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Uncanny Subjects

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INTRODUCTION

UNCANNY SUBJECTS

[T]he uncanny is that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar.

—Freud, “The Uncanny” 340

THIS STUDY addresses age as an undertheorized sign of difference in the humanities, a difference that contemporary narrative fiction and film can help illuminate. The twentieth and twenty-first centuries are important times for a reconsideration of aging into old age, given what is sometimes anxiously referred to as the “graying” of North America. The unprecedented rise in older populations in recent years has increased the attention paid to aging and the elderly across a variety of disciplines, including biology, psychology, and sociology. In the United States anti-aging has become a multibillion-dollar industry supported by the American Academy of Anti-Aging Medicine. Efforts to combat the signs of aging have never been stronger, or more lucrative; a cultural obsession with youth eclipses a growing aging population, furthering the contradictory position of the aging subject as culturally masked and erased, sequestered into institutions for the aged, and, at the same time, visibly present and pathologized.

Within both popular and scientific discourses, aging has largely been construed as a process of decline moving toward death.¹ The discipline of

1. Sociologist Stephen Katz provides an insightful inquiry into the repercussions of the advent of gerontology in *Disciplining Old Age: The Formation of Gerontological*

aging studies is largely a response to the oppressive negativity of cultural constructions of aging into old age, working to expose the denigration of aging, replacing myth with insight and evidence. Included among these critics are the theorists Stephen Katz terms “critical gerontologists,” who take issue with the “scientificity” of gerontology, and “advocate stronger ties to the humanities, endorse reflexive methodologies, historicize ideological attributes of old age, promote radical political engagement, and resignify the aging process as heterogeneous and indeterminate” (4). In this way branches of aging studies have often functioned much like other early investigations into the issue of “difference”: like critics of racial, gendered, ethnic, and sexual difference, critics in aging studies have been invested in exposing aging and old age as a cultural construct, interrogating commonsense notions of age as entirely the result of biological processes, as dominated by decline. Aging studies works to reveal how “the aging body is never just a body subjected to the imperatives of cellular and organic decline, for as it moves through life it is continuously being inscribed and reinscribed with cultural meanings” (Featherstone and Wernick 2–3). As a result there is a great deal of criticism that is recuperative, working to dismantle, or at least interrogate, negative stereotypes and imagery surrounding old age, to think beyond the “discourse of senescence” that Katz identifies (40).

Because preoccupation with “the body as the dominant signifier of old age” in traditional gerontology and popular culture continues to support the association of old age with decline and death, many critics make great efforts to present alternative views of old age that cast doubt on the inevitability of decline, or at the very least, scrutinize the term “old age” and its

Knowledge. As he makes clear, the emergence of geriatrics and gerontology in the post-war era as means of studying old age has contributed to conflicting discourses of aging as simultaneously normal and pathological. In these fields, old age was studied primarily as a time of life overdetermined by the body and its decline. Katz suggests the more recent development of “critical gerontology” moves away from gerontology’s strict focus on the body and its problems to consider in detail the many contexts of aging (historical, social, economic) (*Disciplining* 3–4). Even prior to the emergence of geriatrics and gerontology, “medical research developed what we have called a discourse of senescence: a new organization of associated ideas and practices that captured the aged body” (40). Practitioners regarded the aged body as a particular entity, as a legible system of signification that communicated its inner “states of disorder” (41). Such inner “disorder” was reflected in what was perhaps the most definitive aspect of the aging body, and by implication of the aging person: the aged body as dying (41). This concept continues to influence contemporary estimations of aging and old age, in both gerontological and popular discourses, obscuring the presence of the elderly with anticipation of their future absence.

ideological sources.² The work of Margaret Morganroth Gullette has been invaluable in exposing the damaging, pervasive myth of age as inherently and necessarily a process of decline. The very titles of her books invoke the anti-ageist thrust of her argument: *Safe at Last in the Middle Years*, *Declining to Decline*, and *Aged by Culture*. Her interdisciplinary research shows how everything from literature to museum displays to the fashion industry enforces, and reinforces, “the dominance of decline narrative, early nostalgia, age apprehensiveness, [the] slicing [of] life into mutually hostile stages,” all of which represent “crimes against the life course” (*Aged by Culture* 37).³ Clearly, the highly negative popular discourse of aging is in need of critical dismantling, and texts such as Gullette’s are essential for drawing attention to the ramifications of associating aging exclusively with disintegration. Aging studies scholarship has been invaluable in opening up the field of study, but much like early feminist criticism, the work threatens to slip into a dualistic discourse of positive versus negative representation.⁴ There is more to culture’s construction of the aging process than competing narratives of progress or decline. Each of these evaluative models can easily become a limiting script that erases particularities and ambiguity, producing or reinforcing either/or diagnoses.

The literature and films examined throughout this study dismantle this dichotomization through their continual reliance on contradiction and ambiguity, on simultaneity, and on inconsistency. Fiction allows age to work as both a category of difference and a particular, personal, imagined experience. Moreover, narrative representations have much to offer the theorization of aging and old age, since both narrative and aging rely on, and reflect, the passage of time. The complex interrelation of narrative studies and aging studies informs this project.

