Introduction

The sun goes down. The trees bend,
they straighten up. They bend.
At eight the youngest daughter comes.
She holds his hand.
She says, Did they feed you?
He says no.
He says, Get me out of here.
He wants so much to say please,
but won't.

After a pause, she says—
he hears her say—
I love you like salt.

— Margaret Atwood, "King Lear in Respite Care"

Most had pleasant-sounding names referring to a valley or a view,
a rest or a happy mood, like Sunset Manor or Pine View Hills or Merry Rest.

— Timothy Diamond, *Making Gray Gold*

Issues of aging, demographic change, and care dependency have become increasingly urgent across the United States, Canada, and Europe. As the North American baby boomer generation reaches retirement, the so-called "silver tsunami"—an ageist metaphor describing the anticipated demographic change (Charise)—has sparked widespread concern about economic stability

and the sustainability of health care infrastructures. Consequently, considerations about how to grow old and where to live in old age have grown more pressing, emerging not just as matters of public policy but also as deeply personal anxieties. These societal debates resonate within contemporary literary and cinematic representations, where narratives of aging, caregiving, and institutionalization critically engage with, and often challenge, prevailing cultural perceptions of later life. In literature, these concerns have given rise to a distinct new genre, the *care home novel*, which focuses specifically on the emotional, social, and psychological experiences tied to relocating oneself or loved ones into a nursing home or similar care facilities. While moving to a care home can be rewarding experience that opens up new opportunities for social engagement and improved health, most fictional representations of institutional life are still rooted in a narrative of failing to age well (Chivers, "Blind" 134). Through such representations, film and fiction participate in the discursive construction of aging and old age and invite readers to re-imagine what eldercare could or should look like. The spatial setting of the care home often functions symbolically—as a metaphorical space embodying the experiences, fears, and uncertainties associated with old age. By literally and figuratively "putting age in its place," the care home highlights the marginalized social position of older adults, yet it can also facilitate agency and a reimagination of the protagonists' life-course narratives. A metaphorical reading of the care home thus shifts our focus from concrete realities to more abstract considerations, encouraging us to reflect on existential questions and whether, and how, an "ideal place" to live and grow old truly exists.

This book contributes to the interdisciplinary field of Age Studies, particularly its exploration of reimagining long-term residential care. Through a close reading and critical analysis of novels, short stories, plays, and films, it investigates how spaces and places designed to house the oldest old are simultaneously shaped by—and actively shape—the experience of old age. What underlying fears, hopes, and assumptions can be traced in such cultural representations? How do aspects of space and place influence the narrative construction of the life course and old age? Furthermore, what do such representations (and blanks that are not narrated) reveal about prevailing imaginations of aging and especially old age, in Canada and the United States, and the cultural assumptions surrounding care homes? Drawing on Susan Braedley's conceptualization of "ruling metaphors" (57) in care home design—namely the hospital, hotel, and home, as well as the prison metaphor proposed here within fictional contexts—this study seeks to contribute to a typology of the "care home novel."

It explores the spatial dimensions of late life and potentially uncovers new, forward-looking metaphors that may redefine conversations about aging, old age, and care practices. Anita Wohlmann's work on metaphor dovetails with this idea when she argues that "even when a metaphor appears problematic and limiting, it can in fact be reused and reimagined in unexpected and creative ways [...] we can repair it, or we can repurpose it (if need be) and thereby—in the spirit of upcycling—discover new value" (1).

While aging has traditionally been conceptualized as a temporal phenomenon, I argue—building on the work of cultural geographers of aging such as Glenda Laws, Gavin Andrews, and others[1]—that it must also be understood through the lens of spatiality. The experience of aging is not only a passage through time but also a movement through space—an idea explicitly embedded in common metaphors of aging. The metaphorical and literal marginalization of older adults as a separate population group, the notion of "the big move"[2] to a care home that severely disrupts everyday routines both temporally and spatially, as well as the prevailing ideal of "aging in place" all underscore the spatial dimensions inherent in discourses on later life. The room of the care home and even the old body itself can be read as converging time and space, intertwining personal histories, memories, and identities with immediate physical surroundings to continuously reshape experiences of selfhood. Recognizing how spatial and temporal dimensions intersect helps us understand how cultural narratives around aging, identity, and care are influenced by the physical spaces older adults live in, move through, and embody in their later years.

