4 Fugitives and Escapees

Age, Gender, and the Spatiality of Resistance

> Throughout history, Americans have tended to be infatuated with movement and fearful of settlement. Our mythology celebrates pilgrims, explorers, cowboys, prospectors, and pioneers, while it warns us against being trapped on a farm, in a hollow, in a puritanical village, or in a stifling city. We associate moving with adventure and freedom, while we associate staying put with confinement and backwardness.
>
> — Philip B. Stafford, *Elderburbia*

> You have brains in your head, you have feet in your shoes,
> You can move yourself any direction you choose.
> And you're on your own. And you know what you know.
> And YOU are the guy who'll decide where to go.
>
> — Dr. Seuss, *Oh, The Places You'll Go!*

This chapter is dedicated to "care home escape narratives," which are stories of fugitive mobility in which care home residents choose to break out and run away from their bleak institutional lives. In the texts presented in this part, older individuals transgress spatial boundaries, confront obstacles, and enacts forms of spatial resistance. Their agency challenges the pervasive notion that there are "fit surroundings" (Emerson 285) within which older individuals should safely be contained—a concept that continues to shape discursive for-

mations with regard to the spatiality of old age and, in turn, informs our implicit understanding of institutional long-term care. As Doreen Massey argues, space is never neutral but inherently gendered, shaped by power relations that structure access, mobility, and agency. Care homes, as institutional spaces, reflect and reinforce these dynamics, often positioning older individuals—particularly women—as passive recipients of care rather than autonomous subjects. But what happens in this context, if the traditional matrix of "race, ethnicity, class, sex, gender, and able-bodiedness" is expanded to include age and examined through the lens of spatial analysis? While the literary motif of escape has been widely explored in various studies, a gendered reading of long-term care escape narratives that foregrounds aspects of spatial dynamics remains a largely unchartered area of inquiry.

The reasons why characters decide to run away from care homes differ among the stories. As will be shown, escape plans can be motivated by a mixture of push and pull factors. In all these stories, the care home serves as the starting point for a protagonist's journey, emphasizing the contrast between the limited world of the home and the freedom of the open road. As such, the figure of the care home presents a backdrop against which the road narrative can evolve, underlining the adventurous nature of the old characters, as well as their vigor and agency. While the characters presented in the previous chapter resisted their victimization from *within* the confining walls of the home, the protagonists presented in this chapter literally break out of the restraining structures and hit the road, enacting spatial resistance through mobility. The journeys they undertake are dual journeys, journeys of both the mind and body, physical and spiritual (Roberts 53), which often lead them to a new acceptance of themselves and to the reevaluation of their individual identities, a process that would not have been possible from within the confining contexts of the home.

Whereas the fictional space of the care home is usually not presented as a gendered space, the open road has traditionally been discursively constructed as a male realm. This chapter also offers a gendered reading of nursing home escape stories and examines the question of whether such stories can destabilize powerful regimes of age and gender, as well as of cultural and social differences. Using a variety of texts as touchstones and reading them through an intersectional perspective, I discuss escape as an act of resistance against the processes leading to homogenization, marginalization, and punishment of old age, and as an expression of the protagonists' wish for social participation.

The topic of escape is a foundational motif in American literature that can be traced as far back as the first immigrants escape from Europe (Bluefarb). It already played a role in late nineteenth century care home narratives such as Mary Wilkins Freeman's "A Mistaken Charity" (1887), in which two old sisters run away from an "Old Ladies' Home," since they feel like "two forlorn prisoners" in their genteel surroundings (Wilkins Freeman 244). In 1964, Margaret Laurence's *Stone Angel* most famously addressed the topic of escape again, but especially during the last two decades, a massive increase in the number of stories that feature older protagonists fleeing long-term institutional care has been observed. In the twenty-first century, the "escape narrative" seems to have developed into a very popular sub-genre of the care home novel. Old characters who refuse to obey institutional rules and claim the road for themselves feature more prominently in novels and films today than ever before, thus "conveying [a] shift from self-consciousness to self-empowerment" (Chivers, "On" 213). As Sally Chivers notes, "[c]ontemporary depictions of elderly characters on the road again do more than expand literary and film road genres; they reconfigure expectations of old age in a way that stands to make elderly mobility important enough to matter socially" (214).

A New Genre in the Making: The Care Home Escape Novel

In terms of genre, I argue that the "road novel" needs to be expanded to include older protagonists who flee from long-term institutional care. Individual texts that center on the care home as a place from which to escape follow the conventions and patterns of the escape narrative, road novel, quest story, or romance. Films and stories, therefore, can also be interpreted in terms of such genres. The aspect of age and the starting point of the nursing home add an additional dimension to the interpretation of such literature and films. For example, Chivers has observed that, in terms of nursing home escapes, the form of escape is important to consider: "[C]haracters seek to flee but often come up against perceptions of aging as comically incongruous, a time of boredom, or replete with ill health and abandonment" ("Blind" 135). Even if the protagonists' escapes are only temporary and end in confinement or even death, their journeys and explorations, as will be shown, affect their narratives of self and, thus, change them. From a reader's point of view, these circular texts point to the culturally and socially constructed nature of old age as a time of confinement and to the lack of alternative models of care, or even fantasies thereof.

The first part of this chapter is dedicated to an exploration of the question: why has the escape motif increasingly gained popularity in care home

narratives? This theoretical introduction is followed by a brief discussion of the motif of the journey, the road narrative, and a gendered reading. The second part of this chapter discusses Oscar Casares's novel, *Amigoland* (2009), in which 91-year-old Don Fidencio leaves the nursing home to travel to Mexico in order to find peace. National borders are also crossed in the movie *Cloudburst* (2011), in which eighty-year-old Dot is institutionalized through trickery by her granddaughter, but then kidnapped from the home by her lover Stella. Because same-sex marriage is not yet legal in Maine, where they have been living together for more than thirty years, the lesbian couple travels across the border to Canada to get married, and thus prevent their separation. *Cloudburst* is compared and contrasted to Janet Hepburn's novel *Flee, Fly, Flown* (2013), in which the octogenarians Lillian and Audrey, two friends living with dementia, go on a holiday road-trip through Canada.

4.1 "Oh, The Places They'll Go!": When 90-Year-Old People Walk Out the Door and Disappear

> Acquiring mobility is often analogous to a struggle for acquiring new subjectivity.
>
> — Uteng and Cresswell, *Gendered Mobility*

In June 2014, WWII veteran Bernard Jordan made global headlines when he escaped from The Pines care home in East Sussex, England, to attend the 70th anniversary of D-Day. Wearing his war medals beneath his grey mac, he embarked on a cross-channel journey to France, defying the care home's restrictions. The Sussex Police's Twitter announcement captured the public's imagination: "Ninety-year-old veteran reported missing from care home. Turns out they'd said no to him going to #DDay70 but he went anyway. #fightingspirit" (Huffington Post n.p.). Jordan's story was immediately framed as an act of heroic defiance, with media reports portraying the care home as a site of confinement. The *Huffington Post Canada* wrote, "If the invasion of the Nazis couldn't take you down, chances are a nursing home's staff probably can't either" (Huffington Post n.p.). *The Daily Mail* dubbed his journey "The Great

Escape," drawing parallels to the famous 1963 war film[1] and reinforcing the idea of the care home is an oppressive space like the film's POW camps. Though administrators insisted Jordan had not been forbidden from attending, the media celebrated his breakout as an act of resistance, making him a symbol of autonomy and determination in old age. His story struck such a chord that within a day, a Facebook campaign (that is unfortunately no longer online) was launched to knight Jordan for his bravery, with supporters calling for his story to be made into a film. While many veterans of his age attended the commemorations in France, Jordan's escape captivated the public, revealing deep-seated anxieties about aging, autonomy, and the restrictive nature of institutional care.

The portrayal of the care home as an authoritarian space is reinforced by Jordan's own words in media interviews. Speaking to the *Daily Mail*, he acknowledged the significance of his journey, stating, "Being a veteran myself, this was important to me and it meant the world to be there. […] I loved every minute. It was such an exciting experience." His remarks also suggest an underlying tension between personal autonomy and institutional control, as he added, "I will have to face the music at the care home now, but that is just one of those things in life." His playful confession, "I was naughty, but I had to be there" (Nicol and Craven) further amplifies the framing of his escape as an act of necessary rebellion, positioning the care home as a space where mobility and independence must be actively reclaimed (Dolan et al. n.p.).

Echoing John Urry's questions "why do people physically travel," and "why is there an increasing amount of physical, corporeal travel? Why bother with the risks, uncertainties and frustrations of corporeal movement?" (256), this section explores the growing popularity of care home escape stories. Their appeal can, in part, be understood through Urry's concept of social citizenship, which includes being "a full, active and engaged member of a society," and should "include socio-spatial access to participate within the main practices of one's society" (265). In long-term care facilities, such participation is often severely restricted. Institutional settings tend to limit not only physical mobility but also social and cultural engagement. Urry—even though not thinking about care homes specifically—claims that

1 In *The Great Escape*, starring Steve McQueen, James Garner, Charles Bronson, and Richard Attenborough, allied POWs try to dig a tunnel to flee the escape-proof camp.

> we could imagine that a "good society" would not limit, prohibit or re-direct the desire for such co-presence. The good society would seek to extend the possibilities of co-presence to every social group and regard infringements of this as involving undesirable social exclusion. […] A socially inclusive society would elaborate and extend the possibilities of co-presence to all members. Significant inequalities with regard to access to such co-presence constitute undesirable social exclusion. A good society would minimize "coerced immobility" (as well as the many forms of "coerced mobility") and maximize the conditions for co-presence. (Urry 270)

Escape narratives push back against these limitations, against "coerced immobility," presenting protagonists who refuse to be confined by the spatial and symbolic constraints of institutional life.

Long-term care escape narratives can be read as constitutive of an activity narrative, which helps defeat the nursing home specter by promoting a new narrative of resistance. Their protagonists are "declining to decline" (Gullette, *Declining*) and take control of their own destiny. They position themselves as active and successful, and show readers that even nursing home residents still have hope. Such affirmative narratives of defiance and autonomy in old age help explain the widespread popularity of stories like *The Hundred-Year-Old Man Who Climbed Out of The Window and Disappeared* by Swedish author Jonas Jonasson. The 2009 novel, translated into 36 languages, and its 2013 film by Felix Herngren—screened in over 40 countries—became a cultural phenomenon, earning over $50 million in revenue, making it one of Sweden's the most successful Swedish films (Gustavsson, my translation). Despite its familiar plot, the novel's theme of an old man rejecting confinement and reclaiming agency resonated deeply with audiences. In France, Bernard Jordan was quickly labeled "The Ninety-Year-Old Man," drawing direct comparisons to Jonasson's fictional Allan Karlsson. As one commentator noted in the Huffington Post, "If you like this story, I recommend 'The 100-year-old man who climbed out of the window and disappeared.' It's a wonderful read! Great to hear a real-life version" (Cooper).

This merging of fact and fiction highlights the cultural appeal of escape narratives that challenge societal expectations of aging and celebrate the spirit of independence in later life. In a way that echoes Jean Baudrillard's concept of the hyperreal, "the generation by models of a real without origin or reality" (1), the media constructed Bernard Jordan as a "simulacrum" (1), aligning his real-life story with the fictional model of Jonasson's protagonist Allan Karlsson. To

preserve Jonassonian escape narrative, key details of Jordan's story were subtly reshaped or omitted, such as the fact that he was actually never explicitly forbidden from leaving the care home and that his wife, also a resident there, was aware of his trip. These omissions transformed Jordan into a mythic figure of defiance, reinforcing the hyperreal image of the old escapee as an archetype rather than an individual.

Characters such as Bernard Jordan, as well as his fictional counterparts residing in long-term care facilities, are seen as voiceless victims while still in their roles as frail, old nursing home residents, but transform into picaresque heroes as soon as they attempt escape. As Pam Gravagne explains, "we secretly cheer for the elderly, for the success of those made less than human by an overarching narrative of decline" (47, also quoted in Chivers, "Blind" 139). Well-known literary examples of such escape stories are Sara Gruen's *Water for Elephants*[2] in which the 93-year-old protagonist, Jacob Jankowski, walks out the nursing home door one day and runs away with a circus, or Margaret Laurence's *The Stone Angel* (1964), in which Hagar Shipley runs away before her son and daughter-in-law can force her to move into the Silverthread nursing home. In Todd Johnson's *The Sweet By and By* (2009), Margaret and her friend Bernice escape from Ridgecrest, even if only to have dinner in a diner. In David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* (2004), a short break-out scene from the nursing home is added to one of the narrative threads. In Andrea Barrett's *The Forms of Water*, eighty-year old Brendan Auberon convinces his nephew to hijack the nursing home van to make a final visit to the only family estate remaining. In Gail Radley's *The Golden Days,*[3] Carlotta, an old lady who cannot stand the inhumane treatment she experiences in the nursing home and Cory, an eleven-year-old troubled foster child, become friends and run away to join a circus. Claire, in Janet Campbell Hale's short story by the same name (1999), dresses up as a man to flee the inhumane treatment she receives at Loma Vista and finds shelter with her relatives, and in the short film "The Greyed Escape" (Dehn)—the title, of course, alluding to the famous movie "The Great Escape" mentioned earlier—a nursing home inmate escapes in his late roommate's body bag in order to fulfil his dream of once more picking a couple of apples from a tree. Likewise, in "The Great Nursing Home Escape" (Hartswick), a simple stage play for lay actors, a group of seniors rethink their failed escape

2 The novel was adapted into a movie in 2011, starring Reese Witherspoon, Robert Pattinson, and Christoph Waltz.

3 John Sirmons's movie *The First of May* (1999) is based on Radley's 1991 novel.

attempt and hatch new plans, this time following the original story, digging a tunnel (27). A recent graphic novel, *Shadow Life* (2021) by Japanese-Canadian author Hiromi Goto "provides a new kind of queer aging" (Hess and Ullmann 131)" and focuses on Kumiko, a bisexual old woman who escapes a care home to reunite with her former lover, Alice.

There are several other "geriatric escape stories," as the genre has jokingly been called, and I will, after a brief exploration of the motif of each journey, offer a close reading of three of them: *Amigoland*, a novel by Oscar Casares; *Flee, Fly, Flown*, a novel by Janet Hepburn; and the movie *Cloudburst* by Thom Fitzgerald. The characters in these works gather all their strength and try to escape to resist interpellation (Althusser) into their roles as immobile, isolated, and inactive members of society—in short, "the old." In a Whitmanesque manner, they embark on journeys: Walt Whitman's "Song of the Open Road" from *Leaves of Grass* summarizes the fugitives' feelings: "Henceforth I whimper no more, postpone no more, need nothing / Done with indoor complaints, libraries, querulous criticisms / Strong and content I travel the open road" (Whitman 123). "You must not stay sleeping and dallying there in the house," Walt Whitman commands (131). The protagonists in the narratives that will be discussed seem to follow his advice and escape "out of the dark confinement" (131). Such narratives mirror and reinforce the powerful American myth of mobility, but, as will be shown in the following discussion, also reject it as an ideological construct, particularly with respect to gender and age.

The characters who escape confinement are struggling, as Uteng and Cresswell put it (2), to acquire a new kind of subjectivity. Their spiritual and physical journeys they undertake change them forever and challenge the notion of old age as being static and immobile. Thinking about the protagonists' physical and spiritual mobility is one way of theorizing the connections between age, gender, and spatiality. Kathleen Woodward underscores the significance of movement in shaping perceptions of aging, arguing that mobility is intrinsically linked to vitality, while "[l]ack of movement is characteristic of decrepit age," she argues. "If movement bespeaks life, immobility—lack of movement—is akin to death, and inertia verges dangerously on the inert" ("Instant" 53). From this perspective, escape narratives actively disrupt the myth of immobility in old age, celebrating the protagonists' defiance against the inertia imposed by institutional life. Whether these escape attempts can be considered "successful"—and by whose standards success is defined—will be a central focus of my analysis.