Despite ongoing attention to aging in the social sciences, aging con-

2. Much of aging studies criticism works to correct this bias. Most prominent, perhaps, has been the work of Simon Biggs, Mike Featherstone, Margaret Morganroth Gullette, Mike Hepworth, Stephen Katz, and Kathleen Woodward.

3. Gullette’s treatment of the “recovery novel” and museum displays appear in *Aged by Culture* (2004), while her discussion of the fashion industry can be found in her article “The Other End of the Fashion Cycle: Practicing Loss, Learning Decline,” which appears in the anthology *Figuring Age* (1999).

4. Early feminist film theory is a good example of this critical evolution. The sociological “positive images” criticism of the early 1970s, particularly that of Marjorie Rosen and Molly Haskell, sought to neatly categorize representations of women as positive or negative. Increased attention to medium-specificity in the late seventies, and the growing diversity of critical voices in the eighties, quickly overshadowed the dualistic discourse of image assessment.

tinues to be what Anne Wyatt-Brown calls “a missing category in current literary theory” (Introduction 1). The late twentieth century proved to scholars the necessity of considerations of difference in the study of literature and film, in particular, of the formative structural distinctions between persons that produce us as subjects, namely distinctions of race and ethnicity, gender and sexuality. Yet a degree of blindness to the influence of age, or more particularly, of old age, on subjectivity remains. Although there are many sociological studies of aging and culture,⁵ there are few attempts to examine the ways cultural texts, literature and film, construct multiple narratives of aging that intersect and sometimes conflict with existing critical theories of aging. This is what I address in *Uncanny Subjects*.

AGING AND IDENTITY

Old age renders its subjects both invisible and unmistakable; personhood is often cast into doubt, even imagined as entirely erased, while the body marked by age draws the eye and comment. The collision of hyperbolic specularity—the old person as spectacle and specimen—and cultural invisibility is a paradox that informs much of my study of aging. Older subjects are often rejected by the young, but this rejection is not entirely successful, and takes the form of disavowal rather than successful othering. Disavowal, in Freudian terms, is denial that requires constant effort to maintain, resulting in a paradoxically simultaneous awareness and ignorance.⁶ This simultaneous belief/nonbelief in one’s own participation in aging toward old age results in a rejection of old age that is impossible for the aging subject to maintain.

5. See, for example, the work of Simon Biggs, Mike Featherstone, Margaret Morganroth Gullette, Haim Hazan, Mike Hepworth, Stephen Katz, Sharon Kaufman, and Andrew Wernick.

6. Describing the process of disavowal that precipitates the attachment to a fetish, Freud writes that the patient “has retained that belief, but he has also given it up. In the conflict between the weight of the unwelcome perception and the force of his counter-wish, a compromise has been reached, as is only possible under the dominance of the unconscious laws of thought—the primary process” (“Fetishism” 353). In Freud’s argument this concurrent belief/nonbelief results in a process of substitution, a psychological overinvestment that he terms “fetishism.” I cite Freud because disavowal, in this general sense, is crucial to my concept of old age in contemporary culture. The specifics of Freud’s argument—the fetish involves a woman’s possession of a phallus and subsequent castration—is part of his androcentric legacy, which I seek to destabilize in my own gender analysis.

The disavowal of old age occurs for a number of reasons, all of which rest on the problem of temporality, that is, on the endlessly shifting condition of age. Obviously age (youth, middle age, old age) is an inherently unstable category. In some sense it does not exist since our age identity is always in process. As Simone de Beauvoir explains in her own study of old age, “life is an unstable system in which balance is continually lost and continually recovered: it is inertia that is synonymous with death. Change is the law of life” (17), and it is this constant transformation that gives the concept of age its chimerical quality. It is endlessly slippery, dominated by the ephemerality of time; to speak or write of age is to speak of the present, the constantly receding “now.” Because of this obvious fact—aging is a process, not a state—the discourse of aging is endlessly fraught. Until death clicks the stopwatch, one is always aging; how is one to write of old age if one can always be older? This status of age and old age as endlessly shifting works in tandem with the universality of age to undermine efforts to construct age as a category of difference. The tension between universal mutability and the desire for fixed age identities is an important feature of my study.

For many aging becomes a process of alienation, producing a doubling of self that I examine in chapter 3.⁷ Joseph Esposito anticipates such a process of estrangement in his appeal to aging as “a new identity crisis” that is “not the crisis of youthful development in which we ask “What will I be like when I am grown up?” but a crisis in which we wonder “Will I still be myself when I have grown old?” (2). Simone de Beauvoir explores the idea in psychoanalytic terms, suggesting that old age is an internalization of difference, of the difference that the old subject comes to represent for the outside world: “Within me it is the Other—that is to say the person I am for the outsider—who is old: and that Other is myself” (316). Such change is deeply disturbing; indeed, de Beauvoir deems aging more frightening than death since the latter involves a complete transition into nothingness, while the former process promises potentially distressing transformation:

[T]he dead are *nothing*. This nothingness can bring about a metaphysical vertigo, but in a way it is comforting—it raises no problems. “I shall no longer exist.” In a disappearance of this kind I retain my identity. Think-