By linking Age Studies with approaches used by cultural geographers, this book analyzes how care home narratives rewrite the institution as a textual space in which stereotypical notions of old age can be challenged and deconstructed. Arguing for the centrality of the intersection of age, space, and place to increase our understanding of what it means to grow old, this study uses contemporary anglophone North American texts to illustrate how cultural constructions of especially old age are embedded in spatial practices. Entering the

1 For an excellent overview of approaches in geography, see Enßle-Reinhardt and Helbrecht.

2 Anne M. Wyatt-Brown, Helen Q. Kivnick, Ruth Ray Karpen, and Margaret Morganroth Gullette reflect on the transition into a Continuing Care Retirement Community in *The Big Move: Life Between the Turning Points*, Indiana UP, 2016.

fictional space of narrated long-term care facilities opens a terrain largely unexplored by Age Studies scholars. As the analyzed examples will show, cultural representations of the nursing home may open up theoretical and experiential dialogues about the role of space and place in relation to experiences of aging and the life-course.

This book situates itself in the field of literary Age Studies, or literary gerontology,[3] which has flourished during the past decades. In addition to the successful relaunch of the journal *Age, Culture, Humanities*, edited by Aagje Swinnen and Anita Wohlmann, two significant publications highlight the development and latest advancements in the area: *The Bloomsbury Handbook to Ageing in Contemporary Literature and Film* (2023), edited by Sarah Falcus, Heike Hartung, and Raquel Medina, and *The Palgrave Handbook of Literature and Aging* (2024), edited by Valerie Lipscomb and Aagje Swinnen. Both volumes showcase the diverse range of critical approaches employed in literary Age Studies, encompassing perspectives from environmental studies and cultural geography to critical race theory, postcolonialism, and queer studies. The intersection of space, place, and age is an underrepresented category in this field. The newly emerging genre of care home narratives has also not yet been addressed from an Age Studies perspective that includes spatial theory. Reflecting the *Spatial Turn*, I therefore suggest adding the dimension of space as a lens to a literary Age Studies approach in order challenge prevailing assumptions of the care home as merely a place of decline, disease, and death. Focusing on the importance of spatiality as a framework through which contemporary cultural constructions of home, embodied subjectivity, and old age can be understood, this book addresses cultural representations of institutional eldercare to showcase the complex spatial dynamics that are at play with regard to the construction and redefinition of life-course narratives.

Cultural depictions of care homes in literature and film consistently stress that they function as complex sites where architectural design, institutional organization, and social relationships intersect, shaping both lived experiences and broader perceptions of aging (Katz, *Cultural* 204; Buse et al. 1436). Far from neutral spaces, care homes reflect and reinforce ideologies of care, health, and wellbeing through the practices they make possible. Scholars across disciplines—from sociology and health geography to social policy and gerontology—have examined these institutions as sites where questions of

3 For a detailed discussion of the terms "Age Studies," "Aging Studies," and "Literary Gerontology," see Lipscomb and Swinnen, pp. 2–4.

identity, autonomy, and belonging are negotiated (Andrews 61). Yet the diversity of cultural, political, and economic contexts makes theorizing the care home difficult, underscoring the need for interdisciplinary approaches that can account for both material realities and cultural representations (Chivers, *From*; Chivers and Kriebernegg).