Care home narratives that culminate in escape include both old men and women who set out on their life-altering journeys as heroes and heroines. Thomas R. Cole analyzes the topos of the journey in his 1992 groundbreaking book *The Journey of Life: A Cultural History of Aging in America*, tracing it back to biblical traditions. In "The Aging Pilgrim's Progress in the New World," as chapter two is entitled (32–47): "The journey is among the most pervasive themes in world literature. Folk tales, poetry, drama, fiction, art, and religious teaching are filled with male heroes who set out from safe but constricting origins, undergo a series of adventures that transform them, and eventually reach or fail to reach a goal, or prize, or spiritual home," Cole states (xxxii). The journey narrative, which is often a quest narrative, is traditionally associated with a young man's experience of (self)discovery and liberation from social constraints, but as Gabriele Müller points out, an increasing number of narratives have been published that deal with post-retirement masculinity (and, I should add, also post-retirement femininity), use traveling as a motif (153), and challenge the master narrative of the young, white male going west.[4] In her study of late-life and institutional long-term care, Patricia Life asserts that by escaping the nursing home, "individuals exert agency over their surroundings, further enrich and expand their personal identities, and avoid application of the decline narrative to their own lives" (4). While I agree with her argument that "early twenty-first-century texts have begun to add a surprising new narrative where residents have acquired so much agency that they are able to walk away from the nursing home," (4) I would not go so far as to claim that they walk away "even from old age itself," as Life asserts (4). I would, however, argue that they have come to reevaluate what it means to be old and close to death. They finally begin to acknowledge the limitations their old age and/or the cultural assumptions connected to them bring about while—at least in some stories—a reevaluation of the life course takes place. Their journeys make them see their place in the world and their own aging differently. They allow protagonists to acquire new perspectives on themselves, on others, and their own lives. In other words, their journeys—always spiritual

4 In her essay, Gabriele Müller refers to Paul Mazursky's *Harry and Tonto* (1974), the story of a retired schoolteacher who travels with his cat across the USA, and contrasts it with more recent American movies, *About Schmidt* by Alexander Payne (2002), and David Lynch's *Straight Story* (1999), as well as European interpretations of the road movie, the German film *Schultze Gets the Blues* (2003) by Michael Schorr, and the Icelandic film *Children of Nature* by Fridrik Fridriksson (1992) (Müller 150).

as well as physical—change their lives, even if in spatial terms, they may end exactly where they began, often back in the care home, or, like in the case of *Cloudburst*, even in death.

At first glance, it may seem as if only few differences existed between old women and men with regard to the nature and outcome of their escapes from institutional care, an assumption which may be grounded in the incorrect and stereotypical notion that old age functions as a homogenizing factor. When taking a closer look at the structures of these individual escapes, however, it becomes clear that with regard to long-term care escape narratives and the protagonists' renegotiation of their identities, aspects of intersectionality cannot be ignored. Women's escapes differ significantly from those of men.

All fictional narratives discussed in this chapter use the journey as a motif and borrow narrative elements and generic conventions of the road novel or road movie. The genre's conventions, however, are turned upside down in these stories because older characters are positioned as heroes and heroines, a fact that highlights the importance of analyzing mobility with reference to space and age. With *Driving Visions* (2002), David Laderman has written an excellent book about the genre, but I absolutely disagree with his observation regarding older protagonists in road narratives. Suggesting that older characters diminish the genre's radical, countercultural edge, Laderman maintains:

> As we have seen throughout, the genre is born in and through the counterculture, and is driven essentially by *youthful* rebellion against stability, conformity, and tradition. More typically in the road movie, senior citizens signify such stability and tradition, epitomizing the law and home, both in terms of character (harking back to the "old days") and their physical limitations. Driving the genre with an elder senior, therefore, automatically inclines toward sanitizing its culturally critical core. As with road movies featuring children, such a perspective renders the genre more palatable, more family-oriented, more conventional—and less culturally critical. (Laderman 184)

I agree that traditionally, the road narrative (he refers exclusively to movies) is a genre that has been associated with young and usually male characters whose actions result in self-discovery and liberation from the constraints of social expectations. I also agree that it is a genre in which characters step outside the social and symbolic order to defamiliarize themselves from convention and conformity (Müller 153). I disagree, however, with his assumption that the

perspective of older protagonists "sanitizes its culturally critical core." This assumption would mean that such movies are more conventional, less culturally critical, and less subversive. Here, he overlooks the radical potential of aging protagonists, particularly when they reject the social constraints of old age and resist narratives of decline. This also means accepting the binary of young and old and perpetuating the stereotype of the boring, conventional, homogeneous mass of old people, thereby also marginalizing them and denying their participation, not only in social and cultural life, but also in the criticism thereof. Laderman seems to define cultural critique solely through youthful rebellion against conventional norms. But age-based rebellion against societal constraints can be just as subversive. In recent years, old people, particularly also old women, have inscribed themselves into the genre without, however, rendering the genre more "palatable" or "conventional," as Laderman puts it. On the contrary, the inclusion of old men and women highlights crucial concerns, including the hotly debated issue of long-term care, self-determination in old age, and society's taboos about death. In addition, Laderman's argument treats old persons as monolithic, failing to consider how gender, race, class, and sexuality intersect with aging in road narratives.

Laderman is right when he argues that "driving the road movie with a senior can become a challenge to the genre itself. […] Like that of women, gays, and people of color, this elder perspective becomes an outsider perspective within an outsider genre, a fresh revitalization of the typical young white male point of view of most classic road movies. […] the genre gets fresh fuel from the new/'old' perspective behind the wheel" (Laderman 184). When older characters run away from the confinement of institutional care and hit the road, the genre's conventions are in fact challenged. Rather than diluting the rebellious core of the road movie, older protagonists often reframe and expand it. They do so with a different objective: Whereas young protagonists flee from conventions and break out of the familiar, the old protagonists attempt to reclaim the familiar, recover their place in society, and fight against the marginalized social role that has been assigned to them (Hartung and Maierhofer, "Introduction" 15). This, however, does not make the genre more palatable and conventional.

Heidi Slettedahl Macpherson's excellent feminist analysis in *Women's Movement. Escape as Transgression in North American Fiction* (2002) is a wonderful counterweight to Laderman's important book, as she focuses on gendered readings of escape narratives and points to crucial differences in terms of gender and mobility. Even if she, unfortunately, does not include aspects of aging and old

age in her discussion, her work prepares the ground for such an intersectional reading.[5] She argues that "[t]o incorporate the female—especially the white, middle-class female—into a discourse of escape significantly alters the perception of the maneuver" (1). In addition to initiating a gendered reading of escape stories, Slettedahl Macpherson's study must be credited for widening the scope of the discussion by focusing on the importance of including spatial aspects. The gendered discursive space is integral to women's writing about escape, she maintains (6): "Seen as essentially voiceless and storyless while remaining in their prescribed gender roles, female characters undergo transformation when they take on the role of escaper. To escape is to transgress, and contemporary feminist fiction explores escape as an act of resistance to the status quo" (1). I argue that this transgression is also relevant for the aged male and female protagonists of care home narratives, whose voiceless and storyless existence while still institutional inmates can be contrasted with picaresque adventures or quest narratives that focus on their vigor and strength as soon as they plan to embark on their journeys. As the following analysis will show, however, women's spatial transgressions are met by more obstacles, and their escapes are less self-determined than those of men. Yet, they appear in novels as self-determined protagonists and voice their claims for "roads of their own."

In *Roads of Her Own: Gendered Space and Mobility in American Women's Road Narratives* (2009), Alexandra Ganser investigates American narratives of mobility from the perspective of transdifference, which she defines as "a category of analysis to describe the dissonant plurality of social and cultural affiliations as well as the narrative tensions produced by such pluralities" (11). She comes to the conclusion that women's road narratives "remap the road:"

> Female protagonists on the road—across media, national, and generational boundaries—have always confronted the limits of what is conceived as acceptable "feminine behavior" in certain spaces; both physical realities and

5 In terms of intersectionality, aspects such as class and ethnicity are equally important. It is interesting to note at this point that all of the primary texts that deal with the topic of long-term care present—with few exceptions such as Shani Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at Night*—exclusively Caucasian care home residents; when Latinos and Latinas, African American or Black Canadian characters are present in the texts discussed, they are almost exclusively featured as care-givers. For a discussion of Thomas King's novel *Green Grass, Running Water* (1993) in the context of First Nation's and Native Americans' culture, see Patricia Life, *Long-Term Caring: Canadian Literary Narratives of Personal Agency and Identity in Late Life* (2014).

> ascriptions with which female bodies are confronted on the road have been imprinted on cultural representations of this spatial experience. Yet it is exactly in the act of facing these gendered spaces that women's road narratives remap the road: by questioning, subverting, and appropriating paradigms of mobility, they create transient, deterritorialized subjects and envision not "a road," but many "roads of their own." (311)

Road novels in which female protagonists claim their own spaces, as Ganser convincingly observes with reference to Virginia Woolf, constitute a way of deconstructing gender stereotypes; gender and narrative are established as fundamental for the production of space and mobility (311). With regard to road narratives that present old protagonists, the question of how such texts constitute a way of deconstructing *age* stereotypes arises. While, according to Ganser, women in road narratives usually flee domesticity ("On" 153), old women in care home narratives do not usually escape "from the hearth to the open road" (Waxman, *From*) but, just like their male counterparts, from the confines of institutional care. Although the nursing home specter is equally haunting for male and female fugitives, the literary construction of their escape stories is largely informed by generic conventions, and as such, by age and gender stereotypes.

Particularly in American, but also in Canadian literature and culture, the road has been one of the most preeminent tropes and is linked to notions such as Manifest Destiny, or the Puritan "errand into the wilderness:" "The specific dimension of North American ideas of mobility results from the foundational significance of a colonial settler mentality and a variety of journeys, migrations, and displacements" (*Roads* 15). As a literary genre, the road narrative goes back to the 1930s, Ganser argues with reference to Mikhail Bakhtin's essay "Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel" (1981/1937–38). Chance encounters and unexpected meetings, Bakhtin states, contribute to the dialogic quality of the road as a narrative space, where different lives intersect in meaningful ways. In John Urry's terms, this aligns with the concept of "co-presence"—the idea that human movement is often driven by the desire to share physical space with others (250). Notably, Bakhtin also acknowledges the role of age in shaping these encounters: "On the road […] the spatial and temporal paths of the most varied people—representatives of all social classes, estates, religions, nationalities, ages—intersect at one spatial and temporal point. People who are normally kept separate by social and spatial distance can accidentally meet; any contrast may crop up, the most various fates may collide and interweave with one another" (243). He underlines how the road

collapses social distance, allowing lives that would typically not intersect to intertwine:

> On the road the spatial and temporal series defining human fates and lives combine with one another in distinctive ways, even as they become more complex and more concrete by the collapse of *social distances*. The chronotope of the road is both a point of new departures and a place for events to find their denouement. Time, as it were, fuses together with space and flows in it (forming the road); this is the source of the rich metaphorical expansion on the image of the road as a course: "the course of a life," "to set out on a new course," "the course of history" and so on; varied and multi-leveled are the ways in which road is turned into a metaphor, but its fundamental pivot is the flow of time. (Bakhtin, "Forms" 243)

The road as a chronotope is juxtaposed to the nursing home, a place of stasis and death, a homogenizing place that transforms the most diverse individuals into "old people." As a literal and metaphorical space of transition and transgression, the road is a space "democratic, open to all and opposed to the closed" (Campbell 282, quoted in Ganser, *Roads* 38). The contrast between the static care home and the adventurous, liberating space of the road heightens the protagonists' longing to re-engage and participate in life, making their wish to escape understandable, even necessary. Their movement is not just a physical journey but an assertion of social participation and agency—a concept that aligns with John Urry's argument on the fundamental right to mobility (265). He stresses that participation in society is deeply tied to access to movement "In particular, participation involves issues of transportation and mobility – namely, how to facilitate widespread participation in society by all social groups, especially ensuring that divisions of class, gender, ethnicity, age, do not result in significant forms of socio-spatial exclusion, of 'mobility-exclusion'" (Urry 265).

Ganser builds on this idea, concluding that the road text functions as a means of shifting perspectives and challenging dominant assumptions: "The road text can be read as an articulation of the 'philosophical capacity to shift views and destabilize assumptions' (Campbell 284) and has therefore attracted emergent articulations by marginal social groups" (*Roads* 38). Among these marginalized voices are old people, especially old women, who navigate not only physical but also social and cultural restrictions on their movement. As Susan Sontag's "Double Standard of Aging" (1972) suggests, older women face heightened invisibility and stereotyping, making their representation in road

narratives a powerful act of deconstruction and resistance in both literature and film.

4.2 The Idyllic Chronotope of Family Life: Oscar Casares's *Amigoland*

A man should be able to take a trip if he wants.

— Oscar Casares, *Amigoland*

Oscar Casares's first novel *Amigoland* (2009) chronicles the story of two estranged brothers, Don Fidencio and Don Celestino Rosales, as they reunite after not communicating with one another for many years, and embark on a road trip to Mexico. Don Fidencio, a grumpy 91-year-old retired postman, endures a miserable existence in Amigoland, a nursing home in Brownsville in the Rio Grande Valley, from where he repeatedly, but unsuccessfully, plots to escape. In contrast, his youngest brother, Don Celestino, a former hairdresser in his seventies, enjoys his comfortable retirement with Socorro, his much younger Mexican housekeeper and lover. The novel's third person narration shifts perspectives between these three characters, offering a triangular view of their journey and relationships.

Don Fidencio was forced into Amigoland by his daughter and son-in-law after falling in the yard and suffering an increasingly severe prostate problem, which causes occasional incontinence and unsettles him deeply. Feeling alienated and lonely, he sees the care home's name as ironic, as Don Fidencio does not have a single friend there: "Strangers, all strangers, they had taken everyone he knew and replaced them with strangers. This is where they had sent him to die, with strangers" (Casares 16). His greatest fear is not of death itself, but dying among strangers, disconnected from the world he once knew. His perspective serves as a cultural critique of institutionalized aging, contrasting the isolating nature of nursing homes with the preferred alternative of "aging in place," which preserves a sense of belonging and continuity.

Space theorist Yi-Fu Tuan has pointed out the importance of home as a "protected place," "a place that offers security, familiarity and nurture" (164). In *Space and Place*, he elaborates further on the notion of familiarity, an aspect Don Fidencio essentially lacks: "Familiarity is a characteristic of the past. The home provides an image of the past. Moreover in an ideal sense home lies at the center of one's life, and center (we have seen) connotes origin and begin-

ning" (Tuan, *Space* 128). Amigoland is an unfamiliar space for Don Fidencio. He also criticizes the poor quality of care in the cold, impersonal environment of the nursing home. He longs to spend his final years without the interference of professional staff, whom he sees as indifferent caretakers who medicate him to keep him alive but not truly living. His frustration highlights the dehumanizing aspects of institutional care, where prolonging life takes precedence over preserving dignity and autonomy: "Tell me, why it is that nobody wants me, but nobody wants me to die either," he asks his brother (126). He desires a better way of living—and dying—and prays for it day by day: "It was just one more humble request added to the short but growing list of things he prayed for every night: […] for him to find some way to escape from this prison where they kept him against his will; and for his freedom to come soon, even if it should cost him his life, so long as he didn't die here in this bed, surrounded by so many strange and unfamiliar faces" (10).

Like the novels discussed above, *Amigoland* illustrates what Bill Thomas identifies as the "three deadly plagues of the human spirit: Loneliness, Helplessness and Boredom" (The Eden Alternative 2). Don Fidencio knows these three plagues all too well. He feels no sense of home in Amigoland, which he repeatedly refers to as "the prison." As a form of resistance, he refuses to learn the names of either the nurses or the other residents, further emphasizing his detachment from the institution and its imposed social structure. He applies nicknames based on their characteristics, such as "The One With The Flat Face, The One With The Big Ones, The One With The Worried Face, … The One With The Net On His Head" (26) or "The One Who Likes To Kiss Your Forehead" (37) when referring to staff, and "The One With The Hole In His Back" (31), "The One Who Always Looks Constipated" (10) "The One Who Cries Like a Dying Calf" (243) when referring to his fellow residents. With "the Turtles" (37), he collectively refers to the older female residents in the home. On the one hand, Don Fidencio's refusal to learn names reflects his lack of attachment and reinforces the impersonal, anonymous atmosphere of Amigoland. On the other hand, it serves as a coping mechanism, allowing him to hide his own memory lapses. He is aware that his recollection is slipping—his narration is interspersed with sudden flashbacks and dream sequences, signaling his growing confusion. This awareness deepens his cynicism and bitterness, rooted in his fear of losing all independence and becoming what he calls "The Useless One" (34). His fear of decline is also described on a spatial level, shaping his perception of the care home as a place of confinement, decline, and ultimately erasure.