7. Mike Featherstone writes of the declining aging body as “misrepresenting and imprisoning the inner self” (“Post-Bodies” 227). Simon Biggs summarizes the arguments of Featherstone and others by concentrating on the “mask motif” to deal with “an antagonism between the ageing body and a youthful ‘inner’ self” (*Mature* 63). See also Esposito (68–69); Woodward (*Discontents* 60–63).

ing of myself as an old person when I am twenty or forty means thinking of myself as someone else as *another* than myself. Every metamorphosis has something frightening about it. (11, original emphasis)

The experience of self-estrangement is part of the paradox of old age and the overriding sense that “as we age into old age, we are both more ourselves and less ourselves” (Holland 72). This notion of simultaneous gain and loss relies on divisions between internal and external selves that aging into old age appears to augment. In old age tensions between bodily and “true” selves are understood to increase to the point of fracture, giving rise to what Kathleen Woodward has identified as the “mirror stage of old age,” which is “the inverse of the mirror stage of infancy. What is whole is felt to reside *within*, not *without*, the subject. The image in the mirror is understood as uncannily prefiguring the disintegration and nursling dependence of advanced age” (*Discontents* 67, original emphasis). To see “one’s own aged body with a shock of recognition” (63) is to experience “the *uncanny*” (63, original emphasis). The notion of older persons as inevitably split subjects appears often in writing on aging, both scholarly and fictional. The persistent attention paid to internal, essential, or true selves in aging studies says much about the belief in youth-based identities, and singular, “modern” selves. This insistence on “core” youthful selves betrays the dread of change that provokes aging subjects to reject an altered self rather than admit to transformative identity.⁸

THE UNCANNY

As Nicolas Royle confirms, the uncanny “has to do with a sense of ourselves as double, split, at odds with ourselves” (6). In Freud’s influential essay on the subject, the space of the uncanny is marked by the collapse of boundaries, by the strange trespassing into the regions of the familiar, and

8. Such essential selves take a variety of guises in aging studies. Mike Hepworth and Simon Biggs employ the diction of “core selves,” which Hepworth describes as a “sense of continuous personal identity. The division of the self into the two dimensions, private and public, acknowledges the existence of individual self-consciousness or a personal sense of a stable and continuous identity” (29). Sharon Kaufman describes identity consistency in terms of “themes,” what she terms the “building blocks of identity. Identity in old age—the ageless self—is founded on the present significance of past experience, the current rendering of meaningful symbols and events of a life” (26). Joseph Esposito argues in favor of an “ultimate self,” one “that remains the same through aging” (138).

vice versa. The uncanny destabilizes. Royle finds it “impossible to conceive of the uncanny without a sense of ghostliness, a sense of strangeness given to dissolving all assurances about the identity of a self” (16). Here Royle is drawing on the work of Adam Bresnick, who understands uncanniness as a frightening exposure of the instability of selfhood; the uncanny is not “something a given subject experiences, but the experience that momentarily undoes the factitious monological unity of the ego” (qtd. in Royle 16). The uncanny may be provoked by a novel or a film, a painting or photograph, by the everyday (a sound, a smell, an unsettling sight glimpsed through a streetcar window), but its action is internal, which is why “unsettling” is such a suitable description. The uncanny undoes, if only for a moment, one’s illusions of peaceful stability, of rootedness. To “unsettle”—“To undo from a fixed position; to unfix, unfasten, loosen” (*OED*)—this is the effect of the uncanny.

Later-life confrontations with temporality, that is, a new or intensified awareness of the differences between past and present selves, often produces uncanny intimations of the fundamental instability of selfhood, as Woodward has indicated. Later life, with its proliferation of personal narratives, can expose the chimerical nature of identity, rendering the subject a contested site, at once familiar and strange, in short, uncanny. My use of the term draws on Freud’s famous exploration of the uncanny as “that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar” (340). In Freud’s essay, the uncanny is the chilling resurfacing of buried beliefs, of that which is deeply “known” but repressed.

The uncanny is an experience of doubling, one of ambivalence and contradiction. It has to do with the shocking, even frightening, upset of expectations. It is an unpleasant uncovering, the return of the repressed. Perhaps one of the most widely cited definitions of the phenomenon is Schelling’s, which Freud himself employs as a touchstone for his own investigation. Schelling makes the uncanny an experience of unpleasant revelation of “something which ought to have remained hidden but has come to light” (qtd. in Freud 364), an exposure that Freud locates in the psyche: “the uncanny is in reality nothing new or alien but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression” (363–64). Here the uncanny as collision appears again, this time transformed into the unpleasant confrontation of the conscious and unconscious. It is not merely the strangeness of an event or experience that generates its uncanniness, but the degree to which it disturbs and dredges up something submerged within the psyche. The uncanny is at once strange and all too familiar. Schelling’s remarks

paired with Freud's references to the mind evoke the psyche in spatial terms: the unpleasant is partially hidden in the dark recesses of the mind, and the failure of this concealment triggers an unwanted confrontation. There can be danger in these recesses. At its most extreme, the uncanny return of the repressed can be a rediscovery of trauma that violently destabilizes the subject. But as my overview of decline ideology and its critics indicates, the overriding association of aging with loss has been called into question. For some, aging into old age may indeed constitute a debilitation akin to trauma,⁹ but I think aging and its interpretation tend to be more ambiguous and even paradoxical. Though uncanny confrontations need not be traumatic, they can still disrupt the subject, causing, at the very least, an unsettling of selfhood that is disquieting.

