Uncanny Subjects

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PREFACE

IN THE SUMMER of 2005 I had dinner with my grandparents at a restaurant near their home in Utica, New York. The restaurant was chosen because it was my grandmother's favorite, or more precisely, it was the only place outside her home where she would willingly eat a meal. Our server, a woman I'd guess to be in her fifties, was friendly, in a somewhat overbearing way. She took a self-conscious liking to my grandmother and repeatedly commented on her looks and demeanor to the rest of us at the table, including my grandfather and my parents. My grandmother had lost most of her hearing and was beginning to have trouble with her memory as a result of Alzheimer's. Her strategy, devised over a decade ago when her hearing began to fail, was to smile or even laugh gently when people spoke to her, which we had to come to recognize as her response to inquiries she could not hear. "Is it just her hearing or is anything else wrong with her?" the server asked us at one point. And then later, in reference to my grandmother's long gray hair, which was pinned to the back of her head with a great number of bobby pins, "most ladies cut and dye and curl their hair into these big poufs, her long hair is so cute, she's just so *cute.*" My grandmother continued to smile.

This encounter, which occurred around the same time I was embarking on this study of aging, proved instructive. The woman's remarks had much to say about the difference age makes. Her comments reflect the

kind of pathologization and objectification that culture inflicts on old age, a pattern of othering that can at least partly explain the antipathy felt by many at the prospect of being categorized as "old." Such a category, as the server's comments illustrate, can render one invisible or entirely absent; although present, my grandmother was transformed into the third person. The aging, or here aged, subject is both objectified and exiled. The woman's observations reveal her efforts to read correctly the sign of difference that sat before her. This study seeks to restore what this kind of quotidian interaction erases—the *presence* of an older subject—and, more importantly, to investigate the repercussions of occupying the tenuous cultural position of "old."

Though old age may be a category that awaits everyone lucky enough to live a long life, experiences of the difference of age vary immensely as aging interacts with other cultural categories including race, class, ethnicity, and, most dramatically, gender. As feminism has made clear, gender is largely responsible for the formation of subjectivity, and one need only glance at any representation within popular media, whether print, television, or digital, to quickly recognize that aging is distinctly gendered. Casually surveying the anti-aging discourse of magazines displayed at the supermarket checkout, billboards, "makeover" reality-TV shows, and other so-called women's television programming, one might be tempted to assume that aging is primarily a "woman's issue." Indeed, the server's comments touched only my grandmother, though my grandfather, who is actually one year older, was also at the table. Her reference to my grandmother's "cuteness" highlights the role of the "the body as the dominant signifier of old age" and the infantilizing attention paid to "unusual" old bodies (Woodward, *Discontents* 10). The server's remarks draw attention to the either/or logic that forces an old person, or, more precisely, an old woman, into a dilemma: conceal, modify, deny your old age and you may be seen as ridiculous, even slightly shameful; wear your age without adjustment and you are "cute"—innocuous and childish.[1] And yet with-

1. Herbert Blau draws attention to the rejection in western culture of bodily adornments in old age, arguing that such attention to appearance points to the existence of desire in the old, a desire that the not-yet-old wish to deny (20). As well, Kathleen Woodward responds to the dilemma between the modification and acceptance of old age in her treatment of cosmetic surgery, arguing that such procedures are meant to resolve this dilemma through invisible correction: "With cosmetic surgery, the mask of the aging body is doubled over. The surface of the body is cut and stretched to disguise the surface of the body. Unlike the hysterical body whose surface is inscribed with symptoms, the objective of the surgically youthful body is to speak nothing" (*Discontents* 162). These issues of concealment and revelation, the visible and invisible, are

out the concealment of cosmetics, dyes, clothing, even surgeries, without appropriate adjustments in activity and behavior made to hide what the not-yet-old, the not-yet-aged, largely interpret as a process of decline and degeneration, the old female subject is rendered benign in other ways, in this case through infantilization.