Nowhere is this more evident than in his observation of the U-shaped table, where the most dependent residents are spoon-fed by aides:

> Alongside the window that looked onto the patio, one of the aides stood in the center of a U-shaped table and uncovered trays for the residents, all of them twitching in their reclining wheelchairs that were more like upright gurneys. She took a spoonful from the first tray […] and then a second later the aide had to recover the yellowish dollop that had seeped onto the woman's chin. […] How long could it be before they moved him over to the U-shaped table where the aides would be feeding him? (Casares 15–16)

As in many nursing home narratives, certain spaces and places within the institution signal a closer proximity to dependency, and ultimately death, than others. The U-shaped table where residents are spoon-fed, is one such space; another is the locked section of the building reserved for "The Ones Who Like to Wander Off" (42). These spaces serve as stark reminders of physical and cognitive declin7e, reinforcing Don Fidencio's fear of losing control over his own life. The nursing home itself becomes a symbol of his finitude, a place where he is confronted with the inevitable progression of aging. Ironically, despite repeatedly telling himself that he does not want to dwell on the past, its presence becomes unavoidable, intruding into his thoughts and forcing him to reflect on his life in ways he had resisted before: "The other reason he preferred to not look around was that he didn't like thinking about his life, how it used to be, how it was now, and what it would likely become, if God didn't do him the good favor of taking him soon. No matter how much he had lost, or they thought he had lost, he was still alert and understood what was happening to him" (16).

Childhood Memories Resurface

Ever since being placed in the nursing home, Don Fidencio finds himself dreaming about his childhood, particularly his grandfather. The nursing home itself functions as a *memento mori*—a constant reminder of his own mortality. Aware that his time is running out, he becomes increasingly preoccupied with clarifying a long-standing family myth about his grandfather's alleged kidnapping by Indigenous people. To uncover the truth, however, he must return to the place of his childhood, reconnecting with both his past and the roots of his ancestors. This idea holds particular significance for Don Fidencio, as uncovering the truth about their grandfather's disappearance could ultimately allow him to reconcile with his brother, Don Celestino. The two

became estranged due to a decades-old argument over the true cause of their grandfather's disappearance, further strained by a minor disagreement in Don Celestino's barbershop years earlier. As Don Fidencio's memories resurface, so does his desire to reconnect with his brother, setting the stage for the journey that will unfold later in the story. His growing preoccupation with the past not only foreshadows the brothers' upcoming quest for answers but also suggests that their journey will be as much about healing familial wounds as uncovering historical truths:

> Of eight brothers and four sisters, only the two of them were left. At least he thought it was still the two of them. The youngest and the oldest, almost twenty years separating them. That the youngest was alive would make sense, he supposed, but what good reason could there be for the oldest to be alive and for the rest of his brothers and sisters to be gone? What sense did it make for him to be still walking around? For what? For him to be stuck here, waiting to die? At least if Celestino was alive he was probably out there living his life like a free man. *If*… They hadn't actually spoken in years. Why, though? (Casares 41)

A process of "life review" (Butler) is set in motion, which holds the possibility of coming to terms with past conflicts, to re-evaluate and re-narrate them in order to integrate them into a positive life course narrative. Don Fidencio feels "stuck" in the nursing home, while his brother, in contrast, remains a "free man." This growing sense of entrapment fuels his sudden urge to reach out to Don Celestino. However, with his faltering sense of time, he ends up calling him in the middle of the night—when Don Celestino, sleepy and disoriented, is too slow to answer. One day, however, Socorro persuades Don Celestino—who is also troubled by their old conflict—to visit his brother at Amigoland. When he arrives, Don Fidencio recognizes him almost instantly, referring to him as "The One With The White Hair," and without hesitation, pleads: "You should take me to live with you. Take your brother from this prison" (125). Though Don Celestino cannot grant this request, he continues to visit, becoming a vital lifeline—a connection that not only reintegrates Fidencio into the outside world but also rekindles the bond they both realize they need to mend. Determined to uncover the truth, Don Fidencio repeatedly begs his younger brother to take him on a road trip to the small Mexican village where their family once lived. For Don Celestino, their grandfather's alleged kidnapping seems like little more than a popular historical or folkloristic myth. But for Don Fidencio the

story holds deeper significance: he sees it as the key to understanding his own existence (Sandick n.p.), a final chance to make sense of the past before time runs out. Don Celestino's visits spark a transformation in Don Fidencio, giving him a renewed sense of purpose. No longer resigned to his fate, he begins to (day)dream more vividly of his childhood home and past. The mental shift is mirrored in his physical rejuvenation; he stops using his walker, fights to reclaim his cane, and secretly practices walking without help. Each of these small acts signal his determination to regain control, preparing him for the journey he wants to take:

> They'd seen how much improvement he had made with his therapy and now they were scared that one of these days he would slip out and this time they wouldn't be able to catch up to him. One good, sturdy cane was all it would take. And soon, not even that. In the evenings he was still sweeping the floors with the dust mop, but now once he was out of sight of the nurses' station, he would lean the mop against the wall and continue on his own, staying close to the wooden railing, just in case. They probably thought he would never get anywhere without the walker. But that showed how much they knew Fidencio Rosales. (Casares 173)

The nursing home is seen as counterproductive to this progress, as the nurses keep taking away his canes and force him to use the walker in order to reduce the risk of falling. As in many care home novels, a fall serves as the catalyst for institutionalization, reinforcing the idea that physical instability marks the transition into dependency. Falling is seen as a metaphor for decline, a connection Stephen Katz explores in "Hold On! Falling, Embodiment, and the Materiality of Old Age" (198). He notes that while risk-taking is generally accepted as a natural part of younger life, fall prevention discourses reframe it as reckless and irresponsible in old age, reinforcing a medicalized model of care that prioritizes safety over autonomy:

> If falling embodies aging in ways that signify decline, then it is not surprising that aging individuals attribute falls to accidents, environmental hazards, and the contingencies of life, rather than to the failing or frailty of their bodies. Fall prevention discourses also frame any risk-taking, which is assumed to be a natural part of younger lives, as being dangerous and foolish in later life. (Katz, "Hold" 198)

By illustrating how the protagonist resists these constraints, the novel challenges the assumption that aging bodies must be strictly regulated, offering a critique of the disempowering institutional structures that equate care with control. The risks Don Fidencio will be taking on a road trip to Mexico provide a counter-narrative to the limitations and "risks" he experiences in the home.

Fidencio, meanwhile, also triggers a new interest in the past in Celestino, prompting him to confront his own mortality in the wake of his wife's passing six months earlier. As the estranged brothers tentatively reconnect, Celestino dusts off his old barbershop equipment and brings it to the nursing home, suggesting that he cut Fidencio's hair. This gesture not only revives a shared memory but also symbolically returns them to the moment that caused their rift—a childish fight in Celestino's former barbershop a decade ago. At first, Don Fidencio refuses the haircut, unwilling to sit in a wheelchair for the procedure, but when Celestino accommodates his request by fetching a regular chair, the small but meaningful act becomes a bridge to reconciliation, offering both brothers a chance to mend their fractured bond. "Don Fidencio stayed quiet for some time, looking into the mirror and watching his brother work, though later he seemed to be gazing at something more distant. […] 'I can remember some of it.' 'Some of what?' Don Celestino asked, brushing the hair off his brother's shoulder" (135).

As Celestino meticulously cuts his brother's hair—a process described in vivid detail over four pages—they gradually slip into reminiscences of their childhood in the Rio Grande Valley, rediscovering their shared past through conversation and memory. Their physical closeness during the haircut—"Don Celestino […] cupped his brother's chin and turned his head a few degrees to the left, then back toward the center, and then ever so slightly towards the right. The only thing left to do was snip some of the hairs along the rims of his ears, and growing out from his nostrils" (136)—becomes an intimate act of reconciliation, gradually dissolving the emotional distance that had separated them for years. Don Fidencio takes pleasure in this act of bodily care—a personal, familiar touch he has long missed. This intimate moment stands in stark contrast to the impersonal "bed-and-body work" (Gubrium, *Living* 123) typically associated with institutional care, highlighting the difference between affectionate, voluntary touch and the routine, clinical handling he experiences in the nursing home: "The showers and sponge baths didn't count as touching since the aides were wearing gloves and working so routinely that at times it felt as though he were going through a car wash with a half dozen other old men waiting in their wheelchairs behind him" (Casares 112). He usually resists

all forms of bodily care and puts up a fight when nurses try to help him ("'How can we take care of you, Mr. Rosales, if you won't let us take care of you?' 'I don't need you or anybody taking care of me,'" 21). Don Celestino, however, manages to reach him. Once his haircut is complete, Don Fidencio is finally ready to reconnect with the past: "He turned toward the larger mirror again and kept gazing into it until he could see the faint traces of a face he had almost forgotten" (138). As in many literary texts on old age, the motif of the mirror also occurs in *Amigoland*. Whereas the texts discussed earlier depict the mirror as a site of alienation and disintegration of the self—"the mirror stage of old age" (Woodward, "Instant" 60; Life)—Don Fidencio's experience is different. Rather than feeling estranged from his reflection, he finds recognition in it. Through Don Celestino's care and attention, he does not see a fragmented or diminished self but instead glimpses the younger man he once was, ready to embark on a journey of rediscovery.

The rejuvenating effect of the haircut extends to Don Celestino who, despite having never imagined cutting hair again after selling his barbershop, "was surprised how nimble his fingers were" (133). This newfound energy in both brothers sets the stage for the journey ahead. A few days later, Don Fidencio's dreams intensify, revolving around two recurring themes: his desire to escape the nursing home (101–03) and the promise he once made to his grandfather to return to the ranchito in Linares: "Then he said to me, 'Tocayo,' because we were both Fidencio, but he hardly ever called me by my name. 'Tocayo, someday when you are older you should go back and see how things are now, what there is of my ranchito. Tell them I always wanted to go back'" (148).

While Don Celestino remains skeptical about the accuracy of Don Fidencio's kidnapping story, Socorro begins to take interest in the journey, not least because she wants to be closer to Don Celestino and, as she argues, to his only remaining family member, Don Fidencio. Having left her abusive husband in Mexico—a bold and liberating decision for which her mother and aunt have yet to forgive her—Socorro has embraced her independence by building a life for herself in the U.S., challenging traditional gender expectations along the way. Ultimately, it is Socorro who becomes the catalyst for the brothers' decision to embark on the journey, her determination and presence propelling them forward.

When the old story of their grandfather's kidnapping resurfaces, Socorro urges the brothers to finally travel to the *ranchito* near Linares to uncover the truth about their family history. Their plans come to an abrupt halt when Don Fidencio's daughter and legal guardian, Amalia, strictly forbids him from leav-

ing the nursing home. "Don Fidencio tried to explain that the trip wouldn't take so long, a couple of days at most, but she wasn't listening. No was no" (192). This brief exchange underscores Don Fidencio's dependency, framing the moment as a reversal of traditional parent-child roles. Amalia's unwavering "No was no" mirrors the authoritative tone of a mother denying a young child permission to go out, reinforcing the infantilization often experienced by older adults in institutional settings. This interpretation is further supported by the brothers' ironic exchange that follows: "'Just because she said no this time doesn't mean anything. Maybe later she could change her mind.' 'You mean when I get a little older?'" (194), Don Fidencio responds cynically, highlighting the absurdity of his situation.

Don Fidencio cannot tolerate the constant infantilization he experiences in the nursing home, a theme that recurs throughout the novel. His struggle is evident when he vehemently resists the plastic bib he is forced to wear during meals (13–21), when he laments the lack of locks on bathroom doors and longs for privacy (31), when he dreads the discomfort of a plastic mattress lining (17), and when he fears the ultimate loss of dignity—being put in diapers (339). While such caregiving procedures may be deemed necessary for efficiency in a large institution, Don Fidencio perceives them as deeply humiliating, reinforcing his sense of powerlessness and eroding his autonomy. Such procedures, as Julia Twigg points out, are often considered embarrassing, because they emphasize the lack of control one has over bodily functions and are only directed at the body, not at the person. Such failures "return the person to babyhood and underpin the wider infantilization of clients in the care system," Twigg notes (66). This infantilization and the prison-like qualities of the home reinforce Don Fidencio's wish to leave.

As in most nursing home novels discussed in this chapter, a number of references and allusions are made to famous fictional escape narratives such as John Sturges's movie *The Great Escape*, Alexandre Dumas's novel *The Count of Monte Cristo*, or the movie *Runaway Train* (dir. Andrei Konchalovsky) that the care home "prisoners" seem to be familiar with when plotting escape. Usually, the old protagonists' escape plans mock these famous stories, and *Amigoland* is no exception. Don Fidencio also resorts to a movie as a template for a possible escape, but soon realizes the differences between a prison and a nursing home:

> A few nights ago he'd seen an old black and white about an innocent man who finally escaped prison by hiding inside a pile of dirty laundry that was later loaded into a delivery truck. When no one was looking Don Fidencio

> peeked inside the large container, then jerked away when he caught a whiff. What a way to die. They needed to drive it out into the country, burn whatever was inside there. (Casares 35–36)

Reclaiming Mobility

Don Fidencio's escape fantasies begin to consume him, and he constantly plots ways to break free. Twice, he tries to walk away from the care home, but is already apprehended at the first traffic light (34, 36). His subconscious anticipation of the journey ahead is reflected in his dreams, where his grandfather speaks to him, reinforcing his deep-seated desire to return to his roots. This longing suddenly takes shape when Don Celestino wakes him from a daydream: "'Andale, Fidencio,' 'Andale to where?' […] 'I came to take you with me.' 'Remember I called you last night?' he said. 'I told you we were taking the trip to the other side, to Linares. The way Papá Grande wanted you to, remember?'" (201). Still sleepy, Fidencio complies, but vehemently refuses to take his walker with him, an act of defiance that underscores his determination to reclaim his independence.

The two brothers leave the nursing home in a taxi, joined by Socorro as they set off for Mexico. Notably, unlike traditional road narratives, their escape vehicle is not a Buick, Corvette, or Thunderbird (Soyka 29), but simply a taxi. While seemingly a minor detail, this choice subtly alters the conventional symbolism of the road trip, as the taxi—unlike a personally owned car—limits the characters' autonomy and self-realization. This departure from the classic road narrative framework highlights the constrained nature of their journey, both physically and symbolically. Mike Featherstone explores the implications of car-ownership and autonomy, explaining that "The term automobility works off the combination of autonomy, and mobility. In its broadest sense we can think of many automobilities—modes of autonomous, self-directed movement" (1). He further clarifies the origins of the word: "The auto in the term automobile initially referred to a self-propelled vehicle (a carriage without a horse). The autonomy was not just through the motor, but the capacity for independent motorized self-steering movement freed from the confines of a rail track" (1). The promise of automobility, he argues, is "self-steering autonomy and capacity to search out the open road or off-road, encapsulated in vehicles which afford not only speed and mobility, but act as comforting protected and enclosed private spaces" (2). Ultimately, the car represents "the capacity to go anywhere, to move and dwell without asking permission, the self-directed life free from the surveillance of the authorities" (Featherstone 2). This idea of free-

dom and control is elaborated on also by John Urry, who argues that "car-driving has become a central element of social citizenship" that counteract "socio-spatial exclusion" and "mobility exclusion" (Urry 265).

If the car is traditionally read as a status symbol and sign of masculinity and male mobility,[6] the taxi—still a car, but driven with the help of others—can be interpreted as symbolic of a loss of control and male power. The brothers are not in full control of their journey; they remain dependent on someone else to get them where they want to go, signaling a shift from the classic road narrative where the car represents autonomy and dominance.

This symbolic loss of agency extends beyond mobility and into the realm of virility. Don Fidencio's has difficulties to recall with whom and when he had last had sex with, "before women started treating him as if he were a harmless old creature and what he had once carried between his legs had now shriveled up and fallen off" (116). Similarly, Don Celestino discreetly stashes "little blue pills […] vitamins, if she [Socorro] had to know" (97) behind a hot water bottle in the medicine chest. The novel links the two old men's dependence on a taxi to their anxieties about their loss of virility, underlining how aging challenges traditional constructs of masculinity and independence.