The German word *unheimlich* itself draws attention to the uncanny as an experience of reversals and negations. Freud makes much of the multiple meanings and etymology of *unheimlich*.¹⁰ *Heimlich*, a word associated with home, a place of comfort and familiarity, a collection of positive, homely associations, is upset by the addition of the prefix *un*, which transforms the word into a term of estrangement. But Freud goes further here to point out the multiplicity within the root *heimlich* itself: "on the one hand it means what is familiar and agreeable, and on the other, what is concealed and kept out of sight" (345). Thus, the ostensibly positive root of *unheimlich* is itself tinged with negative associations, with mystery and secrets. Freud's consideration of terminology gestures toward the inevitable cohabitation of the familiar and strange, canny and uncanny: "*Heimlich* is a word the meaning of which develops in the direction of ambivalence, until it finally coincides with its opposite, *unheimlich*" (Freud 347); each term (and its referent) is forever implicated in the other.¹¹ In

9. I am reluctant to go so far as to identify aging itself as a form of trauma, as E. Ann Kaplan does: "The trauma of aging consists in being *in time* and unable to get out of it. One irrevocably *must* age; one must deal with the ravages of the aging body; and one must confront the fact that death is inevitable. All of which can be experienced as a trauma, which, though basic to human existence, is paradoxically also 'outside human experience' in that no one returns from death" ("Trauma and Aging" 173). Only because Kaplan reads aging primarily as "the increasing series of losses—of bodily function and appearance, of mental agility, of ideologies and values one grew up with, of friends and family" (173) is her trauma hypothesis tenable.

10. Royle conducts a similar investigation into the English term "uncanny" and its etymological sources. Perhaps one of the most important similarities between "*unheimlich*" and "uncanny" is that both are made by negative prefixes, drawing attention to the uncanny as a process of undoing, negation.

11. Royle's investigation into the English variant shows a similar ambiguity: "in

this way the ambiguity of the term itself functions as a metaphor for the phenomenon of the uncanny. In other words, the uncanny already resides within the canny, by definition and as a personal and cultural phenomenon. The uncanny reveals unsettling strangeness buried within the familiar, the stranger hidden within the self.

The uncanny is tightly bound to temporality; the inability to return to past sites and past selves often comes into conflict with our memories of these pasts. Memories can become ghosts that haunt the present. The uncanny can be understood as the cohabitation of tenses, memories of a familiar past rubbing up against the strange newness of the present. Familiarity depends on the interaction of experience and recollection, a concurrence between one's perception of what was and what is. I experience the uncanny when my expectations, inevitably based on memory, are upset; when the familiar, the recognizable, is infiltrated by the strange, the unrecognizable, that is, when the past and present fail to align properly. Because no one has the option of actually living in the past, memories must always be summoned from the vantage point of the present, initiating unavoidable comparisons between what was and what is. Considered in these terms, it seems inevitable that aging will provoke the uncanny: both arise out of temporality.

Consequently old age provides fertile ground for explorations of the uncanniness of self since the inexorability of time challenges any belief in a consistent and stable self. Despite poststructuralist deconstructions of the subject,¹² one's experiences of oneself typically rest on a perceived

its archaic past, 'canny' has already meant its opposite ('uncanny'). . . . The similarities between English (or Scottish English) and German, regarding the ways in which 'uncanny' (*unheimlich*) haunts and is haunted by what is 'canny' (*heimlich*), are themselves perhaps uncanny" (11). In Royle's text uncanniness seems highly contagious, if not ubiquitous, already lurking within the most seemingly benign experience. Much of Royle's analysis reveals how the discourse of the uncanny (the term itself, its theorization by Freud and others) is itself uncanny. Indeed, many critics have pointed out the uncanniness of Freud's own essay and its analysis, the ways in which his observations and interpretation appear strategically blind, yet oblivious to their own oversights. Such critics attempt to "articulate what is conspicuously not said in Freud's symptomatic essay or in those of subsequent commentators on the uncanny" (Lloyd Smith 3). Cixous claims that, in Freud's analysis, "Everything takes place as if the *Unheimliche* went back to Freud himself in a vicious interchange between pursued and pursuer; as if one of Freud's repressions acted as the motor re-presenting at each moment the analysis of the repression which Freud was analyzing: the *Unheimliche* is at the root of Freud's analysis" (526). See also Royle 7–8.