When confronted with the increasingly common imagery of aging and old age in popular culture, film, and literature, we are, as Mike Featherstone and Mike Hepworth argue, in our age-conscious society encouraged to scrutinize physical appearance and focus on the age characteristics of the bodies presented (29). Many such images display older people who have preserved their active lifestyle, beauty, fitness, health, and energy, focusing on "successful aging" (Rowe and Kahn), a term which is still used, but has been critically challenged by Age Studies scholars (Cruikshank, "Successful"; Stowe and Cooney; Katz and Calasanti). However, there are also disturbing images of people who are less successful, people who have "failed"—those "whose bodies have betrayed them and, whether through neglect, illness, accident, or fate, face a future in which they have been accorded the negative status of a dependent […] old age" (Featherstone and Hepworth 29). Cultural representations of nursing homes usually highlight this "failure," not only in terms of the individual's failing body, but also in terms of the families' failure to take care of their loved ones, and society's failure to offer adequate care-giving structures for older adults, as Sally Chivers points out (*From Old Woman* 57).

Margaret Atwood's poem "King Lear in Respite Care," cited in the epigraph, exemplifies the perception of the care home as a site of failure, highlighting both familial guilt and societal neglect. The poem begins with the line, "The daughters have their parties" (85), immediately evoking a sense of abandonment. Like Lear's daughters in Shakespeare's play, they have left their aging father behind. The old man, disoriented and helpless, questions his surroundings: "How did this happen, this cave, this hovel?" (85), emphasizing his alienation. His youngest daughter, likened to Cordelia, visits him and holds his hand, yet her presence only reinforces his unfulfilled longing to return home. The poem suggests that she, too, carries a sense of guilt, embodying the societal expectation that his daughters should provide care. Here, the poem not only points to unresolved intergenerational conflicts and the wish for (re-)connection, but has also been read to reveal the pressure often felt, especially by women, to adhere to traditional gender roles and meet cultural expectations to act as the forgiving, caring, nurturing female (S. Jamieson 3). "King Lear in Respite Care" not only exposes unresolved intergenerational ten-

sions, but also critiques the cultural and structural inadequacies that frame institutional care as both a personal and collective failure. As the poem's title indicates, the old man is in "respite care," a model of short-term institutional care developed to provide temporary relief for family members or other caretakers. How long "King Lear" will be in the nursing home is left open in the poem, but he obviously does not feel "at home" there. At the very least, the reference to Shakespeare's play insinuates a tragic ending.

As film and fiction not only reflect, but also create reality, an analysis of care home narratives might contribute to a new understanding of old age and, consequently, to cultural and social change with regard to care-giving institutions. John Bender, Stanford professor of English and Comparative Literature, shows in his seminal work *Imagining the Penitentiary* that attitudes toward prison that were formulated in eighteenth-century English literature in fact enabled the conception and construction of actual penitentiary prisons and prison reform: "The earlier eighteenth century novel bore the form within which the seeming randomness inside the old prison boundaries would later be restructured into a new penal order. Fabrications in narrative of the power of confinement to reshape personality contributed to a process of cultural representation whereby prisons were themselves conceived and thereby ultimately reinvented" (1). Following Bender, who considers "literature and the visual arts as an advanced form of knowledge, as cognitive instruments that anticipate and contribute to institutional formation" (1), I argue, perhaps boldly, that the recent emergence and rapidly increasing visibility of the care home narrative, together with its Age Studies analysis, could potentially be seen as anticipating and contributing to reform in the area of long-term institutional care. Several of the texts that are analyzed in the following chapters actually counteract the predominant narrative of decline (Gullette, *Declining*) and offer narratives of possibility, agency, and a good life until the very end.

When discussing my research with others, I often noticed that as soon as the term "care home" was mentioned, people felt compelled to share personal stories of visiting or placing a loved one in long-term care—stories often marked by difficult decisions, guilt, and a sense of loss or sadness. Sally Chivers offers an explanation for this reaction when she writes that nursing homes invite fear "partly because they house a conglomeration of what people often dread about old age. If old age were not necessarily to conjure up negative opinion, nursing homes may, in turn, not seem or be as threatening" (From 57–58). I hope that empowering fictional narratives can help reshape these negative perceptions of old age, ultimately fostering a vision of long-

term care as a space of community, perhaps even joy, where a meaningful life is possible.