Another adaptation of the traditional escape narrative lies in the nature of the "crime" that compels aged protagonists to flee. Unlike fugitives such as *Bonnie and Clyde*, they are not running from the law but from the confines of the nursing home. In addition, Don Fidencio's journey towards independence does not unfold in a high-speed car race but rather through a slow, deliberate reclaiming of mobility, quite literally, step-by-step. The walker he left behind at the home is replaced by a foldable walking stick that Socorro gets for Fidencio. While there is a clear progress narrative—moving from a wheelchair to a walker, then to a cane, and finally to a foldable walking stick—Fidencio's remobilization is not without setbacks. An embarrassing "accident" during the night delays their journey, forcing Socorro to find fresh clothes for him. This moment serves as a reminder that, despite his determination to regain control over his body and movement, the vulnerabilities of aging remain an unavoidable part of his escape.

After a two-day, adventure-filled taxi journey across the U.S.-Mexican border, the trio finally arrives in Linares. Initially, it seems they will be unable to locate their grandfather's Rancho Capote, but they soon learn that it was

6 "For nearly a century […] the auto has been identified with masculinity and male mobility" (Scharff 166, also quoted in Ganser, *Roads* 7)

renamed decades earlier and is now known as El Rancho De La Paz (308). This revelation allows them to find their way to the small ranch at last. Place names hold symbolic weight in the novel. Much like Amigoland, El Rancho De La Paz—literally The Ranch of Peace—is a meaningful name that foreshadows the novel's resolution. While Amigoland is a hybrid word blending English and Spanish—a linguistic mix that Don Fidencio resented at the nursing home—El Rancho De La Paz exists entirely in Spanish, the language in which he feels most at home. Unlike in the nursing home, where he had to "think of the right words before he could open his mouth" (18), here, he can speak freely, reclaiming not only his past but also his linguistic and cultural identity.

Upon arriving at the ranchito, the three travelers are welcomed by Carmen Rosales and her old, confused mother, Mamá Nene. The women immediately recognize the Rosales brothers as family and are overjoyed by their visit. "'We knew that with time you would find your way back. […] We never stopped from hoping, always waiting for this day,' the old woman said, her voice quivering, […] 'My father, he always told us that the boy would come back'" (317). In her confusion, she mistakes him for her long-lost uncle of the same name, who, as family lore recounts, was kidnapped by Indigenous people as a child. In an unexpected turn, Don Fidencio's version of the kidnapping story is confirmed through her fragmented memories. Though she and Don Celestino are in fact second cousins, Mamá Nene remains convinced that her uncle Fidencio has finally returned from his long-ago adventure. She clings to this belief, eagerly urging him to recount the details of his supposed past, further blurring the lines between history, memory, and identity. Don Fidencio plays along, telling her that nothing could have kept him from returning—which is true for him as well ("And this I told them from the beginning, that we needed to go, no matter what, that it was important, that I had made a promise to come back. If they'd let me, I would have walked all the way here," 314).

Don Fidencio complies with Mamá Nene's request, stepping into the role of his grandfather as he begins to recount the kidnapping story. Recognizing that it would be futile to correct her misconception, he closes his eyes and claims that more and more details are coming back to him. At this point, it becomes unclear what he genuinely remembers from his grandfather's narration and what he improvises along the way. When he describes how the boy was only released because he had wet his pants and smelled so bad, readers are prompted to question the accuracy of his account. At this stage in the story, the distinction between factual accuracy and "truth" becomes irrelevant for both Mamá Nene and Don Fidencio. Memories, wishes, dreams, and life review blend to-

gether: "He had made up so many things he couldn't say where the truth ended and the less-truthful parts began, so that with time it all became the same to him" (340). Through this act of storytelling, a deep bond forms between Don Fidencio and Mamá Nene, further solidifying his place in the family's history.

Closing the Life Cycle: Arriving in the Past

Moved by their reunion, Mamá Nene invites the travelers to stay overnight. While Don Celestino and Socorro prefer to return to their hotel, Don Fidencio—claiming that the trip back would be too exhausting—accepts her offer to spend the night at El Rancho De La Paz. His decision to stay reflects a deeper longing—not just for rest, but for a sense of belonging and permanence in a place that now feels like home. Don Fidencio's journey from the depersonalized, institutionalized care home in the U.S. to the small ranchito and his newfound "family" in Mexico can be understood through the lens of Thomas R. Cole's chapter "After the Life Cycle: The Moral Challenges of Later Life." Seen in this light, his journey is not merely physical but symbolic, leading him to a place where he can re-narrate his identity in a way that holds personal and cultural significance. Cole explores this shift by tracing the evolution from the pre-modern concept of the life cycle to the modern notion of the life course, explaining how these frameworks shape our understanding of aging and identity:

> During this transition to modernity, the cycle of life was effectively severed from the course of life. In pre-modern society, when generations of people lived on farms, in villages and small towns, local traditions of practice, belief, and behavior provided external moral norms as each generation visibly cycled into the next; the problem of identity as we know it did not arise. […] "The idea of the 'life cycle,'" writes Anthony Giddens "[…] makes very little sense once the connections between the individual life and the interchange of the generations have been broken." In a modern, mobile society stages of life are disembedded from place; the individual "is more and more freed from externalities associated with pre-established ties to family, individuals, and groups." [7] (Cole, "After" 142)

Cole's insight underscores the significance of Don Fidencio's transformation. Don Fidencio's journey—which is not really a return, because he had never

7 Cole here cites Giddens, Anthony. *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*. Stanford UP, 1991, p. 147.

in his life visited the ranch before—is narrated as a closing of the life cycle. His identity merges with that of his grandfather, and generations also meet through his connection to Mamá Nene. The pre-modern, familiar Mexican space of the ranch is juxtaposed against the modern and alienating nursing home. In his new environment, he can redefine himself, not only as a needy patient, "The Useless One," a self-definition that he had come to accept due to his isolation, but as a person who is needed by others. This, as Thomas Cole observes in a different context, is crucial for a person's sense of self: "My point is that the dominant social identities available to older people have been narrowly confined to the roles of patients, pensioners, and consumers. […] Falling into purposelessness is not only a matter of individual will and character but also a matter of culture and public policy. Older people—like all people—need to be needed" (Cole, "After" 148). Cole notes with reference to Charles Taylor that meaningful relationships are crucial: "We become full, self-aware, and responsible human persons by engaging with others. Our identities must be confirmed or recognized in dialogue and negotiated with others. Self-definition is not possible in isolation, apart from social forms of expression and the expectations, needs, and values of others" ("After" 145). Mamá Nene not only validates Fidencio's identity but also gives him a renewed sense of being needed and connected. John Urry expands on this idea when he explains why people travel, emphasizing the importance of "co-presence" in maintaining social bonds: "Such intense moments of co-presence are necessary to sustain normal patterns of social life often organized on the basis of extensive time–space distanciation with lengthy periods of distance and solitude (Urry 261). Through her presence, Mamá Nene but also his brother Don Celestino, provide Fidencio with the kind of meaningful connection that bridges the isolation of his nursing home existence, reaffirming his place in the world.

Don Fidencio's experience offers a direct answer to John Urry's question of why people travel (Urry 256). For Fidencio, returning to his childhood landscape is not just about movement—it is about reclaiming a lost sense of self and belonging. Urry argues that "To be there for oneself is critical. Many places need to be seen 'for oneself', to be experienced directly: to meet at a particular house, say, of one's childhood or … walk along a certain river valley or … feel one's hands touching a rock-face and so on. It is only then that we know what a place is really like" (261). For Fidencio, this journey fulfills precisely that need—to physically return, to see, feel, and inhabit the spaces of his past in order to truly know them again. His travel reconnects him to memory, identity,

and the sensory experience of place, reinforcing Urry's idea that some places must be lived firsthand to hold meaning.

Awakening the next morning, Don Fidencio feels an unfamiliar sense of peace. For the first time in a long while, he has not wet the bed, and unlike in the nursing home, he is free to smoke in the bathroom without restriction. Most importantly, he feels at home. As Carmen brings him a cup of coffee in the garden, he soaks in his surroundings, realizing that El Rancho De La Paz is where he truly belongs. The physical and emotional comfort he experiences stands in stark contrast to the confinement of the nursing home, reinforcing his longing for a space that offers both autonomy and connection:

> Earlier the granddaughter had made him some huevos a la mexicana with just enough chiles and spices that he realized he had forgotten what a real breakfast was supposed to taste like. She wasn't his granddaughter, he realized, but her name had gotten away from him again, and in any case, she treated him like he imagined a granddaughter might treat a grandfather. Just yesterday evening when they had already left the store, it had occurred to her to turn the truck around and go back so she could buy him a pack of cigarettes, just in case he ran out in the middle of the night. And this morning after his breakfast, she had brought the coffee to where he was sitting outside, smoking. (Casares 350–51)

Although Carmen's name escapes him, she does not become just another "The One Who"–figures; instead, he instinctively claims her as family. This contrasts sharply with his life in the nursing home, where every moment was dictated by routine and restriction. There, he had to wait for someone to unlock the patio just to smoke, followed by another wait to enter the mess hall, where the same monotonous breakfast was served every day: "Monday, oatmeal and raisins. Tuesday, oatmeal and raisins. Wednesday, oatmeal and raisins. On and on that way" (25). Surrounded by pastel paintings on pastel walls (33), forced to wear diapers at night and a bib at meals, his autonomy had been stripped away. Now, in contrast, he is free—free to walk whenever and wherever he pleases, to smoke in the bathroom, and to sit outside in the morning, savoring his coffee while gazing up at the vast sky: "Looking up past the first forty feet of the trunk, as the branches became more dense and entangled, eventually blocking out most of the rising sun and leaving only a narrow passageway to see where the sky opened up" (351). Like the protagonist in Waltner-Toews' short story "A Sunny Day in Canada," Fidencio senses a newfound openness, a symbolic pathway to

the sky, where confinement gives way to possibility and release. The next day, when Don Celestino returns to pick him up, Don Fidencio refuses to leave. His journey has been successful in three crucial ways: he has fulfilled his promise to his grandfather to return to Mexico, he has escaped institutional confinement, and he has found a new home where he can spend his final days in peace.

Janice P. Stout, in *The Journey Narrative in American Literature*, identifies several key patterns in American quest narratives, all of which resonate with Don Fidencio's experience. His story follows the "journey home" pattern and the "home-founding journey" (41), in which travel leads to the creation of a new home, while also incorporating the "exploration and escape" (245) pattern. In a way, Fidencio's escape has brought him full circle—he has not only left a place of confinement but arrived at a place of belonging. When Carmen and Mamá Nene invite him to stay with them forever, he happily accepts, marking the true end of his journey—not just an escape from the past, but a return to the sense of home he had long been missing.

Why Carmen agrees to care for someone she barely knows remains ambiguous. The narrative offers no clear explanation—there is no indication of altruism on her part, nor any mention of financial compensation that might justify her decision. Instead, her openness is framed as a cultural contrast to the capitalist, individualistic values of the U.S., where care is often institutionalized. Even if Carmen accepts Don Fidencio's deeply human desire to die in peace, not among strangers but with family, this resolution is sentimentalized and elevated to a near-mythical level. The irony is that he does not actually know the Rosales family with whom he now chooses to stay. His sense of homecoming, then, is not rooted in personal history but rather in a romanticized ideal of belonging and familial connection, raising questions about how cultural narratives of kinship and care shape the story's resolution.

The Idyllic Chronotope of El Rancho de la Paz

The ranch, an idyllic space where past and present converge, can be interpreted through Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of "The Idyllic Chronotope in the Novel." This framework helps explain the story's otherwise improbable conclusion, in which Don Fidencio, despite his old age and need for care, finds a seemingly effortless new home. Bakhtin's idyllic chronotope idealizes time and space, erasing the complexities of daily life in favor of a harmonious, timeless present: "Strictly speaking, the idyll does not know the trivial details of everyday life" (Bakhtin, "Forms" 226). Bakhtin, by introducing the term "chronotope," refers to a convergence of time and space, or, as Heike Hartung precisely puts it,

"translates spatial simultaneity into temporal sequence, thus localising time in concrete space" (*Narrating* 8). Reading *Amigoland* through this Bakhtinian lens, El Rancho De La Paz embodies the essence of the idyllic chronotope. Bakhtin describes the idyll as a world where life is deeply rooted in a specific place, binding generations together: "Idyllic life and its events are inseparable from this concrete, spatial corner of the world where the fathers and grandfathers lived and where one's children and their children will live. This little spatial world is limited and sufficient unto itself, not linked in any intrinsic way with other places, with the rest of the world" (225). In this closed, self-sustaining world, generations are bound to place rather than time, blurring the distinctions between past, present, and future:

> This unity of place in the life of generations weakens and renders less distinct all the temporal boundaries between individual lives and between various phases of one and the same life. The unity of place brings together and even fuses the cradle and the grave (the same little corner, the same earth) and brings together as well childhood and old age (the same grove, stream, the same lime trees, the same house) the life of the various generations who had also lived in that same place, under the same conditions, and who had seen the same things. This blurring of all the temporal boundaries made possible by a unity of place also contributes in an essential way to the creation of the cyclic rhythmicalness of time so characteristic of the idyll. (Bakhtin, "Forms" 225)

El Rancho De La Paz functions not just as a physical refuge for Don Fidencio but as a mythic, eternal home, where the anxieties of aging and displacement are replaced by a sense of belonging that transcends time. Employing Bakhtin's perspective, Casares's ending appears both plausible and inevitable, as it aligns with the long tradition of the idyllic family novel. Through this lens, El Rancho De La Paz serves as the natural resolution to Don Fidencio's journey, offering a space where generations symbolically reunite and time loses its linear constraints. What emerges is that Casares, in crafting his novel, draws not only from familiar narratives of the nursing home as a prison but also from the structural narrative conventions of the novel itself. As Bakhtin's historical analysis of the genre reveals, such idyllic endings are not simply narrative choices but well-established literary patterns—ones that shape the ways in which stories of home, belonging, and escape are told.

In the end, Don Fidencio firmly asserts his decision to stay in Mexico. When he informs Amalia, she argues with him and promises that he can live with her and her husband. As he does not trust that her promise will hold, he tells Don Celestino that he will not return to the U.S. "Suddenly I have so many places to live—everybody wants me for themselves," he remarks cynically (354). Don Celestino tries to persuade him, but Don Fidencio offers a simple, resolute response: "'Why are you doing this, Fidencio?' 'Just to live in peace'" (254). Realizing that he cannot change his brother's mind, Don Celestino prepares to leave, needing to catch up with Socorro, who had returned home earlier that morning after an argument. As the brothers say goodbye, Don Celestino discovers a plastic bag left behind in the taxi: "But when Don Celestino looked inside the bag, the pill dispenser was still packed and the extra vials hadn't been opened. Everything was the same as it was when they left the pharmacy five days earlier" (357). Not only has Don Fidencio left his walker behind, but he has also abandoned his medication, symbolizing his rejection of medicalized aging and institutional care. The novel ends without absolute closure, but it strongly suggests that Don Fidencio's journey—both physical and existential—has reached its conclusion. Having completed his "life review," he waves as Don Celestino's taxi disappears down the road: "'Nobody,' Don Fidencio said, and then he waved. 'Nobody forgot anything'" (357).

