From Old Woman to Older Women

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Published by The Ohio State University Press


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Introduction

Situating Old Women: Fields of Inquiry

The Construction of “Vulnerability”

When the now famous ice storm of 1998 hit Montreal, I lived there alone with my cat. As I sat next to my clock radio, powered by a battery that my neighbor thankfully had on hand, I noticed that I, not yet thirty, fit the prevalent media description of the elderly. The following analysis reflects my resistance to what I perceived, during a stressful time, as the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation’s (CBC) attempt to position audience members. The opening section of this chapter describes my impressions of media coverage of an event that affected me personally. I include the impressions here because they set up many key issues of age studies and provide a compelling introduction to the paradox of gender combined with age.

When the reputed “ice storm of the century” swept Quebec, eastern Ontario, and the Northeastern United States, local radio stations leapt to help the millions of potential listeners who could hope to receive information only via battery-powered radio. I spent a few days trapped in my apartment listening to the CBC try to fill round-the-clock broadcast time in the absence of changing conditions to report. Though other English and French radio stations also covered the storm, I, out of habit and maybe even nostalgia, kept my dial tuned to the CBC and became increasingly fascinated by emerging rhetorical patterns. In their indispensable coverage, paradoxes prevailed: Although most people dependent on the broadcast had no electric power in their homes, officials advised them not to venture outside, where sheets of falling ice posed a mortal threat to public welfare, but rather to stay home and watch movies. The same powerless listeners were sternly admonished not to drink the water without boiling it first (an impossibility for those
with electric stoves) but above all to remain well hydrated to avoid hypothermia. Such contradictions reveal that announcers and expert guests found it impossible to adjust certain assumptions about their broadcast audience. One reception assumption became gradually and abundantly clear.

As subzero temperatures persisted, listeners heard that although children and the elderly do not shiver when cold, shivering signals a healthy reaction and indicates the body's efforts to maintain heat. If you are shivering, the CBC told listeners, you are likely not yet suffering from hypothermia. This you oddly excluded the one segment of the population about which the CBC, in concert with local authorities, expressed the most concern: the so-called elderly. You, the listener, meant somebody roughly between the ages of teenager and sixty (that is, not children or the elderly). Well-intentioned public announcements constantly urged those listeners capable of shivering to check on elderly neighbors. But listeners of all ages heard human-interest stories of elderly people who did not want to leave their homes. For example, listeners heard about an eighty-something, forgetful woman who, finally giving in to offers of help, left her home without turning off her stove and caused a fire. In my time listening to the CBC, I never heard a CBC broadcaster say, “If you are over seventy, you may find that your body does not react the same to extreme cold as it used to.” Broadcasters did not appeal directly to the segment of the population about which they exhibited such social concern.

The CBC emergency broadcasts are not exceptional in discourse that condescends to the elderly, but the emergency situation provides a particularly effective context for revealing common late-life stereotypes. What seemed, momentarily, an exciting opportunity for the media spotlight to illuminate numerous positive and negative facets of old age instead predictably manifested countless popular misconceptions. Despite age-old connections between experience and wisdom, the CBC did not consult octogenarians for advice on how to function without electricity—a presumed area of expertise for someone who has necessarily lived through at least one world war and the advent of numerous electrical devices now presumed essential. Of particular note, despite their supposed fragility, the media reported not even one person over the age of sixty who had attempted to heat a home with propane or a hibachi, whereas a number of considerably younger people died as the result of uninformed decisions to heat their homes unsafely. One elderly couple in Notre Dame de Grace (an area of Montreal particularly hard hit by the storm) dug up their old cast-iron cooking implements and, with the help of their gas stove, created radiators to maintain heat in a home that otherwise would have been cold for seven days.
Despite such available anecdotes, CBC radio announcers continually emphasized old people’s “fear” of leaving home. Broadcasters attributed this fear to a belief that the same authorities who wished to “save” them would shunt them off to nursing homes and that they would never see their own homes again. Although likely a legitimate concern, the fear of infectious diseases (considerably more dire for those elderly people with deteriorating immune systems) superseded that of lost homes, and indeed an influenza epidemic did sweep through the emergency shelters. Somewhat familiar with managing without electricity, what seventy-year-old woman or man would voluntarily leave home to spend an unknown number of nights in dormitory-style accommodations with young children and inevitable infectious diseases circulating day and night?

CBC’s misguided, yet somehow philanthropic, attempts are atypical only in that, during the storm (people lost electrical power for anywhere from two days to three weeks), battery-powered radio provided the main communication link for many people. Otherwise, the network participated in a general media tendency to discuss old age only as a human interest topic and as a phenomenon only loosely related to the target audience instead of as within everyone’s either present or (probable) future experience. In the face of a relatively static catastrophe, the CBC had to create for their (in some cases literally) captive audience the drama that people expect from the news. Their choice to “help” those they perceived to be the weakest part of the population allowed them to incite goodwill in listeners who desperately needed not to feel their own need for reassurance. The emergency situation helped stereotypes take over the broadcasts because of a social need to contain and distance the vulnerability that most Montrealers felt. In general, old bodies function as a repository for cultural fears of inadequacy; the Montreal ice storm coverage provides a concentrated example of how that displacement can work.

The inability to project one’s own future onto a reading of an old body, or perhaps more properly the inevitability of doing so, results in continued cultural readings of old age as primarily physical, and necessarily physically limited. News coverage such as that of the ice storm concentrates on images and language of vulnerability. Further, wrinkles and other signs of aging often signify that vulnerability culturally. As a result, although they fulfilled a crucial community function, members of the Canadian media reinforced a detrimental image of aging. The all-too-common, but wrongheaded, association of physical deterioration with mental deterioration results in an accompanying refusal to value the necessary experience that comes with old age. Somehow, a body presaging one’s own potential physical decline is read as no longer housing the knowledge and background gained while physically more able.
It is not just my research focus that makes me choose primarily examples of women portrayed as feeble and in need. Old women suffer from this association and overvaluation of the physical to an even greater extent than do old men, possibly because of social yearnings to associate the female with the body and the male with the mind. Also, women tend to outlive and so outnumber men in late life, and, of course, the double bind of female gender and old age (famously described by Susan Sontag) whets the cultural appetite for female fragility. On January 13, 1998, shortly after many Montrealeans regained their electrical power, the CBC News Magazine aired the shamefully titled “Voices of the Vulnerable.” In the segment, women stand in for the incapacity of the elderly, although they are not given the public voice to express their actual capability. The feature deals with the suffering of the elderly during the January ice storm. It fixates on one particular community in Montreal, without specifying this narrow research base. As a result, the report fails to acknowledge the historical specificity of its subjects who live in a Jewish area of Montreal but are all chosen because of their visual match to cultural notions of the elderly. The additional shared cultural factor, beyond age, suggests at least one logical reason—fear of persecution—for the reluctance of these people to leave their homes and be herded into shelters. Because many of the residents are Holocaust survivors, the CBC’s representation of stubbornness and lack of understanding could be replaced by one of self-preservation and misunderstanding (Shapiro, personal interview, May 25, 2000).

The feature begins with an image of an elderly woman whom well-intentioned citizens have decided to “rescue”: The transcript reads, “I got one down here. I’m sure, potentially, we’ll have a problem getting her out. Madame Lacote? Madame Lacote?” Although the rescuers do not bother to specify the problem, they willingly offer the impression that Madame Lacote’s physical infirmity adds to her mental stubbornness, rendering her a perfect case for an exposé about humanitarian efforts to assist the misguided. The next “unidentified elderly Montrealer” featured visually matches images of an old woman beset by confusion that, as a voice-over implies, results from the storm-induced trauma. The film clearly demonstrates that in fact she simply cannot hear the directions she has been given to gather her belongings and go into a community room; her confusion plainly results merely from not knowing what the workers are asking her to do. The authorities make no attempt to find a more effective way to communicate with her, possibly because all of their efforts have already been directed toward accommodating the media crews.

Dr. Howard Bergman, a staff member of the Jewish General Hospital, evokes a third image of an old woman to represent the feeble, baffled elderly:
Let me just give you one example of a lovely 94-year-old lady who’s living in an apartment by herself with her cat, getting a lot of help in normal times from her niece, who would come and help with the shopping etcetera. She didn’t want to leave because she didn’t want to leave her cats; she didn’t want to leave her home or possessions. I think the first stress of many of the elderly, besides living through the cold and the uncertainty, was the stress of having to leave their own homes and having to leave sometimes possessions, including a cat.

