purple […] they all looked soft and open-mouthed and Arla felt an urge to touch them, to run her finger round their inner lips. She was delighted" (38). This very sensual description and its imagery parallels the first scene of the story in which Arla recalls David caressing her on the floor of their balcony. Arla tries to interest the old woman, "Look Miss Moss,' she said, 'roses!' "Mid-May's eldest child, the coming musk rose"– Keats, right?' No answer, 'Miss Moss?' Still no answer. 'Let's go have

a look'" (38). Arla recites from "Ode to a Nightingale" to reassure Miss Moss that Arla remembered what she had been taught. Miss Moss's sudden reply comes as a shock: "'You may go yourself, Miss Pederson,' Miss Moss growled, 'but if you think this conduct is acceptable during working hours, I disagree and I'll have no part of it. I will not serve as an excuse for your irresponsible behavior'" (38). Arla feels betrayed as Miss Moss seems to side with the institution, and threatens to report her.

Walking back towards the nursing home, the lodge seems to crumble just as Arla's recognition and esteem for Miss Moss does: "From the distance, the lodge looked benign to Arla, though she knew better […] It sat like an aristocratic old woman, […] But age had levied a heavy tax and if you really looked at it, you could see that the fine old three-storey building was approaching dilapidation" (39). From this moment on, Arla dismisses Miss Moss as being no different than the other old women in the residence. Her former appreciation for Miss Moss's kindliness changes to disdain for the old woman's insensitivity when she watches her poke "at a tulip or daffodil along the side of the path with her cane as she might have poked at the carcass of a dead cat" (39). When Miss Moss finally, instead of reciting poetry inspired by nature as Arla had happily expected, breathes heavily, heaves, and vomits on the lodge's steps, Arla's disappointment causes a physical reaction: "Now she felt welling up with her a different kind of emesis, not only the disappointing turn of the day, but disillusionment, a disenchantment so deep it seemed to turn her inside out—a dry heave" (40). Like her reaction with Miss Bole, she again experiences a feeling of abjection when her identification with Miss Moss and ego-boundaries are challenged. As Arla witnesses Miss Moss's disintegration in public, the abject becomes tangible, representing the fragility and unpredictability of aging. She experiences discomfort as her idealized perception of Miss Moss falls apart, triggering her own fears and a visceral reaction of disgust, a physical and emotional embodiment of abjection. Now, she uses the poem Miss Moss had taught her cynically against the old woman: "'A thing of beauty is a joy forever,' she recited to herself, her voice mocking the old woman's, her mouth twisted, her eyes glazed with anger—'its loveliness increases; it will never / Pass into nothingness; but still will keep / A bower quiet for us and a sleep / Full of sweet dreams and health and quiet breathing'" (40). In an interpretation of this scene, Lalonde maintains,

> Arla rejects the argument of Keats's *Endymion* — that things of beauty are immortal since they live in the memory. There is, however, no reason to suppose

> that the consolatory power that Miss Moss ascribes to reading and reciting poetry will be in any way diminished by this temporary loss of her faculties. If we read Arla as the central figure in this story, the message is profoundly negative: she rejects the consolatory power or art in a world where death and dying are never distant, and she loses the compassion she initially showed toward Miss Moss. (92)

While in "The Hoyer" Arla came to realize Miss Bole's uniqueness, "Mid-May's Eldest Child" shows Arla, even if only to protect herself, making a sweeping, ageist statement about old women: she "began to feel not so much hurt any longer, but anger toward the old woman. She felt herself withdraw, felt the old woman's power over her diminish, was relieved to find herself objective. Miss Moss was just an old woman. That was all she was" (39). Arla oscillates between individualizing and homogenizing the nursing home residents, which can be read as "as a metaphor for a cultural necessity to interpret the elderly as complete entities" (Chivers, *From* 71). Arla calls Miss Moss "just an old woman," meaning that she is no different from all the other lodgers who, as she mentions earlier, get on her nerves. As Chivers points out, this conclusion is "insufficient because it has been proven in the previous story to have no inherent meaning; there is no such thing as 'just an old woman' any more than feminists at the very last would agree that there is no such thing as "just a woman" (*From* 71). Arla finds it difficult, even impossible, to find a professional yet empathic way of caring for the lodge's residents. The reference to Keats's poem reveals her difficulty of accepting life's finiteness. While the nightingale is "immortal" through its song, humans are not. The care home symbolically reminds Arla of this fact.

The institutional rules, embodied in Arla's nursing uniform and the restrictive policies she slightly transgresses by taking Miss Moss for an outing, represent Lefebvre's conceived space defined by institutional authority and medical rationality. Arla's bending of these rules—attempting to humanize the institutional experience by introducing leisure and outdoor enjoyment—reveals tensions between institutional expectations and individual autonomy. The spaces outside the institution (the taxi, the park, the hairdresser) unexpectedly become sites where institutional ageist dynamics follow Miss Moss, suggesting the institutional discourse's pervasive influence even beyond its physical boundaries.

Lefebvre's notion of spatial contradictions becomes especially relevant as the spatial distinctions between the park, the public, and the nursing

home blur. The transition from the home to public space becomes a source of vulnerability rather than liberation for Miss Moss. Outside the nursing home, she loses her institutionalized protection and authority (as an educated former teacher) and becomes vulnerable to ageist stereotypes from strangers and Arla's inadvertent infantilization. Read through a Foucauldian spatial lens, Miss Moss's increasing loss of agency symbolizes how institutional disciplinary power extends beyond physical spaces, shaping interpersonal dynamics and perceptions of self-worth. The juxtaposition of Arla's youthfulness and Miss Moss's diminishing vitality underscores how social perceptions shape these contrasting spatial experiences, reflecting the assertion that spatiality actively participates in constructing identities and power relations.

Communion

The next story, "Communion," problematizes Arla's troubled sense of self by juxtaposing her "private 'communion,'" as Lalonde calls it (93), with "the public rites that Reverend Paul performs for Mrs. Pritchard" (93). Arla is the focalizer of the third person narration that presents a detailed account of her sexual arousal and masturbation in the nursing home's toilet, while the Reverend administers communion to Mrs. Pritchard in her room. While Mrs. Pritchard's soul "longed for the body and blood of the Lord" (58) Arla also gets "hungry" (59). She notices the priest's voice jumping "without warning to a higher pitch" (61), then again drifting "down into low throat tones," (61), perceiving the ritual next door as if it were a sexual act. The nursing home's structured, controlled environment sharply contrasts Arla's private space within the bathroom, where institutional surveillance temporarily breaks down, allowing intimate acts typically repressed by institutional norms. The institutionalized religious ritual conducted by Reverend Paul reflects the nursing home's role as a morally regulated space, reinforcing ideals of propriety, sanctity, and discipline. Arla's personal sexuality, in stark opposition to these institutional values, highlights the conflicting spatial ideologies around purity, discipline, and bodily control.

At the same time, Arla observes two dogs repeatedly mating on the hill outside the kitchen window. Arla, agitated by the tone of the Reverend's voice and looking at the "hard pointed flesh" (62) of the "Shepherd" (the term, even more semantically ambiguous because it is capitalized, is only used for the dog), runs down to the washroom in the basement and masturbates in the dark. "The end was convulsive, almost doubled her, she knowing where they were—the dogs, the Reverend Paul and Mrs. Pritchard" (63). Immediately afterwards, she feels

guilty, repeating "quietly, mechanically, 'have mercy upon us, have mercy upon us…'" (64).

Her guilt and shame suggest the fragility of lived space, showing how institutional controls (both of the care home and the church) influence her internalization of moral judgment, even outside direct surveillance. While the institutional space epitomizes Foucault's notion of discipline, control, and normalized surveillance, Arla temporarily escapes this surveillance within the private confines of the restroom. Nonetheless, her immediate guilt afterward demonstrates the deep internalization of disciplinary power—reflecting Foucault's concept of panopticism, where institutional surveillance shapes individual self-perception and behavior even when direct observation is absent. The juxtaposition of Arla's personal, intimate space (the bathroom) against the public religious ritual further highlights gendered spatial tensions. The Reverend, performing a sanctioned public act, symbolizes masculine authority in contrast to Arla's marginalized, concealed feminine desire, which is inherently stigmatized by institutional and religious norms.

When she passes Mrs. Pritchard's door on her way back, she overhears the Reverend whispering, "take and drink this" (64). Arla, "startled by the fact that the service was not yet over" (64), makes herself a cup of tea. As if also attending communion, she drinks it and eats "the one remaining cookie on the tea plate" (64). When she takes a bite, she smells "a faint, sick sweet odor" that stems from the "dark blood on her fingers," remembering "that part of the service which said she wasn't worthy" (63–64). Without completing her chores for the day, Arla decides to go home. She reads "The Prayer of Humble Approach" from a booklet: "We cannot yet praise God as the Angels do. While we are here, the remembrance of our sins and unworthiness must ever mingle, like a dark shadow, with our brightest praises" (65). Upon finishing the prayer, she throws herself on the bed, weeping, "not knowing or remembering in the darkness who or where or even what she was" (65). Unlike Mrs. Pritchard, she cannot find consolation in her feelings of loneliness, shame, guilt, and unworthiness. She has been unable to come to terms with her own self, which she must protect against the threatening, abject image of old age. As in a coming-of-age narrative, she grapples with the difficulty of finding a point of orientation in her life—a point that Mrs. Pritchard has found through her spirituality. As the final sentence reveals, she herself is abject, neither knowing where or who she is, nor even "what"—a question that blind Mrs. Pritchard seems to have found the answer to long ago.

Half Past Eight

The vignette "Half Past Eight" is radically different from the other stories in the collection, not only because it includes Arla only as an absence, and takes place primarily outside of the institution's walls, but also because it challenges the stereotypical notions of how nursing home residents ought to behave. Residents Tessie Bishop and Flora Henderson dress up, as Tessie says, "to see the parade and eat and kick up our heels for a change" (69). Arla is present only in the two rebellious women's cathartic rant: "Goddamn stupid nurse. […] No more of a nurse than a pig's foot. […] She hasn't got the brains she was born with. […] I wouldn't hire her if ya paid me […] She ain't fit for that kinda work!" (70). The story is linked only through its imagery to the previous one, "Communion," when Tessie puts red lipstick on herself that has a "sickly sweet smell" (66), reminding the reader of Arla's "dark blood on her fingers," (63) and her smelling "a faint, sick sweet odor" (64), which redirects, as Jeremy Lalonde puts it, "the narrative focus away from Arla" (94). He argues that Alford "increases the importance of imagistic links between the stories […] [which] work to simultaneously bind the stories and the women of the stories together" (86).

In this vignette, the hoyer also reappears in front of Ms. Bole's room. While Tessie "edged her way around it as if she were afraid it were alive, as if it might reach out and grab her" (*Sleep* 70), Flora "stuck out her foot and gave the hoyer a shove and sent it rolling into the wall, clanking when it hit the baseboard, its canvas straps swinging foolishly. 'You'll never get me inta that goddamn thing,' she bellered at the metal hoist" (70). Flora's rowdy behavior at age 86 is juxtaposed to Tessie's attempts to look seductive. Her make-up routine is described extensively in a third-person narration that oscillates between a judgmental, ageist gaze and Tessie's self-perception: "The rouge was pink and had the same sweet sickening odour as the lipstick, like rosewater and glycerin gone rancid in sun and age. The bright pink cheeks clashed violently with her 'Scarlet Fire' lips and together with white, heavily powdered skin in wrinkles, made her look like a clown" (67). This description of a grotesque masquerade contrasts with Tessie's self-perception: "When she had finished, she smiled with satisfaction at the mirror. She began to hum to herself. […] A very classy number, she thought. […] Admiring herself in the wavy mirror, she remembered that she had been a very beautiful young woman" (67–68). This play with perspective challenges the readers' possible preconceptions. Whereas parts of the narrative portray Tessie as a poor old lady who even had to "cut down on wool for crocheting" (68) to afford the Stampede Parade where she hopes to see Prince Charles on his horse, her self-appreciation, vitality, and strength are also emphasized

throughout the story. Her friend Flora is described as a good companion for Tessie: "Nothing could keep her down. […] Age meant nothing to her, which was probably why they chummed around together, not because of the drinking" (68). Together they set out to enjoy the day, "a peculiar and somewhat amusing couple" (71). In contrast to Tessie, a little old lady who loves crocheting and the Royal Family, Flora is described as a tall, rebellious, manly kind of woman who swears and curses, drinks whiskey, and spits in the street. In one of the story's key scenes, Flora makes a pass at Tessie:

> Hank had just come back from the washroom and had poured himself another glass of beer when Tessie felt the hand on her stocking, moving up her thigh. She leaned toward Hank, then straightened abruptly. Both of Hank's hands were occupied—a half-full glass of beer in one and a Player's cigarette in the other. She had just watched him light it. She turned on Flora. (79)

With reference to this scene, Lalonde writes, "Alford takes the stereotype of the sexless old woman, turns it on its head, and sets it spinning. […] Alford manages to reinscribe the sexuality of the elderly without casting heterosexuality as the normative role" (95). First, Tessie is upset, but when the two women return to the lodge, she no longer holds a grudge. Flora attempts to wake up the other residents, banging on each door and roaring obscenities. Tessie has difficulties stopping her, whereupon Flora argues, "What's a matter with ya, Tess? […] I'd rather be fuckin' drunk than this. […] [M]ost of the old dames don't even make it to seven-thirty let alone half-past eight—and the worst of it is they wouldn't know what to do with it even if they could get holda some" (*Sleep* 82). Flora expresses her dissatisfaction here with the obedient women who succumb to the homogenizing stereotypes that render old women sexless. She voices her anger about how unquestioningly they have come to endorse the binary opposition between youth and age (Waxman, *From* 127), and feels trapped in a heteronormative environment.