Amigoland is not only a quest narrative, but also a *Vollendungsroman*, a novel of completion, of "winding up," as Constance Rooke calls it in her essay "Old Age in Contemporary Fiction. A New Paradigm of Hope" (245). This genre focuses on the final stages of life, which entail letting go and finding "some kind of affirmation in the face of loss" (248). The life review is one of the most common themes of the *Vollendungsroman*. Don Fidencio engages in just such a life review, undertaking a journey not only to recover his family's history but also to assert his autonomy and dignity in old age. Andrew Achenbaum, with reference to Robert N. Butler, describes the process as follows:

> Some of the positive results of a life review can be the righting of old wrongs, making up with enemies, coming to accept one's own mortality, gaining a sense of serenity, pride in accomplishment and a feeling of having done one's best. Life review gives people an opportunity to decide what to do with the time left to them and work out emotional and material legacies. People become ready to die. (204)

Don Fidencio's quest is successful in that it aligns with the aspects addressed by Andrew Achenbaum. He reclaims what he considers essential at the end of life and embarks on a journey to restore his dignity. The road trip serves as both a return to his past and a step toward the future, embodying what Bakhtin describes as the "blurring of all the temporal boundaries" (225). By retracing his roots, Don Fidencio seeks closure and belonging, making the journey a necessary step in bringing his life to a meaningful conclusion—even if in a somewhat folkloristic manner, in the home of his ancestors. Heather Gardiner further explains the importance of returning to one's origins as follows:

> Through retrospect, the wheel of life is turned back to youth and childhood and in many instances, but not all, new pathways are opened towards a different kind of homecoming. The old person ends the journey of life where he or she began it, seeing its full span with a perspective which is only possible when age restricts the physical momentum of life and the journey comes "full circle" in some yet "untrodden" pathways of the mind. (59–60)

Don Fidencio's journey comes full circle, returning him to the place his grandfather—or, in his own version of the story, a fusion of his grandfather's identity and his own—had once left behind. By merging past and present, he creates a unified narrative of his life, finding a sense of wholeness and completion. He has fulfilled his goals, kept his promise, and secured a place of peace—the idyllic Rancho De La Paz—where he will be cared for until the end of his days by those he now considers family. His escape from the nightmarish institution leads not just to freedom but to a fairy tale-like resolution, transforming his story into a "happily ever after" ending.

As previously discussed, protagonists who experience confinement, isolation, and entrapment in old age often respond by turning inward, "initiating an exploration of distant memories," as Gardiner metaphorically describes it, "in the attic of the mind" (57). Don Fidencio's journeys—both the physical journey from Texas to Mexico and the imaginary journey undertaken in his grandfather's name—serve not only his own need for closure but also bring peace to Mamá Nene, who can finally stop waiting for the return of "her uncle." Beyond fulfilling a family myth, these journeys facilitate Don Fidencio's life review, allowing him to re-narrate his own story, reconcile with his Mexican-American identity, and bring the journey of his life to a meaningful and positive conclusion.

Socorro: The Border of Tradition and Modernity

Questions of space and place in the novel extend beyond individual experience, shaping a larger cultural and ideological landscape. By contrasting Mexico with the U.S. and family with institutional care, the narrative reinforces the idea that "blood is thicker than water"—implicitly endorsing the problematic notion that ethnicity is rooted in blood and soil. The novel draws on the common trope that Mexican culture remains pre-modern, where families, rather than institutions, are expected to care for their elders until the end of their lives. This romanticized view ignores the realities of social and demographic change. While eldercare in Mexico has traditionally been the responsibility of families—particularly women caregivers—shifting economic and demographic factors indicate that institutional care will soon become a necessity. As Robledo et al. highlight in their article "The State of Elder Care in Mexico" (2012), this transformation has already been recognized by social scientists and policymakers, raising important questions about the future of aging and care in Mexican society:

> Currently, the majority of the older population lives at home with their spouse or partner, children, grandchildren or other close relatives. Here, most of the long-term care they need is provided to them and within this pool of family members, mostly by women. Nevertheless, reduced fertility rates, constant rural-urban migration within Mexico and international migration, women's increasing participation in the labor force and activities outside the home, among other factors, have changed family size and composition and pose future challenges to the availability of household care and support. (187)

This binary opposition between family-based eldercare in Mexico and institutional care in the U.S. is not only embodied by Carmen Rosales and Mamá Nene, but also by Socorro, who lives across the border in Matamoros, where she cares for her mother and aunt. Her daily routine revolves around household duties and caregiving, as she continues "cooking and cleaning and shopping and going to the pharmacy for these pills or that salve that her mother might need" (Casares, *Amigoland* 81). Her mother and aunt, both older women themselves, fear that if Socorro marries the "old American," they will lose their primary caregiver. Their concerns reveal the deeply ingrained expectation that eldercare remains a familial—and specifically female—responsibility. In response, they urge her to distance herself from Don Celestino, advising her to

find another house to clean and stop seeing him, reinforcing the gendered burden of care within traditional Mexican households.

> "You worry because you think I would go away." "Bah, now she thinks we cannot live without her." Her aunt laughed. The wheelchair squeaked as her mother adjusted herself. "You think your poor tía hasn't sacrificed to be here with us?" "And where else was she going to go?" Socorro said. "If before this she was living with her mother?" "Taking care of her." Her aunt stepped off the bed and went to stand behind the wheelchair. "Until God needed her." (174)

Socorro's mother and aunt make it clear that they expect Socorro to adhere to a normative femininity defined by with home, hearth, family, and traditional patterns of caregiving. Socorro, a woman of the borderlands, disrupts these expectations. Moving fluidly between Mexico and the U.S., she embodies a more independent and transgressive identity, breaking with traditional gender roles. Yet, despite this independence, Socorro still performs acts of caregiving, particularly for Don Fidencio. When he soils his bed at their stopover, she compassionately removes the sheets, provides him with fresh clothes, and helps him shower and dress. These moments highlight how caregiving remains an ingrained part of her identity, even as she resists the rigid structures imposed on her. Marrying Don Celestino, a man thirty years her senior, could eventually mean assuming caregiving responsibilities for him as well. While she may have left behind the traditional Mexican gender roles expected by her family, her future in the United States may still lead her back into a similar role, suggesting that care work remains an inescapable expectation for women, regardless of cultural or geographical boundaries.

The novel presents an ambivalent stance on the tension between tradition and modernity, yet it can be interpreted as a passionate indictment of the institutionalization of older adults. *Amigoland* lays bare the deficiencies of institutional care, vividly depicting the fears and anxieties experienced by its residents. In doing so, the novel echoes critical perspectives found in well-known nursing home ethnographies, which have long exposed the depersonalization, loss of autonomy, and emotional toll of institutional aging. Among these influential works are Jaber F. Gubrium's *Living and Dying at Murray Manor* (1975) and *Speaking of Life* (1993), in Timothy Diamond's *Making Gray Gold* (1992), in *The Culture of Long Term Care* (1995) edited by J. Neil Henderson and Maria D. Vesperi, or in *Gray Areas: Ethnographic Encounters with Nursing Home Culture* edited by Philip

B. Stafford. As Oscar Casares states in an interview, the story is based on his personal experience with his ninety year-old father, who fell and broke his hip, and spent the last three years of his life in a nursing home, an experience that was "possibly one of the most difficult for [his] family" (Casares 8).

Despite its idyllic and, at times, sentimental overtones, the novel also offers a meaningful exploration of what good end-of-life care entails. By centering Don Fidencio's perspective, *Amigoland* invites readers to experience empathy, potentially leading to "changed attitudes, improved motives, and better care and justice," as Susan Keen suggests in "A Theory of Narrative Empathy" (208). Aspects such as privacy, intimacy, friendship, community, and warmth are absent in the nursing home but are instead found in Mexico, where care is provided by a "family member" rather than institutional staff. Carmen and El Rancho De La Paz serve as the binary opposite of Amigoland, which fails to provide relationship-centered care. In this regard, Casares's novel does not reimagine institutional care in a way that redeems it, nor does it offer a vision for reform. Instead, the nursing home is portrayed as a place to be avoided at all costs—a sentiment made explicit by Don Fidencio's desperate nightly prayers: "It was just one more humble request added to the short but growing list of things he prayed for every night […] for his freedom to come soon, even if it should cost him his life" (10). While the nursing home setting evokes isolation, dependency, infantilization, boredom, frailty, and confinement, the concept of travel represents its antithesis—implying movement, transformation, independence, agency, freedom, and choice.

Amigoland illustrates Don Fidencio's journey to freedom, which grants him dignity at the end of his days. By finding a place where he feels at home and at peace despite his physical ailments, he does not exemplify what is commonly seen as "successful aging," but what Wendy Lustbader terms "successful frailty" (Lustbader 15, also qtd. in Cole, "After" 152). She argues that "the alchemy of successful frailty" depends on "[t]urning the 'nothing' of empty time into the 'something' of good days" and the "insults of illness into privileges of being" (Lustbader 15, qtd. in Cole, "After" 152).

Like other nursing home escape novels, such as Sara Gruen's *Water for Elephants* or Jonas Jonasson's *The Hundred-Year-Old Man Who Climbed Out Of The Window And Disappeared* that feature male protagonists, Don Fidencio's journey is successful: his need for care, his dependence, but also his connection with Mamá Nene and the stories he tells her contribute to his "successful frailty" at *El Rancho De La Paz*. Successful frailty, I argue, is a defining feature of the *Vollendungsroman*, a genre concerned with closure and reconciliation in old age.

As Rooke describes, this stage entails "leaving the social stage" (245), yet the *Vollendungsroman* seeks to offer both its protagonist and its readers "some kind of affirmation in the face of loss" (248). Don Fidencio's journey fulfills this function, allowing him to find peace and dignity as he approaches the end of his life.

4.3 Women on the Run: Thom Fitzgerald's *Cloudburst* and Janet Hepburn's *Flee, Fly, Flown*

While *Amigoland* is an example of a road narrative that portrays escape as necessary and, most importantly, successful in terms of fulfilling the quest for the spiritual and cultural redefinition of the male protagonist's identity, Janet Hepburn's first novel *Flee, Fly, Flown* (2013) and Thom Fitzgerald' movie *Cloudburst* (2011) end on a sadder note. Both of the stories portray old women who escape long-term care facilities and embrace the space of the open road. In *Flee, Fly, Flown,* Lillian and Audrey, two nursing home residents living with dementia, decide that they have had enough of their boring lives in the home and that it is time for a holiday. They escape the lock-down unit of Ottawa's Tranquil Meadows Nursing Home, steal a car, and drive west to see the Rockies of British Columbia. Unfortunately, their short vacation ends before they reach their final destination and they are taken back to the care home. In *Cloudburst*, Dot and Stella travel north from Maine in the U.S. to Canada. The lesbian couple had been separated after Dot's granddaughter assigned her to a nursing home in order to take over Dot's house, which would leave Stella homeless. Stella kidnaps Dot from the home, and they flee to Canada, where same-sex marriage is legal, with the hope of finally marrying, but before they can officially wed, Dot falls severely ill and dies in Stella's arms in their car.

Unlike Don Fidencio and Don Celestino, who are never concerned about the police chasing them, the runaway women in both *Flee, Fly, Flown* and *Cloudburst* meet many obstacles, must disguise themselves, use false names, and hide from the police, their families, and the nursing home administrators who are frantically looking for them. In addition, each of the stories includes a young man without whose help and, more importantly, without whose protection the old women would not be able to undertake their journeys. While Socorro, the young woman in *Amigoland,* also travels with the two old protagonists, her function in the story is a different one. She is the catalyst that initiates the journey, but throughout the narration, she is merely configured

as Don Celestino's lover rather than as an indispensable helpmate. Once on the road, however, the two men are able to reach *El Rancho De La Paz* without Socorro's support, whereas the young, male characters of Rayne in *Flee, Fly, Flown* and Prentice in *Cloudburst* literally become lifesavers.

In both cases, and in contrast to Don Fidencio, the women travelers ultimately find themselves denied a place where they can truly be at home. While one might argue that this outcome aligns with the conventions of traditional road novels—where characters set out not to establish a new home but to escape confinement—this discussion will demonstrate that their continued displacement is also deeply tied to their age, gender, and sexuality. The nursing home is contrasted in both narratives with the free and open space of the road; in fact, the two spaces are configured as binary opposites. While the nursing home, despite its bleak perspective, is represented as a safe place, the open road becomes a life-threatening space that forces the women to accept the limits of their own very existence in the end.

As Alexandra Ganser argues in her analysis of road narratives, the road is a gendered space, constructed differently for women on the run than for men. She highlights how Ronald Primeau's *Romance of the Road: The Literature of the American Highway* (1996) relegates women's experiences on the road to a single section—one of eight—grouped alongside "other minorities" (107) including African American and (male) Native American writers (Ganser, "On" 156). This marginalization reflects a broader tendency to overlook or diminish the distinct challenges women face in road narratives. She further explains that:

> Drawing on recent remappings in cultural geography, the "open road" appears as a dangerous frontier—in which women's physical and emotional well-being is always at perilous stake—rather than as an adventurous playground. In women's road stories, the American [and Canadian] highway does not maintain its mythical, iconic status, signifying freedom and the heroic quest for identity, which has been ascribed to it at least since the legendary accounts of the flight from domesticity by Jack Kerouac and his fellow (anti-)heroes of the Beat generation. (Ganser, "On" 153)

In this framework, the road is not a site of self-discovery and liberation for women but a perilous space that reinforces their vulnerability. In the two narratives discussed in the following section, the road is anything but "fit surroundings" for frail old women. My discussion examines intersectionality through the lenses of gender, sexuality, age, and illness/disability, analyzing

how the protagonists' experiences in both the nursing home and on the road are represented. If, as Ganser argues, "these stories reflect a gendered economy of space that creates the road as all but the 'right(ful)' place for a woman" (Ganser, "On" 160), how do factors such as old age, homosexuality, frailty, and dementia intersect in these narratives? How do these additional layers of identity and vulnerability further complicate the protagonists' relationship to space and mobility?

4.3.1 "So Much Space Is Disconcerting": Janet Hepburn's *Flee, Fly, Flown*

> You can get so confused that you'll start in to race
> Down long wiggled roads at a break-necking pace
> And grind on for miles across weirdish wild space,
> Headed, I fear, towards the most useless place.
> The Waiting Place.
>
> — Dr. Seuss. *Oh, The Places You'll Go!*

Janet Hepburn's novel, much like Oscar Casares's *Amigoland*, is also based on the author's personal experience, as she witnessed a frail parent's treatment in a long-term care facility. The novel, as she states in a video interview, was inspired by the wish that her mother would have had the opportunity to make choices for herself:

> I had to write a story about how a person in that position could be free, how they could be more in charge of their own destiny, of how they could live more like they wanted to live, because it's so regimented in there, everything is about safety of care, while there's really nothing about what a person needs or wants psychologically. (Hepburn, "Janet" 2)

In the interview, Hepburn reflects on her experiences as both a daughter and caregiver, expressing her concerns about placing her mother in institutional long-term care. She contrasts the nursing home—depicted as a space of confinement and loss of autonomy—with an imagined space where freedom, control, and independence could be reclaimed. In her novel, she attempts to construct such an alternative world for her protagonists, sending them on a road trip across Canada, from their nursing home in Ottawa to the Canadian West. However, by the journey's end, the adventure proves too dangerous and ex-

hausting for the two women, ultimately leading to their re-institutionalization.

In the following discussion, I examine the genre crossover in *Flee, Fly, Flown*, where Hepburn blends elements of the nursing home novel, dementia narrative, and road narrative. This analysis explores how the story is shaped by the intersection of gender, age, dementia/disability, and space. Specifically, how does the "gendered space of the open road" that Alexandra Ganser analyzes manifest for Lillian and Audrey, the two aging, forgetful *pícaras*? How do their experiences on the road challenge or reinforce the limitations imposed by their identities?

A reviewer has described *Flee, Fly, Flown* as a "*Thelma & Louise* for the Canadian geriatric set" (Quill and Quire n.p.). The reviewer's comparison with *Thelma & Louise* is not surprising given the similarities in plot and the novels' intertextual references, elements that have become integral to road movies and narratives over the past decades (Mayer 371). That *Flee, Fly, Flown* firmly belongs to the road narrative genre is evident from its opening, when Hepburn has Lillian declare, "We'll be like Jack Whatisname. You know, *On the Road*? Or Bob Hope and Bing Crosby in *The Road to*…wherever? We'll just see where we end up" (30). But the reviewer also cautions against dismissing the novel as merely a geriatric escape story, noting that "the novel's subtle nod to issues involving the treatment of persons with dementia infuses the story with a surprising complexity" (Quill and Quire n.p.). On the one hand, the novel employs dementia as an end-of-life-narrative to justify the protagonists' reinstitutionalization. As Heike Hartung explains, "[dementia narratives] may define the limits of development by narrating the end of memory and consciousness. In approaching the dissolution of the autonomous subject, these stories are concerned with loss and crisis" (Hartung, *Narrating* 277). On the other hand, Hartung further states:

> Dementia narratives also question the boundaries of life stories by contesting notions such as development, autonomy and personhood. Narratives of Alzheimer's and other age-related dementias depict old age in both its negative and positive aspects. This involves a discourse of crisis, in which Alzheimer's becomes a metaphor for the fears of ageing and a new "burden narrative" of old age for the twenty-first century. But it also enables a counter-discourse of "heroic helplessness" (Scott-Maxwell 17), in which dementia is represented as part of a relational process of development that

> moves beyond Cartesian subjectivity to embrace a prospective ending of life. (*Ageing* 172)

In line with Hartung's argument, *Flee, Fly, Flown* challenges the assumption that memory loss can be equated with the loss of autonomous subjectivity and personhood. While the journey west traditionally symbolizes progress and self-discovery, the protagonists ultimately never reach their destination and are instead forced to return. This raises a crucial question: what does adequate and responsible caregiving for individuals with memory loss truly look like? In the following discussion, I explore how the spatiality of old age, frailty, and subjectivity are renegotiated on the open road.