Not only does Bergman condescend to an old woman to provide an example of “elderly stress,” but his example is also largely irrelevant because her experience resembles that of many Montrealers throughout the crisis, along a continuum of age. Elderly women, however tempting the stereotype may be, were not the only Montrealers reluctant to leave pets, companions, possessions, or homes during the ice storm, though they were virtually the only people forced to do so. The choice to situate such a logical and common reaction in an anecdote about someone who matches prevailing cultural notions of weakness, both in terms of gender and age, demonstrates exactly what age (especially when combined with gender) signifies culturally today. The interviewer calls upon Bergman, as an expert, to explain the medical term “elderly stress.” Surely, what he describes simply matches the expectations of an audience who may not want to recognize their own habits in those of the “lovely” old woman too attached to her home and cats to venture out into a meteorological disaster.

Notably, though they choose women as visual and anecdotal examples of the fragile old, the CBC News Magazine interviews two old men to perpetuate negative depictions of old women in “Voices of the Vulnerable.” Isadore Fogel, speaking of a special shelter for the elderly at the Jewish General Hospital, explains that “there’s a blind woman here, maybe I shouldn’t mention it, but she—she is very difficult. She yells at the top of her voice with everybody sleeping, and as soon as the people wake up, there’s a big lineup of people walking to the bathroom.” This embedded narrative demonstrates a member of the already supposedly vulnerable population perpetuating the very attitudes that have resulted in his own coerced removal from home. An interview with Abraham Bonder further this tendency when he explains that, although he would not have left his home, “My wife has to go because it’s too cold. Much too cold.” No one actually interviews old women in the entire piece. As a result, viewers do not even have the opportunity to ascertain whether the tendency to perpetuate pessimistic depictions extends to old women’s words. Because they are the only “voices” viewers hear, extending the logic of
CBC’s title “Voices of the Vulnerable” leads a critical viewer to conclude that the vulnerable during the ice storm were members of the media and the medical community—they were vulnerable to prevailing stereotypes.

Taken in the spirit it was more likely intended, the title encapsulates the paradox of being female and old. Not only did the supposedly vulnerable have no voice in the coverage, the CBC did not address them directly as potential members of a viewing or listening audience. Because the construction of gender difference relies to a large degree on a specific understanding of women’s physical beauty, the implicit cultural question lingers of whether old women can fit into the gender construction of “woman” at all. This subject position, rife with internal tension, becomes an ideal substitute for other cultural tensions and comes to represent what younger segments of society fear. At a time when Montrealers felt and were particularly vulnerable to a devastating weather pattern, the media transferred fear and weakness onto a social group that the remainder of the population could consequently comfort itself by “helping.” Those included by the CBC’s you could patronize those excluded, and younger people had the opportunity to construct superficial strength around a false conception of old people’s inevitable dependence. The notion that old women could help not only themselves but also others would threaten a population stabilized through a projected fear and would undermine the feeling of superiority that such a projection had allowed.

I do not mean, however, to condemn entirely media depictions for their problematic and cowardly representations of old age. And the CBC by no means provides the worst examples of the phenomenon of undervaluing elderly people, especially old women. My analysis of CBC ice storm coverage exposes how old age at times substitutes for cultural vulnerability when a scapegoat is needed. This process is unique neither to the CBC nor to the mass media in general. When I contacted the CBC hoping to obtain transcripts of their extensive coverage, Eta Kendall spoke to me with genuine sympathy about “the plight of the elderly” and the resulting “precious moments” (personal interview, October 1998). Many studies of old age also concentrate on vulnerability to examine what is too frequently called, even by Gloria Steinem, “the plight of older women” (quoted in Friedan 1993, 38). Mass media, academic studies, conventional poetry, photography, visual arts, and contemporary humor construct and respond to prior constructions of an expected fragility and a desired, but distanced, incapacity sheltered in the physical frames of recognizably old women. A general, and sometimes even a specialized, public can comfortably pity and even offer help to a group of people who signal physically what they do not desire but have to be careful about possibly becoming.
Body Criticism, Disability Studies, and the Social Construction of Old Age

When academic studies try to address old age, they frequently do so in terms of problem solving, often referring explicitly to “the problem of old age.” Of course, many problems do come with late life, as with any stage of human development, but many of the difficulties that old people face result from social (mis)understandings associated with the myriad contingencies of late life. Despite socially created challenges, physical infirmity most frequently presides as the key “problem” automatically associated with old age. The academic specializations clustered around the medical care of old people understandably seek to alleviate the physical infirmities that frequently occur late in life. Medical professionals of course need to recognize that older bodies require specialized care in the same way that extremely young bodies, adolescent bodies, and middle-aged bodies have specific needs. However, it is equally important not to reduce old age merely to a physical process because doing so encourages precisely the connections between old age and vulnerability that can do so much damage.

Because late life so often conjures notions of physical infirmity, most people likely think of medicine first as the academic discipline relevant to age studies. And because many physical changes currently accompany late life, medicine is crucial to an understanding of old age. However, because medical language is a scientific discourse, it inevitably classifies and then generalizes in order to diagnose and treat patients. The dominant scientific tradition is reductive in that it tends to explore units before (and sometimes in lieu of) a whole. During old age, when the body is often thought to be paramount, there is increased impetus to consider parts of the body and then the body itself before (and even instead of) the whole experience of old age. Medical language frequently concentrates on the physical, excluding other dimensions of aging and thereby limiting the imaginative framework available for understanding old people. Medical anthropologist Margaret Lock explains that such reductionism “tends to dismiss cultural influences of all kinds, including subjective experience, as superfluous distorting mirrors that disguise the relevant ‘facts’ waiting to be revealed in the depths of the body” (1993, 370). Medical discourse seems unable to address adequately the full experience of aging because of its limited conceptualization of the body as a composite of interactive units. I would argue further that, for the most part, medical discourse frequently does not value or recognize narrative enough to comprehend sufficiently the
multifaceted process of growing old. In a standard medical approach, social context and certain kinds of causality obscure rather than create and interpret physical aging.

Counter to medical discourse, the field known as body criticism seeks to incorporate the social and cultural context of the physical in order to understand human experience. Similar to medicine, body criticism also participates in a discourse that needs to generalize and, by doing so, risks abstracting out key differences—Judith Butler’s *Bodies That Matter*, for example, are relatively young (1993). Still, her landmark study, though it does not overtly consider the implications of the aging body, provides the possibility to think about how social contexts render aging bodies “abject.” As Judith Butler argues, bodies unable to reproduce (lesbian bodies for the purposes of her treatise) can be situated under the rubric “abject.” Elderly bodies do not usually exercise sexual desire for the socially sanctioned end of procreation, so any discussion of sexuality and the elderly forces recognition of sexual desire for its own sake. In her study of the female grotesque (which aptly chooses elderly men dressed in drag as a cover photograph), Mary Russo explicitly situates old bodies in the position of the abject by qualifying how the female body can be grotesque with a parenthetical list of grotesque female bodies: “(the pregnant body, the aging body, the irregular body)” (1995, 55). Russo (although only parenthetically) indicates that aging bodies do not fit into paradigms of classical beauty, which is “closed, static, self-contained, symmetrical, and sleek” (8). Though neither theorist fully confronts aging bodies in these early works, both provide tools of analysis for the forces that place aging bodies outside the typical realm of consideration. In the introduction to her edited collection, *Figuring Age: Women, Bodies, Generations*, Kathleen Woodward addresses more directly what she calls the “invisibility” of old women (1999).³ The ensuing essays focus largely on how social interpretations of physical challenges of old age can cause great personal pain that at times outweighs the more immediate physical pain and thereby contributes to the general denigration of the elderly.

