Lesbian literatures of age and identity: the ‘in-between worlds’ within ageing

How much are we aged by biology, and how much by culture? Age criticism is a relatively new discipline – the word ‘ageism’ was only coined in 1968 by sociologist Robert Butler – but it has been asking this question since its inception. Feminists were among the first to investigate the idea of ‘age identity,’ and during the 1980s a handful of American older lesbian feminists took the women’s movement to task about its own ageism. Writers like Baba Copper and Barbara MacDonald argued that age is not only a state of mind but a political construction, anticipating much that has now become mainstream in the thinking of age identity. Since then, there has been a growing recognition that ‘age ideology,’ from birthday cards to employment law, delivers negative messages about ageing as decline, deterioration and loss. But there are still not enough representations of older people – and especially older women – which offer a positive paradigm for ageing, one that goes beyond platitudes of acceptance, or, more insidiously, the chimera of retaining ‘youth’ in old age.

My thesis traces the early work of lesbian and feminist writers as they explored the subjectivity of older women at a time when this was still rare. I argue that this writing still has much to offer in challenging conventional and negative ideas of age-related changes, without sentimentalising or denying physical, as well as social, pain. I begin by setting out an overview of the theory that has accompanied this writing, including Copper and MacDonald’s work. In particular, I explore its expansion in Margaret Gullette’s theory of diachronic identity, in which the fluid character of identity means that many ages can exist simultaneously, and Kathleen Woodward’s notion of a ‘mirror stage’ in mid- and older life. Such concepts provide guiding tools for my subsequent analysis of lesbian age writing. The thesis goes on to examine novels, life writing and poetry by older lesbians, organising the material thematically: chapters deal with menopause, memory and forgetting, sexuality and mortality respectively.

The conclusion hinges on lesbian age theory as an aspect of feminist and gender research based at the interface of queer and age identities. Minority writing on oldness has a particular usefulness in delineating the specificities of difference, or what critic Margaret Cruikshank has called ‘the “in-between worlds” within aging.’ Work by older lesbians can be seen as a tool for both understanding and shaping the experience of old age. This very particular literature, through its emphasis on continuity, friendship and community, refuses prescribed ‘life stages’ and instead offers paradigms for conscious and comfortable ageing.
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I: Introduction

Feminists must ask questions that others do not ask. How does lesbians’ aging differ from that of heterosexual women, for example? What are the “in-between worlds” within aging?
Margaret Cruikshank, Learning to be Old (2003) 195, 121

Age and aging\(^1\) are insufficiently interrogated in feminist theory perhaps because until recently old age for women exceeded the mirror of reproduction.
Mary Russo (1999) 24

The genealogy of feminist age studies
Feminists have been interrogating age identity since the early 1970s. Simone de Beauvoir and Susan Sontag were among the first to comment on ageing as a gendered issue: de Beauvoir, having already pondered the question of women’s ageing in The Second Sex (1949), developed a more coherent argument on older age generally with La Vieillesse (1972); Sontag’s essay, ‘The Double Standard of Aging’ (1977), is an incisive look at the ways women are oppressed through the economy of appearance. In the late 70s and early 80s a handful of less well-known but arguably even more radical writers began to build on this work, developing a politics of age identity in the midst of feminism’s second wave. One of these pioneers, writer and activist Baba Copper, examined the problems encountered by older lesbians and the ways that those problems were enshrined in language. In her book, Over the Hill: Reflections on Ageism Between Women (1988), she points out that ‘someone ”over the hill” is metaphorically out of sight’ (14), at the same time acknowledging that she herself has, as a young woman, unthinkingly used this very phrase. Both parts of the title are significant; for the text identifies the ways in which ‘[t]here are endless unexamined contradictions in the prejudice which women feel toward the old woman they themselves are or

\(^1\) While adopting the British English spelling of the word ‘ageing’ throughout, I have retained the American spelling, without an ‘e’, when quoting authors who use this version.
are becoming. Lesbian ageism is probably the ultimate extension of these self-defeating contradictions’ (14). She went on to examine those contradictions in both personal and political terms. Copper’s indictment of the way that older lesbians were regarded echoes that of fellow critic Barbara Macdonald, who reminds us that ‘[o]ld women are twice unseen – unseen because they are old, unseen because they are women’ (1984 84). Even earlier in that decade, an essay by Matile Poor, ‘Older Lesbians’ (1982), had identified the ways in which ‘[a]n older lesbian experiences a kind of triple jeopardy – as a woman, as an older person, and as a lesbian’ (171). Part of that ‘jeopardy’ is invisibility: Poor points up this ‘unusual situation, where the elders of the lesbian community are for the most part hidden from us’ (166).

Barbara Macdonald, Baba Copper and Matile Poor, along with Macdonald’s partner Cynthia Rich, were the most prominent of 1980s lesbian age critics. Leni Marshall, twenty years on, writes of her predecessors’ struggle to get ageism onto the feminist agenda:

When Barbara Macdonald spoke on a plenary at the 1985 NWSA convention, she was angry! A pioneer in feminist aging studies, Macdonald described a four-year fight to get the topic of aging included in a plenary session. She took feminists to task when she asked, “Has it never occurred to those of you in Women’s Studies, as you ignore the meaning and the politics of the lives of women beyond our reproductive years, that this is male thinking? Has it never occurred to you as you build feminist theory that ageism is a central feminist issue?” (Marshall vii)

The second wave was based on a revolution that often centred on sexuality, and in some ways brought about more profound personal changes than the first wave, with its focus on electoral reform. Ironically, however, this meant that it tended to ignore the particular situation of older women, some of whom felt marginalised as a result. Macdonald might have been be gratified to know that the very same organisation she was haranguing, the NWSA [National Women’s Studies Association], dedicated its Spring 2006 issue (from which this excerpt is drawn) entirely to the issues of age and ageing; or perhaps she would think it too little, too late. She identified several crucial issues in this short speech. Firstly, ageing is an issue that students of gender need to grapple with, for poverty, isolation and the erosion of identity in old age primarily affect women –
who live longer than men but without their superior earning power – as do negative perceptions and abusive behaviours. Secondly, to ignore the prejudice and injustice old women experience tends to reinforce patriarchal thinking in general. And thirdly, being ‘beyond our reproductive years’ puts older women in a particular relation to cultural norms: employment legislation and medical discourse and practice, for example, tend to be aimed at women of reproductive age.

Baba Copper took the argument a stage further: she complained bitterly of ‘lesbian ageism.’ Copper, having identified ageist attitudes in her own community of lesbian feminists, was extremely vocal about the inherent contradictions in this state of affairs, contradictions she described as ‘self-defeating’ and ‘unexamined.’ Lesbians, she felt, having experienced oppressive attitudes themselves, should be better able to confront and overcome their own prejudices: and she proceeded to examine these in some detail. She discerned ageism to be part of a power struggle, as well as speculating on the association of assertive older women with the ‘Bad Mother’ in the younger feminist imaginary (20-25).

Copper linked personal and cultural praxes from the outset; she also separated the biological from the constructed:

Ageism, not aging, oppresses us. We are oppressed by other women and we oppress ourselves. Although many of the details in this book are drawn from my life, they are not the story of my aging, which has yet to be told. Rather, this is a collection of reflections about a social malaise under which all old women suffer, even though they may not even be aware of their suffering, even though they do not have the words to describe it. (3, original italics)

Copper distinguishes between ‘aging’ – a biological process – and ‘ageism’, the construction of age discourse, an argument which other age critics were later to build on. Copper, Macdonald and Poor began the development of what we might call ‘age feminism;’ they also, just as importantly, identified feminism’s failing in this area. Macdonald’s and Copper’s texts must have made uncomfortable reading during the 1970s and 80s when they first appeared in feminist journals; only in retrospect can we see how important such challenges were to the second
wave, with its emphasis on youth and strength. Their work is now paradigmatic for researchers into gendered ageing, and has laid the groundwork for later critical enquiry on the ways that older age and ageism are constructed, not just for lesbians or women but for all older subjects. *Over the Hill* and Macdonald’s *Look Me in the Eye* (1984) marked the first recognition of a central ambiguity in the relation between feminism and age studies: that, while feminism was the matrix of much important research on older age, it was, at the same time, a source of ageism that drew comment from some older feminists and – more subtly – of the discourse of age as decline. The title of Macdonald’s book, *Look Me in the Eye*, speaks to the inequality of the look, the avoidance of age, and the potential powerlessness of invisibility.

Macdonald and Copper may have seemed like the ‘grumpy old women’ of 1980s feminism, but their anger and activism helped to generate an awareness of ageism in the women’s movement. This awareness was paralleled by a broader spectrum of academic disciplines in the late eighties and early nineties. Social and cultural gerontology took on the task of challenging ageist discourses and practices concurrently with demographic change. The last few years of the twentieth century saw an exponential growth in the proportion of retired citizens in Europe and North America. As a result, age anxiety in these cultures has tended to increase, but, conversely, awareness of the issues surrounding age has also grown. Social scientist Chris Phillipson has described the dichotomy at the centre of cultural gerontology:

[D]uring the 1980s and into the 1990s . . . old age entered a time of change and uncertainty. On the one hand, debates focused on the idea of growing old as a period of opportunity and liberation, in particular from restricted roles at work and in the family. On the other hand, concern was expressed about the marginalization of older people, and the lack of meaning and purpose that seemed to characterize their daily lives. (1)

Research into ageing in the social sciences has had to ‘raise important existential issues about the nature and meaning of growing old’ (Phillipson 3). The parallel cultural and literary leg of this movement has produced two outstanding feminist thinkers on old age, Kathleen Woodward (*Memory and Desire*, 1986, *Aging and its Discontents*, 1991, *Figuring Age*, 1999) and Margaret
Morganroth Gullette (Safe at Last in the Middle Years, 1988, Declining to Decline, 1997, Aged by Culture, 2004). Both acknowledge a debt to the foundations of feminist age criticism laid by Copper and Macdonald. Woodward and Gullette have examined, respectively, the psychoanalytic roots of ageism and the formation of – and resistance to – ‘age ideology,’ Gullette’s term for the belief systems that construct ageing as only dependency and deterioration. Both critics develop and nuance the arguments put forward by Macdonald, Copper and Poor, and offer a more general critique of the ageing-as- decline model as it applies to both women and men. Gullette’s texts, which I have drawn on extensively, emphasise her tenet that age critics, continuing the tradition begun by Macdonald and Copper, must do battle with negative attitudes to age. Such attitudes are a social problem, she insists, for age ideology is a construct, and the work of age critics lies in both de- and counterconstruction. Her opinion on resisting decline theory is that silence is not enough. Gullette repeatedly uses the vocabulary of warfare, invoking terms such as ‘skirmish,’ ‘sides,’ ‘forces,’ ‘combat,’ and ‘ramparts’ to reinforce her argument (2004 29).

