Conclusion

We are old, we are young, we are in this together
Vagabonds and children, prisoners forever
With pulses a-raging and eyes full of wonder
Kicking out behind us again

— New Model Army, "*Vagabonds*"

This book has examined how literary and cinematic portrayals of care homes in contemporary anglophone Canadian and U.S. contexts construct, contest, and complicate dominant cultural narratives about aging. My primary aim has been to explore how these fictionalized spaces—designed to house the "oldest old"—reflect and shape broader societal understandings of later life, and how they both produce and are produced by narratives of age, identity, and spatial belonging. The texts and films analyzed here vary significantly in genre, plot, style, and tone, yet they share a common approach in constructing aging identities: They "put age in its place." That phrase, which serves as the title of this book, captures both the literal inscription of older adults into institutional settings and the symbolic work that care homes perform as cultural metaphors. At the same time, some of the works under discussion refuse to reduce old age to a singular or homogenous phase of life, challenging the assumption—famously articulated by Ralph Waldo Emerson and critically echoed by Glenda Laws—that old age "requires fit surroundings" (Emerson 285; Laws, "Spatiality" 90). Instead, they ask what "fit surroundings" might mean, and for whom.

Care Homes as Cultural Constructs

Throughout the preceding chapters, I have discussed how care homes operate as complex spatial and discursive constructs—what Michel Foucault would call heterotopias—that simultaneously reveal and conceal structures of age-based

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marginalization. These institutional settings are never just neutral backdrops for narratives of aging and old age; instead, they actively participate in the storytelling process. Whether depicted as hotels, hospitals, prisons, sanctuaries, liminal spaces, or contested zones of agency, care homes are narrative devices that echo, reinforce, and at times destabilize cultural scripts about what it means to grow old. Analyzing the setting of the care home through the lens of spatial theory illuminates how physical environments are entangled with the social and symbolic meanings of old age, and how those meanings are continually re-negotiated in cultural representation.

The institutionalization of North American eldercare, with its roots in the poorhouse system, has seen major transformations across the twentieth and twenty-first century; however, the fear of transitioning to a care home remains ingrained in the public imagination. Today, anxieties around long-term care are about bodily decline but also concern the spatial and symbolic displacement of older adults from familiar social worlds. The Spatial Turn in cultural gerontology has drawn attention to the ways in which space and place shape identities in later life. Henri Lefebvre's spatial triad—conceived, perceived, and lived space—helps illuminate how care homes are socially constructed environments that both reflect and reinforce cultural narratives of aging. Michel Foucault's concept of heterotopia underscores their function as spaces of exclusion and regulation. Nursing homes, as Jaber Gubrium and James Holstein argue, operate as "discursive anchors" that frame old age in terms of bodily decline, reinforcing the distinction between the imaginary of the "third age" of activity and autonomy, and the "fourth age" of frailty and dependency (519). These theoretical frameworks elicit how spatial configurations within care homes both shape and constrain the lived experiences, determining the degrees of autonomy, agency, and belonging available to older adults.

From "Horrible Homes" to Ambivalent Resistance

Despite the predominance of negative portrayals, some recent texts and films complicate the dominant narrative of the "horrible home." The emergence of the care home novel as a distinct genre in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries has introduced diverse representations of aging, often blending elements of detective fiction, comedy, horror, and even escape narrative. Works such as May Sarton's *As We Are Now* or Janet Hepburn's *Flee, Fly, Flown* depict aging protagonists who resist institutional confinement and subvert ageist stereotypes. Films like *Cloudburst* offer alternative visions of late-life care, focusing on communal living and self-determination, even if only fleet-

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ingly. Authors such as Margaret Atwood in "Torching the Dusties" use satire to expose the ageism and social segregation underpinning the rhetoric of demographic crisis, while Shani Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at Night* opens imaginative space for care homes as sites of nurturing, tenderness, and queer kinship.