Though body criticism often shies away from aging bodies, those academics who do explicitly discuss the elderly typically focus on the body. Age theorists tend to argue that the body becomes paramount in daily experience during old age. Whatever power the mind may have to influence physical change and whatever cultural narratives may affect concrete experience, aging is currently associated with decrepitude. Because this usually entails a physical decline, a body that lives to old age is (almost always, at this historical moment) eventually (however briefly) circumscribed by its physicality. In her *Aging and Its Discontents*, Kathleen Woodward reads this as foreboding mortality:
The inevitable and literal association of advanced old age with increasing frailty and ultimately death itself presents a limit beyond which we cannot go. The body in advanced old age not only represents death; it is close to death and will in due time be inhabited by death. The facticity of the mortal vulnerability of the body in old age, and the meanings we attach to it, cannot be explained away by insisting that an ideology of youth, with its corresponding semiotics, is responsible for negative representations of old age. (1991, 18–19)

Most important, she claims that the aging process has a lived reality underscored by bodies’ increasing unreliability. Currently, that material process cannot be escaped entirely, but there is also a material reality to a vulnerable newborn that, though it denotes frailty, does not connote the same inappropriate representations. Right now, old bodies do change, but the changes need not be figured solely as deterioration. As Woodward implies, the promotion of positive aging damages by relentlessly clinging to an impossible, and undesirable, continued youthfulness; this process is called “positive ageism,” which, like ageism more generally, results in negative perceptions of what age actually entails by restricting it to false optimism and cosmetic, youthful activity. Susan Wendell’s “Old Women Out of Control: Some Thoughts on Aging, Ethics, and Psychosomatic Medicine” draws on a disability studies perspective to explain the difficulties of tackling the physicality of age without reducing the process to decline: “Aging is not always and never just being sick or dying, but it is also these” (1999, 135). Whereas positive ageism tries to deny decline altogether, Wendell seeks to incorporate that decline into a larger social process. In dialogue with Margaret Morganroth Gullette’s Declining to Decline, Wendell contends that “in arguing against the socially constructed midlife decline, it is important, for several reasons, not to insist on its opposite, the ‘wonderful’ [Gullette’s word, on 222 and elsewhere], healthy energetic midlife and old age” (134). The place of the body within age studies is confined, particularly because the choice to think of another or one’s self as old usually occurs because of physical appearance. To deny that physicality is to deny most of what makes old age a rich process worthy of academic scrutiny. To pretend that physical changes do not cause physical, social, and emotional pain is to avoid the complexity that offers age studies such potential.

I seek to conceptualize senescence so as to form a basis on which to build new modes of thinking about age and challenge established modes. To do so, I seek cultural depictions that embrace and contribute
to the complexity of old age. What I call *constructive* aging brings together positive and negative elements of aging to the extent that it is difficult to determine which is which. The ultimate goal is to trouble the distinction entirely. The physical dimension of old age is a substantial consideration, but it, like numerous other corporeal phenomena, remains open to countless cultural interpretations not simply as an indication of imminent death. We need new stories and readings of growing old.

Currently, wrinkles hold a specific cultural stigma that affects how they are read socially even when they are framed as art. In the January 1991 edition of *Border Crossings*, Montreal photographer Donigan Cumming confronts readers with startling images of a naked, seventy-six-year-old female body. As editor Robert Enright pinpoints in his introduction to the portfolio, a stark opposition to standard pop culture representations (and indeed high art representations) of female nudes ruthlessly prevails. Enright describes various photographs in the following way: “[H]er body in the bathtub, in repose, standing improbably in a sink, is a topography of loss and misdirection—a breast appears like the ear of an old animal; toes are so arthritic they look maliciously broken” (25). “Pretty Ribbons,” a portfolio of photographs of Nettie Harris in various states of undress, confronts social understandings of female bodies directly and visually. Harris has an unavoidable visibility that unsettles imaginative stereotypes. Her shocking, naked image confronts viewers with unveiled aged flesh so that they can no longer avoid the stark physical realities of aging. Presented in poses that parody those of young centerfold models, Harris’s images suggest a “decrepit” sexuality that threatens popular images of what and which bodies are supposed to be sexy.

Perhaps it is not just that elderly bodies in all their visible disrepair assault aesthetic requirements, but that they speak of what each individual’s body could become. Whatever cultural value it could have, Harris’s lived experience is visible only to the extent that it is marked on her body, and those markings will be read only in the context of the ageist viewership the photographs confront. Cumming relies on Harris’s wrinkles to signify something socially. He could presumably have chosen to enact any number of photographic tricks and indeed may well have. Nonetheless, he chooses to present the photographs as if they are exact representations of an old woman. Viewers accordingly come literally face to face with their preconceived notions of the grotesque aesthetic of age at the same moment that they must confront what “naked woman” usually signifies to them. How could a woman agree to display her inappropriate body in this way? What will my body become? Can this woman possibly understand herself to be beautiful?
In his anthropological, historical, literary, and sociological study of how people make sense of their physical world, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau suggests that there is something unseemly about a dying body:

No doubt the part of death that takes the form of expectation has previously penetrated into social life, but it always has to mask its obscenity. Its message is seen in the faces that are slowly decaying, but they have only lies with which to say what they presage (be quiet, you stories of getting old told by my eyes, my wrinkles, and so many forms of dullness), and we are careful not to let them speak (don’t tell us, faces, what we don’t want to know). (1984, 194)

The “obscenity” of a body presaging death translates into a required (visual) silencing of aged bodies. This is why pictures such as those of Nettie Harris shock viewer expectations—North American society dictates that aged bodies should be covered to allow for a comfortable distancing; they should be prevented from telling “stories of getting old.” Too often the narratives typically and automatically associated with old age connect it with death uniformly and without challenge. Cumming’s photographs make evident the dangerous assumptions underlying the social position of age because they confront the uniformity of those narratives. Because old age is so often limited to physical deterioration, perceiving that deterioration presents a danger. In order to address and adequately reframe old age as having a particular social and even aesthetic value, “the stories of getting old” have to acknowledge both the physical and the social aspects of aging. New narratives of old age could affect how images of old age come across.

As Wendell’s essay evinces, the emerging discipline of disability studies contributes to the rich discourse surrounding bodies to allow for a greater range of experiences and corporealities. Any discussion of aging bodies, like those of any bodies, has to counter norms, because the physical norm is thought to be young, straight, white, able, and male. Disability scholar Rosemarie Garland Thomson, in *Extraordinary Bodies*, has called this norm the “normate,” which she defines as “the constructed identity of those who, by way of the bodily configurations and cultural capital they assume, can step into a position of authority and wield the power it grants them” (1997, 8). Though body critics have yet to pay serious attention to aging bodies, much body criticism strips away the many facets of the normate so that eventually body theorists can only reasonably conclude that there is no such thing as a “normal” body, only the compulsion to achieve normalcy. Thomson draws on Erving Goffman to highlight this point: “[T]here is ‘only one complete
unblushing male in America: a young, married, white, urban, northern, heterosexual, Protestant father of college education, fully employed, of good complexion, weight and height, and a recent record of sports’” (quoted in Thomson, 8). In his foreword to David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder’s The Body and Physical Difference: Discourses of Disability, James I. Porter addresses the place of the body. He says, “Averted and silenced, the disabled body presents a threat to the very idea of the body, the body in its pure, empty form. It is this idea that informs the prevailing normativities of the body. And it informs current theoretical views of the body as well” (1997, xiii). Even more than combating a cultural comparison to the yardstick of youth, a study of age has to battle the normative power wielded by the very notion of appropriate bodies. An aging, unreliable body also threatens “the very idea” of a body “in its pure, empty form,” which is a youthful body. Expanding Thomson’s normate, a goal of disability, postcolonial, queer, feminist, and age studies requires a new reckoning with the forces that construct identity, especially as formed through physicality.