But I must complicate such a pat gender analysis with a caveat: my grandmother's disability was apparent at the time—the server was warned of her hearing loss, and my grandmother often looked wary or confused. I argue that the intertwining of pathologization and infantilization implied by the woman's comments, which were undoubtedly offered in a spirit of friendly concern, reflects attitudes toward old age and disability as much as gender. Anyone who has spent time in a later-life care facility knows that pathologization, infantilization, and objectification are not reserved for older women alone. In advanced age, men are often deemed "cute" as well. I have no doubt that aging is always inflected by other categories of difference, but my aim is to treat aging as its own difference, which means considering both women *and* men as aging subjects. As a result, discussions of gender have fluctuating prominence throughout my analysis of aging, often implied in the background, and occasionally coming into sharp focus, as in chapter 3. My interests lie in the meanings that arise from the often disorienting and inevitable changes of age, as well as how such changes are revised and rewritten by gender. Gender and age are deeply entwined, but I argue that the difference enacted by old age sometimes outweighs the concerns of gender. Meeting a retired elderly professor and department chair at a party he attended with his daughter, I was reminded of my grandmother's enforced invisibility. The man's daughter explained how she is consistently relegated to the role of interpreter when they are together, though her father suffers no cognitive disabilities. Strangers often spoke of her father in the third person when he stood or sat right beside her. Such interactions reveal how people in contemporary western culture repeatedly interpret the bodily signs of advanced age as indicators of reduced agency and comprehension.

Between the generation of the retired professor and my grandmother and my own generation is a demographic anomaly. Because of the combination of increased life expectancy and lower birth rates, the aging baby boom has produced an unusually large segment of the population approaching retirement and later life: "In 2001, one in every eight Americans was over the age of 65; in 2030 one in four people will be over the age of 65" (Mooney, Knox, and Schacht 277). Throughout the western world,

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integral to the exploration of images and doubling presented in chapter 3.

educational institutions, governmental bodies, and marketers are responding to the demographic phenomenon captured in the title of Kausler and Kausler's encyclopedia of aging: *The Graying of America* (2001), now in its second edition. Of course the United States is not the only country with an aging population; demographic shifts are happening all over the industrialized world, as Laura Katz Olson points out in her introduction to *The Graying of the World: Who Will Care for the Frail Elderly?* (1). The anxious question of Olson's title tellingly constructs older subjects as a feeble, helpless population, a looming burden. The worried title underlines a central feature of demographic analysis and projection: fear that an excessive number of old people will produce a destructively imbalanced society. But aging anxieties are not limited to a fear of old age as a faceless mass of others. The popular media effectively capitalize on the public's angst-ridden awareness of aging *within,* a frightening otherness that consumers are encouraged to repress at all costs. As larger and larger market segments recognize the specter of the "frail elderly" in their own futures and reflections, an anti-aging industry (products, services, and the companies who promote them) has become increasingly powerful, not to mention lucrative. The us/them division declared in a title such as Olson's cannot hold: the audience it addresses, the not-yet-old, not-yet-frail, can only deny and objectify old age for so long before its familiarity becomes undeniable and protective categories begin to crumble.

Nonetheless, many aging subjects struggle to delay the looming "frailty" of later life in a variety of ways. As more and more consumers age into old age, products and services emerge from the expanding anti-aging industry with the ostensible goal of easing the "burden" of aging. Recently in North America and the United Kingdom, numerous education and research facilities have developed to study the increasingly pertinent subject of human aging. Such institutes operate in Newcastle, Sheffield, Oxford, and at the universities of Toronto, North Carolina, and Pennsylvania, to name just a few. In 1996 the Buck Institute, "the first independent research facility in the country [United States] focused solely on aging and age-related disease," opened its doors in Novato, California ("About the Institute"). The year 1993 saw the inception of the American Academy of Anti-Aging Medicine, or A4M, which proclaims "anti-aging medicine . . . as the new health care paradigm" and offers "a solution to alleviate some of the burden of this burgeoning older population" ("What Is Anti-Aging Medicine?"). The aims of these institutions dovetail neatly with popular media representational practices, in which aging functions as a dangerous villain that must be battled at every opportunity, with the

various providers of anti-aging products and services promising effective weapons of defense. As declared on the A4M Web site, "America is being summoned to a new call to arms" ("What Is Anti-Aging Medicine?").