Flee, Fly, Flown opens with Lillian, the novel's first-person narrator, and her friend Audrey lamenting the unappetizing meals served at Tranquil Meadows—"tasteless mush" (3) and "rubbery cubes" (4). As Lillian surveys her surroundings, she describes a sterile, depersonalized environment: "Pastel uniforms with white sneakers perch on stools, spooning food into random open mouths […] They write on clipboards, recording how much we eat, how much we leave behind. […] A mint-green uniform stops at our table and takes away my untouched dinner" (4). In this depiction, residents are reduced to fragmented bodies, their "mouths" serving as a *pars pro toto* for their existence, while caregivers remain nameless, synecdochically identified only by their uniforms—"'Are you cold,' the uniform asks" (4). This erasure of individuality mirrors the institutional dehumanization seen in *Amigoland*, where care is defined by efficiency rather than meaningful relationships. As Lillian, Audrey, and their fellow residents become "institutional bodies"—measured, observed, and charted (Wiersma and Dupuis)—they lose their personhood, reinforcing the novel's critique of long-term care as a space of confinement rather than dignity.

On the level of space and time, the institution imposes rigid structures that dictate residents' lives. The nursing home is portrayed as a monotonous, pastel-colored environment where daily routines revolve around bingo, meals, and "silly games and repetitive sing-songs" (11), reducing time to an indistinguishable blur: "[d]ays and months are no longer distinguishable, one from the other in this place" (11). The dominance of institutional control over space and time has been widely discussed, as Elaine Wiersma highlights in "Conceptualizing Time in Older Age" (75). She points out that while much research has focused on institutional routines and the experiences of medical staff, far less attention has been given to how residents themselves perceive and experience

time in long-term care settings (75). Existing analyses primarily emphasize the institutional culture of "time and task" (Henderson 42), a reality vividly illustrated through Lillian's frustrations: "And everything is timed, you know, like a timetable. I eat when they tell me, sleep when they tell me, play bingo when they tell me. Jeez, I even have a poop when they tell me. I could never poop on demand before. I don't know why I have to start now" (Hepburn, *Flee* 20). As in many care-home novels, the home's sterile atmosphere, meaningless yet rigid schedules, and severe limitations on personal agency reminds of the "total institution." The nursing home represents inertia and motionlessness, where individuality is suppressed, and change or self-determination becomes virtually impossible.

Because both Audrey and Lillian have been diagnosed with dementia, they reside in the locked ward of Tranquil Meadows. Early on, it becomes clear to the reader that Lillian's narration is unreliable. For instance, she complains that her family rarely visits, but when her daughter Carol arrives from Toronto to take her on a planned shopping trip, Lillian fails to recognize her and has evidently forgotten their arrangement (12–13). Her first-person narration is fragmented by flashbacks and dream-like sequences, signaling her confusion over words, people, events, places, and times. The same is true for Audrey, but unlike the reader, Lillian is not always aware of these lapses. What remains evident is that regardless of their cognitive decline, both women experience persistent boredom, loneliness, and isolation—a triad of afflictions that, as mentioned earlier, Thomas refers to as the "three deadly plagues of the human spirit" (The Eden Alternative 2). These emotions underscore the novel's critique of institutional life, where residents, despite their diagnoses, are denied meaningful engagement and autonomy, further deepening their sense of disconnection.

One day, "a uniform" questions why Lillian is cold despite the summer heat, prompting Lillian to recall that August is a "holiday month." Inspired by this realization, she decides that she and Audrey also deserve a vacation. To ensure they do not forget their plan, they share the responsibility of remembering, "I wipe my eyes with my sleeve and pull a pen from my sweater pocket. On a napkin, I scribble the word vacation. Twice. I tear the napkin in two and give one piece to Audrey. I fold the other and place it carefully in my pocket beside the pen. 'So we don't forget,' I say. 'This is important'" (Hepburn, *Flee* 6). Despite their memory loss and physical frailty, the two women prove remarkably resourceful in outwitting those around them—people who tend to underestimate them as "sweet old ladies." Each step of their escape is carefully orchestrated. Lillian keeps track of details in a small notepad, persuades

her daughter to buy her sneakers and a backpack, and keenly observes her to learn how to withdraw money from the bank. Their ingenuity extends to signing up for a crafts class to obtain scissors, which they use to cut off their electronic SafeChip wristbands—devices that trigger an alarm if a resident leaves the building.

Their escape culminates in a series of opportunistic but calculated moves. Audrey, discovering car keys in her handbag, remembers selling her blue Oldsmobile Intrigue to her neighbors' son. Seizing the moment, they trick a taxi driver into unlocking the nursing home door from the outside, allowing them to slip away under the false assumption that he had been summoned. Audrey, in a moment of lucidity, recalls that her home address is written on her expired driver's license. The duo takes the cab there, steals what was once Audrey's car from her neighbor's driveway, and—despite their precarious driving—manages to reach the bank to withdraw Lillian's money. In front of the bank, Audrey struggles to park the car. Ever flirtatious, she enlists the help of Rayne, a young man sitting nearby with a guitar case, backpack, and sleeping bag. This encounter, which recalls *Thelma & Louise*, raises initial doubts about Rayne's intentions—prompting the reader to wonder whether he will exploit the women as J.D. did in the road movie, stealing all of Thelma and Louise's money. As Audrey strikes up a conversation, Lillian, in a moment of confusion, mistakes Rayne for her son Tom. But Rayne, rather than correcting her, seems unbothered by the misidentification. The women invite him to join them as a driver, and in doing so, relinquish control over their destination. Lillian and Audrey, having no clear sense of where they want to go, allow Rayne to determine their course—he eagerly seizes the chance to visit his father in British Columbia. By surrendering their roles as drivers and choosing instead to be passengers, the women subvert one of the defining conventions of the traditional road narrative: the car as a symbol of autonomy and self-determination. Much like *Amigoland*, *Flee, Fly, Flown* reconfigures this central trope, emphasizing not independence but interdependence—further complicating the relationship between agency, mobility, and aging.

As their journey progresses, the travelers adopt a stray dog, which they name Shadow and take along with them. At this stage, Rayne remains unaware that he is driving two nursing home fugitives and car thieves. Unlike "the uniforms" at the nursing home, he treats the women with genuine respect. He establishes clear boundaries while maintaining a sense of equality, telling them: "I'm just setting up my own rules for the trip. If we're gonna be traveling together, we need to be equals. No acting like my guardian, telling me what I

can and can't do. You treat me with respect and I'll do the same for you. How's that sound?" (53–54). His patience further sets him apart from the institutional caregivers they left behind. When the women repeatedly ask, "Where are we going?" (171, 172), he responds calmly each time, demonstrating a level of understanding and kindness that contrasts sharply with their previous experiences of infantilization and control.

While Lillian and Audrey never seem to mistrust Rayne, readers may approach him with a degree of skepticism. Although he establishes early on that they are equals, it remains unclear whether or not he intends to take advantage of the two women. This suspicion is reinforced during a scene at a casino, where the women, eager to experience the thrill of gambling, ask Rayne to take them to the slot machines. Overwhelmed by the flashing lights and complex buttons, they rely on his guidance. Lillian, despite not fully understanding the game, ends up winning a significant amount with Rayne's help:

> Players at nearby terminals watch the attendant return with the money. She counts it out into Rayne's palm, but with all the confusion, I can't see or hear the amount. He tucks it into his pocket. We follow Rayne out through the maze of machines and past the man in the lobby. Inside the van, Rayne hands each of us fifty dollars. "Congratulations," he says. "That's it?" I ask. "With all the lights and bells, it seemed like we won millions." […] "Yeah, we all won." (Hepburn, *Flee* 187–88)

Readers suspicions about Rayne's honesty deepen when they learn that he is, in many ways, a subdued version of *Thelma & Louise*'s J.D.—"a homeless guy with nothing in his pockets and a record showing a couple of petty charges and vagrancy" (94). The casino scene further highlights the women's financial dependence, a theme that echoes *Thelma & Louise,* where, as Dowell observes, the protagonists—"like countless fictional women … can't hold on to their cash" (Dowell 29, qtd. in Soyka 60). Unlike Thelma and Louise, Lillian and Audrey are entirely reliant on Rayne, who serves not only as their driver and treasurer but also as their guardian and surrogate memory. Here, the novel underlines aspects of interdependency. As Patricia Life maintains, Rayne's role is multifaceted:

> Rayne's role in the story is complex. Hepburn presents him as a son figure in need of guidance, a handsome chivalric prince who sweeps in to rescue the damsels from the distress of living in a nursing home, and also as a Byronic "bad boy" who encourages the ladies in their wild adventures. For example,

> despite their obvious health limitations, he goes camping with them by a lake and shares some marijuana with Lillian. (171)

While the women trust Rayne unreservedly, he begins to have doubts about their trustworthiness. Upon learning about the background of their "vacation," Rayne is afraid that kidnapping and car theft will be added to his less than impeccable police record. He advises the women to turn themselves in to the police and abandons them, taking the stray dog, Shadow, with him.

Rayne's absence immediately exposes Lillian and Audrey's vulnerability. When they stop at a supermarket to buy chips, Lillian absentmindedly forgets to pay at the cash register and is accused of shoplifting. Ironically, the cashier does not believe her confusion is genuine, instead suspecting her of feigning forgetfulness. The situation escalates as the manager arrives and insists that the women follow him to his office. Lillian, however, resists, putting up a fight until the "baby-faced young man" (100) becomes embarrassed and ultimately lets them go. Outside, their helplessness becomes even more pronounced. Lillian, overwhelmed by pain and exhaustion, struggles to find their car in the parking lot. Meanwhile, Audrey attempts to seek assistance from two young men, only to become a victim of violence—when she extends her hand in greeting, the "hoodlums" (102) seize her purse and shove her to the ground. The situation nearly brings their journey to an abrupt end. A passing young mother intervenes, offering to call an ambulance and the police. Recognizing their frailty and confusion, she hesitates, torn between her instinct to help and her crying toddler's demands. Ultimately, her child's distress distracts her from following through with a 911 call, and instead, she reluctantly helps them locate their car. Linda McDowell's analysis of the intersection of gender and space offers a crucial lens through which to examine this scene. She highlights how gender divisions shape experiences of public space, reinforcing women's vulnerability:

> When we turn to public spaces we clearly see the effect of the associations of the public/private divide with gender divisions. Because of the strong associations between women and the home, those interior spaces of domesticity, feminist investigations of public spaces have often focused on the problems and dangers that women experience 'outside' compared with an assumption that men may take for granted their freedom in and dominance of these spaces. (McDowell 148)

McDowell further discusses how women's presence in public spaces is often marked by fear, anxiety, and exposure to violence:

> Thus there is a significant literature about the ways in which women experience fear and anxiety, as well as physical danger, harassment and attack in streets and open spaces. […] [W]omen who did not conform or keep to their place were constructed as wicked or fallen, subjected to abuse or vulnerable to physical danger, forcing them to reconsider their decision to participate in the public sphere. (148–49)

In this context, Lillian and Audrey's experience in the parking lot is not just an unfortunate mishap but a reflection of broader gendered anxieties surrounding mobility and public space. Their physical vulnerability, coupled with their age and cognitive impairment, makes them easy targets—further reinforcing the idea that for women, especially older women, public spaces can be sites of exclusion, risk, and instability. Without Rayne, the two women are left defenseless in an unfamiliar world. Still, Lillian and Audrey manage to get back on the road, but Lillian realizes that she is too shaken to continue driving: "My head is spinning, fogging up so that I have to pull over in the lot and turn off the car. I can't drive. I need time to sort out all that has happened" (Hepburn, *Flee* 103). Disoriented and exhausted, they have lost all sense of time and place—uncertain of where they are, how long they have been traveling, or even where they are going. Audrey, overwhelmed, pleads with Lillian: "Please take me home now" (104). At this point, time and space have become ungraspable concepts for them. Lillian, unable to make sense of her surroundings, longs for comfort and familiarity. She finds herself unsettled by the vastness of the open road: "So much space is disconcerting," she thinks (171). Yet, rather than comparing the road to the structured confinement of the nursing home, she contrasts it with her childhood home—a place where space was limited but where she felt a deep sense of belonging: "At home it's crowded but I don't mind. I share a bedroom with my sisters, and space at the table is always cramped. My brothers take up more room than they should with sharp elbows and big feet" (171).

Audrey desperately wants to return to the nursing home, which, in contrast to the open road, is represented as a place of safety and stability. At this moment, the novel reinforces a binary ideological construction: the (care) home as a protected space versus public space as dangerous and unpredictable. This opposition is mirrored in the portrayal of gender and age dynamics—where young men, like Rayne, are depicted as powerful and in control, while older

women, like Lillian and Audrey, are shown as fragile and vulnerable. Their age and memory loss further compound this vulnerability, making their experience of the road even more precarious than that of younger women in narratives like *Thelma & Louise*. Despite these limitations, Lillian resists the notion that returning to the nursing home is their only option. Instead, she insists on continuing their journey: "We're not going home. We're going back onto the highway and we're getting away from this place and all the places we live. […] You signed up, and now you're stuck with me. Lucy and Ethel on the move" (104). Lillian's reference to Lucy and Ethel—a comedic female duo known for their misadventures—reinforces the theme of two women navigating an unpredictable world together. Her repeated exclamation, "Jeez Louise," further evokes *Thelma & Louise*, subtly aligning their journey with the famous road film. Moreover, Lillian's determination to press forward resonates with Thelma's climactic command: "Let's not get caught. Let's keep going! Go!" (Scott 01:59:00, qtd. in Soyka 66). By echoing this moment, *Flee, Fly, Flown* situates itself within the tradition of women's road narratives while simultaneously reconfiguring it through the lens of aging, disability, and interdependence.

Shaken and disoriented, the two women continue driving through the pouring rain, only to nearly run over Rayne and the dog. The downpour compels Rayne to get back into the car, but his decision is also fueled by guilt: "Okay, maybe you're right. I couldn't stop thinking that my grandma would kick my ass if she knew I'd abandoned you, too" (107). Recognizing the need to dispose of the stolen car, Rayne rents a van, and their journey westward resumes. They make stops at grocery stores, diners, and cheap motels, while also camping outdoors—an experience the women surprisingly enjoy, despite their physical limitations and incontinence. To manage, they rely on adult diapers, a fact Audrey shares with an unusual sense of pride: "'We shouldn't need to stop again for a while,' Audrey says, a proud look spreading across her face." "'Please don't explain,' Rayne interrupts. 'I don't need to know everything'" (Hepburn, *Flee* 110). Unlike Socorro in *Amigoland*, who assumes a caregiving role by cleaning up after Don Fidencio and ensuring he has fresh clothes—reinforcing traditional gender expectations—Rayne's role remains strictly that of a more detached driver. As "helper characters" (Soyka 35), both Socorro and Rayne fulfill roles that align with the conventions of the road novel genre. But their functions in the narrative also reveal a clear adherence to traditional gender stereotypes.

Both Audrey and Lillian experience frequent cognitive slips, and the narration often highlights the absurdity of their conversations. Lillian repeatedly

mistakes Rayne for Audrey's boyfriend, her own son Tom, or her late husband Albert, while Audrey insists she must return home to her husband Terry. Lillian also struggles to decipher notes meant to aid her memory, and Audrey frequently loses her sense of direction. Despite these disorientations, Rayne accepts them as they are, in contrast to institutional caregivers and family members who primarily see them as dementia patients. Unbothered by their lapses, he embraces them as a surrogate family: "You two are more like my grandmother than I first thought" (Hepburn, *Flee* 61). Rayne even invites them to meet his father and stay at his house. As Patricia Life observes, Rayne "sees no problem with letting them use his memory as an extension of their own, and thus considers that it is reasonable for them to have left the dementia unit. When he eventually has to take Lillian to the hospital, he explains to the "uniform" that "she may need help remembering" (231). Significantly, he does not say that she does not remember, merely that she "may need help to remember" (169).