There may be some normative aging bodies—a prescriptive format for aging well—but, in general, the elderly have to fight normalization similarly to people with disabilities and indeed all people. As Wendell argues in The Rejected Body, “I imagine that if we did not construct our environment to fit a young adult, non-disabled, male paradigm of humanity, many obstacles to nonelderly people with disabilities would not exist” (1996, 19). That is to say, the elderly and people with disabilities alike fight social restrictions and may benefit mutually from successfully challenging them. Contemporary disability scholarship often favors social model theory, which argues, much as feminism argues for gender, that “disability” is constructed whereas “impairment” refers to a less-mediated physical state; the distinction goes beyond terminological appropriateness and, some argue, contributes to a difficult binary opposition. Among others, Mairian Corker and Sally French take issue with the competing terms: “[B]ecause the distinction between disability and impairment is presented as a dualism or dichotomy—one part of which (disability) tends to be valorized and the other part (impairment) marginalized or silenced—social model theory, itself, produces and embodies distinctions of value and power” (1999, 2). Similar to, and even overlapping with, disability earlier in life, old age entails both physical attributes and socially imposed attributes. To focus overly on either is to ignore the lived experience of aging. Wendell elucidates the interaction between the binaristic terms:

I maintain that the distinction between the biological reality of a disability and the social construction of a disability cannot be made
sharply, because the biological and the social are interactive in creating disability. They are interactive not only in that complex interactions of social factors and our bodies affect health and functioning, but also in that social arrangements can make a biological condition more or less relevant to almost any situation. I call the interaction of the biological and the social to create (or prevent) disability “the social construction of disability.” (1996, 35)

To evade the bodily aspects of aging would be to hide the ways in which those bodily factors interact with social factors to create disabling conditions for the elderly. The instance of aging physicality provides convincing evidence for disability theory’s foundation. As with a body without legs, an elderly body is “disabled” only if the signs of aging “mean” something socially. A person in a wheelchair may not be able to navigate stairs, but that is a challenge only in a society that builds stairs rather than ramps. A person who appears elderly may not win a beauty contest but only in a society with youthful standards for beauty. As note 3 describes, sixty-five-year-old Barbara Macdonald is asked to leave a Take Back the Night march, or rather her younger lover is asked on her behalf, because Macdonald looks as though she will not be able to march—she appears unable because of what her physicality signifies, not because she cannot walk (“Look Me in the Eye”). The idea that age is socially constructed troubles some people because of the seemingly unavoidable physical problems that come with age and because the term “constructed” is sometimes taken to imply complete creation, rather than a social manipulation of available physical material. To say that old age is socially constructed or determined is not to deny the materiality of hot flashes or wrinkles. Social construction involves how physicality relates to, or, as Wendell puts it, interacts with, a social environment, either concrete, as in prohibitive stairs, or intangible, as in the discourses and images of the beauty industry.

Age shows on the body, and others interpret that age as signifying a number of usually negative changes that pervade more than just physical aspects of life. In Old Age, Simone de Beauvoir convincingly argues that those interpretations determine self-acceptance of age identity: “In our society the elderly person is pointed out as such by custom, by the behaviour of others and by the vocabulary itself: he is required to take this reality upon himself” (1977, 324). She initiates the scholarly position that age is a social construction and argues that a reckoning with age involves absorbing social values. Overly focusing on the constructedness of the fragility of age, however, risks evading the physical changes that currently govern late life and discourses of late life and that have to be reckoned with to provide the “frail old” with full access to
social resources. A more encompassing dialectical gerontology, as Harry Moody proposes,\textsuperscript{4} insists upon a mutual recognition of physical and social signs of aging and upon a reciprocal exchange between science, social science, and humanities scholars to defy existing damaging narratives of aging. Such combinations may be able to alter interpretations of aging bodies and thereby to rewrite and reread pervasive narratives of old age.

**Pervasive Narratives of Aging and Margaret Lock’s “Myths of Menopause”**

Medical anthropologist Margaret Lock’s *Encounters with Aging: Mythologies of Menopause in Japan and North America* addresses one way that narrative can contribute to the study of aging (1993). Her methodology provides an important model for age studies, and her focus on Japan provides a helpful introduction to a study of North American aging because scrutiny of one culture’s constructions of aging can help to make those of one’s own appear strange. Although it might be more difficult to identify cultural attitudes from within a cultural framework, witnessing their effect “outside” one’s own milieu can aid analysis “within.” Lock’s experiences in Japan clarify how physical signs of aging take on specific significance that depends on cultural context. Nettie Harris’s photographs, for example, might signify differently outside North America.

When Lock questions the supposed universality of menopause, she presents personal narratives cumulatively so that they reinforce the cultural dimension they illustrate. She solidly grounds *Encounters with Aging* in skeptical scrutiny of pervasive Western medical discourse and the historical progression of misogynist paradigms of female midlife. To justify her criticism of such dominant viewpoints, she presents preview excerpts and then entire interviews with Japanese women. The initial excerpts highlight passages in the later entire narratives, grouped by subjects suggested by the preceding selections, so that an overall trajectory develops out of themes arising from the (translated) words of Japanese women. She then compares the narrative patterns with current data about aging in North America. Lock’s explicit theoretical grounding for her decision to incorporate personal narratives claims that medical language neglects key aspects of human experience: “What people experience and report in connection with their bodies is not in essence the same kind of information produced through observation, measurement and abstraction” (xxiii). Because neither medical language nor any other discourse, according to Lock, sufficiently describes
experiences of human bodies, “human beings create narratives to express the relations between biology, individual sentience, culture and history” (373). For her study, narratives reflect human experience, and so personal narratives necessarily differ from and resist the sweeping generalizations that the biological emphasis of medical language makes possible and even necessary: “Narratives of subjectivity do not permit broad generalizations and abstractions but encourage instead a contextualisation of specific pieces of the puzzle and provide a very important constraint on the way in which we obtain and interpret biological and statistical information” (xxxix–xl). Personal narratives not only enable and enforce individuality in the study of physical processes, they also impose order on how nonnarrative information, or data, comes across. First-person descriptions of experience can influence the ways in which other individuals receive and understand their own bodies. In a search for new stories and readings of aging (though not quite old age) in Japan, Lock turns to individual personal narratives.

*Konenki*, a Japanese word roughly—though not at all exactly—analogous to menopause, denotes a phase unwelcome not so much because of what it threatens in itself but more as “an augury for the future, as a sign of an aging and weakening physical body” (14). Lock claims, “Several Japanese women state explicitly that *konenki* is the beginning of old age (*roka gensho*) and, although having little significance as such, can be a potent sign for the future” (44). The period of middle age usually marked by *konenki* represents a new relationship with old age in that, rather than sentimentally longing for a golden past, Japanese women “choose to focus much more on human relationships, and the way in which in middle age, a woman turns from being concerned primarily with children and their care to enjoy a brief spell of relative freedom (‘mother’s time of rebellion’), before she becomes fully occupied with the care of aged people for a good number of years” (45). The impending care of old people during a partly physical transition—*konenki*—underscores how the aging process is central to these narratives. Women are responsible for the care of the elderly in traditional Japanese culture, in which most women of this generation continue to participate. Even in the brief period of time when they are not responsible for caring for others, *konenki* often makes them aware of the old age they will experience both second- and firsthand. This awareness pervades their personal narratives.

Though not overtly about old women, Lock’s study demonstrates how middle age anticipates old age for Japanese women. Lock writes about women between forty-five and fifty-five years of age in terms of their placement in a Japanese temporal schema related to empires (e.g., Meiji, Shōwa). She implicitly demonstrates the historical specificity of
aging and at the same time explicitly explores its cultural specificity. The shōwa hitokawa women (born in the first decade of the Shōwa reign [1926–1988]) whom she interviews lived through the Second World War and take pride in having survived that difficult time. Those in traditional situations and married to eldest sons usually adjusted to household lives under the scrutiny and control of a meiji (1868–1912) mother-in-law. Repetition among the women’s narratives suggests that the shōwa hitokawa women have found such domestic adjustment difficult. However, patterns emerge throughout their stories indicating that they generally believe they lead easier lives than their mothers, they still expect to take care of their elderly parents-in-law, yet they do not expect the same care from their own offspring or offsprings’ spouses. Different women of the same generation often express and emphasize these three key points. Despite such shared specific cultural and historical experience, the individual narratives of such women, when interviewed about konenki, vary dramatically.