While engaged in the battle, I am also attempting to answer the questions that another age critic, Margaret Cruikshank, raises, reproduced in my epigraph: ‘How does lesbians’ aging differ from that of heterosexual women?’ and ‘What are the ”in-between worlds” within aging?’ These questions are echoed by psychoanalyst Martha Kirkpatrick, who suggests that lesbians experience ‘a different middle age . . . because reproduction and child rearing have not structured the phases of their adult lives’ (135). My reply involves an investigation of some key lesbian feminist texts produced in recent years, which deal with perceptions and experiences of ageing. As Kirkpatrick implies, the lesbian subject takes up a stance which is often outside the reproductive role that determines femininity. She is located in a particular and tangential relation to culture and to the social, and thus by extension to older age. Lesbian feminist academic Jackie Stacey, in her incisive critique of cultural attitudes to lesbianism, illness and death, describes the negative aspect of this relationship:

Deviant and perverse, the lesbian is represented as freakish and shocking – the vampire, the predator, the most unnatural of women. In a culture obsessed with marking the boundaries of sexual difference, lesbians
threatens nature’s guarantee of order and difference. A reproductive telos has come to mark out sexual difference as complementary. (73)

Lesbians do not fit into cultural norms of gendered behaviour because they have divorced sexual activity from reproduction, Stacey argues: ‘Homophobic discourse constitutes lesbian sexuality not as deadly in any literal sense perhaps, but certainly as non-life-giving . . . . Reproductionless sex tastes of death in a culture governed by the heterosexual imperative’ (81). As a result, lesbians may tend to have a vexed relation to reproduction, and much lesbian writing bears this out.

While this can be a problem in both theoretical and practical terms, I suggest that in rethinking older age it can be turned to advantage. That is to say, the (mostly) non-reproductive character of lesbian ontology can become a positive quality in older age, since it means that the loss of role ensuing from an abrupt cessation of mothering when children become adults is less likely to shape midlife lesbian experience. The result may be a continuity of identity into older age; or, for those lesbians who do have children from a former marriage, the upheaval of identity issuing from divorce will already have been dealt with. Selfhood is of course is never static, and will continue to undergo shifts and transitions, but lesbian identity is perhaps less firmly predicated on a parenting role that is bound to end. There are other advantages for a lesbian approaching her upward years: for example, the strong friendship groups that older lesbians sustain, and their participation in political activism, may generate supportive networks and communities. Furthermore, writes Margaret Cruikshank, ‘[h]aving been free to de-emphasize or entirely disregard conventional notions of female attractiveness, many [lesbians] seem to accept their aging bodies with equanimity’ (122).

**Lesbian/feminist theory**

Thinker Monique Wittig critiqued the outsider status that gives lesbian subjects a particular perspective: for her, ‘being a lesbian, standing at the outposts of the human (of humankind) represents historically and paradoxically the most human point of view’ (46). Lesbian subjects, Wittig argues, stand socially apart from the
category of ‘women;’ and in this she echoes the parallel argument of de Beauvoir on ageing. For the latter suggests, in *The Second Sex*: ‘[i]t is sometimes said that women of a certain age constitute a ‘third sex’; and, in truth, while they are not males, they are no longer females’ (63). If both lesbians and older women stand outside the male-female gender axis, as a ‘third sex’, then arguably old lesbians embody a double consciousness of themselves as outsiders.

It is no accident, then, that some of the earliest age critics were lesbians as well as feminists: Susan Sontag (although she was not out at the time), Barbara Macdonald, Cynthia Rich, Matile Poor, and Baba Copper. Furthermore, a rich body of fictional, poetic and autobiographical work that builds on or performs lesbian age theory has been produced over the past forty years. These texts are the subject of my study, which aims to provide a literary history of the debate on ageing, gender and identity. This writing, I will argue, provides a genealogy of age literature that can be traced back to its origins in second-wave feminism, and remains, at present, an under-theorised area. Such texts co-exist in a dialogue of varying degrees of harmoniousness or conflict with the theoretical and activist work of, *inter alia*, Copper, Macdonald and Poor. In a field where paradigms are in short supply, the accounts of lesbian ageing I have unearthed – including fiction, life writing and poetry – may even offer models of being for all older subjects.

In my quest for texts that image old women in useful ways, I have also harnessed the thinking of other, not necessarily older, lesbian feminists. Teresa de Lauretis, for example, in ‘The Technology of Gender’ (1987), urges that the study of gender ‘create new spaces of discourse . . . rewrite cultural narratives, and . . . define the term of another perspective’ (25). Lauretis suggests that, in deconstructing gender – and, I would add, in deconstructing age – feminists must strive to find the interstitial view – a view she labels ‘from “elsewhere”’ – concealed within women’s narratives. ‘For if that view is nowhere to be seen, not given in a single text, not recognizable as a representation, it is not that we – feminists, women – have not yet succeeded in producing it.’ She continues:
For that "elsewhere" is not some mythic distant past or some utopian future history: it is the elsewhere of discourse here and now, the blind spots, or space-off, of its representations. I think of it as spaces in the margins of hegemonic discourses, social spaces carved in the interstices of institutions and in the chinks and cracks of the power-knowledge apparati...

The terms of a different construction of gender... have effects and take hold at the level of subjectivity and self-representation: in the micropolitical practices of daily life and daily resistances that afford both agency and sources of power or empowering investments; and in the cultural productions of women, feminists, which inscribe that movement in and out of ideology, that crossing back and forth of the boundaries — and the limits — of sexual difference(s). (25)

It is this thought that enables my search into the 'blind spots' and 'space-off' of feminist writing for 'the micropolitical practices of daily life and daily resistances' that 'afford... agency and sources of power' for lesbian elders. While I hope to enact the 'movement in and out of ideology,' I am also seeking to analyse texts that perform that movement. Myriad descriptions of the 'in-between worlds' of ageing are embedded in the lesbian feminist canon. I am looking, then, for the technologies of age: the ways that gendered ageing is constructed through discourse, and the counterconstructions that feminist writing has provided.

Lesbian and heterosexual ontology are not diametrically opposed in midlife and old age, I suggest; there seems, rather, to be a continuum of experience between lesbians' and heterosexual women's experiences of — and relation to — ageing. Furthermore, I do not intend either to idealise or to reify older lesbians. Even to apply these labels seems, at points, a little risky; for identity is, of course, fluid in character, and sexual identity especially so. To help in resolving this contradiction, I have made use of Margaret Morganroth Gullette's model of 'diachronic identity,' which offers a framework for understanding the shifts and slippages of selfhood over a life course. This idea, in its simplest form, is that identity changes over time. I have harnessed this theory to elucidate an aspect of lesbian ontology, which often includes a heterosexual incarnation in youth and a transition into same-sex relationships in later adulthood or midlife. This kind of shift in sexuality can, of course, also take place in the other direction; and, indeed, the more inclusive identity of 'queer' often includes a range of sexualities and possibilities which refuse precise
categorisation. Such transitions in identity seem to be an underrepresented and undertheorised area of existence. I have sought out writers who risked writing about them, allowing the full contradictions of selfhood to emerge in their texts: May Sarton and Doris Grumbach, for example, have produced fictional characters whose sexual identities change radically; and Anne Herrmann has described in her life-writing a feeling of sexual ‘difference,’ a sense which remained unchanged throughout her relationships with both women and men. Like Mary Russo, I am ‘interested in texts which disrupt the developmental model of a woman’s life and emphasize an untimeliness in relations between women’ (1999 24). Textual depictions of age identity generated by older lesbian feminists offer one paradigm among many for negotiating the complex and socially determined process of age.

It is important to acknowledge the debt that writing on age identity owes to feminism; indeed, it is difficult to imagine how inquiry into the gendered and sexual specificities of ageing could take place without the critical insights already proffered by feminist theory. The women’s movement has provided the confidence and resources to think differently about cultural institutions and practices. At the same time, relations between feminism and its minority movements have often been problematic or at best ambiguous – we have only to consider the troubled emergence of race as an issue on the feminist agenda to appreciate the full complexity of these dialogues.

Overall, however, a project such as mine is firmly embedded in – and enabled by – feminist theory. The age of the movement itself seems significant here: women’s liberation, was, as Barbara Macdonald put it, ‘barely twenty-one’ during the second wave. With the ageing of its pioneers, feminism itself may have matured, able now to see clearly and at first hand ‘the meaning and the politics of the lives of [old] women.’ Macdonald wrote of the ‘coming of age’ of the second wave; this might imply that feminism is now in midlife (33). From the perspective of the early twenty-first century, feminists can perhaps achieve more nuanced insights into the issues surrounding age identity, and having reached the age of majority will no doubt modify, confirm or challenge the movement’s earlier theoretical positions. The future of feminism will necessarily
be a many-faceted entity, reflecting the plurality of female subjects. Lesbian theorist Judith Roof commented, in 1991, that 'feminist critics . . . have only really begun to formulate strategies by which questions of multiple differences among women can be integrated into feminist theory and criticism’ (216). In the ensuing sixteen years, I would argue, some progress has been made.

I suggest that there is something to be learned about age identity from representations of older lesbians in feminist writing. And yet, although so much theory has been produced since Copper and Macdonald were fighting for equality on the front of both age and sexuality, it is still the case that to write about lesbian ageing encroaches upon two well-established taboos; little wonder, then, that ‘breaking the silence which surrounds ageism feels very unsafe’ (Copper 18). Breaking the silence is, however, necessary. Chris Phillipson argues, strikingly, that ‘[o]lder people are involved in sustaining their sense of self and identity in conditions that many yet to be defined as old would find difficult if not intolerable’ (139). The not-yet-old have a responsibility to contest the 'sociology of exclusion’ that has brought about this state of affairs (138), and that is another aspect of my project.

The remainder of this thesis is divided into a literature review (Chapter 2) and seven further chapters. Chapter 3 examines midlife lesbian ontology and Gullette’s theory of diachronic identity through the novels and journals of May Sarton and Doris Grumbach. Sarton’s *Mrs. Stevens Hears the Mermaids Singing* and Grumbach’s *Chamber Music* both depict older women looking back on their lives; and both protagonists have been married in youth, only to develop more lasting and satisfactory relationships with women after their husbands’ deaths. This shifting of sexual identities over a life course is an important theme in both novels, and also in the experience of Sarton and Grumbach as recorded in their journals. Gullette’s paradigm of diachronic identity offers a way of rethinking ageing over the life course.