12. The study of human identity in the relational terms proposed by semiotics resulted in the idea of persons as entirely determined by language, the subject as

“reality of selfhood,” giving rise to what John Paul Eakin calls the “face-off between experiential accounts of the ‘I,’ on the one hand, and deconstructive analyses of the ‘I’ as illusion on the other” (4). This central conflict between the theoretical (absent) self and the experiential (present) self is brought to the fore in the study of aging and identity. I maintain that in contemporary culture, aging, particularly aging into old age, forces a confrontation between these competing discourses of selfhood. In aging studies the uncanny most often describes the disconcerting newness of the old body and how the subject experiences the body’s image as strange, at odds with the familiarity and continuity of the psyche, termed variously the “core self,” “ultimate self,” “true self,” and so on. Confrontations with the image, such as the “mirror stage” identified by Woodward, represent a distinctly uncanny experience, and the ubiquity of mirror scenes in the literature and films of old age attests to the powerful impact of the reflection on selfhood. But I believe there are other occasions for the uncanny that arise out of old age. Connected to the difficult acknowledgment of the other in the mirror as in fact a part of the internally “young” self is the way that older persons can function as uncanny figures for those around them. Behavior, expression, and personality can all be part of the tension between simultaneous recognition and misrecognition in personal encounters with older persons. For example, somebody one has not seen for many years may present a shockingly changed bodily surface, strangely at odds with the familiarity of their gestures and remarks, the idiosyncratic way with a knife and fork, a recognizable giggle, a peculiar use of diction. The visage of another can seem startlingly “new” as a result of old age, yet at the same time, the younger, more familiar face can be glimpsed at certain moments. A good example of this unsettling strangeness is produced when aged film stars are trotted out at awards shows for recognition of lifetime achievement. The filmic images that precede the entrance of the actor are set into sharp relief by the aged body that enters the stage.

These encounters with the uncanny involving the aged image are common and easily recognizable. But old age can also produce another opportunity for the uncanny that goes beyond the disjunction between an altered image and a perceived “inner” consistency. Indeed, the body, despite its alteration, can provide the only opportunity for recognition after the onset of dementia, a condition that most frequently affects older persons. The

“empty outside the enunciation which defines it” (Barthes, *Image* 145). For informative overviews of these developments, see introductory chapters in Butte, Eakin (*Making Selves*), Schwab, and Paul Smith.

radical disruption of memory caused by dementia can make the body one of the only remaining sources of familiarity for others. Changes and deterioration of memory result in the fragmentation or even severance of the person's life narrative, and by implication, his or her identity. For the victim of dementia, even specular recognition is often not possible, and self-estrangement can become painfully severe. Because of the dissolution of language and narrative abilities, the subjective experience of dementia remains largely a mystery. Fiction can attempt to express dementia-afflicted subjectivity, though the difficulties of representing a subject estranged from language and memory tend to restrict such efforts.¹³

The centrality of narrative-based ontologies, such as those put forward by Paul Ricoeur and others (discussed below), means that the disruption and erasure of memory are largely interpreted as an upset and disappearance of selfhood, evoking once again the central paradox of old age as an uncanny site of simultaneous presence and absence. In *Strangers to Ourselves*, Julia Kristeva suggests that subjects always contain the other, that xenophobia is actually a symptom of the rejection of the foreigner within. According to Kristeva, in "The Uncanny" Freud introduces the concept of the fractured self so integral to psychoanalysis and its application: "The uncanny would thus be the royal way (but in the sense of the court, not of the king) by means of which Freud introduced the fascinated rejection of the other at the heart of that 'our self,' so poised and dense, which precisely no longer exists ever since Freud and shows itself to be a strange land of borders and othernesses ceaselessly constructed and deconstructed" (191). The uncanny is unavoidably entangled with conceptions of identity; it exposes cracks in the facade of that essential self that many theorists of aging continue to erect as a shelter from the unsettling changes of age. As Richard Kearney points out, "Kristeva makes the intriguing point that the ultimate stranger of strangers is the shadow of our own finitude" (*Strangers* 76). Old age functions as a manifestation of this frightening shadow, introducing subjects to their own strangeness.

Incorporating Kristeva's argument, with its emphasis on the unavoidability of otherness within, allows one to assert that the discovery of the self's strangeness is the result not of a new condition, but rather of a new

13. For example, Mordecai Richler's *Barney's Version*, discussed in chapter 2, switches narrators once the title character's dementia becomes severe enough to seriously inhibit clear communication. More commonly sufferers of dementia are characters observed *by* the narrator, rather than actively focalizing the story; see, for example, Alice Munro's "The Bear Came Over the Mountain" (*Hateship*) and "Spelling" (*Who Do you Think*).

awareness of human difference. Entitling her chapter on Freud “Might Not Universality Be . . . Our Own Foreignness?” Kristeva suggests that because we are all foreigners, “there are no foreigners” (*Strangers to Ourselves* 192), a pattern of logic that can be understood as a comment on otherness in general, exposing the subject’s fundamental closeness to that which he or she rejects.

The older subject, as I have argued, is disavowed, at once denied and acknowledged. Old age makes us *aware* of the other within, of identity as always different, multiple, shifting, and contradictory; it shows us how, as Royle puts it, “difference operates at the heart of identity, how the strange and even unthinkable is a necessary condition of what is conventional, familiar and taken-for-granted” (24). Old age is an experience of, or more often a confrontation with, the uncanniness that is always within us; old age simply represents a new awareness of pre-existing strangeness, of the “foreign body within oneself” (Royle 2).