The novel highlights the significance of intergenerational relationships in shaping identity for both the older women and the young man. Initially, Rayne perceives Lillian and Audrey as entirely different from himself, reinforcing a binary opposition between youth and old age. But as he comes to understand their shared desires—for a caring family, a sense of belonging, and a place to call home—he begins to identify with them, recognizing their mutual interdependence. Rayne's acceptance of their differences ultimately leads to a deeper acknowledgment of their individuality. This recognition aligns with Maierhofer's argument that an awareness of difference can facilitate "an acceptance of the other in the self" ("Crossing" 255–256). One night, as Rayne takes out his guitar and plays songs he learned from his grandfather, the dynamic of care momentarily shifts—this time, it is he who needs Audrey's help. While Rayne remembers the chords and the familiar words of the chorus, Audrey recalls the full lyrics. Together, they reconstruct the music from their respective childhoods and youth (Hepburn, *Flee* 214), illustrating how intergenerational connections bridge past and present, memory and identity.

Their holiday is once again jeopardized when the police stop them for speeding, revealing that Rayne is actually Wayne Carpenter, a man with "a few minor brushes with the law" (161). Lillian and Audrey's use of the fake names "Lucy and Ethel" only heightens the officer's suspicions, leading to their detention at the police station. Although it is quickly established that "Lucy and Ethel" are in fact Lillian Gorsen and Audrey Clark—the two missing women from the nursing home—the police are unable to force their return. Despite their Alzheimer's diagnoses, they are legally adults and free to travel

(166). Stunned by this unexpected confirmation of their autonomy, the women agree to let the officer notify the nursing home that they are safe, on the condition that their location remains undisclosed. This newfound freedom is reinforced through spatial imagery: "Outside, an ocean of brilliant golden-yellow blooms stretches north across a field. It takes my breath away" (169). Lillian, unfamiliar with the flowers, asks what they are. Rayne explains they are sunflowers, picking one for each woman "to celebrate four days on the road" (169). The scene transforms their legal independence into a symbolic moment of liberation, where the vast, sunlit landscape mirrors the openness of possibility. A moment later, Lillian again enjoys the free space and the colors of nature: "The colors outside are as vivid as acrylic paint in the mid-morning sun. I imagine myself walking to the horizon in my navy pants and pale blue shirt; picture the trek as color wading through color.' […] 'It looks like a postcard,' I say" (181–82). The strong natural colors are contrasted with the pastel nursing home colors and the open landscape, with the confined space of the care home. Lillian's immersion into nature resembles Walt Whitman's "Song of the Open Road" when he writes, "The earth expanding right hand and left hand / The picture alive, every part in its best light" (125). Here, the novel partakes in the discourse and myth of mobility and freedom and emphasizes the open road's connotation of individualism, independence, and control for the old women, which can be read as "a textual intervention into normative spatialities," as Ganser observes in another context (*Roads* 14). Even if the novel is ambivalent at times with regard to its representation of the women's needs, it emphasizes their rights to maintain their agency and freedom and indicates that these are more important than their physical safety. Sitting around a fire pit near a forest one night, Lillian and Audrey have reached a level of individual independence: "I can't stop smiling. 'This is a grand adventure!' 'You said it.' Audrey drops down onto the log. 'I can die happy now.' […] I say, 'It's funny; I'm not afraid of dying anymore. I don't know when that changed for me'" (Hepburn, *Flee* 116). The act of passing through the Canadian wilderness, and the transformations this enacts, functions as a rite of passage for the women.

The old women's newly won feelings of freedom are soon stifled. When the three travelers reach Saskatchewan, Rayne reminds Lillian and Audrey that after they meet his dad, they should begin to consider returning. The women do not want to hear any of this, and Lillian immediately feels sick to her stomach (174). After a while, Rayne convinces them to phone the home as well as Audrey's niece, Teresa, and Lillian's children, Carol and Tom: "I also know what it feels like to have a mom leave and not know where she's gone. You're not gonna want

to hear this, Lillian, but even though your kids are adults now, it's still gotta be tough on them. For me, that's hard to reconcile" (174). The responsibility of taking care of Lillian and Audrey begins to become a burden to Rayne as soon as he realizes that he will need to continue to be responsible for them even after reaching his home.

Their phone calls tether them back to the confined world of their families and the nursing home, acting as a spatial trap that threatens their newfound freedom. The telephone becomes an instrument of control, pinpointing their exact location for Carol, who orders Lillian to wait for her at the motel. When Lillian tentatively asks if she could live with Carol and her husband, the response is definitive—Carol refuses, promising instead to find a nursing home for her closer to Toronto. Lillian immediately understands that this conversation marks the end of their journey: "'No. That's not what I want.' I hang up the phone and stare at the metal-framed print on the wall—a snow-capped mountain scene with a lake beyond. It's so ordinary, so unexceptional and yet I can't take my eyes off of it" (220). The mountains she had longed to see in person remain out of reach, reduced to an image on the wall—static, confined, and symbolic of the unfulfilled adventure. In this moment, Lillian realizes that her journey will not take her as far as the Rockies; her escape, like the landscape before her, is now merely a surrogate reality.

At dawn, Lillian quietly slips out of the motel with Shadow. In the park, she imagines her late husband, Albert, seducing her: "Albert brushes past. He ducks inside a tent and opens the flap, calls to me, 'Come see the surprise I have for you, sexy lady.' He flashes his buck-naked body at me, all pink and erect, ready" (221). Her imagined sexual encounter in the wilderness reinforces a stark contrast—being fully alive in nature versus the slow decline of institutional confinement. As she searches for Albert, she wanders deeper into the woods, toward the river, believing she has arrived in Algonquin Park. Overcome by desperation, she steps into the cold water, momentarily paralyzed by the weight of reality: "A heaviness settles back over me. It feels all wrong. I am my own person now with new friends, making my own choices, and it's good. I'm on my own adventure, and Carol's call, her coming here to get me, is going to bring it all crashing down" (222). This moment encapsulates Lillian's internal conflict—her fleeting sense of independence threatened by the looming return to institutional life:

> I don't want to go back there—nurses wearing surgical gloves, scrubbing my armpits and privates with a scratchy washcloth, rinsing me off with a hose,

> a bed with railings, and Jell-O and pudding and green beans every day, and I don't want to go somewhere new.
> The sky is getting brighter. The air is still. The water is clear despite its churning motion, the riverbank along the edge a scree of stones and rocks, gray and brown with flecks of deep red and gold. It looks like the bottom drops off near the middle, partially hidden by swirls and reflections. (Hepburn, *Flee* 222–23)

Lillian takes in the beauty of nature—the cold water on her feet, the warmth of Shadow's fur. Her immersion in nature and water is ambiguous. In Canadian literature, water is often portrayed as both life-giving and dangerous, an "ambivalent image" that represents "both the (female) source of life […] and purification and the cause of death" (Hutcheon 224). For Lillian, it nearly becomes the latter. Whether she intends to end her life remains unclear. She secures Shadow's leash to a root, removes her shoes, and steps further into the river. The novel's second section, "Fly," ends here, giving way to "Flown"—a shift in tense that suggests the journey's most unrestrained phase is over.

Lillian hears Albert calling for her, though it is likely Rayne searching for her. Just as she resolves to leave the water and "stop acting like a child, a defeated, compulsive child" (227), her feet cramp, and she is swept away by the current. The river hurls her over rocks and branches until she becomes entangled in a tree. Rayne rushes to pull her out. The fragmented first-person narration suggests Lillian loses consciousness, and she awakens only in the motel, where Audrey—mistaking her injuries as the work of her abusive husband, Terry—tries to help her out of the bathtub. While Audrey remains trapped in past fears, Lillian refuses to give in: "We're on the road, honey. That's where we are. We're going somewhere" (230). At this point, Rayne's decisions become reckless. Instead of insisting they seek medical help, he assures them that their journey will continue: "By mid-afternoon, we'll be passing by Calgary. Keep watching and you'll see the city skyline. I want you to look just beyond that" (230). They get Lillian back into the van, but as her pain intensifies, she loses consciousness again. When she wakes, she is in a hospital, where her disoriented narration and Audrey's confusion immediately expose their cognitive decline.

When Lillian wakes, Carol has already arrived to take her and Audrey back home. Rayne, having ensured their safety, has informed Carol of their whereabouts and left for British Columbia. Before departing, he leaves them a note and an envelope filled with the casino winnings he had been holding onto. The

novel concludes in Ottawa, with Carol driving Audrey and Lillian from the airport back to the nursing home. Their westward journey—symbolic of freedom and progress—is starkly contrasted with the rapid plane ride east, a return to confinement. While Audrey will likely remain at the facility, Carol has decided to relocate Lillian to an even more secure institution, one where she cannot escape. The looming separation of the two friends raises questions about their well-being, but Carol refuses to engage in any discussion about her mother's future. The final sentence hints at Lillian's defiance: "I pat the envelope that bulges in my pocket, search through my pack for my pen and pad. I need to make a note. So I don't forget" (237). Despite her determination, her frail health and Carol's resolve make another escape seem unlikely. The novel closes with a tension between Lillian's enduring desire for autonomy and the inescapable realities of institutional control.

The novel's ending remains highly ambivalent. As Patricia Life points out, *Flee, Fly, Flown* "asks readers to weigh the relative merits of freedom and safety in the lives of aging adults. How much risk is appropriate, and at what point does someone lose the right to assume that risk?" (174). The book urges reflection on responsibility, independence, and self-determination, as well as on the need for better models of caregiving. While one reading suggests that Lillian and Audrey's return to Tranquil Meadows is for their own good, this interpretation is far from definitive. Viewed through the lens of the road novel, the women's journey highlights spatial transgressions. Road narratives often center on escape, expressing "the fury and suffering at the extremities of civilized life, and giv[ing] their restless protagonists the false hope of a one-way ticket to nowhere" (Atkinson 16, quoted in Soyka 10). Here, the narrative adheres to gender and age conventions in such a way that Rayne—despite his initial defiance—ultimately has no choice but to return the women to institutional care. Lillian and Audrey, as Tim Cresswell's concept of being "out of place" suggests, have violated the spatial and social norms assigned to them: "[S]pace and place are used to structure a normative landscape—the way in which ideas about what is right, just, and appropriate are transmitted through space and place" (Cresswell 8). Clearly, Lillian and Audrey have transgressed the limits of the space and place assigned to them, exposing the gendered ageism they experience. In contrast to the male characters in *Amigoland*, *Water for Elephants*, and *The Forms of Water*, whose journeys normalize escape and desertion, the old women's mobility is framed as deviant or even reckless (Slettedahl Macpherson 231). As Heidi Slettedahl Macpherson argues,

> Of those female escapes which entail a physical journey, most end either with a nod to home, or an actual return; those that do not, attempt to envision a space outside of patriarchal ideology. That space may be the wilderness, as it is for many feminist novels of the 1970s, or it may be marginality, a more common site of escape in the 1980s. Regardless of the ending of these narratives, they are clearly involved in questioning the roles of women, and their "traditional" placement within the domestic sphere. (231)

In this regard, *Flee, Fly, Flown* resembles *Thelma & Louise*, which also underscores the impossibility of escaping social and spatial constraints. As Ganser writes, such narratives express "the wish for a better place [but are] frustrated by the realization that moving beyond or stepping outside the social and symbolic order altogether is indeed impossible" (*Roads* 87). Read intertextually, Lillian and Audrey's forced return to the nursing home functions as a symbolic death—similar to *Thelma & Louise*, whose protagonists evade capture by driving off a cliff. In the road movie/novel tradition, death is a conventional endpoint, but its meaning differs by gender: male protagonists often die as heroes, while female protagonists rarely receive such recognition. *Thelma & Louise* complicates this genre convention, reframing their final act not as heroic, but as punishment for transgressing gendered and spatial boundaries (Soyka 67).

For Lillian and Audrey, this punishment takes the form of forced reinstitutionalization—an act that not only strips them of their autonomy but also signals their potential descent into the oblivion of death. Despite their return to institutional care, Hepburn's "Thelma & Louise for the Canadian geriatric set" (Quill and Quire n.p.) actively challenges the conventions of both the road novel and the nursing home novel. By blending these genres, the narrative disrupts entrenched dichotomies of space, gender, and age, exposing how such categories are both naturalized and internalized. As Doreen Massey writes, "[o]ne gender-disturbing message might be—in terms of both identity and space—keep moving! The challenge is to achieve this whilst at the same time recognizing one's necessary locatedness and embeddedness/embodiedness, and taking responsibility for it" (Massey 11). In this sense, while the novel acknowledges the constraints imposed on aging women, it also suggests a form of resistance: movement—whether physical, psychological, or symbolic—remains an act of defiance against the structures that seek to contain them. Yet the negative ending also signals the limits of such resistance: for authors (and perhaps for our culture at large), it may still be unimaginable to allow aging female protagonists genuine and sustained agency.

4.3.2 "Ain't Life Sweet When You're Not Afraid to Care": Thom Fitzgerald's *Cloudburst*

Like *Flee, Fly, Flown*, the Canadian movie *Cloudburst* also features two old women on the run from institutional care. "There are considerable pleasures in Thom Fitzgerald's geriatric romantic comedy *Cloudburst*, which is a sort of Thelma & Louise on a pension," a reviewer writes (National Post), again referring to the two women who have come to epitomize the female road-movie since the early 1990s. Indeed, *Cloudburst* contains several intertextual references and quotations that link it to *Thelma & Louise*, positioning Stella and Dot within the legacy of female road narratives while reconfiguring the genre through the lens of aging and same-sex relationships. *Cloudburst* is "a romance catalyzed by the threat of long-term residential care (Chivers, "Blind" 136), demonstrating "the pervasiveness of institutional care as failure and the power of the fantasy of continually fulfilled desire the pervasiveness of institutional care as failure and the power of the fantasy of continually fulfilled desire" (136). The use of the term "geriatric" (which is often used to signify "old," thereby conflating "old" and "sick") points out the latent ageism that films about older women have to face.

Thom Fitzgerald originally wrote *Cloudburst* as a stage play, which premiered in Halifax, Canada, in 2010 before being adapted into a successful, award-winning film. The movie stars Olympia Dukakis and Brenda Fricker as Stella and Dot, an octogenarian butch/femme couple who have lived together for over 31 years in Dot's home, a small coastal village in Maine. Stella is feisty and unapologetically bold, with short gray hair, jeans, lumberjack shirts, plaid jackets, and a cowboy hat. She swears freely, drinks tequila straight from the bottle, and refuses to conform to societal expectations. In contrast, Dot is gentle, clumsy, and plump, with curly gray hair and a warm, caring nature. She has a sharp sense of humor and a quick tongue, but she is also nearly blind and struggles with mobility. One night, while watching a lesbian porn movie—"Imagine. You can now buy lesbian porn at the gas station!"—Stella playfully teases Dotty with a vibrator. Though not in a sexual way, but in a way that suggests that they had had fun in the past, the moment triggers a fit of laughter that sends Dot tumbling out of bed. She "sprains her ass" (00:06:00) and ends up hospitalized, setting off a chain of events that will challenge their autonomy and relationship.