Chapter 4 documents the ways in which menopause serves as a flashpoint for the cultural anxieties surrounding women’s ageing. My primary texts on this topic are June Arnold’s novel *Sister Gin* (1975), which describes a chaotic triangular relationship between three women in small-town America, and Anne
Herrmann’s *A Menopausal Memoir* (1998). The latter, a series of autobiographical essays in epistolary form, describes Herrmann’s abrupt surgical transition into menopause at the age of forty-three, and enables a consideration of the links between sexual identity, feminism and age.

An important part of the apparatus by which subjects know themselves and sustain a sense of continuity through the life course is the faculty of memory. Chapter 5 is dedicated to analysing examples of the unreliability of memory in textual representations. The two novels I found which deal with memory loss as an aspect of gendered and sexual subjectivity are Joan Barfoot’s *Gaining Ground* (1978) and Jane Rule’s *Memory Board* (1987). The former is the tale of a housewife and mother who deserts her family and removes herself to a cabin in a remote part of the country. In this text, forgetting is, like lesbianism, transgressive, a way of removing oneself from prescribed feminine roles. *Memory Board*, on the other hand, deals with the potentially painful condition of Alzheimer’s syndrome: it depicts an older lesbian couple who deal with one partner’s memory loss in humane and creative ways. Both novels consider the part that memory plays in subjectivity, the constructed character of that memory, and the marginalisation of difference.

Chapter 6 focuses directly on sexuality, drawing on the writing of Mary Meigs and, again, June Arnold. Meigs’ *The Time Being* (1997) is an autobiographical account of a long-distance relationship between two women in later life; their love is complicated by their living on different continents. *Sister Gin* is the perfect antidote to *The Time Being*, its humour and outrageous characters contrasting with Meigs’ more meditative style. Both texts depict an unravelling relationship, but they serve to reintroduce the theme of sexuality in older age, an issue often overlooked, ridiculed, or rendered invisible.

A great many texts comment on mortality. I have selected those that elaborate a particular theoretical strand emerging from the work of Macdonald, Copper, Woodward and Gullette. Should mortality be a preoccupation only for the old? Or is it an issue for everyone, regardless of age? In Chapter 7 I have focused on the life-writing and fiction of May Sarton, together with Marilyn Hacker’s poetry on illness and death. Hacker’s *Winter Numbers* (1994) documents her experience of a life-threatening cancer in midlife, which informs
her attitude to mortality and loss. Physical frailty is also a theme of Sarton’s later journals, and an ambivalence about both life (as her existence became more painful and frustrating) and death. The novel I include in this chapter, however, *As We Are Now* (1973), deals with elder abuse, its protagonist so oppressed by those in charge of her retirement home that suicide is her only recourse. She is not physically ill, but driven to desperation by cruelty and loss of identity.

Throughout, I enquire whether it is possible to develop a coherent theory of lesbian ageing by testing both lesbian and age theory against a diverse group of primary texts. I hope that this writing will offer a route into further understanding of age ideology. Much lesbian literature of two or three decades ago is especially relevant in showing how feminists have resisted the cultural construction of age, even if the authors would not have used those terms. Furthermore, these writers’ focus on difference may show how the experience of older age is always defined through socially determined factors and filtered through ideology. For the specificity of difference – of being differently interpellated – can shed light on the ideologies of age that Macdonald and Copper first identified.

*A personal perspective*

Much of this research has been personally motivated. I would not have taken such an active interest in older age before arriving there myself if my partner, Eileen Bonner, had not been nearly a decade older than me. She is both a video artist and a woman engaged in ageing consciously. Her art work incorporates themes such as the disruption of life-course imperatives, the forms play can take for older subjects, and the shifting and continuity of identity. Because I have had a close involvement in filming these pieces, often located either behind the camera or in front of it, they are, for me, particularly infused with meaning.

Her videos deserve a mention here, since they frequently contain implicit comments on ageing. One in particular, *Eye Myself*, is a four-minute film shot mainly from a camera lofted from an airborne kite, and thus filmed, as it were, ‘from elsewhere.’ The background is a coastal scene of windswept marram...
grass; the soundtrack consists of wind whining in the microphone and the
whistling of a kite-string. The narrative begins with a close-up of an older
woman’s face – that of the artist – her eyes partially closed against the sun. I
was the cameraperson for this shot. Eileen’s head and shoulders embody a
certain layering: a red padded jacket, a baseball cap, untidy grey hair and silver
earrings. The filming is also layered, several shots superimposed on each other
throughout most of the piece. Throughout, the video moves from a still of the
artist’s eye to include glimpses of her body and its shadow in the corner of the
screen; the grassy background moves randomly as a result of the camcorder
swinging from the kite (see Fig. 1). There is no human eye behind the camera;
instead the gaze is integrated in the frame in the shape of the eye; the gaze can
be old and female. The marginal figure holding the kite string seems to enact
the movement ‘in and out of ideology’ by shifting in and out of frame.

There is a specific challenge to age ideology here: the kite, redolent of
associations with childhood, maleness and the heterosexual family unit, is
juxtaposed, surprisingly, with ageing femininity. Eileen is a biological
grandmother, but no grandchild appears in this scene of what is essentially adult
play, albeit with serious intentions. Kite-flying and kite-making are, for her, a
site of continuity, something always enjoyed and now harnessed for aesthetic
ends. In terms of life-course imperatives a woman’s late fifties and early sixties
are not supposed to be the kite-flying years; instead of being serene, abject, or
in any way conforming to age archetypes, an older lesbian is seen here in a
moment of solitary play.

But the effect is more than just playful. For women to make use of aerial
space has long been considered transgressive. Mary Russo connects ‘[a]erialism,
the [g]rotesque and [c]ritical practice’ (1994 17), describing ‘the symbolic virility
of flight as active and dangerous’ (25). Grandmothers – indeed, older women in
general – are not expected to fly kites, still less aeroplanes. Russo also had a
personal investment in old females and flight, for her aunt, Myrtle Butler, was a
licensed pilot and on one occasion co-piloted a plane with her son, making
aviation history.
While I am aware of ‘the fragilities of individualized transgression’ (Segal 67), I hope to extrapolate from these representations of older lesbian women flying, playing, and re-thinking age identity some kind of paradigm for twenty-first century female ageing. It is largely through the specific filter of personal experience that I have shaped the opinions and theories that inform this thesis, and it is for this reason that I dedicate it to Eileen, *sine qua non.*

Fig. 1. Still from *Eye Myself,* video by Eileen Bonner. From the installation *Exquisite Corpse,* dir. Rach Cornish (Exeter, UK 2003).
II
‘Sans Everything:’ the social construction of old age

[A]ging in America is shaped more by culture than by biology, more by beliefs, customs, and traditions than by bodily changes. In other words it is socially constructed . . . Nonetheless, our aging bodies matter greatly. No matter how clearly we understand the complex and interconnecting forces of social aging, we age in our individual bodies.

Margaret Cruikshank, Learning to be Old: Gender, Culture and Aging (2003)

Roz: Old people just make me uncomfortable.
Frasier: Roz, have you ever considered that your discomfort around the elderly may stem from your own fear of growing old?
Roz [with heavy sarcasm]: Wow! D’you think?
Frasier, Channel 4, Dec. 05

Age as construct

In Jaques’ famous lines from As you like it, Shakespeare put his own gloss on the Hippocratic theory that human life can be divided into seven stages. In this speech, aged subjects are said to enter ‘second childishness and mere oblivion / Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything’ (II:VII, 165-6), a bleak view which has a slightly reduced currency in 21st century ontology, but whose legacy still has significance in cultural perceptions of age. The speech begins inclusively – ‘all the men and women merely players’ (140) – but proceeds to address only the masculine life course; the origin of this lacuna, we may speculate, lies with Hippocrates. Despite its gender bias, this monologue rewards close examination for clues about cultural attitudes to the life course in early modern England. Firstly, the ‘theatre’ metaphor – we are all ‘players’, with ‘exits’ and ‘entrances’ (141) – suggests that ageing is performative, and that, by extension, these developmental stages are constructed.

This brings me to the second point of interest. There is a tension in these lines between this construct – for the conventional division of a life into seven
ages can only be a product of culture – and the embodied changes inherent in older age: it is teeth, eyes, and taste the older subject is ‘sans.’ This ambiguity must be central to discussions of older age, for the ideology of ageing permeates all social interactions. My second epigraph suggests that such ideology has not weakened its hold since the seventeenth century; if anything, as western subjects enjoy increased longevity, it has strengthened. Even in a climate of political consciousness where perpetrating social injustice is outlawed in many areas, ageism – a term only coined by gerontologist Robert Butler in 1968 – still thrives, an -ism that people simply do not want to challenge in themselves. In this episode of American sitcom Frasier, Roz is meted out community punishment as the result of a traffic violation; she chooses clearing garbage from the road side rather than visit old people in care. (In fact, in this episode Roz is persuaded to go and visit several elders, most of whom die during her visit: the association between age and death – which I will deal with in a later chapter – is clearly delineated in this programme.) The prevalent, but rarely explicit, attitude to ageing – and older subjects, who are a reminder of that process – is often, as here, ‘out of sight, out of mind,’ although in Frasier this prejudice is undercut by the framing narrative, which is, overall, anti-ageist. But for many, keeping elders ‘out of sight’ is safer and less threatening, like the ‘over the hill’ of Baba Copper’s argument: older people are not encouraged to be visible in workplaces, on the street, or in any other area not designated specifically for them to be.

The interrogation of older age as an academic discipline only began in the last three decades of the twentieth century. Researchers into the life course have recognised that cultures invent ‘ages’ or ‘stages’ in accordance with the Zeitgeist, though based on biological changes. Tamara K. Hareven, in an important essay on the social construction of the life course, comments that [a]ge and aging are related to biological phenomena, but their meanings are socially and culturally determined. ‘Social age’ is a relative concept . . . . [C]hildhood was ‘discovered’ in the first half of the nineteenth century and adolescence was ‘invented’ toward the end of the century. Both stages of life emerged into public consciousness as a result of the social crises associated with those age groups in a manner similar to the emergence of old age later on. (1995 121, 124)
Adolescence, then, is a recent product of ideology: Shakespeare’s seventeenth century example moves straight from schoolboy to lover to soldier, eliding the teenage years that have now become a recognisable phase of development. Social life stages correspond roughly to biological events, and the pressures of ideology coerce human subjects to ‘act their age’ accordingly. The emergence of ‘old age’ or ‘older age’ or merely ‘age’ as a category took place in the latter half of the twentieth century, when social and economic changes brought this section of the human life course into relief.