Lock articulates a pervasive myth of konenki that (as with nineteenth-century British notions of leisurely bourgeois women with too much time on their hands for reading fiction) figures as lazy housewives middle-aged women who succumb (or admit) to the physical symptoms of konenki. Traditionally, Japanese people perceive physical complaints as excuses for not conforming to standards of discipline and continual work. None of the women Lock interviews show even glimmers of matching that circulating denigration of physical and other changes at midlife (i.e., none are lazy housewives). Still, women experiencing middle age in Japan listen to a generally applied story that works as an ideological tool and influences their own descriptions of personal experiences: “[T]he rhetoric thus becomes a yardstick against which women measure and from which they dissociate themselves but also produces a stereotyped specter of the archetypal disciplined Japanese woman fallen from grace, a specter that helps to keep Japanese women divided among themselves and insensitive to the reality of one another’s lives” (106). The false tale of the lazy housewife controls, in that it gives order to, the way that women describe their own experiences of konenki in relation to the lazy housewife figure. Even if one woman knows that her physical experience does not result from a desire to shirk responsibility, she will likely be reluctant to admit to anyone what will probably be perceived as a shortcoming. The cultural silence reduces the chance that women will discover other narratives of konenki. Any sign of succumbing to physical change—of not continuing to work hard or feel good—signals failure because it seems to match the lazy housewife story. Consequently, a feeling of inadequacy accompanies any acknowledgement of midlife change, and this feeling prevents women from gathering together and
learning that the archetype is only that and does not have to pose a threat to individual experience.

Lock’s methodology reveals a common tendency among Japanese women to speak about certain elements of konenki while remaining silent about others. The layering of narratives allows her to apply the literary device of theme to a broad survey of disciplines so that she can pick out the relevant threads according to the repetitions and weave them together to demonstrate a significant cultural specificity in a phenomenon previously considered universal. Lock turns to narrative to examine the full experience of aging—in her case, middle age. Her findings are impressive and counter medical beliefs that a diet high in fish and soy accounts for Japanese women’s konenki. It is possible that a pervasive cultural narrative that characterizes konenki symptoms as shameful also prevents even the naming of hot flashes. It is also possible that the vastly different cultural role of women between the ages of forty-five and fifty-five results in a physical phenomenon distinct from that of North American women in the same age group. Lock determines at the very least that this physical experience is defined, if not caused, by cultural context. The personal narratives and their relationship to circulating narratives about aging contribute to a new theory of the aging process. Lock determines which narratives participate in the construction of aging in order to discover how to undermine or transform those narratives. Her work presents one example of how a recent emphasis on narrative offers social scientists an innovative and effective approach to reexamining social processes.

**Narrative and Humanities Age Scholarship**

The field dedicated to reexamining the social process of old age, gerontology, is beginning to attract some humanities scholars who will surely enhance its interdisciplinarity and contribute greatly to the role narrative can play in understanding the elderly. The theoretical, methodological, and applied facets gerontology rely heavily on observed data and thereby, despite Clark Tibbitts’s development of social gerontology, tend toward a fact-based, body-centered study (Kart 1990, 21). As James Birren says, “we [gerontologists] are in a phase of being data-rich and theory poor” (quoted in Achenbaum 1995, 20). Thomas R. Cole and Ruth E. Ray explain in the introduction to their *Handbook of the Humanities and Aging*, “Gerontological knowledge making remains dominated by the paradigm of modern science and its various expressions in the social and medical sciences” (2000, xi). Humanities-based gerontology, which includes literary gerontology, may be able to fill the theoretical gap Birren perceives
because it provides opportunities to piece together the myriad facets of aging into a complex cultural picture. Because artistic works, including literature, rely on complexity for their aesthetic value, their study can maintain the many seemingly contradictory facets of old age. As I state in the preface, narrative, for example, can offer a perspective on aging that avoids categorizing late life as either positive or negative and that balances its physical and social elements. Literary analysis of narrative offers a rich reconfiguration of old age equal to the complexity of narrative depictions of the elderly.

In part because they often draw on autobiographical theory, in part because they frequently write about autobiography, and in part because of an inevitable compelling personal investment in aging, North American humanities age scholars tend to write themselves into their work. In doing so they often reveal an anxiety about what some euphemistically call the “coming of age.” Even when not writing explicitly autobiographical essays, critics explore their own personal experiences with age or with the age of loved ones. Kathleen Woodward’s recent anthology, *Figuring Age: Women, Bodies, Generations*, exemplifies the autobiographical tendency within age scholarship. The interdisciplinary collection of essays seeks to make older women more “visible” in order to reflect on the process of growing older (1999, xvi). To achieve these goals, scholars write themselves into essays about subjectivity, historicity, psychoanalysis, visuality, performance, family, and age.

In “The Marks of Time,” Nancy Miller makes her aim explicit: “I want to speak of aging as a project of coming to terms with a face and a body in process—as an emotional effort, an oscillation that moves between the mirrored poles of acceptance and refusal” (1999, 4). Focusing on the face, Miller offers devastating explanations of her own and other women’s reactions to their own age. Miller’s resolution to the painful dilemma presented by her own image acknowledges, if only questioningly, a strong social influence on interpretations of aging. She resists the pervasive cultural stories of aging, and she incites readers to reevaluate and rewrite cultural narratives to make room for new understandings of physical and other change: “[P]art of how to find new ways of perceiving ourselves as aging bodies and faces is to construct a narrative in which these images can be read, otherwise” (12). In her contribution, “Scary Women: Cinema, Surgery, and Special Effects,” Vivian Sobchack acknowledges the luxury that allows her, and other contributors, to reflect on her own physical aging as she writes about rejuvenation technologies (1999). Similar to Miller, she speaks of her distaste for her changing face and, going a step further, acknowledges her struggles over the option of cosmetic surgery. As does Miller, Sobchack draws on her own face to reinterpret the cultural significance of age so that, given
time, she will not turn away from the mirror. Patricia Mellencamp begins her contribution, “From Anxiety to Equanimity: Crisis and Generational Continuity on TV, at the Movies, in Life, in Death,” with a personal narrative in which she describes the moment she became “an old woman” in her own and in others’ eyes (1999, 310). Kathleen Woodward’s own contribution to her collection, “Inventing Generational Models: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, Literature,” opens with a narrative that recollects childhood encounters with her grandmother. She remembers herself as a child connecting with the older woman via objects that evoked shared stories, and, as an adult, she identifies the relationship as one that is absent from Freudian psychoanalysis. She later draws on her own experience with aging to dismiss models she, as a younger woman, found more valuable and turns to literary models that she, in light of her own aging, finds more “suggestive” (1999, 155).

As evidenced by these examples from *Figuring Age*, personal narratives have enormous potential to address perceptual gaps left by inadequate academic and media depictions of aging. Autobiographical accounts can challenge circulating narratives that depict aging as simplistically negative or straightforwardly noble, and they often refuse a straightforward concentration on either physical or social aspects of growing old, demonstrating poignantly how intimately linked the two can be. The authors I cite each struggle to reconcile their sense of self with their sense—mediated by social strictures—of their aging physical being. As a result, one of Woodward’s collection’s greatest strengths is that although it is by no means an entirely positive contribution to age studies, it is an almost entirely constructive one. It provides a basis for new and challenging ideas about aging. When Woodward articulates the goals of *Figuring Age*, she explains that narrative has a role to play in changing social attitudes toward old women: “The purpose of this book is to help bring the subject of older women into visibility and to reflect on growing older as women, with our contributions to this project built primarily on the foundation of stories and images, words and visual texts” (1999, xvi). She consistently turns to narrative to make her introductory points, recounting three stories (one about the accidental death of eighty-six-year-old Anna Gerbner, one about an abused eighty-seven-year-old widow, and one about activist Maggie Kuhn’s meeting with Gerald Ford) in the first four pages of her introduction. I agree that to develop the “new ways of thinking about growing older” (xvi) Woodward overtly seeks, narrative must be a chief object of study. Autobiographical narratives certainly can contribute—and have done so—to the process of increasing awareness and complex understanding of late life, and I think overtly fictional narratives have another, equally important, contribution to make.
Both reading and viewing (though likely more the former than the latter) narrative fiction provide an opportunity to engage with age that at first still seems to evade old bodies. There is of course a profound difference between an actual old person and a depiction of an old person, even when an aging actor embodies that depiction. An engagement with a text is, as Thomson points out when discussing disability, static compared with the dynamic engagement required with a living person. And, as Thomson argues for disability, in a typical representation of an old person, age often stands in for the whole person, disallowing the complexity sometimes achieved through an engagement with the full, lived reality of age. However, because age can always be displaced along a continuum, and because age alarms many people who fear their own future, an engagement through narrative fiction might be a gentler and therefore potentially more successful way to begin the process of dismantling harmful attitudes. Atypical representations of old people in fiction and film allow readers and viewers a new approach to addressing old age; such an entrance may lead to the conclusion that typical representations of frailty, poverty, and nagging are as mythical as the lazy housewife story that Lock claims controls konenki in Japan.