Both Tess and Flora undercut the "sweet old lady" image that does not allow for any kind of diversity, challenging the traditional images of sexless old women in nursing homes. They feel liberated and see themselves as independent subjects who undermine the institution's rules by "breaking out," drinking, and flirting. They position themselves as not belonging to the community of the old age home. For a moment they even jokingly consider opening a brothel in Pine Mountain Lodge—a business Flora used to run unofficially when she was younger—and feel both unshackled and subversive, using the

absurdity of the idea as comic relief. This spasm of relief helps them come to terms with the strict institutional regimes imposed by the matrons, with which they know they must comply. They do not see Arla as any different from the matrons. While readers get to know Arla's moral dilemmas with regard to the quality of the Pine Mountain Lodge's care-giving ethics, she is, according to Flora's judgment, part of the institutional authoritarian regime, and not even good at her job (70).

Although the story has been criticized for disrupting the volume's coherence because it takes place outside of the institution, and lacks Arla's focalization (Osachoff 165), Edna Alford argued that she put it into the volume deliberately:

> When Tessie Bishop and Flora Henderson slip the traces and bolt for the Stampede Parade and the Palliser Hotel, their story bolts the form, goes AWOL as well. I had initially intended this story to be told from within the Lodge with more emphasis/dramatization on the consequences of their escapade, but they escaped. I let them. Worse than that, I went with them. And I'd do it again, regardless of the formal, aesthetic consequences. (Alford, "Fear" 177, qtd. in Lalonde 94)

As mentioned earlier, Lalonde suggests reading the collection as a "narrative of community" that is organized according to the compartmentalized structure Alford mentions. Not only are old people compartmentalized as "other," and stored away in a home, but further compartmentalization occurs as a result of the spatial and social structures in the nursing home itself. Therefore, the vignette "Half-Past Eight" does not disturb the unity and coherence of the volume, but instead adds another perspective to the collection, rendering it more diverse (as well as criticizing the lack of diversity in the institution). Alford lets Tessie and Flora escape, and establishes an additional viewpoint by using Tessie as a focalizer to complement Arla's perspective, a technique she applies to challenge and criticize the ageist "othering" gaze in contemporary society (A. Twigg 3).

Fall Cleaning

In "Fall Cleaning," readers are taken into another "compartment" in the Pine Mountain Lodge. This time, the reader is introduced to Mrs. Tweedsmuir, who lives in a cluttered room that Arla and Matron Benstone attempt to clean. To Arla, Mrs. Tweedsmuir is a disgusting hoarder who collects everything from

"dry bread crusts and mouldy oranges" (83) to "reeking curdled milk" (84) and "bundles of string, a set of insoles, corn-plasters by the dozen, ribbons of all colours and fabrics, old calendars and ancient, yellowed copies of *The War Cry*" (83). Mrs. Tweedsmuir is upset by the fact that Arla and the matron do not respect her privacy, and begin to clean out her room without requesting her permission: "'These are my *things*, my personal belongings,' began the old woman. 'I want to see what you're taking. I don't want my things thrown out as if they were trash. I have important papers in my room.' Why couldn't she understand that all these things *were* trash, Arla wondered—garbage and nothing more" (84). The institution's medical discourse treats Mrs. Tweedsmuir's belongings purely as "garbage," erasing their emotional significance and personal history. The matron forces her to sit outside her door until the "fall cleaning" has been completed, not allowing her any agency. Both Foucault's and Lefebvre's idea of spatial practices is easy to note here. Cleaning routines designed for efficiency, hygiene, and discipline, reinforce institutional order and norms. Arla's intrusion into Mrs. Tweedsmuir's room exemplifies spatial practices reinforcing the institution's dominance over individual autonomy through surveillance and regulation.

In this story, Arla is again the focalizer, but by now readers are aware of her shortcomings as a nurse, and realize that the perspective presented is biased. Even though Arla reveals a hint of self-criticism by saying that "she could find nothing in Mrs. Tweedsmuir to love" and that this was maybe "the worst thing she could say about herself" (93), she story underlines her lack of empathy for the old woman. For instance, Arla mentions her own passion for collecting "the Royal Albert 'Wild Rose' pattern" (88), but fails to see its similarity with Mrs. Tweedsmuir's hoarding behavior.

To the old woman, the things she keeps in her room are intrinsically connected with her former habit of "fall canning," but, as Lalonde observes, "Arla does not draw the connection between the pioneer spirit that she frequently ascribes to the women of the Lodge and Mrs. Tweedsmuir's refusal to throw anything away. Significantly, all of the food that Mrs. Tweedsmuir hoards away is kept in half-pint sealers; in an exercise that mirrors fall canning, she turns her closet into a pantry for her 'preserves'" (96). The narrative presents the "fall cleaning" as an ambivalent act: while it is necessary to keep the rooms clean to satisfy the institutional hygiene regulations, Mrs. Tweedsmuir's sense of self is endangered by the lack of empathy. The nurses do not display any understanding for the fact that everyone has some level of attachment to their belongings.

When Mrs. Tweedsmuir talks to Tessie Bishop, the narrative reveals how she experiences the cleaning. She fears that she is being cleaned out along with her stuff, and that the room is already being prepared for a new lodger: "'They anticipate my death. […] They are cleaning it out for someone else. […] It won't be my room any more. My room will be in the ground,' she said," (84–85), fearing that her belongings and, thus, her identity will disappear. The radical cleaning of her room has a devastating effect on her.

The next scene meticulously describes Arla helping Mrs. Tweedsmuir get up and walk to the next room, after she had fallen asleep during mealtime and, therefore, not eaten a bite. The excruciatingly slow pace of the narration mirrors the duration of the process. Arla, impatient and bored, does not care that the old lady is hungry, and forces her to leave the dining room. Her dinner tray is taken away, and when Mrs. Tweedsmuir tries to keep a piece of bread with her, Arla demands she hand it over, reminding her that "the matrons don't like you to carry food back to your room. We wouldn't have to shovel it all out so often like we did today" (87). Mrs. Tweedsmuir, slightly jerking, responds, "You ought not have a key to my room. You ought not barge in and root around when I'm not there" (87–88). "'I'm paid to do my job,' said Arla. 'So are pro-sti-tutes, my dear Miss Pederson,'" Mrs. Tweedsmuir counters (88). She is very frail and tired, and her asthma makes it hard for her to walk. Arla prods her to move on, losing what is left of her patience: "If you think that [the asthma] makes you special, Mrs. Tweedsmuir, you're wrong. There's not a woman here who doesn't have something wrong with her but most of them handle it far better than you.' Arla knew she was stretching the truth a little but Mrs. Tweedsmuir was getting on her nerves" (88).

While Arla continues to prod the old woman towards the next room, her associations and thoughts are shaped by the stereotypical ageism, which she usually "tries to counter in her personal life and that her professional experience should help her to avoid" (Chivers, *From* 72). To escape the pressures of her job and avoid acknowledging the threatening idea that she could one day be just like Mrs. Tweedsmuir, she resorts to "othering" her as a monster, a witch, "an old packrat" (88): Mrs. Tweedsmuir "reminded Arla of one of those reptile monsters in old technicolor movies" (87), she observes. "She had whiskers growing out of the many moles on her face, like the witches Arla remembered from fairy tales" (89–90). Arla questions whether there is any meaning to Mrs. Tweedsmuir's life: "There had to be more to a person at the end of her life than a heap of old things. Otherwise, what was the point" (88). Arla's bored description of the dining room underlines the meaninglessness she ascribes to old age

and the simulacrum of life in the care home: "Last month, she remembered, there were plastic orchids and at Christmas, large red plastic poinsettias, one at each setting for four in the dingy dining room. So this was what was at the end of the rainbow, thought Arla. The Land of Promise delivered. The gleam in the eyes of the immigrant women—plastic roses. Hardly worth the effort when you stopped to think about it" (89).

When Arla wakes Mrs. Tweedsmuir the next day to get her ready for breakfast, she states that she feels too weak to get up. Arla, despite noticing the feverish look in Mrs. Tweedsmuir's eyes, and realizing that the woman draws her breath "through networks of phlegm growing in her lungs like thick patches of weed on the bottom of a lake" (91), still adamantly demands that she get dressed. A little while later, she finds Mrs. Tweedsmuir lying in a large pool of her own blood, having obviously fallen on her head. However, Arla does not feel any pity: "'Oh God,' Arla muttered. 'Here we go again. This job is just like riding around on a bloody ferris wheel'" (92).

Mrs. Tweedsmuir passes away during the night, and readers are left to wonder whether the "fall cleaning" (the double meaning of the title perhaps intended), including Arla's removal of the board Mrs. Tweedsmuir had used to seal the window against the cold, had weakened her so much that she could not get up by herself anymore. Although the narration encourages the readers to blame Arla for her carelessness, no mention is made of a care-giving mistake, and Arla, as usual, cleans up the room to prepare it for the new lodger, a Mrs. Brockmann, who is already waiting.

Arla's indifference to Mrs. Tweedsmuir's death is stunning. The cleaning, she notes, was "relatively easy for a change. After all, they had thrown out most of the garbage" (93) the day before. However, Arla's negligence regarding the cold air coming in through the window is hinted at, as Lalonde writes, and "the narrator makes plain connections to the reader to which Arla is not privy" (96): "The room she left behind was clean and quiet. Sunlight flickered through the green and red and white blotched curtains. A cold fall breeze fluttered them, lapping them in and out against the screen" (Sleep 93). This description, with which the story ends, is exactly the same as Arla's description of the room after cleaning it the first time, with the exception of the final sentence, "Mrs. Tweedsmuir slept on her freshly plaited bed" (86), which is now missing. Like a hotel room, number 18 waits for a new resident. While readers are presented with both the patient's and nurse's perspectives at the same time, no signs that Arla identifies with her charges appear in this or the following vignette.

Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday

While Arla has so far found it very difficult, if not impossible, to identify with her charges, she manages to adopt the perspective of Mrs. Langland in "Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday." Mrs. Langland, a very frail and thin old woman, slips and falls in her own excrement because Arla is too busy and impatient to stay with her during the painfully slow process of getting dressed. The description in this vignette is very detailed and exact, and evokes a strong, nearly abject feeling in the reader, as Chivers contends: "Alford once again imparts to readers a disgust that exceeds the stereotypical disgust of older bodies that younger people often associate with the elderly" (*From* 73). Arla portrays Mrs. Langland as looking "like a ghost" (111) with "[h]er eyes [which] appeared to have grown permanently monstrous, shone silver with horror" (109). The description establishes a stark contrast between herself and the old woman: "Her breasts were empty, flat and wrinkled like crushed tin foil. They disgusted Arla who was young and well-endowed with tight resilient skin enveloping her own breasts" (111). Arla's young body in its "clean white uniform" is further juxtaposed to Mrs. Langland's half-naked and old body, as "a large brown-yellow stain begun to spread over the back of Mrs. Langland's white cotton underpants. Soon it hung heavy inside the cloth and then it escaped through the bottom of her bloomers and ran straight down her right leg, crossing over the maze of cold blue veins till it reached her ankle" (112). Arla scolds her, "Of all mornings to come up with a stunt like this" (113), starts undressing her again and leaves with the dirty laundry. While Arla is away, Mrs. Langland's "old body would jerk into a new set of shivers" (114)—she slips and falls:

> The old woman lay naked, rigid with fear, and again she began to shiver. […] The yellow mass oozed beneath her and found its way to the edges of her body where some escaped around her boney hips and some just above her armpits, near her shoulders. She held her legs straight out before her, suspended a little above the floor, which gave the body the appearance that it was about to levitate, had already begun to rise. (114)

Mrs. Langland is presented here as close to death, and at the same time lying in her excrement as helpless as a baby. This infantilizing analogy, stereotypical as it is, links the beginning with the end of life, and is frequently applied in nursing home narratives (e.g., *Half Life* by John Mighton). When Arla enters the room, she is shocked to see Mrs. Langland lying there:

> Her face looked like a blank sheet of paper, her eyes large, almost silver, mirroring the eyes of the old woman lying on the floor. The longer Arla stared obliquely at the body, the more she recognized or remembered something familiar in the old woman's frozen face, something unholy in the humiliating posture of the crooked old bone body, framed in the yellow ooze of its own feces. (114)

The beginning of this description merges Arla's face with that of Mrs. Langland. Readers might first think of "her face" as the old woman's, but it soon becomes clear that Arla's face is being described here. The abject is threatening Arla's ego boundaries—she is horrified. Arla suddenly recognizes herself in the old woman:

> Arla couldn't say exactly what it was she recognized there, but she knew it was somehow part of herself. And although she would never really know why, it tore like a ragged fish-knife through the flesh of her indifference, her only ally at times like this, left her with a deeper repugnance, a more palpable fear and disgust than she had ever felt before, even at Pine Mountain Lodge. There was something she saw here, something she smelled in the sulphuric acrid air that made her think of hell, the long-forgotten Sunday School hell of a four year old girl. (114–15)

Here, a process of identification with the old woman begins for Arla. She recognizes that Mrs. Langland is intimately related to her as an individual in her present, her future, and also in her past. The narrator alludes to Arla's indifference, which had been a protective shield ("her only ally"), and indicates that it now slowly gives way to a sense of recognition. Arla is horrified because she realizes Mrs. Langland's lack of personal agency. Chris Gilleard and Paul Higgs argue:

> The deeper abjection of old age lies not so much in the leaking of bodily products nor in the physical stigma of an ageing appearance nor the demonstrable performance handicaps of a disabled person. What constitutes abjection in old age is the evidence of absence, absence of self-consciousness, of self-control, of corporeal ownership—the abjection of the orphaned body. ("Ageing" 139)

Using both George Bataille's and Julia Kristeva's concepts of abjection, Gilleard and Higgs redefine abjection as the cultural and symbolic process by which

the aged body becomes emblematic of a deeper existential and social exclusion, where the body is stripped of subjectivity and reduced to an object of care or even horror. Abjection here is not just about the physical signs of aging but about the perceived loss of social and individual agency. Arla's difficulties stem from the breakdown between her personal boundaries and the "orphaned body," the old body's failure—its near-death.