**Ageing, gender and feminism**

Feminism has brought its own perspective to the examination of age. I have already mentioned Simone de Beauvoir’s lengthy treatise *La Vieillesse* (1970), translated in two different versions as *Old Age* (1972) and *The Coming of Age* (1973). De Beauvoir considered older age to be one of life’s ‘unrealizables:’

> We must assume a reality that is certainly ourselves although it reaches us from the outside and although we cannot grasp it. There is an insoluble contradiction between the obvious clarity of the inward feeling that guarantees our unchanging quality and the objective certainty of our transformation. All we can do is to waver from the one to the other, never managing to hold them both firmly together. (1972 290)

In other words, as we age it is difficult to reconcile the outward, bodily appearance with our internal sense of self, which, although it may change, does not generally undergo shifts of identity that precisely match the embodied alterations of ageing.

Not only is there a split between internal and external perceptions of self as we age, but between biology and culture. De Beauvoir was one of the first feminists to consider attitudes to age as cultural, following on from her insights into the constructed character of gender. However, her meditations on old age are unrelentingly gloomy. Her research is, nonetheless, extremely thorough, encompassing much material gleaned by anthropologists and historians on the treatment of elders in various cultures. It seems that the romanticised notion of older people as more respected in pre-modern times and traditional societies is
not borne out (1972 57-131). De Beauvoir reports that reverent attitudes to the old in tribal cultures are either mythic or vary vastly between societies. She concludes:

The practical solutions adopted by primitive peoples to deal with the problems set by their old people are very varied: the old are killed; they are left to die; they are given a bare minimum to support life; a decent end is provided for them; or they are revered and cherished. (131)

She goes on: ‘As we shall see, what are called civilized nations apply the same methods: killing alone is forbidden, unless it is disguised’ (131).

De Beauvoir also flagged up the ways in which growing old differed for women and men. She had already begun considering this issue in The Second Sex (1949), where she uses terms such as ‘rupture’, ‘crisis’ and ‘shock’ to describe female ageing; even worse, she describes the physical changes wrought by age as ‘mutilation’ (1976 (1949) 587). Part of this negativity must have come from de Beauvoir’s own chagrin at her changing body and face: in Force of Circumstance (1963) she wrote: ‘I loathe my appearance now’ (656). Ironically, she does not identify this horror at her looks as the result of a construct, the ideology that insists youth is good, and age is bad. Marilyn Pearsall comments on de Beauvoir’s view of female ageing thus:

[T]he aging of women, in contrast to the aging of men, is discontinuous. In women’s life course there is rupture that corresponds to changes in her reproductive cycle (that is, menopause) . . . . For her, therefore, the aging of women represents a “crisis in femininity” and a shock to female narcissism. (Pearsall 2-3)

This is a perception of femininity as threatened by ageing, predicated as it is supposed to be on looks. Feminist writer Susan Sontag also commented acidly on this problem in her essay, ‘The Double Standard of Aging,’ published soon after La Vieillesse in the early 1970s.

This portrayal of women’s ageing as ‘discontinuous’ and typified by ‘rupture’ is one that I hope to challenge; and various age critics have pointed out that it is attitudes to ageing, rather than biological processes, that produce the ‘rupture’ of menopause and midlife. De Beauvoir may have laid the foundations for the idea of the construction of age, but her negative perspective on female ageing contributes to the very ideology that essentialises it: she bemoans the
idea that ‘[f]or every individual age brings with it a dreaded decline’ (1972 60). For her, post-menopausal women have ‘no future’, since ‘erotic attractiveness and fertility . . . provide the justification of her existence’, thus perpetuating the most negative stereotypes of gendered ageing. Marilyn Pearsall’s anthology, *The Other Within Us* (1997), both acknowledges feminism’s debt to Beauvoir’s thinking on age and points out where her negativity – a product of western culture’s obsession with appearance – is unhelpful to later generations of feminist age critics.

Copper, Macdonald and other older lesbians of the second wave also noticed that women who age encounter prejudice; but, as we have seen, they were angry rather than gloomy. For them, it was a short step from experiencing ageism to analysing the constructed character of cultural ageing, the result, like racism and ableism, of negative social attitudes. These women were activists rather than academics, and wrote in the feminist and gay journals published in the US in the ‘70s and ‘80s: *Broomstick, Equal Times, Gay Community News*, *New Women’s Times, Sinister Wisdom, Sojourner* and *Trivia* are all mentioned on Macdonald’s acknowledgment page. Copper, Macdonald and peers challenged the ageism of feminist discourses and practices; they read, commented on, and quoted from the other’s work. They noticed the problem of ageism everywhere they went, and did not hesitate to challenge it: Copper, for example, attended the 34th Annual Meeting of the American Society on Aging in 1988, and was shocked to find that the issue of ageism was nowhere to be found on the agenda or list of presentations. In her local women’s book store, she discovered two shelves of books labelled ‘Age’, but was disgusted to see, on closer inspection, that ‘they they were how-to books about “getting old graciously.” “Be positive! Be content!” say these books written by young or middle-aged gerontologists, “even though you are getting older”’ (1988 79-80). The women involved in this early feminist age consciousness movement had a well-developed awareness of the personal in writing and activism, and used the narratives of their lives to make a political point. They were aware of the power relations that attempt to render old women abject, and of the difference between biological and cultural ageing. A woman who knew Macdonald writes this of her:
Since we all knew that she had put herself through college by stunt parachute jumping, it was easy to assume that daring came naturally to her. But she also admitted she was terrified at those plunges through the air; she got through them because they had to be gotten through. I believe it was in the same spirit she offered those critiques, and would go on to write articles and to give speeches which often offended and even infuriated women she wanted as allies and as friends. (Weil 2000 1)

A social worker for most of her life, Macdonald only began to write seriously after joining a writing group run by Cynthia Rich, who later became her life partner. Their collection of articles, Look me in the eye, published in 1984, was written between 1978 and 1983; it seemed to Macdonald, however, that she had been writing these essays since her teens, since they are ‘about difference – about otherness’ (1). They document her anger about her marginal status, and about inequality and injustice wherever she found them. Examples of exclusion abound in her life-text: Macdonald was enraged, for example, by the assumptions of well-meaning feminists about her ability to keep up while on a ‘take back the night’ demonstration. The irony of walking the streets chanting ‘we are angry, proud and strong’, when the monitor in charge had questioned her ability to decide whether she could sustain the pace, was not lost on Macdonald, and she found the experience both infuriating and painful (31). She also writes about the invisibility of older lesbians: she was unseen, she speculated:

    not because they had identified me as a lesbian, since I was no longer thought of as a sexual being, but because they had identified me as old. I had lived my life without novels, movies, radio, or television telling me that lesbians existed or that it was possible to be glad to be a lesbian. Now nothing told me that old women existed, or that it was possible to be glad to be an old woman. Again the silence held powerful and repressive messages. Again I had to chart my own course. (5)

No longer being perceived as a sexual being, like no longer being represented, is an aspect of identity that is eroded by cultural perceptions, especially for women: grey hair on men is seen as ‘sexy’ or ‘distinguished,’ for example, whereas in women it denotes ‘letting oneself go.’

Baba Copper also commented on this lack of recognition and representation of older lesbians in Over the Hill. She bemoans the fact that her
'life story is seldom reflected in the books [she] find[s],’ continuing: 'I believe there is an unconscious ideology maintained by the professionals who write about old women which obscures or denies the experiences we've had and choices we've made' (36). Clearly, Copper and Macdonald were aware of the ideology of age, and recognised the extent to which ageing is constructed. Both use the appellation ‘ageism’ to denote age ideology, an idea that has subsequently been developed by age scholars, most notably Margaret Morganroth Gullette, who declares that '[i]deology wizens the middle years' (1997 6).

Midlife is not a moment too soon to begin examining age ideology. Macdonald’s partner and co-author, Cynthia Rich, confesses:

ageing itself I see as simply "failing", a painful series of losses, an inevitable confrontation with the human condition. Since ending patriarchy will not change the course of physical deterioration and death, we had best spend our energies on what can and desperately needs to be changed. The special problems of the aging woman – about which I have given little thought – are, I assume, only the accumulation of the problems of younger women throughout our lives. If we change the world for younger women, we change whatever can be changed for older women. (Macdonald 10)

Rich, initially, saw no connection between the struggle to ‘end patriarchy’ and the bodily changes that precede death: the first was ideological, for her, and the second biological, and therefore beyond her influence. It was only through her relationship with Barbara Macdonald, twenty years her senior, that Rich began to consider that ageing might be a political issue after all: she began to notice, for example, that when they were together everyone they encountered, from other lesbians to shop assistants, made eye contact with her – Rich – and avoided Macdonald’s gaze. Through this experience, Rich begins 'to see that the fear of the stigma of age, and total ignorance of its reality in the lives of old women, flow deep in [her], in other women . . . in the women's movement' (11-12).

The embodiment of ageing – what physically happens to the bodily subject, the counterpoint of age ideology – has an important place in
Macdonald’s and Rich’s text, alongside challenges to ageist attitudes. Significantly, Macdonald writes of her own arms – the body part that has to do with agency – as something ‘disconnected from me . . . someone else’s . . . the arms of an old woman . . . old women I have turned away from.’ Her own ageism is acknowledged here: ‘I wonder now how and when these arms I see came to be my own – arms I cannot turn away from’ (14). Intent on facing her own ageing rather than exerting energy in ‘passing’ as younger, Macdonald, as poet-novelist May Sarton would also do, challenges the ideology of youth-as-good in the most straightforward way possible: ‘The truth is I like growing old’ she finds herself saying (18), even at the same time as she acknowledges saying so ‘with surprise’ (19). This is the central tension and ambiguity of age: that ideology, which seeks to convince us that ageing must equal decline, is set against the lived experience, which may actually hold unexpected pleasures.

MacDonald argues that this inside/outside split, like the division between biology and culture, means that older women are forced to grapple with a ‘deeply self-alienating defense;’ and its most obvious manifestation, being told you are ‘as old as you feel’ makes for being ‘cut off from direct knowledge of your identity’ (56). Her interrogation of ageism enables MacDonald’s consciousness of other categories of othering: she points out that older black women are ‘thrice unseen’ (84). Copper also experienced a shift of sexuality, establishing sexual relationships with women during midlife. She muses: ‘Sometimes I wonder what growing old would have been like for me had I not rushed toward being an outsider’ (1988 6). The implication is that it would have been easier; we might also speculate that she would not have developed the awareness of age ideology that spawned Over the Hill and the feminist anti-ageism movement that followed.