Aging and its anxieties have also gained prominence in television programming. In reality-TV shows such as *Age of Love* and *Ten Years Younger* (with UK and U.S. versions), age produces the central conflict. In the former, female contestants in their twenties ("kittens") and their forties ("cougars") compete for the attention of an eligible bachelor. In *Ten Years Younger,* contestants, who include a few token males, are judged by strangers who guess their ages, setting the figure that specialists in hair, makeup, and (in the UK version only) cosmetic surgery attempt to decrease by ten years. All three shows have appeared within the past few years. It seems age has become the new, trendy difference in reality television—such shows have long capitalized on gender, race, and class—that can effectively triangulate familiar gender binaries, as in *Age of Love.* Old age has long been a subject of fear and trepidation, even disgust,[2] but these anxieties are taking on a new pitch in a time of rapidly aging populations. My project is an attempt to address the imbalance between the preoccupation with age in popular and scientific culture and the near invisibility of age as a category of difference in humanities scholarship.

Contemporary social contexts provide multiple narratives of aging, in various media, that rely on numeric boundaries to mitigate the anxieties surrounding aging into old age. A case in point appears in a letter from the editor of the newly launched Canadian edition of *More* magazine, "Canada's magazine celebrating women over 40" (Summer 2007). In response to a sixty-nine-year-old reader who urged the magazine not to "forget those of us who are over 60" (Taylor), the editor explained that "our primary focus is communicating with women in their forties and fifties," though she implored the marginalized sixty-nine-year-old to "continue to read and enjoy *More*" ("Editor's Note"). The magazine aimed at older women makes efforts to exclude the old and thereby protect its target audience from age by association. But in spite of all such efforts to segment aging into discrete periods, and categories, we are all growing older every moment, and this constant movement of time will eventually undermine any attempt to fix age identity.

The movement of aging is the movement of our lives, and this dynamism aligns aging with narrative: both are a function of time, of change, of

2. For historical accounts of the marginalization of the elderly, see Achenbaum, Beauvoir, Demos, Katz, Laslett, Mangum, Small.

one thing happening after another. Human lives follow a certain biological narrative trajectory that moves from birth through maturity into adulthood and old age toward death. As a result, subjects understand their lives through narrative trajectories—through stories—not necessarily as they are living moment to moment, but in reflection, reflection that becomes, many argue, more and more likely as one ages into old age (see, for example, Butler; Woodward, "Telling Stories"). For these reasons, I found that my study of aging quickly became an inquiry into narrative and its relation to the construction and comprehension of selves.

The narrativity of aging inspired me to look to storytellers to better understand the difference of age. I discovered that literature and film have much to contribute to the discourse of aging identity and its various anxieties. I have chosen to focus on fictional accounts of aging into old age because life writing about aging has been theorized more frequently and fully already, but also because I was interested in authors and filmmakers as theorists of sorts; I looked to see how they *imagined* aging. As I read fiction and watched films, I recognized a recurring depiction of aging into old age as a disorienting process of self-estrangement, one that often shed light on the strange nature of temporal identity. In short, these texts exposed a version of what Freud called the "uncanny," which I reconfigure as the uncanniness of aging. My own theorization of difference and identity is a response to a perceived thematic similitude within contemporary narratives of aging. To that end, I have focused my discussion on a small number of texts that have, each in its own way, taught me something specific about the implications of uncanny aging in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, about the difficulty of reconciling the conflicting versions of identity that culture offers its subjects. My own theorizing is an attempt to better understand the implications of these narratives.