In what is nearly a moment of epiphany, she overcomes this abjection, and feels a deep sense of connection with Mrs. Langland: "The two women stared at each other silently, as if they were in a play and had been directed to 'freeze,' motionless, suspended in time. And although neither spoke or moved, this was the first honest communication between them, the only time Arla had ever been able to imagine the old woman as an ordinary human being" (115). Recognizing herself in Mrs. Langland, almost as if seeing to the bottom of her soul through her eyes, "A red streak slid over Mrs. Langland's face, lit upon the bulbous silver eyes, and only for a moment Arla thought she saw the old lady's eyes on fire, thought she saw flames licking out from her eyelids, then consumed and rekindled in the grey-white irises and finally smothered in the blackness of her tiny, precise pupils" (115). In this moment of epiphany, abjection takes hold of Arla:

> The light reflected on the old woman's body rekindled Arla's memory, haunted her with infernal childish notions she couldn't seem to shake this time. She almost took leave of her senses, screamed and dropped the basin, ran out of the room, out of the lodge, out of the city. Yet, somewhere within her she knew there was nowhere far enough to run, no escape from what she had learned. And so she began to move toward Mrs. Langland, very slowly at first, as if she were a robot or hypnotized. She felt her flesh soften, release her, allow her back into herself. (116)

She then heaves Mrs. Langland onto her bed, cleans and disinfects her and the room, and asks the old woman, this time gently and respectfully, to stand up. She helps her with her food on the sun porch, and Mrs. Langland, although still staring absentmindedly, begins to eat. A few moments later, Arla learns from Mrs. Mackenzie, another old woman, that Mrs. Langland had come to Pine Mountain "from the asylum" (117), after she had "watched her house afire, burned to the ground and her children in it at the time" (117–18). Arla is shocked by this bit of information that gives "the experience an unearthly kind of aura" (119), and starts to shake. She realizes that "more terrifying than

anything else, had been the vague, still undefined recognition of some part of herself in the disintegrating mind and body of the old woman, a recognition so deep it seemed to shake her from within" (119). Arla cannot help thinking of this incident again and again, feeling guilty for not treating Mrs. Langland as a human being. As the narrator notes, "her own incompetence and thoughtlessness converged on her. She could have done better. She should have known she couldn't leave the old woman standing by herself" (119). Readers might assume that this revelation would change Arla's perception more deeply, and consequently alter the way she works in the nursing home. In the course of the next few days, however, Mrs. Langland, whom Arla had been treating very patiently and sympathetically as atonement for her harsh behavior, does not react to any of her efforts, "remembering [what Mrs. Langland had been through] became progressively more difficult" (121), and Arla's patience wears thin, increasingly leading her to give way to aggression. When kneeling on the floor, trying to put shoes on Mrs. Langland's feet, Arla "became brutal, grew determined to force the rebellious toes into their proper places" (121). Any connection Arla had felt with Mrs. Langland is now severed, as Lalonde also remarks (97). "Angry now, forgetting grew easy for her, understanding impossible—both finally of the same thing—that these could be her feet, her toes, her somewhere, some other distant time" (121). I agree with Jeremy Lalonde who observes, "Arla appears as compassionless as she was in the opening story, making it difficult to argue that she has undergone any real emotional development" (97). Looking back at the story's beginning, its epigraph, "cold and in the winter weather / comfort is denied / doors are fast but still the weather / rages inside" (108) now makes sense in reference to both the home and Mrs. Langland's inner struggle.

Companion

"Companion," the last and, I would argue, the most complex story of the collection, begins with Arla looking at "the snowflakes intact" (140) on her coat, picking up from where "Under the I" (a vignette not included in my analysis) ends, providing a link between the stories via the cold winter weather through which Harold drives home, focusing on "the spray and hiss of flakes against the glass" (139). The snow during the post-Christmas season not only creates a link, but it establishes a cyclic structure, which connects the ending of the book to its beginning. Ending it with a story set in winter emphasizes the cyclical yet static nature of residents' lives, symbolizing a temporal loop without meaningful change or progression. In this sense, it can be read as a Bakhtinian chronotope of stagnation. Arla reflects on the year that had passed: "Every year she

looked forward to Christmas and Easter and summer and always she found herself melancholy afterward, had trouble believing they had come and gone, slipped into her uneventful past with everything else" (140). She is aware of how quickly time is passing, of how she, too, is aging without feeling as though much happening in her life, like the old women in the lodge. The passage of time and, as the natural consequence of its passage, death, is one of the story's central themes. Even when pulling up a blind, Arla cannot help noticing that "it rolled up rapidly, disappearing with a flap flap into wherever it is that blinds go, into nowhere, it had always seemed to Arla, like time, like life" (149).

The diamond ring—another cyclic structure—that David gives Arla can also be seen as a symbol of the natural cycle of life and death. The ring also connects this story back to a previous vignette, "Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday." In contrast to the yellow and red fiery flames Arla saw in Mrs. Langland's eyes, the ring in this story "glittered and flashed stellate patterns like fractured glass on the smooth white plaster of the wall" (140). Even though it is an engagement ring, it fills her "with doubt and apprehension" (148), and fails to touch her heart. She realizes that "although the ring still glittered in the artificial lights still on in the lodge, […] the diamond made her sad, was cold as ice, had lost its fire" (140).

The metaphoric connection established between the dark, cold winter and the uneasiness Arla experiences as she enters the lodge on that particular day seem to foreshadow the death of Mrs. Dawson, the story's resident protagonist, who is just a few days away from her 100th birthday. Arla has developed a special connection to this woman, not least of all because she feels that Mrs. Dawson, unlike the other residents, has always shown a genuine interest in her life and respects her. When she received her ring, Mrs. Dawson was the only woman who did not tell her that she was too young to "throw life away" (146). On the contrary, "she knew of the light which danced inside Arla" (147) and "really looked at her as if she was important" (147). Arla gains recognition and respect for what she does from Mrs. Dawson that she does not receive from David or her own family, let alone from the other women or matrons, who show no appreciation for Arla's work. When Arla shows her parents the Christmas card and doily Mrs. Dawson has made for her, she wishes "that they would read the card where it said 'Thank you to a good helper—' that they would know she was of some use to someone, had done something honorable with herself" (147). Her parents, however, are more impressed by the size of the diamond than with an old woman's snowflake-shaped doily. "Biggest chunk of ice I ever saw," her mother had said. 'You're a lucky little lady. Looks like you're gonna be pretty well

fixed'" (148). Instead of giving their daughter the recognition and encouragement she craves, they adhere to traditional values that dictate the importance of catching a decent husband who is, they assume, well off. Mrs. Dawson, on the other hand, verbalizes what Arla longs for:

> "Yes, I had a companion once. We were together for forty years, and they were good years, good years." Companion. That was the word Arla lifted out and turned over and over in her mind, studying it from every angle like the ring. That was a good word. Sane and gentle and reassuring. She found herself taking it out whenever she started to worry about David and their future together. Companion. It was all a matter of perspective, she thought. Some comfort here. (147)

Arla is relieved to find a different definition for their relationship, one that is based on understanding and respect, trust and comfort, and equality. "'She didn't want to be 'fixed,' well or any other way," Arla thinks (148). Jeremy Lalonde states, "The perspective embodied by the word [companion] is, along with the snowflake doily, Mrs. Dawson's gift to Arla; together, the word and the snowflake displace the weighty 'chunk of ice' and the threatened loss of self that it implies" (99).

Arla also admires Mrs. Dawson for her "stories full of secrets, clues to longevity, her innocent happiness, the source of her calm and optimism and self-reliance" (146). Their special connection is also visualized in the dance they perform while preparing for the birthday party. Mrs. Dawson "extended one of her withered hands toward Arla. […] Without speaking, they had begun to wheel around the room in a strange, but in its own way, graceful, shuffle-rhythmed waltz" (142). It comes as a special shock to Arla to find Mrs. Dawson in very bad shape when she arrives at work the next day. The old woman has fallen and hit her head; she is confused and suffers a gaping wound on her forehead. The negligent wound treatment administered by the night nurse, an unreliable, confused older woman, adds to the critical nature of the situation, but as Arla knows from experience, "incidents such as Mrs. Dawson's fall were like the top of a toboggan run for these old women. Once the toboggan slipped off the top, there was nowhere to go except down and swiftly" (144). The toboggan run represents another spatial metaphor that symbolizes decline. Still, Arla cannot let Mrs. Dawson go, and resolves "that she wouldn't let her die" (146). She is "furious with Mrs. Dawson who lay motionless, though in pain. She would not fight. Now she was giving up, after all those years, all those hard

times she had come through and told stories about. Arla […] had believed in the old woman, put her faith in her. What was she now but a quitter, a traitor" (149)?

At the same time, Arla feels guilty, and doubts whether she is any good at her job. Although Arla tries hard remain professionally neutral, she can no longer maintain this façade, and hopes for a closer connection with Mrs. Dawson, who seems to be in an "uncommunicable space" far away: "By now, Arla was stooped over the bed, her hands softly cupping the old woman's face, looking hard at the eyes, desperately trying to reach into that space which housed the fight. […] The woman's eyes glittered like blue ice in the sun" (151). As in previous vignettes, a feeling of "quiet horror" strikes Arla when she realizes that the old woman wants to die, "desired death like a lover, like a friend. Like Arla desired David" (152). Death has now become Mrs. Dawson's companion. Arla cannot deal directly with the situation, but reacts through deferral and avoidance, escaping into her everyday routine by expertly changing Mrs. Dawson's sheets, which gives her a sense of security. But she cannot stand being close to the dying woman, and escapes: "A person had to go to the bathroom regardless of what was going on, she reasoned" (152). When Arla decides to go back after a while, she passes the empty lounge, "but a curious, chill feeling came over her. For a moment she thought she saw Mrs. Dawson dancing with someone" (152). She then re-enters Mrs. Dawson's room, and is struck with sadness. She realizes that Mrs. Dawson is truly dying. She holds her tight, "humming and rocking," until "she felt as if she and the old woman had changed partners" (153).

After Mrs. Dawson has passed away, Arla closes her eyelids, and covers her with a sheet. She then tells Matron Oliver what has happened. "'I quit,' she said, quite without warning to herself" (154). Arla's realization of stagnation—mirrored in her final decision to leave—is pivotal in breaking the chronotopic cycle, symbolizing her personal rejection of the repetitive temporal and spatial confinement institutional spaces enforce on residents and caregivers alike. She leaves the lodge, thinks of moving in with David, and of selling the ring back to afford "a decent bed" (155). She decides that "she might as well face the fact that she didn't give a damn about it" (155). The independence expressed through her thoughts, her deviation from her previously unquestioned adherence to the social norms and values exemplified by the diamond ring, and her newly acquired freedom in making her own decisions render her happy, and mark the beginning of a development that "is projected beyond the close of the sequence," as Lalonde notes (99). Most importantly, Arla realizes that "needing

someone didn't make you weak. It made you human" (155). When she finally walks away from the lodge, "she felt she was not alone, because she felt the presence of someone or something walking with her" (155).

The collection ends with an almost supernatural scene that hints at what Arla has gained from her experiences, not only from Mrs. Dawson, but also from the other ladies in the lodge and, perhaps, from her contact with the aging and dying processes in general. The caregiving responsibilities and emotional labor Arla undertakes, as well as the emotional toll this takes, reflect the gendered expectation placed upon women within institutional contexts, reinforcing broader societal power imbalances related to gender and caregiving roles.

A Sleep Full of Dreams—even if not a *Bildungsroman* in the narrowest sense—portrays Arla's struggle to find her own voice, while gaining an understanding of what it means to grow old. While she has difficulties seeing herself reflected in the old women in the earliest stories, such as "The Hoyer" or "Midmay's Eldest Child," the breakup of the binary opposition between young and old, herself and the "other," is already foreshadowed. During the course of the book, and although Arla sometimes seems to move "two steps forward, one step back," she develops an understanding for her own self as a "self-in-relation" (Surrey 51). Roberta Maierhofer emphasizes the importance of such bonds:

> When talking about personal bonding in spite and in acceptance of difference, texts depicting inter-generational relationships can be helpful. The aging individual and the conflicts, passions, and joys, exemplify more than any other stage of life the interplay between the private and the public, the individual and the communal, and stresses the importance of relationships and connections. ("Crossing" 251)

Arla's assertion that "needing someone doesn't make you weak. It makes you human" (155), which appears on the final page of the book, reflects her recognition of the necessary interrelatedness of self and other. Roberta Maierhofer claims with reference to Jacques Derrida's essay "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" that an understanding of the self is only made possible when the binary construction of self and other has been replaced by a self-in-relation, by the recognition of difference. She argues, drawing on deconstruction, that the other is not separate from the self, but implicitly imagined as part of the self-understanding because it preconditions the self. The binary opposition described here is deconstructed as arbitrary

through an integration of opposites (*Salty* 123–24). The young self, she maintains, can only overcome the binary opposition between young and old by recognizing that the aging self is *not* other, *not* independent from the young, but is its correlate, its completion.[6] This is also exemplified in the case of Arla, for whom Mrs. Langland and Mrs. Dawson are essential reminders of what she is, was, and might become. Arla's identification with the individual old women and her understanding that they are "somehow part of herself" (115) are prefigured in all vignettes presented in the collection that include her.