It is important to acknowledge that other deconstructive work was going on in social gerontology during the late 1960s and early 70s (Waxman 1997 3). Gerontologist Robert N. Butler coined the word ‘ageism’ in the late 1960s, along with other useful concepts such as that of the ‘life review’ (U of Indianapolis Centre for Aging & Community website). However, women like Macdonald, Rich and Copper did more than build on this work: they introduced issues of gendered
ageing into the debate, working tirelessly to challenge the ‘social malaise’ of age ideology. Copper writes, for example, of her ‘endeavour to analyze and resist the false assumptions about aging ingrained in my own psyche and in the society as a whole’ (3), for she was aware that ‘the terrible cancer of the fear and loathing of old age’ was a drain on the energy of the women’s movement. Copper objected to the roles women found themselves forced into: choices between sex-object and nurturer, marriage and service, seemed to her like no choice at all (57, 39). If the only role open to older women was that of grandmother, she opined, she would opt out of it altogether – to the annoyance of her married daughters, who were perhaps hoping for free childcare (8). Macdonald and Rich also comment on the entrapment offered women by familial roles. It is one thing, writes Rich, to know that two women of different ages grew up in different generations with differing experiences; but, she continues: if I carry in my head the notion that you are “young enough to be my daughter,” or you are thinking “she is old enough to be my grandmother,” the quality of our dialogue is instantly converted. Our roles are defined for us; the possibility for real exchange between us is radically diminished. (102)

Family, for Macdonald and Rich, implied fixed and delimited roles for women, servitude and entrapment. For Copper, too, who was a biological grandmother, these roles were to be resisted: ‘It is important to me that I do not submerge my identity in any female service role, least of all with my grandchildren’ (9).

The radical movement that characterised Anglo-American lesbian feminism in the 1970s and 80s was vehemently anti-family and anti-marriage; it did not, as yet, have the maturity to be anti-racist or anti-ageist, or have much awareness about disability, although a minority of women, such as Audre Lorde and Cherrié Moraga, were working toward drawing attention to the first of these gaps. As Macdonald pointed out, writing in the early eighties, there was a political immaturity about the feminism of this time (33). There were certain triumphs, however: in 1979, the feminist journal Sinister Wisdom devoted an entire issue to ageing (Macdonald and Rich – Acknowledgments), and they also published Macdonald’s first paper on the subject, ‘Do You Remember Me?’ But the fundamental problem remained: as Macdonald says, the women's movement
of that time was ‘made up largely of young women in their twenties and thirties who are concerned with their physical strength as well as their political strength’ (33). (She fails to mention that they were also mainly white). The emphasis on physical strength is troubling to Macdonald, as well it might be; for the next stage, she speculates, is to imagine that the physically enfeebled are also mentally weaker, and then to segregate them from the strong (34). This, indeed, was what happened to her in the ‘Take back the night’ march – she was pressured to go to the front of the throng of women, where an even pace was more likely. It is to her credit that she argued back, and refused to go anywhere. But even a woman of her determination and resources ‘began to internalize the message and to hear it from within instead of from without’ (34). And this is precisely the issue, for it is difficult not to introject such harmful ideologies, and the result is a collusion in our own abjection, and the potential for isolation and fear. The very energy that second wave feminism embodied also led, paradoxically, to some of its difficulties: despite the huge strides the movement achieved, its youth perhaps rendered it insensitive to those whose vigour was less physical, or who were differently abled.

This was not the case, as Macdonald points out, with the first wave of feminism, which consisted mostly of midlife and older women: ‘Emmeline Pankhurst, herself, was fifty-nine when she marched to King’s Gate and was arrested. Nobody in the suffragist movement would have stopped any of these older women and asked if they could “keep up”’ (Macdonald 36-7). There may have been any number of reasons for these differences: earlier feminists were perhaps less physically free at any age, because of dress conventions of the time such as hats, long skirts and corsets; and, indeed, they were fighting for different causes – votes rather than sexual freedom. Perhaps older women had more power to protest in the culture of that time; or, possibly, older people may have been more powerful generally.

But, as Macdonald points out, the issue should not be whether women can compete with men on physical grounds. I do not have to look far for a personal anecdote that brings home the point: my partner, some years ago, was interviewed for work as a gas fitter. During the interview she was asked if she
could lift a boiler that weighed 80 kilos; she pointed out that, when she
interviewed for nursing jobs, nobody asked her whether she could lift an 80 kilo
patient. If health and safety guidelines are observed, neither patient nor boiler
should be lifted single-handed, by women or men. The problem is not physical
strength but ideology.

Macdonald’s concern about segregation echoes the remarks of cultural
gerontologists about the removal of elders into nursing and retirement homes.
May Sarton’s novel As We Are Now deals with the subject, Betty Friedan has
gathered research on the ways such homes can be improved to give residents
fuller autonomy, and Gullette takes the argument further, to speculate on how
the removal of ageing subjects from their own environment contributes to
‘identity stripping.’ Macdonald showed extraordinary insight into this segregation
in her own life, before the issue had general currency. She was not entirely
alone, however: African-American poet Audre Lorde showed her own
consciousness of age as difference in a paper she gave at Amherst College in
1980 entitled ‘Age, Race, Class and Sex: Women Redefining Difference.’ Lorde
was accustomed to finding herself ‘part of some group defined as other, deviant,
inferior, or just plain wrong’ (1984 114). She identified similar problems in the
women’s movement of the time:

By and large . . . white women focus upon their oppression as women
and ignore differences of race, sexual preference, class, and age. There is
a pretense to a homogeneity of experience covered by the word
sisterhood that does not in fact exist. (116)

However Lorde was unusual; in general, as critic Barbara Frey Waxman
observes, race tends to eclipse other kinds of difference (1997 92). Lorde was
rare in recognising age as an issue before she herself was old, demonstrating
‘how directly Lorde’s knowledge was tied to her difference – those realities of
Blackness and lesbianism that placed her outside the dominant society’ (Bereano
11). Audre Lorde’s statement was particularly significant because she
acknowledged age as an issue alongside the overriding categories of othering,
sexuality and race. Her early death meant that Lorde never fully developed this
area of work; but there can be no doubt that she, like Macdonald, experienced
an outsider status that sharpened her senses to the existence of prejudice since adolescence.

**Margaret Morganroth Gullette and age ideology**

Feminists since Macdonald and Copper have continued to produce work on ageing; despite age studies being a minority movement within the broader study of gender, it has continued to gain strength in the last decade of the twentieth century and up to the present. Theorists such as Kathleen Woodward, Margaret Gullette, Marilyn Pearsall and Margaret Cruikshank have brought a feminist perspective to the academic study of older age and midlife. Gullette argues that age, like gender, is a construct or set of practices that have become naturalised. The parallel between the two categories is also reflected in Macdonald’s writing: she demands that older women be regarded as ‘in process’ (75), resonating with performative or processual theories of gender. If, as Judith Butler suggests, it is ‘never possible finally to become a woman’ (1990 33), then perhaps it is also never possible finally to become old; ageing, like gender, may prove to be an ‘ongoing discursive practice, sustained and regulated by various social means’ (33). Because of age ideology, whose archetypes determine that old women be seen only as ‘grannies’ or ‘crones,’ oldness, once constructed, tends to become congealed in the cultural imaginary. Instead, age critics propose that it be reconfigured as a ‘becoming’, thus disrupting the ideologies which seek to fix and delimit older female subjects.

Margaret Morganroth Gullette is a resident scholar at the Women’s Studies Research Center at Brandeis University. She describes her research areas as: ‘Age Studies; Cultural Studies; Sexualities; Postmaternity; [and] Politics of the Life Course in America’ (Brandeis U, WSRC Scholar’s Program). A Jewish feminist with a political and activist perspective on ageing, Gullette produced her first significant book in the ‘age studies’ genre, *Safe at last in the Middle Years*, in 1988. This examination of the ways midlife is positively depicted in fiction traces the ‘will to revision [that was] in the air’ in the 1980s (xii). Gullette surmises that in the latter quarter of the twentieth century ‘the culture was giving its writers permission to overthrow the traditional decline view that the
middle years are a time of devolution, on a spectrum from fatigue through multiplied losses to despair’ (xii-xiii). She goes on to propose that ‘fictional events . . . revise the norm that we might call “pathetically or despicably aging.” They can weaken the effects of the corrosive, powerful, negative ideology of aging we all grow up submerged in’ (xiii). Safe at Last comments on Margaret Drabble’s character Frances Wingate, who treasures her lover’s bridge of false teeth, sentimentally tucking the piece of plastic into her bra (Gullette 1988 2). In contrast, ‘the dentist in Updike’s Couples handles the hermeneutics of teeth with gloom-filled glibness. “Losing a tooth means death to people; it’s a classic castration symbol”’ (2). Gullette asserts that ‘[a]ging has been so emphatically constructed as a no-win process that any counterconstruction (that there may be recovery and even gains in the middle years) may take considerable energy to maintain’ (xiv). But attempts such as Drabble’s, she implies, are a good beginning. Human subjects do not cease to evolve at a certain age, Gullette argues: in reality, ‘development is probably a lifelong process’ (xxi). In Declining to Decline (1997), Gullette develops her theory further: ‘ideology wizens the middle years,’ she complains. ‘None of this is natural’ (6). Her recommendation is that midlife subjects seek out examples of constructedness in order to limit the ’identity stripping’ that is otherwise inevitable (6-7).

One of the most important sites of resistance, Gullette argues, is the autobiography of ageing; for personal narrative will yield ‘truly new accounts of . . . being and becoming’ (14). While acknowledging that life writing will itself constitute discourse rather than truth, she maintains that it will also challenge and disrupt ‘the mainstream connotations of ageing as natural, biological, prenarrativized, ahistorical, universal decline’ (14).

The idea that sex-gender differences are not a biological given, but are inscribed by a culturally-determined ‘performative’ fully imbricated with bodies (Butler 1993), must also inform any discussion of age and ageing. This parallel argument may explain the ways in which, just as most (but, importantly, not all) human subjects identify with the gender associated with their biological sex, so it may at first appear that all the affective changes of ageing are the result of biological process. And yet this is not entirely the case: on closer examination,
we find that the ideology of age is as pervasive and difficult to resist as the ideology of gender. Gullette states these parallels with characteristic clarity: ‘Feminist theory denaturalized female/male difference, and then started on older/younger differences; critical race theory denaturalized the sphere of black/white difference’ (2004 102). The task of feminist age studies is, in her words, ‘[u]nmaking an essentialized, body-based ideology’ (102), for ‘[a]ge is becoming an overriding constructor of difference and an alarmingly ubiquitous focus of subjectivity throughout the life course. Age is the new kind of difference that makes a difference’ (35).