Her prudish granddaughter, Molly, who is more interested in Dot's house than in her granny's well-being, takes advantage of this opportunity and reserves a place for Dot in a nursing home in Bangor. She informs Stella of this

plan ("I am her only living family. […] Nonna is coming with me, and she is going to live where people with more training can take care of her," 00:11:27) and tells Stella that she will eventually need to move out of Dot's house. Stella does not want to hear any of this, defending their relationship, their home, and her ability to be Dot's care-giver, and violently kicks Molly out. Unfortunately, Molly returns when Stella is out of the house and tricks her grandmother into signing over a power of attorney. As soon as Dot has signed the papers, the camera moves outside and frames Dot, using a low-angle shot of the wooden window, trapping her behind what looks like prison bars (00:09:38). Soon after, Molly shows up with her boyfriend, a local policeman, with a court order in hand to take Dot away. Dot, defenseless, still unsuspecting, surprised, and overwhelmed, complies, while Stella is absolutely furious. Stella physically and verbally confronts Molly and the policeman, who initially refuses to intervene. When he realizes that the women genuinely do not want to be separated—and that Molly is oblivious to their relationship—his stance wavers: "'They're lesbians, Mol, hello!' 'Oh Tommy, listen to yourself, Nonna is my grandmother. She gave birth to my mother by heterosexual means, she is not a lesbian, Einstein. [Pause] But… that would color Stella's opposition! You might be right about Stella'" (00:12:56), Molly's disbelief exposes her refusal to see Dot and Stella as anything more than "best friends" rather than a committed couple. By emotionally manipulating the officer—questioning his loyalty and their future marriage—she convinces him to comply. Together, they forcibly remove Dot from her home. "She's taking you to an old folks home, to cremate you," Stella warns Dot, as she is led to the car by Molly (00:14:03). "'You're going to cremate me?,' Dot gullibly asks her granddaughter. 'Um, not right away,'" Molly answers in a surprised tone and closes the car door, revealing her emotional coldness (00:14:16). The nursing home specter looms large as an existential threat over the couple's heads.

Devastated but determined, Stella hatches a plan, tequila bottle in hand. That night, she parks her red pickup outside Dot's care facility—an uninspiring square brick building—and disguises herself as an "old lady" by throwing a nightie over her shirt and jeans. Masquerading with a headscarf, slippers, and a cane, she performs age and gender in a deliberately exaggerated way (Woodward, "Performing"). The contrast between "the old lady" and Stella's butch identity not only reinforces the performative nature of the scene but also serves as a critique of stereotypical depictions of aging. She knocks on the locked entrance door and is scolded by the night nurse, who sits behind the admittance desk, for being outside after 8:30 p.m. Her fake institutionalization

is successful: she "passes" for an "old woman." "It's like being nine years old all over again," she complains to the nurse, who answers, "Hey, I don't make the rules!" "That's what Joseph Goebbels said," Stella's vents her anger, pressing the elevator button with her cane and leaving the night nurse speechless (00:17:20). Her statement, although "low and sitcom dull" (Groen), yet again establishes a link between the home and a "total institution." The number of prohibitory signs and its architecture underline the home's identity as "panopticon" (Foucault, *Discipline* 205): when Stella has to hide from the night nurse during her inspection round, the "institutional gaze" (205) of the home is highlighted. To maintain surveillance, all doors remain wide open, despite the large, wired glass windows already allowing constant monitoring of the double rooms. This creates a tension between private and public space, where residents are visible at all times yet deprived of autonomy. The dimly lit linoleum floors and austere hallways—filmed in near darkness, illuminated only by emergency lights and an exit sign—reinforce the institution's hospital-like atmosphere, where control takes precedence over privacy. As in many other texts and films, the nursing home is depicted as a space of confinement and decline. As Sally Chivers aptly observes, it serves as "a figurative repository of cultural fears of aging as a dead-end" ("Blind" 137). The bleak, institutional nightly world of the home is contrasted with the beautiful landscape, sea, and scenic sunsets seen in the women's home town on the coast of Maine and in Nova Scotia.

Stella finally finds Dot, who is whimpering in her sleep. A close-up frames Stella's face as she peers through the wired glass window, the harsh lighting emphasizing the grid between them—a visual marker of their temporary separation. When Stella enters, Dot wakes in confusion: "Did they get you, too?" (00:18:50). Dot shares the room with Wilma, a heavily sedated woman with dementia—"a druggie" who has been put to sleep "with a horse tranquilizer, she'll never wake up" (00:18:59), as Dot explains. To create a diversion, they place the unconscious Wilma in a wheelchair and send her down to the reception area via the elevator. While the night nurse rushes to return Wilma to her room, Stella and Dot slip out through the stairwell and into the parking lot. Stella sheds her disguise, leaving it discarded in the street, and reclaims her brash, cursing self as she climbs into the truck. With laughter and exhilaration, the two women speed off in their red pickup, trading the confining walls of the nursing home for the open road and the freedom of their own journey. Sally Chivers analyzes this scene as follows:

> There is a self-mocking hilarity to these older characters' liberation, reinforced by their choices not to conform to the appearances expected of them, slippers, nighties and so on. This humor foregrounds not the infantilization of these seniors but rather the ridiculousness of how they are viewed from the perspective of the facilities and the people who think they can only safely reside there. The comic tone emphasizes the ingenuity of their escapes as well as the enjoyment they glean from regaining their relative freedom. ("Blind" 138)

As soon as they have calmed down, Dot becomes hungry. As in many road movies, diners also play a decisive role in *Cloudburst*; Dotty and Stella have breakfast in a diner and think about their further escape plans:

> STELLA: You know, I saw this TV show, Rosie O'Donnell took a bunch of dykes on a cruise to Nova Scotia. Then this flock of lesbians got married there.
> DOT: Flock?
> STELLA: Well, that's what they call us when we're in a group. You know, a gaggle of gays, a flock of lesbians, like in nature.
> DOT: Stella, are you proposing to me?
> STELLA: Maybe.
> DOT: Are you down on one knee?
> STELLA: Yeah.
> DOT: I don't believe in marriage. I was married, remember, and that was like having a brain clot.
> STELLA: I loved you for thirty-one years, I loved you when you got fat, I loved you when you went blind. I'm gonna love you forever.
> […]
> DOT: […] Thirty one years. Well, I have lived with you for thirty-one years, I suppose I put up with you for another thirty-one.
> STELLA: Thirty-one year trial commitment. That's a deal.
> [They shake hands over the table]
> DOT: That's a deal. And then we can see other people.
> […]
> STELLA: We'll drive to Canada to get legally married, and then no one can separate us.
> DOT: Great.
> *(00:21:11—00:23:10)*

Stella's marriage proposal is pragmatic, rather than romantic, and Dot, having already experienced heterosexual marriage, reacts with ambivalence. The

film engages with the highly debated issue of same-sex marriage in the U.S., highlighting the legal and social challenges many LGBTQIA+ elders face in a heteronormative society,[8] particularly when navigating long-term care.[9] Stella and Dot embark on their journey to Canada, where same-sex marriage is legal,[10] not just as an act of love but as a necessity. Their decision to marry is about securing legal protections—ensuring that Stella has the right to care for Dot, with the hope that such rights might one day be recognized in the U.S. as well.

The next day, as the women drive through a picturesque landscape, Stella spots a young hitchhiker. They decide to pick him up, reasoning that adding a third traveler "will confuse anyone looking for two old broads" (00:25:02). The hitchhiker, Prentice (played by Ryan Doucette), is a strikingly handsome young man who confidently flaunts his half-naked, athletic body. However, Stella quickly shuts down any attempt at seduction: "Pull up your pants, kid," she quips. "You're humping the wrong fire hydrant" (00:25:25). Amused by Stella's bluntness, Prentice reveals himself to be a struggling modern dancer and occasional stripper, heading home to Canada to care for his terminally ill mother—trapped in a loveless marriage and financial hardship. His presence starkly contrasts youth and age, further reinforcing one of the film's central themes. According to director Thom Fitzgerald, Prentice also serves a strategic function, making the "geriatric lesbian road movie" more accessible to a broader audience.

Beyond rejecting the discrimination implicit in Fitzgerald's argument—based on sex, age, gender, and able-bodiedness—I also challenge his claim that Prentice influences Stella and Dot as much as they influence him. His inclusion in the film adheres to a conventional narrative structure: he serves as yet another "helper character" (Soyka 35). Unlike the male antagonists in *Thelma &*

8 As a recent study shows, LGBTQIA+ elders have "a tougher time securing health care, affordable housing, and economic security due to institutionalized heterosexism in the Federalized programs and policies governing these service arenas" (Scheidt 516).

9 The issue of long-term care for LGBTQIA+ seniors is addressed in the award-winning 2010 documentary film, *Gen Silent Maddux*, which follows the lives of six LGBTQIA+ seniors living in the Boston area, showing "the disparity in the quality of paid caregiving from mainstream care facilities committed making their LGBTQIA+ residents safe and happy, to places where LGBTQIA+ elders face discrimination by staff and bullying by other seniors" (Programsforelderly).

10 Same-sex marriage became legal by popular vote in Maine on December 29, 2012, after the film was shot. In Canada, it was legalized country-wide in 2005.

Louise, both Rayne in *Flee, Fly, Flown* and Prentice in *Cloudburst* function as binary opposites to the aging, vulnerable women, reinforcing the idea that they cannot travel independently. Rayne acts as their external memory and driver, while Prentice—added as "eye candy"—serves both as a distraction for viewers and a means of misleading law enforcement searching for the fugitives. Like Rayne, Prentice learns mid-journey that the women are on the run. Unlike Rayne, however, he finds this revelation exhilarating: "Awesome!" (00:30:12), he exclaims upon hearing that there's already an all-points bulletin out for them. His enthusiastic reaction underscores his role as a conventional sidekick, reinforcing rather than disrupting traditional road movie dynamics.

When analyzing aspects of space and place in *Cloudburst*, it is interesting to observe that the women's journey across the Canadian border is not initially driven by their marriage plans, which only take shape once they are already on the road. Instead, their escape unfolds as a resistance to forced separation, underscoring the film's tension between movement and restriction. The narrative plays with two competing stereotypes—old age as static and immobile versus queerness as inherently fluid. As Daniel Mudie Cunningham, drawing on Eve Sedgwick, argues, queerness is "always 'on the go'—both as a concept and as a lived experience:

> Eve Sedgwick once claimed that "queer" is movement, not only in the sense that it refers to a community, collective, or even a cinematic movement, but because it moves in the literal sense. Sedgwick writes: "The word 'queer' itself means across […] The immemorial current that queer represents is antiseparatist as it is anti-assimilationist. Keenly, it is relational and strange." (xii)

Cunningham further explores how this sense of movement is central to queer cinema: "One of the consistent features of New Queer Cinema is that queerness is continually represented in terms of 'movement'. Queerness is always 'on the go'. The ability to move and a general resistance against standing still is a strong, identifiable trope in much queer cinema" (1). In many queer films, this "movability" is symbolized through the road movie:

> The "movability" of queer is often expressed in queer cinema through the recurring motif of the road. The idea that queer moves across things is evocative because in some queer films, its subjects don't inhabit any one specific place for too long. Instead, such characters keep moving across the landscape, forever passing through and between places, identities, things. For ex-

> ample, some of the most notable films of the New Queer Cinema were road movies about young, free-floating characters who hustle their way through life. (Cunningham 1)

By placing *Cloudburst* within this framework, its road narrative can be understood not just as an escape from institutionalization, but as an embodiment of queer resistance—where movement itself becomes an act of defiance against restrictive social and spatial norms. Stella and Dot are old and usually not free-floating, but rather settled characters, who are forced out of their long-term home by Maine's heteronormative legislation. The only reason for them to become *picaras* "on the go" is because they are marked as "different" in terms of their sexual orientation—and they embrace the risk of the open road.

Their marginalization is further underscored by Prentice, the embodiment of everything they are not: young, heterosexual, healthy, and free-floating. His physicality—highlighted during the eponymous cloudburst scene where he strips to do laundry on the beach, and later, when a high-angle shot captures him naked, thumb-sucking, and curled up like a baby in the truck bed—stands in stark contrast to Dot's aging, overweight, and immobile body. Throughout the film, Dot is visually framed as out of place and incapable of independent survival, both at home and on the road. Indoors, she is always seen lying in bed or sitting in a chair, reinforcing her physical limitations. The juxtaposition of her constrained movement with Prentice's effortless mobility highlights the gendered and ageist structures that define who gets to be free on the road.

When the trio arrives at Prentice's parents' house, his mother—a frail, broken woman—is relieved to see him but warns that his father will not tolerate his stay. After a series of slapstick moments, including Prentice's naked father furiously chasing them from the house after Dot accidentally falls asleep in his bed, it becomes clear that Prentice no longer has a home. Recognizing his predicament, Stella and Dot take him with them—not just as a companion, but as their best man, reinforcing their unconventional yet chosen family dynamic.

Adopting Prentice proves life-saving. While walking along the beach, Stella—empty tequila bottle in hand—realizes too late that the tide is rising, cutting them off from the shore. As in many scenes, the characters' liminality is reinforced through their spatial positioning—frequently depicted at the water's edge. This recurring motif emphasizes their in-betweenness, symbolizing both transition and uncertainty, as they navigate the boundaries between freedom and confinement, past and future, life and death. Stranded on what is quickly becoming an island, she urges Dot to hurry, but as during

their nursing home escape, Dot cannot move as fast as Stella wants. This time, Dot falls into the water and cannot get up on her own. Stella tries to lift her, but she isn't strong enough. Panic sets in as the waves rise around them. From a distance, Prentice—once again half-naked, lounging on the hood of their car—hears their cries and sprints to their aid. Together, he and Stella manage to pull Dot to safety. An extreme long shot captures their tiny figures against the vast ocean, visually emphasizing their vulnerability. The moment exposes Dot's physical frailty and, more painfully, Stella's growing realization that she may no longer be able to care for her. Later, at the hotel, Stella voices her doubts to Prentice: "I can't do it. […] Taking Dotty on this trip, I nearly killed us both. Watching her almost drown… I couldn't—I couldn't—she's my life! If you hadn't been there, we'd both be dead. Molly's right. I can't take care of Dotty anymore. That's it. That's it!" (01:13:30–01:14:19). As a result, Stella withdraws her marriage proposal—but Dot refuses to accept it:

> DOT: No, no, you promised me, Stella. You can't break your promise now.
> STELLA: It's not gonna change anything, Dotty. It's not gonna make us younger. It's not gonna mean we can live together. You still have to go to that special care home. And I don't need special care, so I can't go with you. I mean, it's not gonna mean anything to Molly, and it's sure as hell not going to mean anything to that damn judge.
> DOT: It's not going to not change anything. It's going to change everything. […] If I'm going to die in some nursing home somewhere alone, I want to die there as your wife.
> *(01:14:35—01:16:55)*

Although she had been the one skeptical of marriage, she now makes it clear to Stella that there is "a romantic and a political element to her transformed desire for matrimony" (Chivers, "Blind" 139). Because marriage is the only possibility that will allow them to reach a decision about who will take care of Dot together, they strike a deal with Prentice: he will join them to live in Dot's house in Maine and "will do the driving and all the heavy lifting" (01:22:32).

Just as Stella and Dot are about to be married, their ceremony is abruptly interrupted by Molly and her policeman boyfriend, who storm in and attempt to handcuff Dot. But Dot convinces the registrar that she was deceived by her granddaughter. The ceremony is postponed, and instead, Molly is the one led away in handcuffs. At the police station, Dot speaks with Molly, revealing more about their family history and pleading for forgiveness for leaving her

husband—Molly's grandfather—decades earlier. In a moment of reconciliation, she promises to have Molly released on the condition that she agrees to be her bridesmaid. With tensions momentarily resolved, the group sets out once more to complete the wedding.

As they drive through the countryside, Stella basks in the beauty of the open road, feeling a sense of relief: "Nothing but blue, blue skies, blue water. Open. Nothing in the way" (01:23:15). It seems all obstacles have finally been cleared. But suddenly, Dot falls violently ill in the car. They are forced to stop, and with her last reserves of strength, Dot begs Prentice to marry them on the spot. Despite Molly's protests, he complies, performing an impromptu ceremony and pronouncing them "women and wives" (01:25:09) just before Dot dies in Stella's arms. By the film's end, it remains uncertain whether Stella will be allowed to stay in Dot's home. The final scene shows Prentice and Stella standing at the shore, gazing at the ocean as the sun sets—silent, remembering Dot. The Soundtrack (Penny Lang) that played at the beginning of their road trip is repeated: "Ain't life sweet, when we know what we're doing. Ain't life sweet, when we're not afraid to care" (01:29:30).

Dot's death replicates the conventions of traditional escape movies. The protagonist's death highlights the search for individual freedom and identity and the social conflicts that precede an escape. In this sense, the film advocates aging in place, as Sally Chivers also writes, "while appearing to embrace, if not ultimately enact, alternative care arrangements" ("Blind" 139). *Cloudburst* invites fantasies of what such alternatives could look like, as its heroines escape the nursing home specter, even if they only escape it to enjoy freedom for a short while and their marriage does not even last a day ("best fucking day in my life," as Stella calls it (01:29:33)), it is an empowering journey on more than one level.