2.2 Finding Home in a Liminal Space: Shani Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at Night*

> What is theoretically innovative, and politically crucial, is the need to think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences. These "in-between" spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood—singular or communal—that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself.
>
> — Edward Soja, *Thirdspace*

In referencing Homi Bhabha's concept of the "Third Space of enunciation" (Bhabha 37), Edward Soja underlines the importance of moving beyond binary oppositions to embrace the creative potential found within "in-betweenness." The articulation of cultural difference, and the deconstruction of binary oppositions, is central to Shani Mootoo's novel *Cereus Blooms at Night*. I discuss in

6 "Wenn die Vorstellung der Binarität von Selbst und dem radikal anderen durch ein In-Beziehung-Setzen des Selbst zum anderen abgelöst wird, bedeutet das, dass ein Verstehen des Selbst nur dann möglich ist, wenn es in Relation zu dem, was es umgibt, bindet und definiert und durch sein grundsätzliches Anderssein abgrenzt, gesetzt wird. Das andere ist somit nicht vom Selbst getrennt, ist in dem Verständnis des Ich selbst impliziert: Das Selbst ist das, was nicht das andere ist. Anderssein ist somit eine Ergänzung zum Selbst, ohne das das Selbst unvollständig und sogar unvorstellbar ist. In diesem Sinne kann das jugendliche Ich nur durch die Erkenntnis, dass das alternde Ich nicht unabhängig, sondern als Ergänzung zu ihm besteht, zu einer Überwindung des Gegensatzes von Selbst und anderem gelangen." (*Salty* 123–24.)

the following how the nursing home portrayed in the novel operates as such an "in-between" site that facilitates the elaboration of strategies of selfhood, both singular and communal, reflecting and advancing Soja's and Bhabha's insights.

Irish-born Trinidadian-Canadian writer Shani Mootoo sets large parts of her 1996 novel in a care home on a fictive Caribbean island called Lantanacamara. Focusing on the immigrant author's cultural affiliations, most critics have so far concentrated on discussing the novel's place within the postcolonial tradition of Caribbean writers (Warnock 270), and the "shared queerness" (Mootoo 48), which is also at the center of the narrative (May, "Trauma"; May, "Dislocation"; Ashworth; Fox). As Carol Anne Howell states, "Mootoo writes about liminal identities positioned on the margins or between worlds. Such issues relate not only to the immigrant condition but also to sexual and racial politics and the legacy of colonialism" (7).

I argue that *Cereus Blooms at Night* is a text that not only addresses liminality with regard to the traditional matrix of "race, class, and gender," as Howells implies, but also with regard to age, a category of difference that needs to be included in the critical scholarly discussion of what constitutes the text's definition of "otherness." The intergenerational relationship depicted in the novel is a central element for the constitution and redefinition of the protagonists' identities. When Howells writes, "[i]t is through the stories of these two protagonists who are struggling to formulate their identities on the boundaries of social definition that concepts of liminality are explored" (149), the liminality of age must also be included in the discussion.

In *Cereus Blooms at Night*, spaces and places play major roles in the development of personal life-course narratives. The village of Paradise on the fictional Caribbean island of Lantanacamara initially prompts associations with the Garden of Eden—not least of all because of the village's name. Associating Caribbean landscapes with paradise has a long history in the development of Caribbean literature, Lorna Burns asserts (52), arguing that this trope was already recognizable in the testimonies of Christopher Columbus, Amerigo Vespucci, and others. Such a conflation of the New World with the Garden of Eden, she argues, served to disguise imperialist exploitation and masked colonial power relations (52). Mootoo, however, subverts idealized representations of the Caribbean landscape as paradise (the village's name is both ironic and subversive), and distances herself from any idealization by portraying a paradise lost when describing the garden of the main character, Mala Ramchandin.

While this garden, in which the eponymous cereus blooms, has received special attention as a symbolic landscape (see, for instance, Burns; Casteel; Hoving, "Gardening"), the nursing home, which serves as a setting in the story's extensive frame, has been largely overlooked as a symbolic, liminal space.[7] This is all the more astounding because the Paradise Alms House is central to the protagonists' development, enabling the marginalized characters to come to terms with their sometimes traumatic pasts. It is revealing that the narrator describes the home's location as a heterotopic space outside the city limits, a space elsewhere and in the middle of nowhere at the same time, with a lane that ends long before it reaches the home: "The Paradise Alms House is not en route to anywhere. To get there, one must leave the main road, cut through a cane field and carry on up a lane that ends on top of a small hill. The home with its excellent view of the cane fields is in the shallow valley below. There is nothing beyond" (122). The home, as Nurse Tyler describes it here, is literally located "over the hill," at the periphery, far away from the center of the village's social life. In this way, the nursing home represents a place beyond the present,[8] which Bhabha has described in *The Location of Culture*: "'Beyond' signifies spatial distance, marks progress, promises the future; but our intimations of exceeding the barrier or boundary—the very act of going beyond—are unknowable, unrepresentable, without a return to the 'present' which, in the process of repetition, becomes disjunct and displaced" (4). As Howells observes, this excerpt reads like a "sketch for Mootoo's novel" (148). The characters go "beyond" all boundaries to return to their origins, but also return to the present, a place from which they can continue, travelling "beyond" into a future (148). Interestingly, the starting place for this journey, clearly a progress narrative, is a Catholic nursing home. Contrary to conventional representations of nursing homes, the home in *Cereus Blooms at Night* is a place of improvement and growth, which is also illustrated by Mala Ramchandin's development: a few days after being delivered to the home, tied to a stretcher, and unable to move, she soon recovers: "After a few days in the wheelchair,

7 Linda Chris Fox, in her article "The Paradise Alms House: Siting Literary Thirdspace in Shani Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at Night*, actually does refer to the nursing home.

8 Here, I adapt Coral Ann Howells' interpretation, in which she uses Bhabha's study of the postcolonial diaspora to explain how the text itself, as a "Canadian" novel set on a Caribbean island, is positioned "in-between" the Caribbean and Canada "by its narratives of desire for escape and its transformations of identity" (Howells, *Contemporary* 148).

Miss Ramchandin was strong enough to walk" (Mootoo 46). Both Mala and Nurse Tyler develop new life course identities after getting to know each other in the Paradise Alms House. The novel "traces a particularly harrowing late-life journey from silence and insanity to human interaction and sharing," as Perrakis asserts (19).

In Mootoo's novel, the narrative of a care-giver is again used to introduce readers to the troubled life story of Miss Mala Ramchandin, an old woman. Tyler, the homosexual Afro-Caribbean nurse at the Paradise Alms House, "the only Lantanacamaran man ever to have trained in the profession of nursing" (6), is exclusively assigned to the care of Mala, an Indo-Caribbean "crazy lady" (7). She is said to have murdered her father who, having been left by his wife and her lesbian lover decades earlier, takes revenge for this humiliation by brutally raping and abusing his then young daughters, Mala and Asha, for several years before mysteriously disappearing. While Asha eventually manages to escape to Great Britain, "the Shivering Northern Wetlands," as Mootoo names it, and later on to Canada, the trauma-related guilt that Mala suffers prevents her from leaving her father's house. She remains with him for several years before killing him during a violent fight.

The novel begins decades after Chandin Ramchandin vanishes, when Mala, after years of dwelling in the wild garden around her family house beyond the margins of society, is taken to Paradise Alms House. There, she is "to receive proper care and attention until the end of her days" (8), as is the ruling during her murder trial at court. She is exonerated for want of evidence because her own house, and with it her father's dead body, has burned down: "No victim, no evidence, no witnesses—no crime" (8). As Paradise is a small village, however, Mala remains a suspect, "the nurses' gestures were loud enough. They recoiled several paces" (19), when the helpless woman is brought to the home. Because both characters, Mala and Tyler, are "scandalous figures," as Coral Ann Howells states (149)—Tyler, because of his homosexuality and Mala, because of her status as a social outcast—none of the nurses wants to interact with them. Neither skin color nor race, however, are the primary identity markers in this context, as Howells observes (149). She affirms that "issues around sexuality and gender are much more socially relevant. The old colonial mechanism of violent othering has not vanished, but has only been transformed into the social ostracism of certain individuals who are seen to transgress the heterosexual norms of their community" (Howells 149). "Miss Ramchandin's care was therefore left in my hands," Tyler explains (Mootoo 13). The nursing and nurturing care Mala subsequently receives in the home not only changes her own life, but

also Tyler's. The relationship they develop is as crucial to the transmission of the story as it is to the survival of the two characters, as Sally Chivers contends (*From* 75).

The effect of nurturing on their connection also affects the community on a larger scale, which is revealed by Tyler's observation that, upon Mala's admission to the home, the thick, black cloud of smoke that had been hovering over the village begins to disappear: "[i]t is said, incidentally, that […] the life-robbing cloud began to break up and shift south over the ocean, letting light shine in Paradise once again" (8). The complete destruction of the eerie house, a symbol of sin and moral decay, not only frees the townspeople from the uncanny "other" hovering at the community's edge, but also rids them of their own guilt: although Chandin Ramchandin's violence and his incestuous relationship with his daughters was an open secret in the community, nobody ever openly confronted him. Instead, Mala is ostracized by the community, and victimized yet again. Even Asha's letters, in which she begs Mala to join her in Canada, are never delivered to her "because the righteous postman, deeming the Ramchandin house to be a place of sin and moral corruption, refused to go up there" (Mootoo 243). After killing her father and hiding his body in the basement, Mala never again enters the house. She remains in the garden, living with the animals and plants that completely hide and shelter her. She is considered a mean, magical creature, an evil witch parents warn their children about, and the townspeople almost forget about the crazy, wild woman dwelling on the hillside.

When Mala is finally taken to the nursing home, this is done "out of compassion for her health and welfare" (8) by Judge Bissey, who, also having grown up in the small town, still guiltily remembers bullying Mala and her little sister when they were all young children. It is also Judge Bissey who finally gives Mala her sister Asha's letters, which had been kept in a box at the post office all these years. Moving into the care home means re-entering social life for Mala. Contrary to her family home, the Paradise Alms House is a nurturing environment, which enables both Mala and Tyler to re-narrate and reevaluate their life course narratives not only with regard to their "queerness," but also within the larger framework of the novel as a postcolonial text "that confronts the binary structures inherent in colonialism and in sexual politics through a narrative that first explores the traumatic effects of such polarization on individual lives across several generations, and then in an effort of displacement sets out an alternative narrative of transgressive desire, which opens up spaces for new identity constructions" (Howells 148).

Mootoo narrates the heterotopic space of the care home as a nurturing place in such a way as to facilitate a process of re-identification with the protagonists. This re-appropriation of their life stories is only possible because of the specific characteristics Mootoo ascribes to the nursing home. She crafts it as a place that, as L. Chris Fox states, "provides a locational frame within which cultural meanings are reworked so that characters may perform self-coherent versions of themselves and be appreciated as themselves by others" (73). Fox also positions the home as central to the story, and reads "the alms house and its residents' garden as a place of productive literary thirdspace" (70). Her argument resonates with Homi Bhabha's definition, who sees the process of identification as a process of hybridity, which "gives rise to something different, something new and unrecognisable, a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation" (Rutherford 211). The liminal space is described by Bhabha as a "productive space of the construction of culture as difference" (209), and this is, I also argue, the home's primary function in the novel. In this sense, the home itself operates as a "third space," because it facilitates the formation of a productive hybridity for the subjects inhabiting it.

The presence of the cereus plant, a key image of the novel, indicates that the nursing home and its surroundings present a nurturing environment in which growth is possible. The care home not only ensures Mala's survival, but also that of the cereus plant, which had once grown next to her house. Otoh Mohanty, a central character in the novel, saved a clipping of the succulent before setting fire to the house and garden. He does so to destroy any evidence of Mala's crime, trying to protect her from being convicted for murder. Together with his father, Ambrose, he brings the clipping to the Paradise Alms House, where the gardener plants it and where it develops its symbolic bloom.

Ambrose Mohanty, Mala's childhood friend, plays a pivotal role in Mala's development. When he comes back to the village after several years of studying, he begins an affair with Mala. Her father Chandin, incidentally observing Ambrose as he leaves the Ramchandins' house, is extremely jealous. He severely beats Mala, and brutally rapes her several times during the night. He demolishes the entire kitchen, and attempts to kill Mala with a cleaver. Ambrose, returning to the house the next day, finds Mala severely wounded. Suddenly, Chandin attacks him with the cleaver. Mala trips Chandin so that he falls, and sinks her teeth into his wrist. Ambrose "saw the opportunity to go for help" (227), and dashes out of the room in an act of cowardice, unintentionally slamming the door against Chandin's head, stunning him. Feeling "as though he had been betrayed by Mala, and at the same time wrestling with the notion

that she could not possibly, not conceivably have been agreeable to intimacies with her father" (227–28), Ambrose distances himself from Mala. He ponders running for help, but is stopped by his fear of being associated with "the shameful goings-on in the house" (228), thereby siding with members of the island's community in blaming Mala for the incestuous relationship. Before he leaves, he hears a dreadful crashing and notices Mala calling his name. Ambrose runs back upstairs to see, "instead of the woman he had made love to the day before, an unrecognizable wild creature with a blood-stained face, frothing at the mouth and hacking uncontrollably at the furniture in the drawing room" (228). Mala, in a state of absolute confusion, oscillating between her childhood memories and the present, returns to Chandin, who is still lying on the floor, and hits his head with the door until she is exhausted. Although Mala begs him to stay, Ambrose again fears for his own life, and bolts from the house. Mala then drags her father's body down the stairs, and locks it in the basement. Utterly confused, she returns to the house to look for her mother, re-living the moments of her departure, which had traumatized Mala as a child. Mala does not dare re-enter the house for fear that her father might return: "She never lit a lantern in that house again. Nor did she, since that day, pass a night inside its walls" (230). During the following years, Mala dwells in the garden next to the Cereus plant, immersing herself in nature, and discontinuing her use of spoken language:

> Eventually, Mala all but rid herself of words. The wings of a gull flapping through the air titillated her soul and awakened her toes and knobby knees, the palms of her withered hands, deep inside her womb, her vagina, lungs, stomach and heart. Every muscle of her body swelled, tingled, cringed or went numb in response to her surroundings—every fibre was sensitized in a way that words were unable to match or enhance. Mala responded to those receptors, flowing with them effortlessly, like water making its way along a path. (127)

In contrast with examples given in other Canadian novels, such as Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*, this immersion in nature is not a healing experience. Mala's withdrawal into the wild garden isolates her completely, separating her even further from human society. Howells argues that "Mala becomes a living ghost as she abandons language and leads a truly liminal existence, teetering on the borderline between human and natural worlds" (155). In the garden, Mala remains frozen in her childhood trauma, unable to escape without outside help.