In addressing the uncanniness of aging I am not entirely alone. My work builds on the pioneers of critical aging studies—in particular, Simone de Beauvoir and Kathleen Woodward, both of whom address the strange otherness of old age. In her brief but astute characterization of old age as the "Other within" (320), Beauvoir evokes the dialectic of repression and recognition that makes aging so disturbing and, I argue, uncanny. My project engages theories of aging and identity posited in theory *and* fiction. Beauvoir's description of the vertiginous effect of aging is echoed in fictional depictions of aging into old age as an unsettling discovery of repressed strangeness, calling to mind Freud's account of the uncanny as "that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar" (340). His essay on the subject has often functioned as

a primary text in discussions of literary instability and the inscrutability of meaning (see, for example, Cixous, Kofman, Kristeva, Lydenberg, Royle, Wolfreys). Though Freud's essay is a formative influence on my theorization of uncanny identity, my analysis is not strictly psychoanalytic; those interested in such a reading should consult Kathleen Woodward's fine book *Aging and Its Discontents*. In my own treatment of aging, Freud's essay functions less as a primary text than as an enabling source of provocation, its multiplicity and open-endedness inciting forays into wider-ranging concerns. My treatment of Freud's essay departs from recent theorization of the uncanny, which often analyzes and even dismantles the various sections of Freud's text (see, in particular, Cixous, Lydenberg, Royle); instead, Freud functions as one of many interpretive voices offering insight into the strange otherness of aging.

This study remains an unusual one in the humanities. Despite shifting demographics, age remains an undertheorized site of difference in cultural studies. The most recent edition of Routledge's *The Cultural Studies Reader* makes no mention of age or aging in any of its eleven sections. There are sections devoted to "Ethnicity and Multiculturalism" and "Sexuality and Gender," but for all its attention to the "The New Cultural Politics of Difference," to borrow from the title of Cornel West's essay in the collection, age remains invisible. Similarly, a 448-page reader on identity recently published by Blackwell announces the noteworthy categories of difference in its title: *Identities: Race, Class, Gender and Nationality.* In their representation of the contemporary, anthologies of cultural studies and of critical and literary theory repeatedly overlook the structuring force of what Woodward calls "gerontophobia" (*Discontents* 193) in western culture. But this oversight is limited to the cultural studies work done by scholars in the humanities. Age analysis flourishes in the social sciences. This project is an attempt to build bridges of understanding between these disciplines, and to demonstrate why such interaction might be productive. My perspective emerges from training in literature and cinema studies, and consequently, this project has its roots in literary discourse. Because the field of aging studies has been largely dominated by the social sciences, my literary approach in itself fosters a kind of interdisciplinarity. To that end, I have tried to function as a translator between these often discrete fields of inquiry, to produce a book for a diverse audience, for any reader invested in the theorization of identity. In her landmark study of aging, Woodward remarks, "We repress the subject of aging. We relegate aging to others. We do not recognize it in ourselves" (Woodward, *Discontents* 193). Here Woodward is explaining the operations and effects of western culture's

gerontophobia, but I think her remarks also effectively elaborate the critical invisibility of aging in humanities scholarship. This study of aging and identity in fiction and film is a step toward reversing the critical repression of aging, an initial gesture toward revelation and understanding that I hope will soon open into a wider field of study.

I conclude with a final anecdote, this one from the other end of the age continuum. My own relative youth has led many to question my motives for studying old age. "Aging?" my sister-in-law asked in an email, finding such interests unlikely, even bizarre, in someone "so young." This is a common response to descriptions of my work, and I think the recurrence of this question has much to say about the difference of aging. It is not new for scholars of literature and film to explore issues outside their own range of experience; indeed, one of fiction's primary pleasures is its ability to lead its readers and spectators beyond the familiar. And though one's own identity must often be reckoned with when one strays into territories of identity politics different from one's own, there is some consensus that studying the workings of misogyny or racism in a text teaches one about categories of gender and race, about the function of difference. Cultural critics have come to recognize that everyone is implicated; we are all subjects of gender, race, sexuality. Yet aging remains somehow *different,* somehow outside the realm of theories of identity, a different difference, one might say. Denial allows "aging" to remain the concern of the "aged," despite the fact that we are *all* unavoidably implicated in discussions of aging. Like everyone around me, including those who ask "why aging?," I am constantly aging and with luck I will become old. "Why aging?"—I think perhaps the essential question is "why *not* aging?" Why do so few identity theorists enter into these discussions? What is so unsettling about aging, and what is so "different" about old age? It is questions such as these that this study attempts to answer.