Larry Polivka has probably best expressed what humanities scholars give to gerontology. At the 1994 "Aging and Identity: A Humanities Perspective" interdisciplinary conference in Florida, he answered a question about what of practical value humanists can contribute: In his opinion "the humanities can help older people to understand the narratives of their own lives and can also assist gerontologists and others who work with the elderly in their efforts to preserve their clients’ dignity, identity, and self-worth" (quoted in Deats and Lenker 1999, 11). Reevaluating narratives of aging—both circulating and more overtly constructed in the form of literature and film—provides a new vantage point on what is inevitable to late life and what is imposed from without. Literary scholars analyze patterns of and within such narratives and can do so with an eye to maintaining an image of aging that entails a complex array of physical, social, and cultural factors. To me, and I think to Polivka, narrative is not merely a resource to be mined to determine and test cultural attitudes toward the elderly. Narrative provides the clues to the creation of the stereotypes that fix old age as a time of decline. I contend that it also contains clues to the revision of those ways of thinking. And it has the advantage of being able to rethink late life from various vivid perspectives rather than reducing it in a way that almost always leads to negative generalizations. Even applied to physical dimensions of aging, narrative offers the potential to avoid pitfalls—such as essentialism, appropriation, and relativism—that many current theoretical movements have difficulty negotiating.
When sociologists Jon Hendricks and Cynthia A. Leedham introduce a scholarly volume titled *Perceptions of Aging in Literature*, they explicitly turn to what they call in a subtitle “Literature as a Data Base” (1989). Literary analysis holds extraordinary potential for enriching gerontological study, but the examination of a wide cultural, temporal, and generic range of literary works as “a highly select and specialized data set” does not quite capture what literary scholars, including those published in this volume, can achieve (3). In the preface, Andrew Achenbaum writes, “More than other types of inquiry into aging, humanistic gerontology has emphasized the extent to which modes of conceptualizing and expressing ideas have perennially shaped our viewpoints and conditioned our behavior” (xiv). Humanities scholars who have turned to age studies, rather than merely mining cultural products for evidence of attitudes toward the elderly, have exposed theories of—“modes of conceptualizing”—old age, opening the door for new models. They acknowledge and encourage the social construction of age and work toward understanding the processes behind it. In particular, literary gerontology can balance social and cultural narratives of aging with the physical dimensions of aging to develop rich models for new understandings of late life.

The paradigmatic potential of narrative suggests that stories might provide a way to reconceptualize old age and counter models of decline without flattening old age into merely positive aging. In *Cinema and Spectatorship*, Judith Mayne explains, “The common interface between narrative and psychoanalysis suggests that the act of storytelling needs to be understood as one of the most fundamental ways in which one constructs an identity, in both cultural and individual terms” (1993, 24). For her it is not just what narrative chooses to represent, but also the process narrative enacts that makes it a significant field of study. Narrative can guide how old age is seen, heard, felt, and understood. Woodward has explored this process within common narratives of psychoanalysis in her *Aging and Its Discontents* (1991). Personal narrative can contribute further to the process because it is grounded in experience and so has credibility and even appeal. Barbara Frey Waxman chooses, in her second book about narrative and aging, *To Live in the Center of the Moment*, to write about “self-consciously literary autobiographies” because “[t]hey are . . . potentially more transformative of sociopolitical attitudes about aging because of their sophisticated narrative methods, depth of characterizations, and rich descriptive powers. In other words they are more capable of creating ‘literary experiences’ for readers, more skilled at transporting readers into the foreign country of age” (1997, 17). She compares what she calls “literary autobiography” with autobiography by authors who have not had careers as writers. In choosing to focus on literary authors, she has begun to
discover personal narratives that work as new models for the narration of old age. Her reason for selecting those writers is similar to my reason for concentrating on narrative fiction. I examine precisely the “sophisticated narrative methods,” especially narrative voice; the “depth of characterizations,” in particular of the narrative agent; and the “rich descriptive powers” enacted by narrators of overtly fictional narratives about old age. Those narrative elements compel a reevaluation of old age, which, to borrow (like Waxman) from May Sarton, is frequently a foreign country, so that readers might transform their “sociopolitical attitudes.” I do not mean to suggest that reading narratives of aging provides readers with the experience of aging. Rather, narratives of old age can offer ways of thinking about the experience of late life that could change how readers interact with the elderly and with themselves as they age. Narrative fiction deserves scrutiny in this regard because it engages readers on slightly different premises than do overt personal narratives. Further, the rich investment in language that literary forms require provides fertile ground for the revision of the strong cultural narratives that otherwise might make age a frightening, or at the very least, an uninteresting topic.

Gerontological study as a whole grapples with the major challenge of how to balance the individuality of the aging process with the generalization that an interdisciplinary field of study encourages. Narrative fiction holds a particular potential for theorizing old age because of its capacity to work with vivid individual examples that remain individual while relevant to a wide range of experience. When Margaret Laurence develops the character of Hagar Shipley, she does not merely offer readers an example of an elderly woman. She offers an imaginative embodiment of social constructions of aging that gains some strength from the fact that it is entirely fictional. Nobody could argue that Hagar Shipley exemplifies old women in Canada, but it is possible to argue that she operates as a metaphor for the multiple, shifting meanings that age takes on within a larger social world. Even if that reading does not quite hold, Hagar figuratively and vividly embodies many of the concerns that old women harbor without pretending to speak for them as a community. She achieves the individuality frequently evaded by considerations of aging, yet her depiction is widely applicable.

The Literary Potential of Old Age

This study is based very much on potential. At this historical moment it is still subversive to imply that old age is a time of enormous potential—the words “old age” and “possibility” seem incongruous when linked. It is not so extraordinary to claim that literature holds a vast potential to
transform a larger social world. I want to examine the potential within literary narrative in combination with the potential inherent within old age. To connect these two concepts, that narrative holds a world of possibility and that old age does as well, I suggest the possibility of a type of reading that is, as Waxman puts it, transformative. Theories of readership, and in its turn spectatorship, have examined myriad, often related, scenarios for the engagement with text (written or film) and its effect on audience. Wolfgang Iser’s allowance for a number of readings that occur somewhere between implied and actual readers, Roland Barthes’s coded reader, David Bleich’s subjective reader, and Stanley Fish’s interpretive communities, to name a few, have more recently given way to politically charged, contextually based arguments (particularly in postcolonial criticism) that challenge the precepts of dominant literary forms. To a large degree, my argument rests on later, more ideological, arguments because the literary potential of old age depends upon the ideological positioning of readers. This work depends upon the postcolonial arguments that readers come to texts with a set of assumptions that they try to impose upon the texts and that those assumptions can (and in some instances should) be oppositional. The ensuing chapters explore, with a different category of analysis (age), the possibilities that an interaction between text and reader can help to construct new narratives and new theories of aging.

I am most interested in how author, text, and reader can come together in a conjunctive process, what I call “committed reading,” that could transform the way the text operates in the future and the way the reader understands both it and a larger social world. Conventional reader response theory tends to concentrate necessarily on the synchronic reading process rather than on the diachronic social process begun by the act of reading. One goal of this study is to suggest some ways in which reading and viewing narrative can contribute to forms of profound thinking and social practice that extend beyond engagement with the text. I am most interested in what reading can yield. This book enacts my own committed reading and will, I hope, contribute meaningfully to ongoing efforts to theorize how damaging understandings of old age might be countered with more constructive accounts. What happens when we turn to a novel or a film as we turn to theory and look to it for a profound rethinking of a social problem depends in part on the particular reader and the nature of the reading in question, and it also depends to a large degree on the complexity and tenor of the text in question.