She exists in the wilderness around the house, detached from the city: "With its yard-long, bean-like purple pods, the mudra had taken over the side of the yard, completely blocking out the road beyond and glimpses of town" (154–55). As Howells notes, "her residence on the verandah is a sign of her in-between existence: she is still human, a woman who may speak the language of the animals, but who wears clothes and sits on a chair in her garden" (157), which grants her invisibility and, at the same time, isolates her. Isabel Hoving reads the garden as an "ambiguous paradise" that is neither an Edenic site, nor an obscure jungle: "At first sight, the yard recalls the image of the lost Garden of Eden, which European explorers wanted to recognize in the lush Caribbean islands they visited for the first time. At second sight, however, there is something seriously wrong with this lost jungle paradise. There is something very eerie about the garden" ("Moving" 154). The uncanny atmosphere is reinforced by its peculiar, nauseating smell, "[a] ghost of scent" (Mootoo 154) that hovers over the yard. When Otoh, Ambrose Mohanty's son, approaches it, he is aware of the "double recognition" (Burns 56), and notes that "except for the odors he would have sworn he was in paradise" (Mootoo 155). Mootoo here deliberately subverts all clear-cut boundaries, including those defining paradise and hell, and, as Burns also observes, deconstructs any binaries by conflating house and garden (56):

> Fruit trees and hot pepper trees had sprung wherever birds and insects dropped their seeds. A patch of bright orange, sweet-smelling roses and a profusion of night-blooming cereus plants were the only ornamentals in the yard. The roots of the cereus, like desperate grasping fingers, had bored through the damp wall of the house. It was no longer the wall that supported the succulent but rather the other way around. (Mootoo 115)

The odors that pervade the garden stem from the dead body of Chandin Ramchandin in the basement. Worms and maggots have started consuming his body as well as the wooden frame of the house:

> Termites had gnawed a board barring the window and sunlight beamed through throwing a brilliant gash on the opposite wall and illuminating the insects. […] The insects that had fallen crunched beneath her bare feet. They were fodder for a vibrating carpet of moths, centipedes, millipedes, cockroaches and unnamed insects that found refuge in Mala's surroundings. Death feeding life. (130)

Nature has started to take over, controlling the garden and the house, and blurring the border between inside and outside.

This image is contrasted with the garden of the Paradise Alms House, which is clean and professionally maintained by the institution's gardener, Mr. Hector. Here, a clear separation exists between inside and outside, the yard and the house. Mr. Hector is in control of everything that grows there: "He was carrying a full gerbera plant, flowers, leaves and roots protruding from a large ball of soil in one hand, a spade in the other" (72). Assuming that it might humor Mala, Mr. Hector suggests that she should do some gardening in the newly arranged flower beds. Tyler remembers that a clipping of a cereus plant had just been left for Mala Ramchandin by two visitors, but as the head nurse had turned them away, he had forgotten about it. When he suggests planting the succulent clipping, Mr. Hector only accepts it reluctantly because he deems it too ugly. While he digs a hole to plant the cereus, a conversation develops between the two men. Mr. Hector tells Tyler how he reminds him of his older brother, who was sent away years ago, "He was kind of funny, he was like you" (73). Mr. Hector misses him terribly: "Is like I recognize you but is a sad feeling" (72), he tells Tyler. This short sequence deepens the relationship between the gardener and Tyler, and strengthens Tyler's self-esteem: "[I]t suddenly lifted a veil between us. Unexpectedly, I felt relief it was voiced and out in the open. I had never before known such a feeling of ordinariness" (73). This is the first feeling of normalcy and an initial hint of Tyler's liberation from the traditional sexual identity categories described, which from then on takes root in him, like the cereus plant takes root in the garden.

The two visitors who left the cereus clipping are, as readers learn later, Ambrose Mohanty and his son Otoh. Ambrose, after running from Mala's house, married another woman, Elsie, "for solace" (109), because she reminded him of Mala. They have one daughter, Ambrosia, who eventually transforms into a son and becomes Otoh, an acronym for "on the other hand." This was given to him as a nickname because of his "ability to imagine many sides of a dilemma [...] and the vexing inability to make up his mind" (Mootoo 110). Otoh literally embodies the conflation of binaries, which is also expressed by the fact that his gender transformation was so "flawless" (110) that "even the nurse and doctor who attended the birth, on seeing him later, marveled at their carelessness in having declared him a girl" (110). Again, Mootoo blurs all boundaries, and Isabel Hoving reads Otoh and his father as another embodiment of the transgression of borders:

> Father and son form a curious pair, and they embody the novel's most remarkable instances of border crossing and mirroring. Ambrose is a former suitor of Mala, but he proved unable to save her from trauma and he has slept away most of his life ever since. Otoh is his remarkable son: he is a transgender boy who succeeded in letting even his parents forget that he was born a girl. But Otoh is crossing not only just the border between genders but also that between generations: he takes over his father's place by bringing Mala food, sometimes even dressed like his father, in an effort to make amends for his father's betrayal. The cereus is therefore a gift from two people who cross borders between genders and generations, past and present, sleep and waking life. ("Moving" 162)

Otoh crosses yet another boundary when, dressed up in his father's clothes, he sets out to the enchanted garden to bring Mala food. He feels obliged to continue on in his father's tradition when Ambrose has to stop visiting the house after an accident that confines him to a wheelchair: "Otoh, intrigued by his father's devotion to a woman whom he had not seen in more than thirty years, accepted his inherited task" (Mootoo 111). After bringing food to Mala for several months and being fascinated by her, Otoh eventually dares to speak to the strange woman his father has adored all his life. He is her "first human visitor in at least a decade" (150). Mala, using words for the first time since moving into the garden, mistakes him for Ambrose. In this passage, focalization shifts between the two characters, and the narration uses a "language of magic realism, offering a kind of suspension between two modes of apprehending the world, where neither realism nor magic is cancelled out," as Howells (158) analyzes the scene in which Otoh and Mala start dancing in the garden.

The fairy tale turns into a "Gothic nightmare" (158) as Mala leads Otoh down into the basement through mounds of dust, clouds of stench, and around a huge pile of furniture several feet thick that hides the doorway of yet another locked door, behind which she shows him her father's decayed body ("an indecipherable mass," Mootoo 163). The horrible sight and smell overwhelm him. He faints, and only wakes up again as Mala carries him upstairs. During a scene that mirrors his father's flight decades ago, he escapes from the house, leaping through the wall of shrubs, bushes, and plants, and runs as quickly as he can towards the village road, where he finally collapses. People quickly gather around him, misunderstanding Otoh's stammering comment of "A body, it have a body in she house" (Mootoo 166). They wrongly conclude that a murderer has entered Mala Ramchandin's yard. The rumor spreads and changes quickly, finally

reaching Ambrose, who is terrified that his son might have been the victim. Ambrose stands up from the wheelchair for the first time in years, and pushes it into the street in order to look for Otoh. When he finds him, Otoh tells him what had happened. Both father and son now share the concern that Mala will soon be accused of having murdered Chandin. Otoh's fear of having betrayed Mala is resolved by Ambrose, who remarks, "Clearly you did not cause trouble. It seems that trouble was lurking like a diseased phantom, waiting to be revealed, and you had the misfortune to come upon it" (Mootoo 170). Upon hearing that the police have taken Mala into custody, Ambrose, again unable to save her, sinks back into motionless passivity, while Otoh sets out to burn Mala's house in order to destroy any proof of her crime. He sets fire to the house, burning it entirely, so that the house and trees and "every bit of live and dead matter that had thrived on the Hill Side property remained floating through the town in an irritating dust, suspended in a thick, black cloud above the town and blocking out the light of the sun" (188), restoring the previously secluded space, albeit transformed, to the public view and serving as a reminder, for almost a week, to the community of the house's dark history. The only living remnant from Mala's property is a clipping from the cereus plant, which Otoh takes with him.

After Otoh's flight from the scene, Mala becomes the main focalizer of the narration. Filled with despair due to Otoh's (and, due to the case of confused identity, Ambrose's) abandonment, she realizes that she might be in danger, and decides that "her first duty was to save and care for Pohpoh" (172). Her childhood self has become a split personality, a separate individual in need of her protection. This separation enables her to stay alive by allowing her to construct alternative narratives of rescue and escape (Howells 157). Howells notes, "In her distress, Mala's identity fractures completely into a condition of schizophrenia where she is divided between the adult Mala and the child Pohpoh, caught in a time loop between present and past as she leads the police downstairs to her father's body" (159). The story is now related through Mala's focalization, who perceives Pohpoh to be a child that she needs to protect from Chandin, who in her eyes is still alive and a threatening presence. She considers herself in control of the situation, safeguarding imaginary Pohpoh. While the policemen interpret her whispering off to the side as a sign that she has gone mad, Mala has only one aim: to help Pohpoh escape. In her fantasy, she sees Pohpoh fly away: "Down below, her island was soon lost among others, all as shapeless as specks of dust adrift on a vast turquoise sea" (Mootoo 186). Mala is taken into custody while her house burns down, and while any proof of crime is destroyed. She is not convicted of murder, but is sent to the almshouse. Here, the narrative

switches back to the beginning of the book when she arrives at Paradise Alms House tied to a stretcher. The book opens with Tyler addressing the reader in what seems to be an explanation for the story and its aim, that of finding Mala's sister, Asha. Mootoo creates a narrative meta-level, and establishes Tyler as a narrative voice with an agenda—to draw the reader into the story and help look for Asha:

> By setting this story down, I, Tyler—that is how I am known, simply as Tyler, or if you wanted to be formal, Nurse Tyler—am placing trust in the power of the printed word to reach many people. […] Might I add that my own intention, as the relater of this story, is not to bring notice to myself or my plight. […] Forgive the lapses, for there are some, and read them with the understanding that to have erased them would have been to do the same to myself. (4)

With these statements, Tyler ascribes meaning to his role as a nurse; he is the one who knows Mala Ramchandin, and he is the one who communicates her story to the world outside the home, "fashioning a single garment out of myriad parts" (105). By pleading for "trust in the printed word" he shows that without his narration, Mala's story and her life—and with it, his own—would disappear. Because Mala is almost dying and does not speak when she is first admitted to the home, readers must already assume that not only a process of recovery, but also a process of developing trust and understanding, must have taken place in the home that enable Tyler to tell her story (Chivers, *From* 75). At the same time, Tyler's account draws attention to the fact that Mala's voice is interpreted by someone taking care of her, pointing to an act of representation that "in itself risks reinforcing frameworks of oppression" (Burns 61). Burns continues,

> Mindful of the complex politics of representation, *Cereus* both draws attention to the risk of reinscribing oppression and the necessity of speaking for or about vulnerable members of society. While the risk remains that Tyler projects something of his own agenda on to Mala's story in the act of retelling it, by highlighting the opacity of Mala's past, her inability to identify with her own memories of her childhood self (Pohpoh), Mootoo nevertheless underscores the necessity of Tyler's mediating perspective. (61)

Without Tyler, Mala would not be able to make herself understood to others, nor would she be able to come to terms with her own traumatized past, and

she understands that she needs him in order to survive. From a feminist perspective, it may seem problematic that Mala loses her voice, and the re-construction and interpretations of her life-course narrative are dependent upon a man. Mala seems to be constructed as a "madwoman in the attic"—a "monster" and an "angel" at the same time (Gilbert and Gubar 17). Yet, the novel also subverts this binary, and highlights both the need for Tyler to tell Mala's story and their relationship as a "model of alliance or co-belonging with a conscience, one that protects vulnerable members" (Burns 61). Tyler both accepts and is himself already in need of this role of translator when he first touches Mala, and notices her transformation: "This one touch turned her from the incarnation of fearful tales into a living human being, an elderly person such as those I had dedicated my life to serving. I needed to know the woman who lay hidden by the white sheet" (Mootoo 11). First, he must get used to her acts of communication, since she does not speak, interpreting her small movements, making sense of her wailings, her perfect imitations of animal sounds, and the seemingly absurd utterances ("Pohpoh") as well as single words that she slowly begins to use.

His dedication to care for her to the best of his abilities, and his devotion to listen and respond to the old woman's needs clearly differentiates him from caregivers described in the stories in Edna Alford's *A Sleep Full of Dreams*, such as Arla, who rarely displays the patience and dedication her patients require. Although Tyler is not sure whether his attempts will ever be fruitful, he tries to be as sensitive as possible: "There was still no recognition that she heard me. I became acutely conscious of my movements and the subtleties of my tone, which may have been all that communicated with her" (Mootoo 16). Every slight improvement is meticulously recorded in Tyler's little notebook, and he learns to understand her gestures and sounds, and begins to grow "[a]ccustomed to reading, as if by Braille, her twitches and gasps" (100), and "to recognize in her mutterings elements of the legendary rumors" (99). "I felt like an explorer charting her life in murky, unmapped waters. I was not sure what I was discovering beyond her voice but I felt it would not be long before I would have the privilege, and honour, of entering her world" (72), Tyler describes the process that, in the end, leads to the success he has wished for, resisting any praise that he had "performed miracles" with Miss Ramchandin, "knowing the change in Miss Ramchandin was only a result of humane treatment" (97). In the nursing home, Mala progresses from a "crazy woman tied to a stretcher" to a woman sitting in a wheelchair, mumbling syllables and emitting animal sounds, and then to a woman walking freely and talking to her former lover, Ambrose, who has become her frequent visitor at the Paradise Alms House, by the end of the book.