Gullette sees resistance to age ideology and the de-essentialising of age as a political struggle which will take place on a number of fronts: homes, workplaces, parliaments, council offices, art, writing, science and law. In her most recent book, _Aged by Culture_ (2004), the military metaphor is explicit:

> We do well to see this as a war over age and aging. In the war there are a thousand sites of skirmish. If my preliminary observations are correct, the sides are immensely unequal. Decline muscles on, yielding here and there when enlightened forces shove back. When age critics choose terrain for a combat we openly declare, age ideology is fortifying the ramparts someplace out of sight. (28-9)

The ideology of age now begins to stake its claim on subjects, Gullette maintains, ‘at ever younger ages and in ever higher classes’ (33). In theory this could be an advantage, harnessing more youthful and powerful subjects to engage in the battle of counterconstruction; in practice, this does not seem to be the case, for ‘old age is not interesting until one gets there, a foreign country with an unknown language to the young, and even the middle aged’ (Sarton _AWAN_ 23).

Gullette suggests that

> it is illogical and damaging to keep “aging” in artificial conceptual isolation from our multiple identities . . . From observation and self-report, I think that identity over time can be seen as a sense of an achieved portmanteau “me” – made up, for each subject, of all its changeable and continuing selves together – connected in different ways, or intermittently, but sometimes barely at all, to a sensuously material body. (2004 124-5)
Gullette has developed this argument into the theory of ‘diachronic identity,’ a way of codifying and making sense of our ‘changeable and continuing selves’ over time. Acknowledging the postmodern idea of multiple selves, she further suggests that we can be ‘multiple not just simultaneously but . . . sequentially’ (127, original italics). She goes on to claim that ‘age identity’s “community of selves” is panoptic enough to incorporate . . . ghosts’ (127). The idea that identity may be connected ‘sometimes barely at all’ to bodies underscores Gullette’s belief that age ideology, with its insistent message of ‘natural, biological, prenarrativized, ahistorical, universal decline, seeks to emphasise the bodily;’ in reality, our sense of age identity is not always tied to bodiliness. I have asked a roomful of people what age they felt themselves to be; almost no-one’s self-perception accorded with their biological age; if we add to that aspect of experience the social pressures to look, feel or pass for a particular age that is culturally valorised, the full complexity of age identity begins to emerge.

One way that we reveal our diachronic identity is literally in our faces and bodies, which bear the marks of life-course changes; this is erased by the makeover industry, which seeks to eradicate the signs of biological age from older female bodies and faces – one process among many in the cult of age-passing Gullette complains of. Plastic surgery, for her, is ‘middle-ageism, more and more often cutting its ideological imperatives into living flesh’ (69). As for the menopause, she argues that despite the common belief that it constitutes a pivotal moment, the onset of midlife decline, and the inference that ‘only women age,’ in many women’s experience ‘nothing happens’ when their menstrual cycle ceases (103). ‘This is part of the endless cultural coercion on women to “pass,”’ she writes (111). Part of the work required to disrupt the ideology of ageing is ‘resisting the prescribed’ (114) on every level. Gullette acknowledges that the process of ageing is not one-dimensional: ‘[d]iscourse cannot by itself explain how . . . identity-stripping occurs’ (1997 199). In fact, her insistence that shedding items of clothing may be an aspect of this ‘identity stripping’ constitutes perhaps the only area of her argument with which I disagree. For Gullette, fashion has a profound effect on midlife
women: ‘going through market cycles affects our experience of the life course,’ she insists (183, original italics). It seems to me contradictory that, on the one hand, Gullette cheerfully admits that her mother buys most of her clothes (181), and, on the other, claims that discarding old garments – garments not chosen by her in the first place! – represents the ‘shedding of pieces of the self’ (188).

This minor quibble notwithstanding, I have based some aspects of my argument squarely on Gullette’s theoretical position. She argues, for example, that decline is generated in the individual by the unconscious: it ‘enacts itself’ (199, original italics); and certain practices – such as striving to pass for younger – underpin the message of decline. She teaches us to be on our guard for age ideology everywhere, for decline narratives, ranging from the ageist humour of birthday cards to medical discourses and practices, are ubiquitous. Resistance to the negative ideologies requires us to be conscious of ‘how little of midlife pain is natural; how much it depends on reiterated stresses and patterns’ (200).

We are aged, then, by threefold forces: discourse, socio-economic factors, and practices (211). Denial is not a useful form of resistance, she points out. Well-worn homilies about ‘positive’ or ‘graceful’ ageing will not disrupt the social order of age ideology; rather, they are part of it (213). We all have the task, she believes, of ‘fend[ing] off the master narrative’ (218); and to do this will require both personal stories and further theory about ageing, until it is understood as well as racism, sexism and homophobia (218).

**Kathleen Woodward and the power of the mirror**

The other towering figure of feminists age studies, and inheritor of the Copper and Macdonald’s legacy, is Kathleen Woodward. She agrees that we are ‘interpellated by age,’ and engages playfully with psychoanalytic theories of subject formation in her book *Aging and its Discontents – Freud and other Fictions* (1991). Her key contribution to age theory is the idea that the transition into old age constitutes an inverted ‘mirror stage’ of ageing. This transition is
similar to the infant version theorised by Lacan, in which the child enters the Symbolic via the Imaginary order by seeing his or her image reflected in a mirror, in the eyes of the mother, and in the wider world. Through this image the inchoate ego is formed, inevitably a bodily ego since that is what can be seen, or in Lacan’s own words:

This development . . . decisively projects the formation of the individual into history. The mirror stage is a drama whose internal thrust is precipitated from insufficiency to anticipation and which manufactures for the subject . . . a succession of phantasies that extends from a fragmented body-image to a form of its totality. (180-1)

The infant mirror stage is a movement from fragmentation into wholeness. But Woodward argues that the midlife ‘mirror’ stage signifies a journey in the other direction. The subject not only recognises the destabilising bodily processes that signify ageing, but is simultaneously projected out of history and back towards ‘insufficiency.’ However, the reflection that looks back at a midlife subject in the mirror still embodies the ego, and for most this will be a more solidly formed and accepted sense of self than is possible in infancy. For the infant, this process is accompanied by the realisation of being a separate whole, part of striving for separation from the mother. In the later mirror stage, an appraisal of another kind of separation takes place: a shift in position away from the centre of the Symbolic order. During this transition, the subject becomes aware of a pressure, or tendency, to move towards the margins of its social environment. Testimonies to this phenomenon have been recorded even by well-known and independent thinkers. One pioneer of the women’s movement, Betty Friedan, experienced the discomfort of being – as she saw it – ‘push[ed] out of life’ (13) in response to a surprise sixtieth birthday party organised by her friends; for her it was an unwelcome rite of passage. The late-life mirror reflects this transition.

Importantly, the mirror phase is a process rather than an event, ceaselessly reiterated like interpellation itself. Margaret Gullette records her own mirror scene, containing an internal dialogue: ‘Am I ugly yet?’ she asks her reflection (1997 67). It also appears in the work of playwright and psychoanalyst Florida Scott-Maxwell, for whom ‘mirrors [were] a mortification’
Gullette’s meditations on cosmetic surgery are a reminder that this particular form of cultural inscription results from a morbid fear of the mirror; this preoccupation with appearance tends to displace, in the feminine imaginary, the more troubling relation to mortality which is ultimately more difficult to face.

Kathleen Woodward undertakes a detailed analysis of the second mirror stage, linking it to age ideology: ‘old age is in great part constructed by any given society as a social category, as is, for example, adolescence’ (66). For her, ‘[t]he mirror our culture holds up to the elderly contains the feared image of death’. Because this image of the ageing self is no longer an object of desire, she suggests, ‘the subject denies this identification rather than embraces it . . . . 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 nurling dependence of advanced age’ (67).

Woodward takes a literary example, the writing of Marcel Proust. It may be significant that she does not choose a female writer for this piece of psychoanalytic criticism, perhaps because the association of women and mirrors tends to imply merely narcissism. Woodward focuses on his description of ageing faces at a soirée in Paris, where his acquaintances’ altered appearance seems to him particularly shocking, a ‘frightening hyperparable of aging’ (53). He describes the faces around him in grotesque terms: one guest, he comments, imitated an ‘old beggar’, and ‘put so much realism into his character of a drivelling old man that his limbs shook and the flaccid features of his unusually haughty face smiled continually with a stupidly beatific expression’ (in Woodward 56). Woodward suggests that the idea that this man is merely acting his old age dilutes the full impact of the ‘mirror’ (56); this description is resonant of Shakespeare’s ‘players’, who perform the stages of life according to cultural imperatives. Here the idea of ageing as performance is precisely parallel to Butler’s ‘performativity’ of gender, a copy with no original. Gullette also sees age as performance, but one with ‘no uniform set of age-associated behaviours’ (2004 172). For her, the ‘dismemberment’ of the life course means that the gestures and body language of age constitute an arbitrary collection of signifiers developed by co-identities over time.
Woodward speculates that Proust undergoes a similar psychic dismemberment: reflected in the altered faces of his peers, he recognises that he too is altered, and this recognition, in contrast with the pleasure the infant derives from its own image, disrupts the continuity of his age-identity, what is ‘felt’ being at odds with what is seen. Here is the inverse ‘mirror’ at its most devastating; the midlife or older subject is disoriented by its reflection: there are no maps for this journey (Woodward 55). Woodward describes Marcel’s experience thus:

[ünchen] the drawing room . . . is a dizzying hall of mirrors where each person possesses the dangerous potential of reflecting the aging Marcel . . . the old people surrounding him force him to acknowledge that he too is old. They hold up the mirror to him. What was abstract is now palpably real. (59)