Gary Saul Morson draws on the work of Mikhail Bakhtin to make the strong claim, “Critics and intellectual historians have overlooked that literary genres are themselves profound forms of thinking. The most important
content of literature is not to be found in explicit statements nor even in a given work’s import, however profound. We must not miss the wisdom carried by genres themselves” (1999, 175). According to Morson, what defines the novel as a genre (for Bakhtin) determines its import in terms of critical thought. The form of the novel and its relationship to a social fabric are crucial to its rhetorical impact. As Ken Hirschkop puts it, “So far as Bakhtin is concerned, logical argument belongs to the world of rhetoric and direct discourse, a world inhabited by disembodied ideas. The novel’s procedures, by contrast, present arguments in a different form, in the belief that this fictional experiment can reveal the import and significance of ideologies more adequately than could pure verbal disputation” (1989, 27). The novel to some degree embodies ideas, even if they are embodied by constructed speakers (such as characters and narrators) as much as by the putative author. In “The Race for Theory,” Barbara Christian argues that such an embodiment results in the complexity that I claim is necessary to a constructive approach to age studies: “Writers/artists have a tendency to refuse to give up their way of seeing the world and of playing with possibilities; in fact, their very expression relies on that insistence. Perhaps that is why creative literature, even when written by politically reactionary people, can be so freeing, for in having to embody ideas and recreate the world, writers cannot merely produce ‘one way’” (1988, 75). The structure of literary production, its need to embody ideas, provides the literary potential of old age in that the multiplicity that both Bakhtin and Christian explain allows for a conceptualization of aging that neither denies nor misrepresents the lived body in late life.

In order for the novel as a genre to have the potential for which Bakhtin and some of his followers argue, it must have a particular impact on at least committed readers. Bakhtin recognizes that the situation of reading makes the novel unique, explaining in “Epic and the Novel,” “Of all the major genres only the novel is younger than writing and the book: it alone is organically receptive to new forms of mute perception, that is, to reading” (1981, 3). One could make a similar claim about film and viewers, and the process of embodiment is even more vivid (and double) in that mode since the constructed speakers within a film are embodied physically as well as textually (in that actual actors play them). Thus, theories of readership to some degree can apply to spectatorship, and theories of spectatorship (which I discuss further on) can similarly apply to reading.

In “Discourse in the Novel,” Bakhtin sketches out a theory of the reader that is generally thought to be inadequate and incomplete. He explains, “The listener and his response are regularly taken into account when it comes to everyday dialogue and rhetoric, but every
other sort of discourse as well is oriented toward an understanding that
is ‘responsive’—although this orientation is not particularized in an
independent act and is not compositionally marked” (1981, 280). He
claims that drawing on dialogue as a model to understand other modes
of expression entails an understanding not just of speech but also of
response, and the combination of the two composes utterance. David
Shepherd argues that a slippage between speaking and writing makes
dialogism crucial to how Bakhtin conceptualizes the reader, character-
ized as the listener through much of his writing. As Shepherd puts it,

However, the constant sliding throughout the essay [“Discourse in
the Novel”] between speaking and writing, listener and reader,
although it leads to a certain theoretical fuzziness, actually goes
hand in hand with an unremitting emphasis on the dependence of
dialogism on a context which is crucially not intratextual, but exter-
nal to the enclosure of the text: “every word smells of the context
or contexts in which it has lived its socially intense life, all words and
forms are inhabited by intentions” (DN 293). (1989, 84)

The investment of the novel in the “maximal zone of contact” and the
way in which each word is overlaid with layers of preexisting social sig-
nificance encourages Bakhtin’s articulation of the reader as listener.
The concept of the reader-text relationship as dialogue begins to
address not just the reading process but also the process begun by read-
ing. A reader brings a particular context to bear on a novel, and, to
extend the implications of Bakhtin, the same reader might bring dif-
f erent aspects of a historical context to bear on the same novel in a
rereading.

Though what he means by it remains unsuitably vague, Bakhtin
desires an active reader as opposed to an unengaged one and proposes
that reading participates in the process he elucidates: “To some extent,
primacy belongs to the response, as the activating principle: it creates
the ground for understanding, it prepares the ground for an active and
engaged understanding. Understanding comes to fruition only in the
response. Understanding and response are dialectically merged and
mutually condition each other; one is impossible without the other”
(1981, 282). This process makes the reader, and especially the reader’s
assumptions, crucial to dialogism. Further, it provides the possibility for
the type of constructiveness I mention, in that a response to a text pro-
vides the basis or “creates the ground” for an engaged understanding.
For example, thinking about old age as a response to reading the char-
acterization of Hagar Shipley makes it possible for me to have an active
and engaged understanding not only of *The Stone Angel* but also of the
social context into and out of which it is written. This is a second type of dialogism that overlaps with the more commonly understood dialogism: “This new form of internal dialogism of the word is different from that form determined by an encounter with an alien word within the object itself; here it is not the object that serves as the arena for the encounter, but rather the subjective belief system of the listener” (282). In separating out the forms of dialogism, which elsewhere, Bakhtin explains, become intertwined for an interpreter of text, Bakhtin makes the ideological positioning of the reader crucial to the encounter between author, text, and reader. Shepherd claims, “What is important at this point is that when Bakhtin is introduced into the specific area of reader-oriented theory, this brings us ineluctably to acknowledge those questions of politics and ideology which are bracketed out, consciously or otherwise, by theorists such as Iser and Fish” (101). Bakhtin’s conceptualization of the reader provides the basis for an understanding of a committed engagement with a text. However, what Bakhtin does not emphasize, and what I believe to be crucial, is how a novel might affect a reader’s subjective belief system, so that one novel might become part of the context a reader brings to another novel or even to the same novel at a later date.

Judith Mayne’s work on cinema and spectatorship explains more clearly how one work can contribute to the perception of another. She claims that “spectatorship is not just the relationship that occurs between the viewer and the screen, but also and especially how that relationship lives on once the spectator leaves the theater” (1993, 2). Mayne addresses what she perceives as the main problem within the historical evolution of criticism on cinema and spectatorship: an attempt to divide or unify opposing notions such as “passive” versus “critical,” “subject” versus “individual,” “dominant” versus “marginal,” “social” versus “psychic,” and “woman” versus “women.” Her term spectator intends to evoke the difficulty of distinguishing between or eliding the ideas of the “subject” and the “viewer.” As she puts it, “I am opposing, in other words, the cinematic subject and the film viewer so as better to situate the spectator as a viewer who is and is not the cinematic subject, and as a subject who is and is not a film viewer” (36). The term spectator encompasses the various ways in which people might come to a text, as critic or as fan, for example and, perhaps more important, the ways in which people might leave a text.

Spectatorship as Mayne describes it allows for contradictory and changing personal views that may or may not accompany different viewing experiences. She confesses, “Spectatorship is one of the few places in my life where the attractions to male adolescence and feminist avant-garde poetics exist side by side. For Chantal Akerman’s particular
approach to spectatorship, for instance, engages me in different but equally satisfying ways as Arnold Schwarzenegger’s” (3). A study of spectatorship allows for a complex process that, like reading, contains and even gains strength from its internal tensions. As Mayne puts it,

Here is another level of complexity, for spectatorship may find its most condensed forms in the cinema, but spectatorship is not reducible to the cinematic. For many scholars working in film studies, the study of spectatorship has provided a way to understand film in its cultural dimension, while avoiding the simple determinism of the reflection hypothesis, whereby films “show” or reflect in relatively static ways the preoccupations of a given society. Instead, the study of spectatorship involves an engagement with modes of seeing and telling, hearing and listening, not only in terms of how films are structured, but in terms of how audiences imagine themselves. (32)

The process of spectatorship, like the process of reading, expresses (even embodies) how audiences develop self-understanding. The form of narrative fictions encourages an engagement not just with a representation of a particular social moment but also with a distinct mode of conceptualizing it. For example, in viewing *The Company of Strangers*, audience members do not merely learn how old women are treated in Canada; rather, they both witness and participate in the ways in which stories of aging, and attitudes toward it, are formed. The very dynamism of that engagement provides a potential for the reconfiguration of social attitudes, such as ageism.