This is clearly an example of a progress narrative rather than a decline narrative: Mala reverses the traditional development of a person entering a nursing home. She adopts speech again, and is brought back to life in the nursing home after "everyone in the village seemed to have finally forgotten about Mala" (113). On the book's last page, Tyler reports that Mala "trembled with joy" (249) sitting on a bench during a reunion with Mr. Mohanty, and "uttered her first public words: 'Poh, Pohpoh-poh, Poh, Poh, Poh'" (249).

Tyler's investigations and the "restoring and re-storying of Miss Ramchandin" (Howells 150) also restore his own self-confidence, and strengthen the bond between the two individuals, which is proven when Miss Ramchandin successfully protests against the home administration's plans to take Tyler away from her by devastating her room. When she understands that Tyler may have to give up his exclusive caregiving for her, she starts to build mountains of furniture in her room. To stop Mala's seemingly crazy behavior, Tyler gets to maintain his care of her, which leads, with reference to the blooming plant, to the "affiliation blossoming" (48) between Miss Ramchandin and Tyler. Tyler's act of coming out as a homosexual is facilitated by Mala, who steals a female nurse's uniform for him. She wordlessly encourages him to secretly put it on in her room, only to ignore his new outfit when he shows himself to her: "She knows what I am, was all I could think. She knows my nature. […] The reason Miss Ramchandin paid no attention to me was that, to her mind, the outfit was not something to congratulate or scorn—it simply was. She was not one to manacle nature, and I sensed that she was permitting mine its freedom" (76–77). Tyler, for the first time, feels "natural," "normal:" "I had never felt so extremely ordinary, and I quite loved it" (78), he states. Mala's unconditional acceptance permits him to recognize his agency in terms of questioning social norms and values. From the privacy of Mala's room, he will soon step out into the public space of the Alms House and its garden. He comments early in the novel,

> [o]ver the years I pondered the gender and sex roles that seemed available to people, and the rules that went with them. […] I was preoccupied with trying to understand what was natural and what was perverse, and who said so and why. Chandin Ramchandin played a part in confusing me about these roles, for it was a long time before I could differentiate between his perversion and what others called mine. (47–48)

Tyler's explorations here include his own revelations, but also relate Mala's history. Howells notes, "Tyler's investigation provides an important dynamic in the restoring and re-storying of Miss Ramchandin, reconstructing her history of sexual abuse from the victim's perspective against the falsity of social opinion, while at the same time Tyler's self-confidence is restored through Miss Ramchandin's unconditional acceptance of him" (Howells 150). By reconstructing Mala's life, Tyler not only transmits her story, but also manages to carve out a niche for himself in the narration. The act of storytelling, in fact, enables him to position himself "as the center of his own life story" (Howells 151) despite the fact that the narrative situation changes frequently. Although Tyler remains the main storyteller during large parts of the novel, the narrative voice shifts from that of an omniscient narrator to Miss Ramchandin's indirect inner monologue, especially when her confused state of mind is described immediately before her admission to the nursing home. It is highly unlikely that Tyler can know all the details he relates throughout the book, but I agree with Rebecca Ashworth, who, instead of viewing him as an unreliable narrator, reads him as a "reader of narratives" (Ashworth 37), arguing that "unreliable readings and even misreadings are far less important than Tyler's attempt to read" (37). In order to read people or characters, she contends, Tyler, as well as readers of the novel, must learn to empathize with them. Tyler's ability to do so stems, as he explains it, from his relationship with his own grandmother: "The relationship between Nana, my Cigarette Smoking Nana, and me, her Peculiar Grandson, was special, for we both had secrets from my mother, her daughter. Miss Ramchandin and I, too, had a camaraderie: we had found our own ways and fortified ourselves against the rest of the world" (48). Tyler's grandmother is the one who first tells him, during his childhood, about the Ramchandin family, thus introducing him—and the readers—to Chandin Ramchandin's history, which is crucial to the plot. Howells claims in this context, "[s]torytelling has mutually restorative functions here as it weaves different kinds of sexual transgressiveness into the wider context of Tyler's grandmother's tale told twenty years earlier about one of the casualties of colonial history" (150).

In the nursing home, the characters feel Tyler's empathy; their constant "in-between-ness" can only change into a productive site of identity development through Tyler as a caring person. Yet, Tyler's account "falsifies the novel—not the facts but the structure," as Howells notes, "for this is a very fractured narrative, with its multiple voices, its temporal dislocations, and its hesitations between realism and fantasy, 'with neither managing to subordinate or contain the other. This sustained opposition forestalls the possibility of interpre-

tive closure through any act of naturalizing the text to and establishes system of representation'" (Slemon 12, qtd. in Howells 159). The rejection of a linear plot is a deliberate strategy, she maintains, which "creates the sensation of being caught in the middle of proliferating narrative versions where resolutions are promised but endlessly deferred. The protagonists' condition of always being 'in-between' is mirrored in the reader's own experience of the text" (159). The act of placing in-betweenness in the foreground relates to both postcolonial, as well as gender and age identities, because Tyler not only relates the story of an old woman's social marginalization on the island, but also that of homosexuals (160). Tyler provides a voice for this state of in-betweenness when he describes what he felt when wearing women's clothing for the first time: "Not a man and not ever able to be a woman, suspended nameless in the limbo state between existence and nonexistence" (Mootoo 77). Tyler's liberation from this limbo state is facilitated by Mala (who also enters the home in a limbo state, the "fourth age"), on the one hand because she offers him a way to recognize his normalcy as a homosexual, and on the other because she is the reason why Tyler gets to meet Otoh, her visitor. Due to his own ambiguous sexual identity, Otoh contributes to Tyler's liberation. Their romance at the end of the novel disavows all binaries regarding sexual identity categories: "I was about to cross his line" (247), Tyler reports when deciding to approach Otoh. Wearing pink lipstick, a flower-patterned scarf and "enough scent to make a Puritan cross his legs and swoon" (247), Tyler picks a bouquet of flowers, and presents it to Otoh who "deliberately cupped [Tyler's] hands and held them to his chest" (248). Holding hands, they wait for the cereus to bloom to consummate their love for the first time: "From the cereus hung pink buds on the ends of long stems. […] 'The cereus will bloom in just another few nights. Can you wait?' I whispered to him. 'Yes, yes. Just barely, but I will wait'" (248).

The ending of the story is filled with hope, as Howells argues, "precariously balanced against loss as it is poised on the cusp between present and future, with everybody at the Alms House waiting for something to happen" (160). While Tyler and Otoh are holding hands for the first time, Ambrose, whose wife Elsie left him before he visited Mala in the home, tells Mala, "No time to waste, not a moment to be wasted" (Mootoo 248). Hearing this, she starts to speak "her first public words" (249) which, although it is not quite clear what her stammering means, can be interpreted as her acceptance of their late reunion. Through Tyler's account, readers learn that Mala is still waiting for Asha to return. The last sentence of the book in which Tyler (as in large parts of the novel) addresses Asha, reads, "[s]he expects you any day soon. You are, to her, the promise of a

cereus-scented breeze on a Paradise night" (249). In this scene, Mootoo subverts conventional assumptions of old age as a state of decline. Mala, despite the fact that her age is unknown, is a nursing home resident who progresses.

The nursing home represents a third space that allows the cacophony of voices to be disentangled, leading to what seems to be euphony in the end. It is contrasted with Lantanacamara, which is represented as a place where such healing is not possible. The people inhabiting the town suffer from different sorts of identity crises because they are caught in their "in-between" spaces, trapped between different identity categories in situations that do not allow for creative renegotiation. As Tyler, addressing Asha, observes, "I wonder at how many of us, feeling unsafe and unprotected, either end up running far away from everything we know and love, or staying and simply going mad" (90). Those who find their way to the alms house, which, as a symbolic space, breaks up all binary oppositions over the course of the story, manage to overcome their crises. Others, such as Mala's father who is himself a victim of the island's colonial oppression, die, or like Mala's mother and sister, emigrate. Within the caring and nurturing space of the Paradise Alms House, the characters of Tyler, Otoh, Mala, and Ambrose can develop, and with them the cereus plant, which also depends on the benevolence and care of Tyler, Otoh, Ambrose, and ultimately Harry, the gardener, to survive. As Fox puts it:

> Through performing, witnessing, and accepting themselves and others the effects of the past on each are recognized and cared for in the present while webs of interconnection are formed that will serve in the future. Intergration,[9] both within and between this group of individuals, is the basis for a radical interconnection that makes hybrid community not only possible, but productive: the cereus has rooted and will bloom.

Cereus Blooms at Night is an example of nursing home narratives that counter the assumption that such institutions are merely sites of decline. The interpersonal and intergenerational encounters that are portrayed in the novel show the importance of nurturing relationships and mutual listening and understanding in order for the characters to develop, as well as for readers to be able to reimagine care homes differently. As Chivers puts it, the depiction "encompasses a reimagination of the possibilities of what most people think of as a last

9 Fox here deliberately misspells the word "to parallel Bhabha's 'international' which places the emphasis on relation, on between-ness, on 'inter.'"

resort in frail old age" (*From* 77). Mootoo's novel is one of the few books that place the caregiver in a prominent position. Even though it is not a documentary or an auto/biographical text, a genre which, as Kathleen Woodward argues, might be better suited than fiction to press for changes in social policy because it "draw[s] us closer to what is real" ("Public" 46), the novel calls attention to the "public secret" of the caregivers, lifting them and the old people out of "the one-dimensional frame of victimhood. Isolated and separate, caregivers and elders are vulnerable. Together, caregivers and elders are strong," Woodward maintains ("Public" 46). *Cereus Blooms at Night* portrays Mala, despite her frailty, as a strong and pivotal character, and reverses the conventional assumption of aging as a state of decline. Both Mala and Tyler find a home in the liminal space of the Paradise Alms House.

2.3 Challenging the Nursing Home Specter: Joan Barfoot's *Exit Lines*

Joan Barfoot's novel *Exit Lines* (2008) also focuses on the difficulty of renegotiating one's identity within the context of long-term residential care. The novel introduces readers to Sylvia Lodge, one of four protagonists, who has to negotiate the difficult transition from the privacy of her own home to the semi-public space of the Idyll Inn retirement lodge. In her struggle against an overly well-meaning nurse on the one hand and an overbearing administrator on the other, she resists becoming a "patient" and prefers to be seen as a paying customer. "Here, people are *residents*, at least to their faces," Sylvia contends, not without a hint of bitterness (29). She sees the Idyll Inn as a hybrid space—a hotel, light-flooded and customer-oriented from one perspective, and a "genteel, open-doored prison" from another (16). "'I am Sylvia Lodge,' she announces at what, in a hotel, would be the front desk; in a prison, the guard post. 'I have arrived'" (10). The novel starts with Sylvia Lodge moving to the Idyll Inn to avoid becoming a burden for her daughter Nancy. She has moved to the lodge on her own initiative and—in a passive-aggressive mode—did not even inform her daughter about her decision. Most importantly, however, she is aware of the fact that this is not yet the ultimate destination she will move to: "Depressing, really, and this isn't even a nursing home, the next step downwards en route to incapacity's basement" (20), she says to herself.

The novel tells the story of three women, Sylvia, Greta, and Ruth, and one man, George, who meet—or meet again (George and Greta had actually had an affair when they were younger)—as they become residents of the

Idyll Inn. Soon, the four characters become friends, and undermine the rigid rules imposed by the management by "forming an alliance, downing early-evening glasses of chardonnay to the consternation of the administrator" (Wheelwright n.p.), as one of the reviewers put it, while they are more or less enjoying their "community of fate." The story reaches a climax when Ruth, the "baby of the place" (Barfoot 55) only 74 years of age, announces her intention in a theatrical gesture to leave "the stage of life" by committing suicide exactly on her 75th birthday. To prepare for her exit, she carefully crafts her speech (hence the title) with which she intends to ask her three friends for euthanasia as she cannot carry out her plans without them. "Dry cleaner bags, duct tape, little scissors – primitive tools, but as Ruth says, 'Simple is best'" (263). After being rather shocked at Ruth's request, her three friends decide to help her. Having a common goal, their friendship deepens and there is a certain sense of purpose now that makes them overcome their mental disabilities and physical difficulties. When the set moment for Ruth's assisted suicide has come, they gather in her room, trying to convince her once more to re-evaluate her decision. But Ruth is determined to go through with her plan. Just before they actually set out to wrap plastic around Ruth's head, Greta suddenly collapses with a severe heart problem. Sylvia instantly runs for her medicine, while Ruth gets up from her bed to let Greta lie down in it. Together, they competently manage to save Greta, thus also demonstrating, as Patricia Life also observes (113), their ongoing ability to react to new situations and to alter their consequent opinions and actions. Ruth, recognizing the new significance friendship has given to her life, determines to put aside her earlier suicide wish. Instead of assisted death, the situation in a comical turn of events develops into one of assisted life. The plot is resolved in almost a cliché ending when Ruth realizes that the support of her new friends makes life meaningful (Life 113).

Joan Barfoot first thematized the care home back in 1985 with her novel *Duet for Three*, which portrays Aggie, an old woman who is afraid of being moved into a nursing home by her daughter. In her most recent novel, *Exit Lines*, Barfoot modifies the depiction of the care home to some degree, making it more luxurious and hotel-like. In this respect, *Exit Lines* can be placed in the tradition of stories such as *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* (2011) or *Quartet* (2012), which also portray residents in their "third age" who are able to afford an affluent lifestyle, and decide to leave their long-time dwellings, making provisions for the time when they will eventually need assistance.