These evolving representations are not free of ambivalence. Many texts introduce moments of resistance or acts of defiance but struggle to sustain them through to radical potential. Narrative closure often forecloses transformation, re-asserting order and constraint. In such cases, later life, especially in institutional care, is depicted as linear and finite, leaving little room for reinvention. Still, some texts do offer glimpses of aging as a dynamic process: unfinished, relational, and politically resonant. Together, these works expand the imaginative horizon of what institutional care can mean, even as they remain tethered to dominant cultural anxieties about decline.

Exclusions, Neoliberal Frames, and Structural Conditions

A critical question remains: who gains visibility in these stories, and who is left out? Fictional and cinematic depictions of care homes tend to focus on relatively privileged, independent, and cognitively healthy residents. The frailest members of society—those with advanced dementia or severe disability—are often marginalized or erased. Likewise, issues of race, gender, and class are frequently underdeveloped, despite the reality that caregiving is performed largely by low-wage migrant workers, many of them women from the Global South. These silences are significant and reflect broader cultural patterns of neglect and invisibility.

Moreover, neoliberal logics shape how value in old age is narratively assigned. Protagonists remain meaningful primarily insofar as they are active, resourceful, or narratively useful, while dependency and vulnerability are displaced to the margins. This reinforces a conditional model of worth, one that privileges productivity and autonomy over interdependence and care. Many texts even mobilize assisted dying, like in *Exit Lines*, or suicide, like in *As We Are Now*, as narrative "solutions" to dependency. Caro Spencer, for instance, enacts her ultimate protest through self-chosen death, writing her story as legacy. While powerful as an act of resistance—and open to feminist readings that recuperate its agency—such stories might risk naturalizing death as the only dignified escape from prolonged dependence.[1] *Half Life* offers an example

1 Chie Hayakawa's film *Plan 75* (2022) is a prime example of such a kind of geronticide: a state-managed, voluntary program promotes euthanasia for anyone older than 75

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of this logic when Agnes dismisses Mrs. O'Neill's passing with the sardonic remark, "At least she doesn't have to do crafts anymore" (Mighton 44)—a line that reduces death to a welcome release from the trivial indignities of institutional life. In such cultural scripts, the care home is imagined more as a terminal site framing mortality as the inevitable resolution to dependency than as a space for rethinking care. In this way, systemic shortcomings are obscured: rather than envisioning improved models of care, such stories conclude through the erasure of the dependent subject altogether. Such endings align closely with neoliberal discourses of cost containment, where the "fourth age" subject is cast not as someone to be supported but as a burden to be relieved—or even eliminated as abject.

However, as I also tried to show, some of the protagonists discussed in this book embody resilience in their own ways, but their acts of defiance do more than assert individual agency: they illuminate the structural conditions that shape late-life experience. From Stella and Dot in *Cloudburst* to Mala Ramchandin in *Cereus Blooms at Night*, from Sylvia Lodge in *Exit Lines* to Cora Sledge in *Breaking Out of Bedlam*, these characters resist being "put in their place." In reclaiming space through imagination, escape, or subversion and opposition, they expose how cultural narratives of aging are entwined with gendered ageism, systemic inequalities, and neoliberal pressures. These ambivalent depictions of care homes point to a broader cultural unease with dependency and vulnerability in later life. Reflecting on human relationships as relationships of care opens up the possibility of overcoming "the aversion to 'dependency' in modern industrialized societies that still give prime value to individual agency" (Puig de la Bellacasa 4). Engagement with literary texts that describe the end of life makes it clear that the dominant, idealized paradigm of successful and active aging—conceived as a counter-model to the bleak social imaginaries of the so-called fourth age—perpetuates neoliberal narratives of progress. Dystopian fiction highlights this by placing questions of responsibility and connectedness at the center. At the same time, old age is often reduced to narratives of catastrophe and burden, while an idealized image of independent, high-performing individuals is simultaneously constructed.