This project follows in the footsteps of my earlier collaboration with Sally Chivers, whose work on fictional representations of long-term care (Chivers, "Reimagining"; Chivers, *From Old Woman*; Adams and Chivers, "Architecture") has had a huge impact on my thinking, inspiring me to dig deeper into this genre. In 2017, Sally and I collaboratively edited *Care Home Stories: Aging, Disability, and Long-Term Residential Care*, a volume that aimed at highlighting the individual experiences of what it means to grow old in such facilities. Together with our authors, we aimed to challenge stereotypes of institutional care for older adults, illustrate the changes that have occurred over time, and illuminate the continuities in the stories we tell about nursing homes. By bringing together diverse perspectives, our volume sought to deepen the understanding of care homes as complex social and cultural spaces, emphasizing the need for more diverse and empathetic narratives about aging and long-term residential care. We explored various ways in which long-term residential care in later life might become desirable rather than merely necessary. What if institutional long-term care became a place not to fear but to look forward to—a milestone celebrated rather than dreaded, worthy of marking positively, even with a greeting card?

Finally, a quick note on terminology: in the context of this book, the term "long-term care facility" comprises all forms of institutionalized eldercare such as nursing homes, assisted living facilities, or retirement homes. A plethora of different definitions exist that not only depend upon country and region, but also upon individual institutional policies and funding schemes, and although I am aware of the differences, I use the terms "care home," "long-term-care facility," or "retirement home" interchangeably, and am only more specific if the exact type of institution is relevant for the argument upon which I base my interpretation. Sally Chivers and I agreed on a similar solution in our introduction to *Care Home Stories*, where we argue that the term "care homes" is complex enough to warrant discussion. While "nursing home" is commonly used in North America, its meaning varies by jurisdiction. Not all spaces explored in this book involve nursing, though all relate to paid or unpaid care work. Sally and I acknowledge the institutional legacy of these residences but avoid overemphasizing it, as "long-term residential care" can carry difficult connotations, especially for Indigenous people in Canada. With this in mind, I chose to use "care home" for its broader implications while incorporating other terms where relevant. After all, as Baldwin, Harris, and Kelly have noted, "'institu-

tionalization' may occur regardless of the care setting" (qtd. in Andrews and Phillips, "Changing" 65).

Chapter Outline

In Chapter One, "Over the Hill to the Margins: The Spatial Politics of Age and Care," I briefly trace the development of institutional eldercare in North America. This is not to be understood as a detailed historiography of care-giving institutions, but serves to establish the context within which cultural narratives appearing in care-home literature and film are embedded. The chapter begins by tracing the historical stigma associated with the institution's history from poorhouses to modern care facilities. The enduring fear of nursing homes, described by Betty Friedan as "death sentences" (510) is linked to their historical roots in poor relief systems and their continued portrayal as spaces of decline and dependency. Building on this historical context, the chapter delves into the spatiality of age relations, emphasizing how care homes are more than just physical structures; they are shaped by intersecting social, economic, and ideological forces. Drawing on theorists such as Stephen Katz, Gavin Andrews, and Glenda Laws, the discussion highlights how spatial organization within these institutions influences the lived experiences of residents, caregivers, and family members. Institutional spaces, rather than being neutral, actively contribute to the construction of aged identities through their design, regulations, and the discourses surrounding them.

The second part of this chapter puts contemporary spatial theory, especially the work of Michel Foucault, Henri Lefebvre, Doreen Massey, John Urry, and Mikhail Bakhtin in dialogue with Age Studies in order to elucidate how these approaches and methods can enrich one another and to set the stage for my analysis. The third part of the chapter introduces the genre of the "care home narrative" and discusses the themes that have thus far guided its interpretations. The emergence of the "care home novel" as a distinct genre signals a growing engagement with the complexities of later life in fiction. While many narratives reinforce fears of institutionalization through depictions of neglect and confinement, others present more refined portrayals that emphasize autonomy, resilience, and community within care homes. By integrating historical analysis, spatial theory, and a typology of the care home novel, this chapter underscores the importance of viewing long-term care through a spatial lens.