This experience gave rise to Proust’s observation, in agreement with de Beauvoir, that old age is ‘of all the realities . . . the one concerning which we retain for the longest time a purely abstract conception’ (in Woodward 59). This failure to imagine our own old age can lead to a further psychic division, which echoes the splitting of the child becoming-a-subject in the Lacanian mirror stage. These is a division between self and other, and between inside and outside, where ‘I’ am young but my peers are old, or I am young inside, despite being perceived as aged. Woodward is unsure whether this denial of age is in some ways useful in preventing despair, or whether, as de Beauvoir argues, we should make efforts to identify with older subjects as a way to avoid the repression of old age which gives rise to ageism (1991 59). ‘Is it wise in personal terms to recognise one self as old?’ Woodward muses. ‘Should, in fact, one incorporate one’s mirror image of old age as reflected in the eyes of others, the social world? Or is it more productive to deny it?’ (60). Repression or denial of old age, on the one hand, may be merely a tactic for survival. On the other, it can powerfully express the experience of a core identity that refuses or escapes the painful cultural mirror stage of old age; indeed, such a denial can perhaps preserve an ego that would otherwise be fragmented or ‘cracked’ in the process of mirroring. Woodward has no doubt,
however, that the repression or abjection of the ageing bodily self has problematic effects on the cultural psyche, ‘[f]or like sexism and racism, ageism is prejudice rooted in physical difference as well as in discrepancies in social power’ (70, italics added). Challenging ageism through personal ‘incorporation’ is not an easy process; but Woodward implies that it is possible by harnessing one’s discomfort in front of the mirror and making it conscious. She describes the ‘inverse mirror stage’ in these terms:

[I]n western culture all mirrors are potentially threatening. As in the mirror stage of infancy, in the mirror stage of old age the subject is confronted with an image. If he identifies with it, he is transformed [sic]. In the mirror stage of infancy, the infant enters the imaginary. In the mirror stage of old age, the subject enters the social realm reserved for “senior citizens” in the western world. But the point is that the subject denies this identification rather than embraces it. . . . The infant holds his mirror image in an amorous gaze. But the elderly person wishes to reject it – and thereby to reject old age for himself. (67)

It is only through resistance to this tendency – the drive to reject the mirror image and older age along with it – that useful counter-constructions to age ideology can emerge. Similarly, Nancy K. Miller, in her appraisal of older age and creativity in ‘The Marks of Time,’ writes 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’ (in Woodward 1999 4). The latter paper is to be found in a collection edited by Woodward with Murray Schwartz, Figuring Age: Women, Bodies, Generations. Woodward was also responsible for the anthology Memory and Desire: Aging – Literature – Psychoanalysis (1986), indicating the range and scope of her involvement with age studies.

Lesbian feminism, ageing and the mirror

From a lesbian subject position, the mirror is both more and less problematic. Gillian Spraggs, for example, has commented on the ways that same-sex desire in women has been represented as seeking a mirror-image, and thus characterised as a kind of unhealthy narcissism:
In the course of evolving his complex theory of narcissism – which identifies it, among other things, as characteristic of an early stage in the progress towards personal maturity – Freud lent his immense prestige to the notion that a love-object of the same sex is always a manifestation of narcissism in a marked degree. (1992 123)

Whereas love of all kinds justifies itself by 'attention to the Other', Spraggs goes on, the 'imagery of mirrors . . . neatly brackets lesbian or homosexual love well outside the possibility of any such justification' (124), presumably because for lesbian desire, the love-object is often typified as not other but 'same.' Spraggs challenges this stereotypical view of love between women, freeing the idea of the mirror in lesbian old age to become a means of self-examination and a medium through which to explore the problem of a perceived inside/outside split.

On the other hand, Mary Riege Laner's curious (and admittedly dated) paper on the 'personals' advertising habits of lesbians (1978) finds that 'outward appearance seems clearly less important to lesbian advertisers than to members of other groups', as demonstrated by the fact that 'only 2 of the 273 lesbian advertisers asked for photos from their respondents,' compared with between a quarter and a third of other groups, who clearly wanted to see what their potential partners looked like (Laner 51). Women seeking female partners were much more likely to mention character traits or professional occupation than appearance, either in themselves or their sought-for mate (52). Laner went to some lengths to find out what feminism has since suggested: that appearance is less important to women than to men, especially when also seeking a female partner. This may make the changing of her physical appearance less troubling to a midlife lesbian, who is not so likely to be traded in for a younger model as her heterosexual counterpart; and coming to terms with bodily changes may therefore be less problematic. On the other hand, changes in appearance are also significant for lesbians, whose struggles with the 'mirror' are documented in their writing: Audre Lorde's confrontation with her post-mastectomy, one-breasted self; May Sarton's ambivalence about her wrinkles; and Marilyn Hacker's anticipation of bodily alteration. I will be exploring the theme of lesbian old age through the recurrent theme of the 'mirror stage' or 'mirror moment;' the
mirror is also linked to the Gullette’s key idea of diachronic identity, for it is a way to render such changes both visual and external.

Much critical theory by lesbians dealing with aspects of difference and gender theory has also been useful to this project. Lesbian ontology – the lived experience reflected in perspectives on culture and ideology – differs from that of heterosexual women in two important ways. Firstly, as Spraggs identified, lesbian pairing is often regarded as a troubling desire for sameness; and secondly, lesbian sex disassociates sexual activity from reproduction. Academic and cancer survivor Jackie Stacey offers an interpretation of these cultural perceptions of lesbians, suggesting that the result is a view of lesbianism as monstrous or grotesque. She argues:

The monstrousness of lesbian desire lies in its perceived devotion to sameness and continuity, which threaten to return the subject to a merging state with the maternal body. The disgust lesbianism evokes may also be seen as a disgust with the maternal body in the perception of its most cloying manifestations and desires . . . . 

Stacey’s thoughts are echoed by Judith Roof, who writes of ‘a doubling (too many women) that typifies . . . perverse excess’ (22). In A Lure of Knowledge (1991), Roof complains that depictions of lesbian relations in popular culture – she examines both soft porn and lesbian cult movies such as Desert Hearts – are always configured in such a way as to make them ‘safe.’ She suggests that

[1]n practices of viewing or perceiving, configurations of lesbian sexuality challenge the stability of a visible, rigidly defined sexual difference . . . . By implicitly challenging the habitual heterosexual paradigm, representing lesbian sexuality conspicuously unmask[s] the ways gender and sexuality normally coalesce to reassert the complementary duality of sexual difference. (Roof 12, 2)

In order to neutralise this challenge, she goes on, popular culture’s ‘configurations of lesbian sexuality embody the conflicting impetuses of representational insufficiency and recuperation . . . [a]s titillating foreplay, simulated heterosexuality, exotic excess, knowing center, joking inauthenticity, artful compromise, and masculine mask’ (4-5). By commenting on lesbian ontology from the inside, I hope to avoid this tendency towards ‘recuperation.’
Terry Castle propounds a similar argument in the wonderfully humorous *The Apparitional Lesbian*. In the eponymous essay, she harnesses Monique Wittig’s startling statement that ‘[l]esbians are not women . . . for “woman” has meaning only in heterosexual systems of thought and heterosexual economic systems’ (32). This conceit locates the lesbian subject firmly outside the binary gender axis of male-female, not biologically, we must assume, but socially. In my opinion Wittig’s assessment runs the risk of being interpreted as essentialist, for there can, because of identity’s infinite fluidity, be no fixed lesbian identity; perhaps rather one can be said to take up a lesbian position. However, Castle uses Wittig to good effect:

The refusal to become (or remain) heterosexual always meant to refuse to become a man or a woman, consciously or not. For a lesbian this goes further than the refusal of the *role* ‘woman’. It is the refusal of the economic, ideological, and political power of a man. Under the circumstances it’s perhaps no wonder that so many men (and some women) have sought to see the lesbian “disappeared.” (1993 5)

Castle’s essay examines the long history in European writing of lesbian characters that are rendered spectral, ghostly or otherwise insubstantial. Lesbians are not invisible by accident, Castle argues: they are rendered invisible by a culture that does not want to see them. Castle’s argument is ultimately positive: she concludes that this very spectral quality has become a haunting, a refusal by the phantom lesbian figure ever finally to disappear:

[T]he metaphor meant to derealize lesbian desire in fact did just the opposite . . . For embodied in the ghostly figure, as even its first proponents seemed at times to realize, was inevitably a notion of reembodiment: of uncanny return to the flesh . . . . And once there, the spectre, like a living being, was not so easily gotten rid of. It demanded a response. (63)

This very invisibility, then, is part of the way that the existence of lesbian feminism troubles the heterosexual economy. A similar process, a kind of haunting, is enacted by the presence of old lesbians in the discourses of age.

On the other hand, it would be a mistake to romanticise lesbian ageing, for certain problems do inevitably trouble older lesbians that may not be an issue for their heterosexual peers. Sexuality itself may, for example, be a difficulty in
terms of societal perceptions: the observations of sociologist Margaret Cruikshank may be helpful here. She comments that although ‘old women in general are seen stereotypically as asexual . . . old lesbians, when they are noticed at all, are perceived only through their sexuality’ (121). And yet older lesbian women are a heterogeneous group. Cruikshank remarks: ‘They differ in ethnicity, class, education, income, and degree of identification with the gay and lesbian community’ (121). It is difficult, therefore, to generalise about older lesbians as a cohort, but there does seem to be a particular double bind that epitomises older lesbian existence: Cruikshank explains it thus:

[T]he resilience needed to cope with a stigmatised identity helps older lesbians adapt to aging, but it may also be true that the special stresses of their lives, especially if they have been fired from jobs, lost custody of children, or otherwise harmed because of their sexual orientation, have long-lasting consequences. (121)

Examples of this resilience abound in the texts I will analyse: and that resilience also helps with the ‘special stresses’ of Cruikshank’s argument. But lesbian literature is not confined to progress narratives. About minority views of ageing, Cruikshank suggests: ‘Shifting consciousness [is] valuable for old women who can see with ironic detachment the ways others project “old” onto them, without internalising ageist attitudes (120). This, perhaps, is the value of accounts of old age by marginalised subjects; for ‘[s]urviving the dominant culture’s influence requires, in the words of Paula Gunn Allen, “an uncompromising commitment to multiplicity”’ (Cruikshank 120). We all, as we age, need strategies for survival.