NARRATIVE AND AGING

This foreignness within is part of the nonfixity that results from what Paul Ricoeur identifies as “the temporal character of human experience” (*Time* 1: 3). Subjects experience this temporality in their own aging and in the explanatory narratives they create. Narrative allows subjects to explain, to create meaning in every area of existence, with works of literature and film forming only one small subset of narrative practice. I am particularly interested in the explanatory power of narrative, and in models that stress causality. Ricoeur is emphatic in his association of narrative and explanation: “A list of facts without any ties between them is not a narrative. . . . To explain why something happened and to explain what happened coincide. A narrative that fails to explain is less than a narrative. A narrative that does explain is a pure, plain narrative” (*Time* 1: 148). Ricoeur’s emphasis on the explanatory imperative of narrative points to its ontological power, to narrative as a process of making worlds and making meaning. One creates or recognizes a narrative by identifying, elucidating, and even creating relationships between various incidents and characters. According to Ricoeur, this is how human subjects simultaneously create and receive time. Narrative and time are part of a hermeneutic circle: “time becomes human time to the extent that it is organized after the manner of narrative; narrative, in turn, is meaningful to the extent that it portrays the features of temporal experience” (*Time* 3: 3). The constitutive circularity of

narrative and time means that any study of aging must inevitably consider questions of narrative. Indeed, if aging can be regarded as a manifestation of human time, narrative and aging are intrinsically, if not constitutively, bound.

Narrative is also tightly bound to questions of identity since subjects' ideas of themselves and others, of their "meanings" as persons, largely stem from their interpretation of their own and others' narratives. It is through the narrative use of language that one comes to understand the self. Anthony Kerby proposes a "model of the human subject that takes acts of *self-narration* not only as descriptive of the self but, more importantly, as *fundamental to the emergence and reality of that subject*" (4, original emphasis). In Kerby's view, "the self is not some precultural or presymbolic entity that we seek simply to capture in language. In other words, I am, for myself, only insofar as I express myself" (41). Some theorists of identity, such as Eakin, remain skeptical of the simple equating of narrative and identity, arguing that a story cannot stand in for "all that we believe we are" (*Making Selves* 102), asserting the importance of other factors, particularly embodiment, in the subject's experience of him- or herself.¹⁴ However, a broad understanding of "narrative identity" can make room for a variety of "selves," even "selves" in conflict. Because narrative is constantly proliferating, one can find a great number of versions of self that might assuage Eakin's fears of exclusion.

The assumption that narrative produces meaning underlies many of the models of aging and late-life identity constructed and employed by aging studies critics. Indeed, the burgeoning field of narrative therapy, discussed in some detail in chapter 2, attests to the potential restorative power of narrative. The preservation of personal narratives is often a defensive strategy that can temper the discomfiting changes of age. But this ontological function of narrative leads us to the problem of the nonnarrativized life: without a story the life is without explanation, without meaning, and by implication the nonnarrativized person is without selfhood. The inescapable emphasis placed on narrative in the production of meaning and identity presents serious difficulties for the victim of dementia or amnesia, whose selfhood is often seen as jeopardized by his or her reduced ability to employ memory in the service of personal narratives. Although those suffering from dementia may still use short-term memories to produce

14. Eakin's own analysis of autobiography and selfhood rests on a pluralistic model of identity based on the work of Ulric Neisser, which regards self-experience as the result of the ecological, interpersonal, extended, private, and conceptual selves (*Making Selves* 22–23).

micronarratives of the immediate past, these narrative fragments are often radically disconnected from one another and fail to contribute to coherent life stories. Memory loss, coupled with the intermingling of actual and imaginary histories, produces a subject disoriented by a disarray of narrative fragments. Dementia presents a most extreme instance of ruptured selfhood. Aging into old age can challenge our conceptions of identity in much subtler ways. Autobiographies, interviews, anecdotes, literature, and film have articulated the numerous ways old age can fray the lines of connection between the various sources of self-identification, exposing change and ephemerality where subjects once experienced an illusion of security and stability.

Narratives of old age in both fiction and film have much to teach us about the mechanics and effects of narrative-based ontologies and their potential straitjacketing of subjectivity. A most extreme example of the anxiety that attends failures in storytelling is the representation in popular culture of the horrified reaction to dementia as a gradual erasure of the self. Consider the saccharine film *The Notebook*, in which Duke (James Garner) responds to his wife Allie's (Gena Rowlands) Alzheimer's-induced failure of memory with narrative. From his notebook, he reads her the story of their life together, using this metanarrative of her life to wrest her true, core self, the one based on narrative memory, from the fog of dementia that has her in its grip. Notably, the narrative he tells is one of heteronormative romance, locating her identity in her choice to devote herself to one man (that would be Duke) over another. Dementia has severed her from her maternal and spousal roles, and her return to them, even temporarily, through narrative is coded as a triumph; during the film's climactic scene in which Allie achieves a momentary lucidity, she clings to Duke and insists he "tell the children I love them." In this film, narrative functions as palliative care, easing Allie out of the disturbing emptiness of nonnarrative living so that she can die peacefully, with narrative coherence, devoted husband at her side.

Experiences of dementia, largely occurring in late life, raise many questions regarding identity and subjectivity, depicting in the starkest terms a subject made strange to him- or herself. How does one interpret the relationship between the disappearance of narrative and the disappearance of the cogent aging subject? If narrative disappears, what, if anything, remains? Are alternative operations of narrative and identity possible, new interpretations of narrative fragments (reminiscence) and the larger narratives that construct lives as teleologies? I assert that film and literature can help theorize responses to such questions in their dramatization of the

dissolution of personal narratives and the concomitant phenomenon of the merely present self.