Mayne’s most important observation for the future study of spectatorship and reading is that it is impossible to separate out a radical viewer from a complicit viewer. The delicate and pleasurable imbrication of complicity and resistance defies film theory’s past attempts to characterize spectatorship as defined by *either* subjects or viewers. It also counters reader-response theory’s claims that readers must be *either* active *or* acted upon. In her updated *Narratology*, Mieke Bal defends and explains her own continued engagement with narratology by saying, “What I propose we are best off with in the age of cultural studies is a conception of narratology that implicates text and reading, subject and object, production and analysis, in the act of understanding. . . . A theory, that is, which defines and describes narrativity, not narrative; not a genre or object but a cultural mode of expression” (1997, 222). Escaping the binaries of most structuralist narratological studies, Bal’s narrativity changes the coordinating conjunction of exclusivity—“or”—to that of inclusivity—“and.” I situate my study precisely within that conjunction
so that I offer an examination of how the author of fiction about old age makes an appeal to the audience who might engage with or commit to that piece of art. That commitment can alter subsequent readings of the same or different texts. The question for me is not whether to privilege the author, the text, or the reading but how to link all three in an examination of two cultural phenomena: narrativity and old age.

In what follows I invest in a group of contemporary fictional narratives centered on old women as a committed reader seeking to benefit from the aesthetic and topical complexity of the works, examining both what the texts offer and how an encounter with them may influence what Bakhtin calls the “zone of maximal contact.” Following Janice Rossen, Barbara Frey Waxman, and Anne Wyatt-Brown’s lead, I examine narrative fiction’s particular role in addressing the social problem not of old age, but of negative perceptions of old age. Wyatt-Brown and Rossen explore how aging affects creativity, as Wyatt-Brown puts it, in order to “challenge the preconceptions about aging that influence our thinking about later life” (1993, 3). The study combines personal narratives with the creation of fiction and poetry to examine how the experience of aging affects the production of literary worlds; they focus on creativity in late life. Barbara Frey Waxman’s From the Hearth to the Open Road: A Feminist Study of Aging in Contemporary Literature concentrates on popular journalism and novels (including short stories) about three middle- to late-life stages (1990, 40–60; 60–84; 85ff.). She is especially concerned with how the works affect readers, arguing that they “create a receptive readership for more complex fictions of aging” (12). Those more complex fictions of aging are the focus of my current study, which moves beyond the printed page to include what I call the silvering screen. I continue the work of Rossen, Waxman, and Wyatt-Brown, aiming also to challenge preconceptions of age through an examination of narrative fiction about old age. Woodward’s crucial contributions to literary gerontology always inform this book, but my goals are different from hers.10 I want to examine the explicitly textual (and in film’s case physical) mechanisms that create elderly characters in prose and on film as exemplary of the ways in which attitudes toward old age, which circumscribe and culturally define the process of aging, are formed. My chief aim is to suggest that narrative fiction offers a vast potential for rethinking social problems, akin to that of critical theory but with broader appeal.

This analysis focuses largely on the Canadian context because I feel well positioned to witness the constant bombardment of images and descriptions within Canada. Further, a group of innovative narrative works of fiction and film published and released in Canada in the second half of the twentieth century address old age and offer audiences
new vantage points. The selected narratives adapt key conventional narrative devices to their ends in order to play on and counter mainstream representations of aging. I by no means argue that narrative fiction necessarily has a particular or salutary social effect, nor do I suggest that fiction and film, especially the works studied here, are widely appreciated. Rather, I explore the imaginative potential of literary and film narratives and seek to claim that fictional narrative presents the possibility of profound social reconfiguration.

In the 1950s and 1960s Simone de Beauvoir and Margaret Laurence published fiction that takes on a relatively new subject matter: age, from the perspective of middle and old age. In the following chapter I explore a repertoire of attitudes toward aging through these works of fiction and examine the cultural construction of age that each enacts. Reading de Beauvoir’s fiction through her critical treatise on age, *Old Age* (1970), allows a cross-fertilization that exposes the social construction of age in keeping with de Beauvoir’s famous articulation of the construction of gender: Woman is made, not born. Laurence’s nonagenarian protagonist, Hagar Shipley, constructs her own aging in keeping with stereotypical attitudes of disgust, horror, and physical unreliability. She attempts to evoke a past Hagar she desires through the present Hagar she fears terribly, and the resulting tension forces a discomfiting distance through bathetic, bestial metaphors that describe a current self. The trope of mirror gazing pervades negative fiction of aging because characters struggle with a new self-identification in connection with a changed physical form. Both de Beauvoir and Laurence hint at the larger problem of social understandings of physical form, and the increasingly constructive depictions of aging discussed in the following chapters move away from the mirror to the reflection in younger people surrounding the aging characters.

With *The Stone Angel* as a touchstone, chapter 2 explores how Joan Barfoot’s *Duet for Three* (1985) and Hiromi Goto’s *Chorus of Mushrooms* (1994) depart from previous conventions of equating age with decrepitude at the same time as they theorize grandmotherhood as a possibly liberatory social role for old women (though grandmotherhood is not the exclusive province of the elderly). Grandmotherhood surely entails social scripts similar to that of motherhood, but we currently lack a discourse on the institution of grandmotherhood. To begin the process of developing such a discourse, this chapter presents a little-discussed literary trope wherein the intergenerational conflict so common to mother-daughter relationships frequently resolves across generations, at least
in literature, so that grandmothers and granddaughters appear able to work together to battle cultural forces. *Duet for Three* and *Chorus of Mushrooms* risk positive ageism in their idealization of the grandmother role. At the same time, the novels invite readers to experience the potential for certain old women to play a significant, new role of grandmother that exceeds the limitations of positive ageism. Despite considerable intergenerational acrimony in each novel, neither Frances nor Murasaki (the granddaughters) cancels her grandmother, metaphorically or otherwise. Instead they continue the older women’s personal, gendered struggles and, particularly in Murasaki’s case, stories. Of course, any grandmother is also a mother, and these novels carefully situate elderly women in at times conflicting roles.

Hagar Shipley, in *The Stone Angel*, Aggie, in *Duet for Three*, and Naoe, in *Chorus of Mushrooms*, share more than just old age—they are all old women living with their offspring, and they are all threatened with a move to a nursing home. In chapter 3 I discuss how, as nursing homes are thought of as repositories for useless, old bodies, they become, conceptually, repositories for negative attitudes toward aging. The two most disturbing aspects of typical treatments of institutional care are the assumption that old people are all the same and the creation of emotional and physical dependence. Current gerontological nursing textbooks suggest that a direct, individualized engagement with each elderly resident, technically named “reality orientation,” could go a long way to debunk such detrimental and even life-threatening assumptions. May Sarton’s *As We Are Now* (1973) provides a figurative perspective on the potential for elderly inmates—an appropriate term perhaps with regard to the institution she depicts—to demolish damaging stereotypes attached to nursing homes through their association with all that is thought to be terrible about growing old. Arla, the caregiver in Edna Alford’s *A Sleep Full of Dreams* (1981), is a cipher for readers both in her developing interpretive skills and in her ambivalence toward her aging charges. Tyler, in Shani Mootoo’s *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996), works so hard to piece together Mala Ramchandin’s devastating story that readers are forced to understand, through his transvestite self, the intricate communication strategies required to bring together disparate social groups. These depictions of institutional care, more than commenting on the possibilities of such facilities to provide improved care, demonstrate the complicated process of forming attitudes toward the frail old and help to counter the impetus to think of age as either positive or negative. They provide examples of how narrative fiction can offer a perspective on the individuality of elderly residents that differs from clinical interaction.

Families and institutions present conventional options for old women who feel compelled to change their living situations. Growing out of the
constructive relationships that can develop within an institution, friendship and collaboration among old women can present another, less conventional, late-life choice. Feminist literary critics have devoted some attention to female-female relationships, and they allow me, in chapter 4, to turn one last time to contemporary fiction for a conceptualization that eschews both young-old and mother-daughter binary paradigms. Joan Barfoot’s *Charlotte and Claudia Keeping in Touch* (1994) sets up the possibilities for both commonality and complementarity to benefit female friends. Cynthia Scott’s *Company of Strangers* (1990) provides, through semifiction, a model of female friendship and community that grapples with its own construction and transformation in which the viewer participates. The overt hybridity of the National Film Board production emphasizes the possibilities narrative fiction offers to both underlining and affecting constructions of age. It is not just that forming female-female friendships late in life could contribute solace and practical solutions to housing dilemmas; it is also that thinking of the value of connections among old women and imagining the help they can offer each other forces a recognition of late-life value and knowledge.