The first part of Chapter Two, "Home, Hotel, Hospital: The Care Home at the Nexus of Public and Private," establishes the care home as a liminal space that exists between institutional and domestic realms, drawing comparisons

to hospitals, hotels, and even airplanes to highlight its structured yet ambiguous nature. While efforts to design care homes with homelike aesthetics seek to soften their institutional character, the chapter interrogates the limitations of these approaches, questioning whether spatial design alone can counteract the loss of autonomy, identity, and agency experienced by residents—laying the foundation for the literary analysis that follows. I then explore the symbolic and concrete dimensions of spatial identity by focusing on fictional characters who, as residents or workers of an institution discursively lodged within decline, search for new progress narratives that emphasize their individuality. Patients/residents and caregivers alike must redefine their identities in the homogenizing place situated at the crossroads of hotel and hospital, a place that is commonly seen as the opposite of "home." With Edna Alford's short story cycle *A Sleep Full of Dreams* and the Caribbean-Canadian writer Shani Mootoo's novel *Cereus Blooms at Night* as touchstones, the first part of this chapter discusses narratives in which care-givers function as focalizers, introducing readers to the world of the care home from the perspective of two nurses. *A Sleep Full of Dreams* focuses on Nurse Arla, a young woman who finds it terribly difficult, even threatening, to deal with old age, frailty, and dying. In vignettes that are simultaneously brutal, grotesque, comically absurd, and sad, readers are presented with a nightmarish hospital-like institution that is diametrically opposed to any notion of what it means to be "at home." The cycle reveals the powerlessness, vulnerability, and loneliness of the old in the world of the care home, and crystallizes the conflicts central to the struggle to maintain one's sense of self in an institutional space that interpellates, in the words of Louis Althusser (28), everyone (i.e., both caregivers and recipients of care) into their respective roles.

The second text, *Cereus Blooms at Night*, explores intersectional identity, memory, and resilience by examining the entanglement of personal histories, spatial belonging, and the legacies of colonial violence. Through the narrative of Tyler, a homosexual Afro-Caribbean nurse at Paradise Alms House on the Caribbean island of Lantanacamara, readers learn the life story of his patient, an old woman named Mala Ramchandin. The almshouse, literally a "home over the hill," and its adjacent garden constitute the setting of the story's frame narrative and function as a productive literary "third space" (Bhabha 37) in which both Mala's and Nurse Tyler's life course narratives can be re-written, enabling the marginalized characters to come to terms with their traumatic pasts.

In the second part of chapter two, I juxtapose Joan Barfoot's novel *Exit Lines* and Ashley McKenzie's short film *Rhonda's Party*. These two narratives depict institutional care from the point of view of residents who challenge the "nursing home specter." In contrast to phenomenological studies of care home narratives that explore transformation processes of individuals into "institutional bodies" (Wiersma and Dupuis), I show how fictional characters (both patients and care-givers) can be transformed and themselves transform the institution in what I see as counter-narratives of long-term institutional care. They demonstrate how subversive protagonists manage to maintain a sense of self in seemingly unconquerable institutional settings.