The differentiation between a traditional nursing home and a hotel is emphasized at the beginning of the novel when Sylvia, through whom the passage

is focalized, describes her new home. She is fully aware that, despite its hotel-like ambiance, the residence is in fact a caregiving institution and, therefore, a move away from independence:

> Unlike nursing homes, with their particular standards for the amount of actual medical care required in the course of a day, not to mention a considerably less elegant ambience, this is a *retirement lodge*, the Idyll Inn—hard to imagine who dreamed that name up. "Sounds like one of those twee cottage names," Sylvia told her friend Mabel when she was deciding to move here. "Dun Roamin. Bide-a-Wee. You know? The Idyll Inn, my rear end. The Belly-Up is more like it." (20)

Joan Barfoot sets her novel in a luxurious place that boasts a sun deck, large private suites, a shuttle service into town, and birthday cakes for people "with healthy incomes but varying hopes, despairs, abilities and infirmities" (231). Despite the lavish ambience, the Idyll Inn remains a caregiving institution that interpellates individuals into the role of resident-patient.

Like many other care home novels, *Exit Lines* illustrates how the experience of transitioning from home to institutional care changes a person's sense of self. Anthropologists such as Renée Rose Shield have observed that care home residents often experience an incomplete *rite of passage* when moving into a long-term care institution, as they have to leave old roles behind, but do not have any new roles they can assume (Shield 103). In *Exit Lines*, this process can be clearly traced with all four protagonist residents as focalization oscillates between the four characters (and Annabel Walker, the manager, in some instances) who all develop different coping strategies. As Sylvia Lodge functions as the prime focalizer in large parts of the book, I will concentrate on her perspective. The novel opens with her account of the transition:

> She must learn not to think home of the place she has left, even if she lived there for half a century and has been here for maybe ten minutes. So much will need swift redefining; for instance, what's referred to here as the living room, with its sturdy bluey-grey spillproof carpeting and pale yellow blank walls […] it will be her sitting room. That being, she expects, her main activity in it. (13)

What used to be "living"—connoted with activity—is now reduced to mere "sitting," which can in itself be very emotionally and mentally active, but is here, through its opposition to "living," connoted with dying, or at least idleness. The

residence's ambiguous name "Idyll Inn" that can also be heard as "Idle Inn" foregrounds this stereotype of inactivity in old age and emphasizes a decline narrative. Equally, Sylvia's interpretation of the spill proof floor-cover underlines the narrative of physical decline. Although the room does not have a linoleum floor as common in a hospital or nursing home room, the easy-to-clean carpeting has been put there for reasons of institutional efficiency and hygiene.

Sylvia has moved into the retirement lodge on her own initiative, a sign of agency in late life, and tries to justify this move by imagining a positive future for herself, forcing herself to see the home in an optimistic light: "Her suite is the seventh door on the left down this wide hallway. Her sanctuary; her vacant sanctuary at the moment, pending the arrival of her possessions. The remains of her life. Don't think of them that way" (12). Always having been very disciplined, Sylvia forbids herself to let herself go and tries to shut out even the smallest doubt that moving into a home eventually means that she will have to deal with thoughts about the finiteness of her being. Clinging to her independence, she is determined to enjoy life in her new home, imagining herself on her private sundeck that she will furnish with "her own private lawn furniture […]. She sees herself out there in loose trousers and shirt, a book and binoculars, the world of the sitting room left well behind" (13). Sylvia imagines a space of her own, outside of the home and at the same time part of it—a transitory space that allows her to benefit from both places, uniting aspects of institutional care-giving and independence. She feels the need to reinforce her freedom and stresses the fact that she will be able to move around freely between institutional and private space as she intends to replace the "clinically white vertical blinds" with "a second door to the outdoors and her own private deck" (13). Sylvia will decide herself to what extent she is symbolically and literally inside or outside the institution, and the door, more substantial than mere blinds, will reinforce this borderline. Although she feels that her freedom to move about is jeopardized, she still tries to convince herself that keeping up a good spirit is what she needs to do. Determined to think positively, she tries to reformulate her concerns and fears into affirmative ideas, giving them "[t]he most positive possible spin" (16).

In her fight to remain independent despite institutionalization she wins an argument with the institution's manager Annabel Walker who tried to talk her into moving to the second floor "where the most lucid and able are supposed to gather in merry segregation" (14). As in *Half Life*, the residents' or patients' abilities determine which floor they live on. In the Idyll Inn, the upper floors are allocated to those who only need little help while the main floor rooms are

kept for residents who, as Annabel expresses it, "can't move so independently" (14). Sylvia sees them as "other" and defines herself as not being part of them, which she underlines by insisting on moving into a suite on this particular floor: "Having a deck suits me best. Have you considered that your plan is entirely backwards? Of course that's up to you. And your other residents. But as for me, this is my choice" (14), Sylvia tells Annabel Walker. She will not simply be allocated a space, reduced to her body that is placed in the institution. She has a self-understanding as a paying customer and thus insists on her freedom to choose. The aspects of freedom and choice are linked to keeping personal control, which the narrative highlights when Sylvia cannot help noticing the small differences that seem to foreshadow her future as a more dependent person: "The toilet and shower feature bars to hold on to and lift off from as need be. It's the little things, isn't it? While other little things can turn at the flip of an ankle into quite large things" (12). As this passage shows, Sylvia's move to the Idyll Inn redefines her first and foremost in terms of physical abilities. It is primarily her aging body that will be taken care of, and she learns that the decision on which floor she may reside are usually left to nurses and medical practitioners who cite physical aspects as a basis for such decisions. Sylvia's adjustment process in the facility and the consequent redefinition of her identity are difficult, and although she is aware of the process and manages to subvert many of the institution's strategies, the transition is experienced as threatening to her identity as an independent and self-determined person.

The Idyll Inn as a place also structures Silvia's relationships and exerts its power on new inhabitants, as the opening paragraph of the novel reveals:

> At three o'clock in the morning, that defenceless hour when anything feels possible and nothing human or inhuman out of the question, the Idyll Inn's only sounds are the low hum and thrum a complicated building makes to keep itself going. Like any living body, even a sleeping or unconscious one, a building has to sustain its versions of blood and breath, so there's a perpetual buzz to it, white noise to the night. With only those faint sounds of companionship, three o'clock in the morning is an uneasy hour for the wakeful. (1)

The simile ("like any living body") and personification emphasizes the important role the building plays in the narrative. With its human characteristics it literally embodies institutional power and links spatiality to the social as it determines its residents' relations.

Another perspective of the Idyll Inn that relates the building to the body is also presented in the next chapter: "This Idyll Inn, if viewed from the unlikely vantage point of the air, more or less resembles a sperm: a rounded head with a long two-storey tail" (4) with all the "friendly, communal, well-intentioned features located in the part of the building which would, from the air, form the plump head of the sperm" (5). Whether the shape of the building should underline the fact that it houses active life or even represents a new start in life, or whether the metaphor alludes to an eternal circle of life and death, it seems absurd and certainly bears some irony which is reinforced by the description of what the sperm's head contains: it houses the staff office with "harried people, women, on a steep learning curve" (6) and the "ill-named library, a dark paneled room with no books" (6)—descriptions that highlight the fact that the emotional aspects of care-giving are not very well taken care of in the Idyll Inn. There is no point in complaining to anybody because "[c]omplaints risk retribution," (76) as Greta observes with an air of disillusionment and fear at some point—a phrase characteristic of the relationships between residents and staff at the Idyll Inn. Relationships among residents themselves are to be formed in the unwelcoming common areas such as the dining room with "a certain draftiness around some of the windows" (7), the crafts room and the coffee lounge where all sorts of gatherings can remain within the control of the staff. Sara Jamieson observes in this context,

> The novel's emphasis on the intentions and expectations underlying institutional design draws attention to how the built environment functions, particularly in its more public areas, as the expression of specific ideas about how the elderly should best manage the leisure time that the facility has made available to them. The pastoral focus on leisure in *Exit Lines* frames the novel's engagement with gerontological debates concerning the optimal level in old age of activity and engagement with the world. (373)

With reference to Katz (*Cultural* 121) Jamieson points out that "'the association of activity with well-being in old age' is one of the dominant ideologies of contemporary gerontology" (373), observing that the importance of activity and interaction was more compatible with the ideal of positive aging than what came to be known in the 1960s as "disengagement theory" (373), an approach that regards the desire to withdraw from any activities and the attenuation of former relationships as natural aspects of aging (374). *Exit Lines*, she argues, "participates in a rehabilitation of concepts associated with disengagement,

suggesting that the choice to cease participation in certain activities, and to focus on certain relationships while letting others lapse, has at least as much to recommend it as maintaining high levels of activity and social contact in old age" (374). Sylvia as well as the other characters literally embody disengagement theory. She is suspicious of activities that are forged by planned encounters: "Relationships are bound to develop, but obviously it will be necessary to hold out against forced jollity. Presumptuousness. The sort of thing that leads to sing-alongs, and clumsy exercises from a seated position to the tunes of old ballads" (11). These disciplinary acts, as Sylvia understands them, reflect Michel Foucault's notion of the institutional gaze (*Discipline* 174), but Sylvia and her friends radically undermine all kinds of disciplining ("Honest to God, we're just old, we're not morons" (EL 51)) and refuse to participate in "all the promised fun" (31). For this reason, Annabel Walker, the embodiment of institutional discipline, is suspicious of the group meetings in Sylvia's room—and she is right, as they are actually held to prepare for Ruth's assisted suicide.

It is precisely here that *Exit Lines* subverts the Foucauldian panoptical gaze as well as discourses of normalization. While the consciousness of being surveyed has also been induced in the residents of the Idyll Inn, they still reject and even reverse, as Patricia Life has pointed out, institutional discipline and any attempted administrative gaze. "They boldly move about the residence in the middle of the night in the dark, and they know more about the administrator's private secrets than the administrator herself does," Life argues (118), alluding to the fact that Annabel Walker's father used to be Sylvia Lodge's secret lover, and Sylvia is well informed about Annabel's turbulent family history. When they finally set out together to euthanize Ruth, the rejection of the institutional gaze is at its peak. They manage to carve out a niche of independence and self-determinacy, and although the mutual euthanasia pact of the residents presents a questionable twist in the plotline, the text here suggests that the residents seize the ultimate agency, agency over their very existence (Life 124), challenging the institution's surveillance practices as well as the assumption that they have become "institutional bodies" (Wiersma and Dupuis).

Exit Lines can be read as a powerful and self-confident assertion of strength, endurance, and energy in old age. The characters "defy the outmoded social expectations of passive senescence by taking charge of their lives. […] By leading 'young' lives in middle and old age, these fictional heroines [and heroes] undermine the conventional binary opposition between young and old," as Barbara Frey Waxman has stated with reference to what she calls *Reifungsromane* in the context of feminist literary gerontology (*Hearth* 183). Sylvia and her friends in

Exit Lines reject the negative cultural stereotypes of what it means to be old in a caregiving facility. Joan Barfoot uses the space of the care home as a setting metaphorically to critique traditional assumptions that are discursively anchored in such spaces. The value of such a text is to be found, therefore, not only in its literary quality, but also, and more importantly, in the ways in which it contributes to deconstructing metaphors and discursive formations that represent the care home as a place where the focus is directed first and foremost on the aging *body*. Instead, such texts widen the focus to the whole person, and consequently invite diverse readings that provoke questions of identity and the life course as well as about inter- and intragenerational relationships, questions that naturally include bodily aspects, but are not limited to them.

Like feminist scholars who address the gendered construction of space and the spatial construction of gender (McDowell and Sharp; Massey), I argue that the intersection of age and space, for which the care home novel can be used as a paradigm, needs to be addressed by literary gerontologists in order to facilitate a change in attitudes toward old age. Both the creation and the analyses of such sites in care home narratives can contribute toward that end. As literary gerontologist Sally Chivers states in a similar context, "These depictions of institutional care, more than commenting on the possibilities of such facilities to provide improved care, demonstrate the complicated process of forming attitudes toward the frail old and help to counter the impetus to think of age as either positive or negative. They provide examples of how narrative fiction can offer a perspective on the individuality of elderly residents that differs from clinical interaction" (*From* xlvi).

2.4 Celebrating Life: *Rhonda's Party*

The 8-minute Canadian short film *Rhonda's Party* was written by Christine Comeau, directed by Ashley McKenzie, and produced by Nelson MacDonald as part of the Atlantic Filmmakers Cooperative's FILM 5 program for emerging filmmakers. It premiered at the Montreal World Film Festival in September 2010. It has won several prizes[10] and was included in Air Canada's flight

10 The film received awards at the Montreal World Film Festival, the Atlantic Film Festival, the Worldwide Short Film Festival, St. John's International Women's Film Festival, the En Route Film Festival (*Best Cinematography*), the Young Cuts Film Festival (*Best Cana-*

entertainment program as a winner of the airline's film festival "EnRoute,"[11] reaching a relatively wide audience for such a film.

Rhonda's Party recounts a tragic and, at the same time, touching incident in Rhonda's life as a nursing home patient. She has spent months planning a party to celebrate her friend Margaret's 100th birthday. Rhonda is still busy with the final preparations when she learns that Margaret, the guest of honor, has passed away. Before Rhonda, played by Marguerite McNeil, can cancel the party, the samba band arrives and starts to play. Tightly clutching a red feather from Margaret's scarf in her fist, she finally chooses to join the "birthday" party, making it a farewell celebration in honor of her best friend.