POSTMODERN AGING?

Even within a narrative-based ontological framework, identity functions as a process, shifting to accommodate the changes in one's life story. Ricoeur himself stresses this dynamism in his articulations of narrative identity, conceding the importance, indeed the unavoidability, of multiple narratives. Far from arguing for a metanarrative or fixed identity, his model recognizes the mutability that results from temporality, a mutability that still allows for a persistent subject. Ricoeur's concept of the *ipse*, or self-sameness, incorporates change into some kind of consistency: "self-sameness, 'self-constancy,' can escape the dilemma of the Same and the Other to the extent that its identity rests on a temporal structure that conforms to the model of dynamic identity arising from the poetic composition of a narrative text. . . . Unlike the abstract identity of the Same, this narrative identity, constitutive of self-constancy, can include change, mutability, within the cohesion of one lifetime" (*Time* 3: 246). This temporal, narrative identity obviates the need for the terminology of the "core," "ultimate," or "true" self through its incorporation of change into its very definition.¹⁵ Theories of flexible, mediated selves, such as Ricoeur's, assist in my interrogation of the overly neat division of identity and specularity in the theorization of aging and old age. Such concepts of the self-sameness achieved through narrative incorporate constant change and instability into a vision of identity that I believe invokes the uncanny.

More extreme theories of nonfixity have been proposed in the last few decades by a postmodern turn that urges the discarding of antiquated humanistic conceptions of an inner self in favor of a belief in relativism, the proliferation of signs, performativity, and simulacra. According to such

15. The fluidity of the *ipse* allows for human agency and integrity since we are both readers and writers of our narratives (*Time* 3: 246). As David Kaplan explains, by incorporating temporality into identity Ricoeur suggests that "otherness is not external to selfhood but internal to and constitutive of it" (93). Temporality means both that one is, in some sense, other than oneself, and that narratives are always in process and multiple. As Kaplan puts it, "[I]t is always possible both to tell another version of what happened and to tell another story of our lives" (10), and thereby create another version of self. This concept of an adaptable, shifting self disrupts simple distinctions between secure interior selves and their mutable exteriors.

perspectives, Ricoeur's *ipse*, or self-sameness, along with all other models of the self, reflects a fantasy of agency that belies the arbitrariness of subjectivity as a site that has "the status of a mere grammatical pronoun" (de Man 18). The dynamism of poststructuralism and postmodernism has seeped into aging studies and gerontological research, with mixed results. Though some critics have proposed postmodern models of aging, these tend to focus on the bodily adjustments made possible by new technologies, the "bodycare techniques for masking the appearance of age" that further complicate the position of the aging subject (Katz, "Imagining" 70).¹⁶ These critics tend to look at the relationship between consumer culture and embodied aging, pointing out the potential, and perils, of the body as "project" (Turner 257): "new modes of disembodiment and re-embodiment" made possible by "developments in information technology" may alleviate some of the pains of old age (Featherstone and Wernick 11), but the new malleability of the body may also increase pressure to "correct" the signs of aging. As Stephen Katz argues, "the postmodern life course engenders a simulated life-span, one that promises to enhance living by stretching middle age into a timelessness" ("Imagining" 70). Often such discussions perpetuate surface/depth dichotomies in an effort to protect the humanity of the aging self, acknowledging how aging results in an increasing "inability of the body to adequately represent the inner self" (Featherstone and Wernick 7). By and large, social gerontologists insist on something essential beneath the ever-shifting masks of the self, something constant and reliable, a kind of core identity that provides the subject with a sense of continuity, a self that persists over time.¹⁷ My project, on the

16. In some models of "postmodern aging," "ageing is considered as a series of progressive betrayals that let an individual down and come between the self and the multiple identities made available through consumerism" (Biggs, *Mature Imagination* 6–7), furthering the idea, common in aging studies, of selves and bodies at odds. For example, in his study of aging and fiction, Mike Hepworth divides the subject into private and public selves, discussing identity as related to, but separate from, corporeality. He regards the self as a "social process with potential for change throughout the entire life course[;] the ageing of the body does not destroy the self though it certainly produces changes in the relationship between body and self" (34).

17. Katz, Featherstone, Biggs, Esposito, Hepworth, Holland, and Kaufman all invoke various images of a persistent self. For example, Joseph Esposito's philosophical study of aging divides the lifespan into two stages: "the emergence of the ultimate self and the maintenance of the ultimate self" (101). Temporality can also be divided to reflect a sturdy core resistant to the changes of age. In their study of the benefits of autobiographical reflection, what they term "restorying," Gary Kenyon and William Randall differentiate between "Outer Time-Aging" and "Inner Time-Aging" (9–20).

other hand, works to construct an alternate version of postmodern aging, putting aside models of core selves in order to interrogate the mutability of subjectivity.