In Chapter Three, "Captives of Care—Prisoners to the Palsy: Resisting Confinement from Within," I reconsider the representation of spatial exclusion of frail, old people in the context of institutional care by offering a close reading of four texts that interpret the care home as an institution of confinement. These serve as examples that illustrate how care home residents, or inmates, each in their own way, rebel more or less successfully against their confinement from within the care home. The first part establishes confinement as a central metaphor in representations of aging, positioning the nursing home as a synecdoche for broader anxieties about bodily decline and loss of autonomy. Drawing on Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope, as well as literary and cultural narratives that frame old age as imprisonment, the discussion highlights how spatial metaphors—whether the aging body as a restrictive space or the care home as a site of entrapment—shape perceptions of aging, thereby setting the stage for the literary analysis that follows. I then juxtapose May Sarton's *As We Are Now* (1973) with Leslie Larson's *Breaking Out of Bedlam* (2010), two *Reifungsromane* (Waxman, "From") in which the old and strong female protagonists document their struggle against homogenization and marginalization in institutional long-term care by means of keeping a journal. Both women find a way to maintain their agency and individuality and figuratively shake off the shackles of institutional confinement. While Sarton's main character Caro Spencer chooses to commit suicide by burning down the care home, Larson's protagonist Cora Sledge opts for life and moves back into her old house.

In the third text discussed in this chapter, John Mighton's play *Half Life* (2005), the space of a prison-like long-term care facility is represented as a "total institution" (Goffman, *Asylums* xiii) in which the "geriatric gaze" (Hepworth, "Images" 12) prevents a romantic relationship between two residents, Clara and Patrick, from developing. Patrick, who is locked away on a closed ward, keeps cracking the door code in order to see his beloved Clara, who has dementia,

but seems to remember very clearly that she and Patrick were lovers during the war. However, both her son and Patrick's daughter have difficulties accepting the old couple's romance. Life inside the limits of institutional space is, as the title of the play indicates, only a "half life;" the nursing home is a world separated from the outside, where different rules and regulations apply that contribute to interpellating individuals into their roles as patients, stripping them of their personal freedom and choice.

This choice is entirely obliterated in Margaret Atwood's dystopian short story "Torching the Dusties," which portrays a violent movement systematically incinerating elder care facilities across North America. Returning to Michel Foucault's concept of "heterotopia," I explore the marginalization of old age and the ageism manifested in spatial segregation. The short story can be read as a satirical burden narrative of old age that reveals how the rhetoric of crisis disaffiliates the oldest old (in discursive and spatial terms) from the young, establishing a binary opposition that affects the nursing home inmates' identity construction.

Chapter Four, "Fugitives and Escapees: A Gendered Reading of the Spatiality of Resistance," explores the care home escape narrative, a genre that has gained increasing popularity in recent years. Using the road narrative as a template, these stories contrast the freedom of the open road with the limited world of the care home, presenting escape as an act of resistance against the institutionalization of old age, and old age itself. The journeys undertaken by care home "escapees" are both physical and psychological, allowing protagonists to challenge spatial confinement, reclaim agency, and reevaluate their identities in ways that would not have been possible within the restrictive context of institutional care. Framing these narratives within spatial theory, particularly Doreen Massey's argument that space is inherently shaped by gendered power relations, the chapter examines how care homes function as sites of coerced immobility (Urry), where older individuals—especially women—are positioned as passive subjects rather than autonomous agents. The decline narrative of old age is counteracted by the escape narrative, which reconfigures the spatiality of aging in complex and ambivalent ways. Gendered power structures remain deeply embedded in these narratives: female escapees, as seen in *Cloudburst* (Fitzgerald, 2010) and *Flee, Fly, Flown* (Hepburn, 2013), often encounter obstacles and are perceived as being "out of place" when transgressing spatial and social boundaries. Hepburn's protagonists, for example, find their newfound mobility overwhelming and "disconcerting" (172), whereas male escapees, such as those in *Amigoland* (Casares, 2009), tend to navigate their new-

found autonomy with greater self-determination. By integrating theories of mobility (Urry), agency, and the gendered spatiality of the road (Ganser; Slettedahl Macpherson), this chapter interrogates the ways in which care home escape narratives challenge dominant discourses on aging and institutionalization. It also considers the increasing popularity of these narratives and their potential to subvert traditional representations of old age—not by denying its limitations, but by reimagining aging as a site of resistance and self-assertion.