In *Rhonda's Party*, the intersection of space and identity is emphasized on several levels. The sterile corridors in which some of the action takes place are highlighted in the opening and closing scenes; a doctor with a stethoscope and a nurse in her white coat reinforce the hospital-like atmosphere, and close-up shots of a room full of mobility and health care devices such as canes, crutches, walking frames, wheelchairs, and bedpans underline the aspects of limited mobility and disability. The film's opening sequence is unsettling. With a silent shot of a long and dimly lit aisle and its closed doors, a very dark and clinical atmosphere is created. No paintings or any other decorative objects, nor any signs of life, are displayed. The sterile setting suggests that the comfort of the residents is less important than the efficiency of the institution, as is signaled by the laundry bins on wheels that stand in front of some doors. The dismal, gray scene, completely lacking sound or color, and the cold neon ceiling lights that reinforce its sad ambience, create an uncanny feeling, and evoke common associations such as sickness, dependence, dementia, and death. After a few long seconds, the title of the film appears in large, superimposed, white letters: *Rhonda's Party*. The almost ironic juxtaposition of the *tristesse* presented during the first seconds with the "party" in the title invokes the curiosity of the viewer. How will "Rhonda"—yet unknown to the audience—celebrate, or be celebrated, in such a sad place? What sort of party is going to take place here?

The next scene shows a low-angle shot of a dilapidated radiator and window, wind softly stirring the thick, white, hospital-like curtain. This is the only noise apart from that of what we learn a little later is of scissors cutting paper, which continues while a close-up of a calendar month—although the specific

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dian Short), and the CBC Short Film Faceoff 2011 (*Telefilm People's Choice*) (see http://www.grassfirefilms.ca/#645/custom_plain)

11 http://enroute.aircanada.com/en/film-festival

month is not recognizable—is shown, with all the days up to the eighth of the month crossed out. Obviously, the day on which the scene takes place is the marked 8th. It is circled with what looks like a black-and white representation of a red felt pen. Still, and although the film was not shot in black and white, no colors except for shades of gray or sepia have been introduced.

The first scene featuring color is an extreme close-up of a woman's wrinkled face, and in particular, her eyes concentrating on the green, red, and blue paper stars she is cutting out with yellow scissors. Red and blue balloons sway silently above her desk while the woman completes what seems to be a handmade birthday card, "Happy 100th Birthday, Margaret" is written on the front. The camera focuses on the woman's hands, marked with age spots and eczema, as she clumsily writes "For Margaret" onto the card. The yellow and blue birthday card has an eye-catching red ribbon, foreshadowing that from now on every item in the film that is related to the birthday is yellow, red, blue, or green, and stands out from the sandy gray background of the entire nursing home and its equally grayish patients.

In the next scene, the camera follows a young nurse as she walks towards the reception desk, which is centrally located in the home, overlooking both the aisle and the adjacent sitting room. The first word spoken in the short film is "sorry"—the nurse apologizes to a doctor and receptionist for having kept them waiting. They need her to sign an official "Registration of Death" form. The receptionist, a middle-aged woman dressed in beige like everyone else, is seated in a small space behind her desk, and does not seem particularly friendly or patient with the young nurse. That the nurse is dealing with her first death and is still very new in her profession can be concluded from the fact that the receptionist has to help the her find the signature line on the form. The stark white of her coat also stands out against the beige surroundings, indicating that she has not yet been "institutionalized." While she signs the form, the camera zooms in on the letters just long enough to reveal—not without irony—that the nursing home is called "Trodden Hills" and is in Nova Scotia, and that the name of the dead person (in an ironic nod to the film's director of the same name) is "Mackenzie, Margaret Ashley." The camera moves to the adjacent sitting room, which is decorated with several yellow, blue, and red balloons and a large banner saying "Happy 100th Birthday Margaret." Two women, one with a walking frame, the other also supporting herself on it, approach the young nurse whom they call Amy, suggesting that someone should take down the birthday sign. "And what about Rhonda?" they ask. At this point, no one has yet told her what has happened.

Rhonda, the woman who has been cutting paper stars and inflating balloons in her room for hours, is now visited by Amy, who tries to deliver the sad news very gently, "Rhonda, I know how special you wanted to make the party," Amy begins. "Oh, well," Rhonda answers, still cutting stars. "I ordered the best cake from Ricardo's. A full slab cake. I didn't care how much it cost. You see, here, they would use a cake mix. A cake mix! For Margaret!" Rhonda does not conceal her dissatisfaction with the place, referring to the "cake mix" as a *pars pro toto* for the indifferent and careless treatment she disdains.

After several tries, Amy eventually manages to tell Rhonda that her friend Margaret has passed away. Rhonda, in shock and denial, answers, "No, no, you don't understand, sweetie. We've been planning this party for six months now. Where is she? I want to talk to her." This scene explains the film's title. "Her" party, the capstone of the project that had produced meaning in the gray everyday life of the nursing home for six months, is now jeopardized by Margaret's death. For Rhonda, the celebration has been a project—an "escape world" (Goffman, *Asylums* 309) in which she could lose herself, "temporarily blotting out all sense of the environment which, and in which, [s]he must abide" (309). Rhonda pushes Amy out of her way, and walks briskly into Margaret's room.

Margaret's few personal belongings have already been packed up, only a few hours after her death. The room with its hospital bed, stripped of all individuality, will soon be ready for the next patient. Rhonda is shocked at the emptiness, which reinforces the heterotopic institutional aspects of the setting. "Where are all her pictures? Who gave you permission to do this?" she asks and takes a red feather from something that looks like a feather boa—the only colored item in the scene—from the open suitcase, symbolically holding on to her friend. "She must be very upset," Rhonda states, still in denial. While she tries to come to terms with Margaret's death, the other patients are still "patiently" and passively waiting in the sitting room, still wearing their party hats although they are by now all aware of what has happened. It seems as though they remain inert, seated like spectators, curious to see how the situation will develop; nobody has told them to go back to their rooms. The group is depicted as a beige conglomerate of old people that all look alike, which again reinforces the aspect of homogeneity, another facet that invokes the "nursing home specter."

In this scene, the filmmakers represent the nursing home "as a place where individuality disappears alongside the more obvious loss of independence," as Chivers claims in a different context (*From* 58). "That homogeneity typifies the way in which old people relegated (as it is so frequently expressed) to institu-

tions are considered primarily if not solely as old (and therefore dependent)," she continues (58). It is often stated that it is "nice for old people to be among themselves," a statement that presupposes the assumption that being old is a more significant identity marker than any other factor. But after having lived long lives, the people's differences might actually be more striking than their commonalities arising from various forms of dependence or frailty. As Paul Higgs and Chris Gilleard note:

> At first sight, the increase in the numbers of older people might suggest greater opportunities for intragenerational solidarity […]. Precisely the opposite seems to have happened. Age is more a site of contradiction than of community. […] It is increasingly meaningless to consider age as conferring some common social identity or to treat older people as a distinct social group acting out of shared concerns and common interests. (*Cultures* 8)

Similarly, Sally Chivers has noted, the institutions' "biggest flaw" is "a tendency to homogenize the very old" (*From* 60). This homogenization is in direct opposition to the cultural narrative of individualism that, even if more dominant in the U.S. than in Canada, is a central theme in novels that deal with aging and identity. Roberta Maierhofer maintains that "the quest of the individual for a self-determined life in opposition to the norms of society has often been defined as the central cultural narrative, in which the desire of the individual to seek and define an identity within or without the community is the driving plot" ("Crossing" 250–251). *Rhonda's Party* is an example of such a quest. What makes this quest special is that it is set in a nursing home, the heterotopic setting of which changes the preconditions. Moving into institutional care redefines notions of individualism and self-determination and impacts the development of a life-course narrative. The processes that lead to this "mortification," Goffman notes, are "fairly standard in total institutions" (14) and include everyday chores such as bodily care performed by staff, which can be particularly threatening, "rendering older people as bodies that need to be cleaned, dressed, maintained, and treated" (Ryvicker 13). In Foucauldian terms, these bodies are subject to the clinical or social "gaze" (*Discipline* 174), and positioned as "other" in relation to the staff (Ryvicker 13).

In *Rhonda's Party*, the mortification of the home's residents is expressed through more or less subtle means, first and foremost on the level of aesthetics. In one example (fig. 2), a close shot focusses on a woman whose shirt seems to

reiterate the chair's cover pattern, suggesting that she blends in perfectly, not only with the group, but also with the furniture.

Fig. 2: Stills from the Short Film Rhonda's Party

The only patient who seems to resist this homogenization to at least some extent is Rhonda. Although she, too, wears a beige vest, the rest of her clothes are black, and by organizing the party, she has injected the colors red, blue, green, and yellow into the residence—if only for one day. The party she has been planning is an overt sign of resistance against the institutional gaze. The staff, with the exception of the understanding nurse Amy, Rhonda's only supporter, is not in favor of activities that deviate from the routine of the institution. The bad-tempered, beige receptionist, for instance, likes to keep her distance from the inmates, signaling this by putting a stop sign on the cabinet drawer at the boundary of her enclosed space from which she can, almost as in a panopticon, survey the aisles and the sitting room.

The receptionist embodies the nursing home's authority, and she is irritated when the cake is delivered to her desk, intrudes into her space, closes in on her, and violates the boundary she has put in place against the patients. When Amy, rudely ordered to take it off, tries to move it somewhere else, she

holds it such that the candles read 001 instead of 100. On a metaphorical level, this reverted cake could be interpreted as celebrating a new beginning—on the one hand, of Margaret's "new life," and on the other hand, of life on a more abstract and general level: life goes on—and even though Margaret is no longer with her, Rhonda will not be defeated. By taking agency, she has successfully resisted mortification, and seems to know that Margaret would not want her to cancel the celebration—hence the title of the film, *Rhonda's Party*.

Exactly at this moment, the samba band enters, making a huge amount of noise with their whistles and drums. The celebration has started. While Amy is at first shocked, a close-up shows how her facial expression suddenly changes, and she starts to smile, as if she has understood the importance of celebrating Margaret in her absence. Rhonda, still sitting on a bed, also hears the samba drums from a distance. The camera zooms in, showing an extreme close-up of her tightly closed fists. Encouraged by the rhythm, Rhonda slowly opens them, releasing the red feathers, indicating that she is symbolically letting go of her friend. She fetches a red balloon from her room, and determinedly walks down the long, nearly black-and-white corridor, the ceiling lamps of which highlight the balloon as if it were a blinking red light. In the final scene, a long shot, Rhonda turns the corner, pulling the balloon behind her, presumably to enter the sitting room where the band is playing, and joins the party. Now, as opposed to the opening shot, the doors are all open, movement and color is visible, and the former silence has given way to raucous samba sounds that fill the aisle and the entire home with life.

With the use of the concrete space of the nursing home as a setting, Comeau, McKenzie, and MacDonald have contributed to the newly emerging genre of the nursing home narratives. The film encourages viewers to evaluate their own attitudes towards aging and old age in institutional care. Rather than emphasizing Rhonda's or Amy's perspectives through the use of camera techniques such as a simulation of the characters' sight-lines, the camera imitates the position of a participant-observer, inviting the viewer to enter the home. Unlike the inmates, the viewers are not committed to stay. *Rhonda's Party* taps into the fear of an aging population of finally ending up in institutional care, and initially offers no respite from this dread. The movie's potential to challenge the nursing home specter lies in another quality: it broaches the topic of individuality and collectivity, underlining an individual woman's efforts to subvert institutional power structures through an act of defiance. With her initiative to organize a colorfully decorated birthday party, complete with a fancy banner, party hats, a cake, and a samba band in the

"Trodden Hills" nursing home, Rhonda counteracts the mortification of her identity in the nursing home, resisting the clinical gaze and emphasizing her individuality in contrast to the homogenized group of people that characterize the "Institution." Through Margaret's death, Rhonda's plan develops an even more strongly subversive aspect. She challenges the nursing home specter, and insists on celebrating life in the face of death, despite the intimidating institutional surroundings that interpellate her as a patient with only little influence on everyday matters. She defies objectification and homogenization and, with the help of Amy as her ally, manages to appropriate the nursing home's space for her celebration. Rhonda takes agency, carving out some individual niches for herself, and reading the film within the context of second wave feminism that points to the interrelatedness of the personal and the political, she acts as a positive example for all women.

The position of the young caregiver is also important in this context. In Foucauldian terms, she subverts the normalizing discourse that renders the bodies docile (*Discipline* 135), and encourages the patient's resistance. Through her understanding and empathy, Amy supports Rhonda's plans, and acknowledges her individuality, takes her seriously, and sees her not only as a patient, but as a person. Amy has gone out of her way to help Rhonda organize the party very much against the will of the other staff members, as the critical remarks of the receptionist reveal. Although Rhonda might have been strong and independent enough to pursue her plans without Amy's help, the nurse's support is crucial, and leads to the development of a closer relationship between the two women. Furthermore, it reinforces the change Rhonda is able to bring about in the home because Amy, a staff member, takes sides with Rhonda, a patient, crossing the boundaries of her professionally inhabited space—a separation characteristic of total institutions (Goffman, *Asylums* 19). By presenting Amy's perspective, the film emphasizes the need for individualized care from the caregiver's point of view.

The relationship that develops between the two characters, Amy and Rhonda, is important and comforting for both, and transforms not only Rhonda's, but also Amy's identity. While Rhonda might see Amy primarily in her role as a nurse, Amy manages to understand the importance of Rhonda's resistance, and sees herself in relation to the old woman. This relational understanding of identity is also referred to by Roberta Maierhofer, who argues that in a rapidly aging society, a shift in cultural values will be necessary to foster understanding of the interdependence of generations. She emphasizes "the necessity of mutual and supportive relationships as a key to the development

of a personal identity" ("Crossing" 251), and points to the need to redefine individuals "not only as independent and self-supporting, but also as necessarily relying on the help and assistance of others" (249). Applied to questions of eldercare, such an approach that takes a life-course perspective and subverts the binary opposition of young and old by a concept of "self-in-relation" (251) has the potential to challenge the nursing home specter. The film *Rhonda's Party* offers a strong and life-affirming expression of individuality, despite the bleakness of institutional care.