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years, regardless of health or fitness. It "critiques the dehumanizing narratives that frame aging as an economic and social burden [...] By exposing the state's role in assigning value to human lives based on productive futurity assumed solely based on age, the film challenges the moral and emotional toll of policies that treat older people as waste" (Kriebernegg and Danely 2025).

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Old Age as a Spatial and Temporal Construct

All these readings suggest that old age is both a temporal and a spatial construct. Care homes, as sites of spatial-temporal liminality between life and death, highlight the paradox of being simultaneously dependent and independent, finite and unfinished, confined and yet capable of creativity. They reveal how the young/old binary is culturally constructed and how power dynamics in aging are shaped and reinforced by spatial structures. While it is important to challenge the decline narrative by portraying old age as a time of agency and self-determination, fictional care home narratives go even further. According to Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope, they enable us to see how the past, present, and future all merge into a single narrative space. The protagonists in a number of the texts under discussion are physically confined in institutional settings that restrict their autonomy, and they experience time non-linearly—alternating between memories of their youth and their current realities. They are heterotopias in Foucault's sense: they exist simultaneously inside and outside society as sites of exclusion and contestation. The reason existential questions are staged there with such intensity is because they represent the lack of a future. Since the care facility is culturally coded as a final station, unlike a hotel or cruise ship, it is ideal for examining the circumstances of finitude, dependency, and meaning in later life.

Additionally, these texts show how ageist dichotomies—young versus old, agency versus decline, and autonomy versus dependence—are reproduced by spatial structures. Yet they also show how such binaries can be unsettled, even if only temporarily. Road narratives like *Flee, Fly, Flown* or *Amigoland* reimagine mobility as an intergenerational and late-life possibility, challenging assumptions that movement and freedom belong solely to the young. Other narratives depict smaller but still significant forms of resistance within institutional walls, such as reclaiming memory, establishing new forms of community, or asserting dignity. In all these cases, space and time are relational and connected to the cultural imagination of aging.

Responsibility and Future Directions

Representations of aging in literature and film are never merely descriptive; they actively shape cultural expectations, policies, and social realities. The stories we tell about care homes matter because they influence how societies imagine the boundaries of age, dependency, and care itself. Taking responsibility as readers and scholars means acknowledging our own ambivalences toward aging, resisting interpretations that naturalize decline, and question-

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ing the persistent assumption that "aging in place" is always preferable to institutional care. It also requires interrogating silences around race, class, frailty, and care labor, and insisting that cultural analyses of aging account for those most often left invisible in dominant narratives. Only by interpreting the care home in such narratives as a space for self-determination and agency can we understand experiences of old age as meaningful at all times in all places.

The New Model Army lyric that frames this conclusion underlines the importance of intergenerational solidarity: "we are young, we are old, we are in this together." Breaking down binaries between youth and old age is not only a scholarly endeavor but also a cultural and political imperative. Care home narratives, with their ambivalences and contradictions, provide a vital space for imagining how aging might be lived otherwise. They remind us that agency in later life need not be tied exclusively to autonomy or productivity, but can also emerge through interdependence, vulnerability, and collective forms of living. Having agency in old age should not be undermined by established genre conventions or conventional interpretations that are guided by preconceived and stereotypical notions of age and aging as decline. Interpretations of care home novels as disempowering often reflect ageist readings that portray frail, old people as victims. What remains is the challenge of understanding representations of the "fourth age," and the spaces associated with it, not as "black holes" only relevant to those experiencing it, but for us all, and to redefine them as meaningful to understand our existence throughout the life course. As the spatiality of age relations is socially and culturally constructed, the way we narrate and interpret old age is always determined by our own position as readers.

Putting age in its place, then, means interpreting texts with the narrative power they hold while making conscious our own ambivalences about aging. It also means recognizing age's spatial, temporal, and cultural power to reshape how we imagine care, community, and our collective futures of aging.

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