Throughout this project, I explore models of late-life conflicts of identity within the larger framework of irrepressible uncanniness, while maintaining a skepticism toward the possibility of identity consistency. Like Eakin, I postulate the “self” as “less an entity and more as a kind of awareness in process” (*Making Selves* x). I argue that the dynamism and process of identity, the multiplicity that characterizes “selves” and makes the discourse of “subjects” more preferable, eventually come into conflict with the stasis written onto old age. Dynamism and identity are frozen, fixed by a culture that scripts old age into a small number of rigid categories. In this way age functions very much like other categories of difference, such as gender, race, and sexuality: older subjects are largely straitjacketed by their supposed otherness, offered simplistic, restrictive identities overly determined by their bodies. But aging produces an instability that constantly evades identification; it defies categorization and casts doubt on the dualism of self and other. Instead there is simultaneity, familiarity *and* strangeness. One of the central problems with the inner/outer identity binary is that it denies “internal” uncanniness. I argue that the uncanniness of old age is far more than a shocking confrontation with an unfamiliar reflection; aging, particularly aging into old age, opens our eyes to the ubiquity of uncanniness, and most unsettlingly, to the contradiction that is constitutive of selfhood. Just as Freud reveals how “*heimlich*” is already tainted by its opposite, uncanniness is always already within our most familiar self.

We are, according to Kristeva, always already “strangers to ourselves,” a foreignness that is, I argue, harder and harder to deny as we age into old age. It is our awareness of our own otherness that Ricoeur would argue can lead us to become moral agents, able to move beyond simple self/other oppositions to an appreciation of “oneself as another.” As such, old age may present the potential for heightened ethical awareness. Indeed, as Kristeva asks, “how can we tolerate strangers if we do not know that we are strangers to ourselves?” (269). Perhaps aging into old age can alert us to our own strangeness in new ways, leading us toward new ethical relations. The obliquely intersecting claims of Kristeva’s *Strangers to Ourselves* and Ricoeur’s *Oneself as Another* inform much of my interpretation of narratives of aging and my central insistence on old age as a new awareness of a pre-existing condition.

Each chapter of *Uncanny Subjects* begins with a fragment from Freud's "The Uncanny," which together serve not merely as building blocks but as catalysts to ignite discussion and debate. The use of moments in Freud's essay to structure this book reflects the continuing centrality of Freud's ideas in critical explorations of uncanniness and of the fruitful unsteadiness of his claims. Observations, images, anecdotes, and conclusions from Freud's essay provide provocative, often contentious forays into issues integral to the study of aging, issues of narrative and life review, illness and selfhood, gender and doubling. If such an organizational strategy grants Freud the first word in theorizing the uncanniness of aging narratives, it certainly does not give him the last.

Chapter 1 tackles the relation between identity and narrative by focusing on the project of late-life review. In fictional life review narratives, such as Margaret Laurence's *The Stone Angel*, John Banville's *Shroud*, Carol Shields's *The Stone Diaries*, and Cynthia Scott's film *The Company of Strangers*, characters look back at their lives with varying results. In these texts, the project of looking back exposes the mutability of identity, and the difficulty of plotting a life as a single, coherent narrative. These literary and film narratives both employ and rework the "life review" genre, exposing the implications of temporality for self-understanding as characters confront their own uncanniness.

Chapter 2 refines the concerns of the first chapter by attending to narratives of dementia and caregiving in later life, exploring the problem of identity once narrative abilities are disrupted, or even destroyed. In fiction by Mordecai Richler, Alice Munro, and Jonathan Franzen, along with the film *Iris* directed by Richard Eyre, dementia becomes a frightening exaggeration of uncanny identity. In these texts, the interaction between afflicted older persons and their caregivers tests the limits of witnessing and testimonial, provoking the pivotal question: how does one ethically listen to a sufferer who can no longer testify? In this chapter, I argue that dementia entails a distressing, alienating glimpse of the otherness of the other, a vision that can have serious repercussions for the witness.

Chapter 3 turns to the fraught relationship between the aging image and subjectivity in old age, examining photographic and cinematic doubles that appear within various narratives of old age. In stories by Alice Munro and P. K. Page, and the films *Requiem for a Dream*, directed by Daniel Aronofsky, and *Opening Night*, directed by John Cassavetes, visions of doubles result in a blurring of recognition and misrecognition that challenges the subject's sense of self. In particular, *Opening Night* dramatizes the violent clash of young and old selves, following in the tradition of films

such as *Sunset Boulevard*, *All About Eve*, and *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane*, and exposes the damage enacted by age on the specular subject par excellence, the female movie star. These films make explicit the structuring force of gender in old age that is implied in the stories and novels I discuss.

A number of questions propel my investigation into theories of aging, questions that narrative fiction can help us to explore. Some transformations inherent to aging are impossible to deny, but how one interprets these changes, both in oneself and in others, has much to do with how one recognizes and comprehends the subject and subjectivity. How does one understand, adapt to, interpret, live with the seeming simultaneous sameness and difference that accompanies old age? I believe aging can help us, or sometimes force us, to recognize our occupation of a space between singular selfhood and entirely *subjected* subjectivity. Aging into old age can usher us into an uncanny awareness of our own indistinction, our constantly fluctuating status, our own difference. The uncanniness of aging into old age can teach us that the self is always other than it was, other, even, than it is.