**Age, interpellation and (older) subject formation**

How, then, are these theories of lesbian difference, and the problematic of representation, applicable to the discourse of ageing? First, I suggest that lesbian subjects are accustomed to being interpellated as different; it is perhaps less problematic, then, for us also to be interpellated as older. Louis Althusser’s theory of interpellation is the Marxist philosophical frame for subject formation, the counterpart of the Lacanian ‘mirror phase’ in psychoanalysis. I have attempted to incorporate both theories in the thinking of older age. Judith Butler
provides an examination of their interface in *The Psychic Life of Power* (1997): for her, the moment of interpellation, famously explained by Althusser by the everyday example in which an individual is ‘hailed’ by the law of ideology and called into subjectivity, is never so simple and complete as it appears. This is always already an ambiguous process, for, according to Butler, ‘the formulation of subjection is both the subordination and becoming of the subject’ (1997 13). The ‘turn’ is presented by Althusser as inevitable and complete; lesbian writer Doris Grumbach echoes this when she writes of ‘turning’ seventy, the ‘turn into older age’. Butler points out, however, that subjectivation is not a moment but a process. She explains, furthermore, that the *reiteration* of interpellation is necessary for the subject to remain a subject:

> What is brought into being through the performative effect of the interpellating demand is much more than a “subject,” for the “subject” created is not for that reason fixed in place . . . a subject only remains a subject through a reiteration or rearticulation of itself as a subject, and this dependency of the subject on repetition for coherence may constitute that subject’s incoherence, its incomplete character. (1997 99)

Interpellation is not only iterative, then, but always incomplete, leaving part of the human organism – that part not constituted as subject – as our ‘unharnessed and unsocialized remainder’ (88), a fragment that is held in the unconscious and resists the normalising force of ideology. It follows that a subject is always a subject in process, and that its subjectivity is sustained by a constant repetition of interpellation which constitutes identity. It must then be this ‘unharnessed and unsocialized remainder’ – which resists cultural imperatives – that gives the Barbara Macdonalds and Baba Coppers of the women’s movement (and indeed feminism itself) the drive and energy to resist normative forces.

I suggest that, for example, the ‘remainder’ of Judith Butler’s argument, the aspect of self that is resistant to the power of ideology, is the driving force behind older women’s – and especially older feminists/lesbians’ – ability to move ‘in and out of ideology.’ This vestigial, unsocialized scrap of psyche enables what one critic has called ‘late life courage in non-conformity’ (Waxman 1997 90). Thus I will investigate the possibility that representations of sexuality in older lesbian writing are more likely to be self-configuring, to refuse or sidestep
the imperatives of ‘recuperation’ Roof mentions and thus to produce ‘fictional
events’ which show ageing as an enabling continuity of development rather than
consisting only of loss and decline. The double consciousness of an othered
sexuality complicated by older age is an undertheorised area, one which may,
like other minority accounts of ageing, contribute to the development of age
studies and age activism.

Crucial to the understanding of this doubling of consciousness is an
appreciation of what Butler calls the ‘failure’ of identity. For interpellation
‘institutes its subject as an agent precisely to the extent that it fails to determine
such a subject exhaustively in time’ (1997 197). Butler sees the inevitable
incompleteness of subjectivation and identity as that which both prevents the
subject from ever being a unified self, and also saves it from complete subjection
to ideology; for her, a totalising identity would be a sort of psychic prison (198).
Ultimately, then, there is ‘no “one” without ambivalence, which is to say that the
fictive redoubling necessary to become a self rules out the possibility of strict
identity’ (198). This theory harmonises with Gullette’s ‘sequential selves,’ the
shifting and resettling of identities over a life course, signifying the always-in-
process, never fixed, character of subjects. It also, perhaps, figures with the
fluidity of sexuality and the ultimate instability of the lesbian subject position,
which offer some interesting difficulties for my argument I will expand on in later
chapters.

Such theories indicate the complexity of the process of subject formation,
as well as the always ambiguous character of taking one’s place in the social
order. The call to ‘align oneself with the law’ (Butler 107) invites us to yield to
interpellation, and this implies, according to Butler, a certain readiness on the
part of the inchoate subject to respond to ideology’s ‘hailing’. The difference in
my appropriation of this idea to age theory is that, in the Althusserian model, it is
difficult to know who or what the human organism is before interpellation, since
Althusser claimed that ‘individuals are always-already subjects’ (302, original
emphasis). At the moment of the responsive turn the subject is brought into
being, and, before that, was some other organism – a not-yet-subject. The adult
interpellated as old, however, was clearly already a subject and through this
further process of interpellation has become something else: an ageing subject, and thus someone of less status in the social order. If we add to this equation the complexity of having already been a female subject, with a more tenuous hold on the Symbolic in the first place, it becomes clear that a complex hierarchy of power relations is involved in ageing. A sexually inflected and marginalised embodiment complicates the web still more. Furthermore, the ambiguity of subjectivation, which Althusser characterises as ‘(1) a free subjectivity, a centre of initiatives, author of and responsible for its actions; (2) a subjected being who submits to a higher authority, and is therefore stripped of all freedom except that of freely accepting his submission’ (303), has a parallel in the ambiguity of ageing: for whether we are aged more by biology or ideology is still open to interpretation. If we become a lesser form of subject through the interpellation of age, does that render us somehow more free, less docile or submissive? And if so, is this a positive aspect of ageing that has been overlooked? Does it mean that we conform less to ideological imperatives in later life? What becomes of the ‘unharnessed and unsocialized remainder’ in old age? Is this residue, left over after subject formation and held in the unconscious, the part of us most likely to achieve ‘living in one’s body resistantly’ (Gullette 2004 109)? Is ‘outrageous ageing’ – sometimes typified by ‘wearing purple’ – a useful way of attempting to subvert ideologies? Or does it simply create new ideologies, an alternative ‘how-to’, so that the injunction to age ‘disgracefully’ or ‘outrageously’ becomes just another imperative?

The slipperiness of this enquiry now becomes apparent: for how is it possible to separate cultural constructions of age from the embodied experience of growing older? This ambiguity in age studies echoes the tensions within feminist theory – principally that ‘the category of “woman,” the subject of feminism, is produced and restrained by the very structures of power through which emancipation is sought’ (Butler 1991 2) – as well as the uncertain relation between the two fields. This ambiguity appears to be an extension of that which is inherent in subjectivity. At the same time, in considering the differing bodiliness and experience of the ageing female and lesbian subject, the importance of the embodied character of subjectivity will be
paramount, for we understand much of the process of ageing, as my first epigraph suggests, through our bodies. Elizabeth Grosz’s *Volatile Bodies* offers guidance through the difficult terrain of embodiment. For her, ‘[b]odies are not inert; they function interactively and productively. They act and react. They generate what is new, surprising, unpredictable’ (xi). Both speech and agency have nowhere to issue from except the body. One problem I expect to encounter is the separation of body from psyche when thinking of ageing: for this dualistic thinking is embedded in language, to the point where avoiding this artificial separation means the adoption of clumsy neologisms such as ‘bodymind’ or biological terms like ‘organism.’ This often results in the use of phrases such as ‘embodied subject,’ still not entirely satisfactory but the best compromise available.

Subjectivity, then, is not an abstract aspect of the human psyche but always embodied; and those bodies are inflected in various ways, giving them status as semiotic sites which indicate race, gender, age, often class and sometimes - but more rarely – sexuality, which tends to be invisible. Grosz, arguing against Cartesian dualism, configures the body as centrally important in theories of subjectivity and gender. For bodies have long tended to be marginalized in this binary: Grosz points out that this ‘bifurcation of being is not simply a neutral division of an otherwise all-encompassing descriptive field . . . [but] necessarily hierarchizes and ranks the two polarized terms so that one becomes the privileged term and the other its suppressed, subordinated, negative counterpart’ (1994: 3). Clinician Fiona Mackie agrees:

From the moment of birth, a child of modernity imbibes an externalized form of knowledge and control deemed objective and associated with “mind.” Thus begins the long progression in which “mind” becomes detached from “body” and installed as emperor over all that lies below the neck. This panoptic “head” governs each bodiliness toward a self-enacted control, premised on a form of “rationality” marked profoundly by its separation from “nature.” “Body,” deemed part of “nature” is thus relatively put out of play. (17)

Bodies, then, are ‘the centers of perspective, insight, reflection, desire, agency.’ She comments on ‘the ability of bodies to always extend the frameworks which attempt to seep beyond their domains of control’ (xi). Grosz’s insistence on
foregrounding bodies may initially appear in direct contradiction to Kathleen Woodward, who complains that ‘the problem . . . is in part precisely that of representing aging primarily in terms of the body. What of the psyche?’ (1991 20, original italics). What Woodward is objecting to here, I suspect, is the naturalising effect of age ideology, the narratives of age that figure decline as inevitable, and a steady deterioration towards death as the sum total of ageing experience; or perhaps precisely that, as the ‘head’ is dethroned, the body is seen as taking over in a negative way. Ultimately, however, I believe that Grosz and Woodward would agree that older subjects do experience biological changes which take place alongside discursive production, changes that may be summed up as an increased bodily vulnerability. The body both supports the cultural self and is determined by it: the result is a tension in which the instability of older bodies is typified by leakiness, volatility, excessiveness and the loss of cultural control. In short, old bodies house an aspect of the ‘unharnessed and unsocialized remainder,’ the ‘excess’ that is a by-product of interpellation (Butler 1997 198). In seeking out texts that illustrate the interplay of ageing and sexuality, therefore, I have been mindful of embodiment: for Hélène Cixous’ injunction to ‘write the body’ continues to apply into older age.

**Greer, the body and ritual**

In contrast to those age critics who emphasise the cultural and psychic aspects of age, Germaine Greer stresses the importance of the biological perhaps a little too strenuously. Her text *The Change* (1991), which deals with menopause and female ageing, acknowledges the body as the seat of all experience, but leans heavily towards biological essentialism. For example, she sees the body as something to ‘transcend,’ posing bodiliness as a problem, the thing that ‘other people principally value [women] for’ (430), in contrast with Grosz’s suggestion that gender theory move ‘towards a corporeal feminism.’ At the same time, *The Change* shows an acceptance of cultural categories as ‘natural’ that is, to say the least, troubling. For example, Greer has feminised Shakespeare’s seven-ages-of-man theory; this is an interesting idea, but she has based her theory squarely on
western cultural norms of woman as heterosexual and reproductive, contained in a ‘marriage plot’ that serves to define and delimit female experience:

Women’s seven ages begin with the first critical phase or climacteric, which is birth and infancy; the second stormy passage is adolescence, the third defloration, the fourth childbirth, and the fifth, menopause. Between them lie the relative calms of childhood, maidenhood, wifehood and motherhood. The fifth is exceeded in significance only by the grand climacteric of dying. (56)

Unfortunately, this model tends to reinforce rather than challenge age ideology and life-course imperatives. Greer’s argument refuses to take into account the multiplicity of female experience: a good many women, I suspect, would have difficulty in relating to terms such as ‘defloration’, ‘maidenhood’, ‘wifehood’ or ‘motherhood.’ Greer’s ‘seven ages’ contribute the paradigm that seeks to keep women and the narratives of their lives confined to limited roles. One reading of this model might be as an example of Gullette’s diachronic identity: that paradigm, however, reflects the female subject’s fluidity of identity, culminating in a collection of selves which constitute the identity of older age, whereas Greer’s model is couched in fixed terms, attempting to mould all women into a uniform life course.

Gullette and Greer do agree, however, in their criticism of the discourses surrounding Hormone Replacement Therapy, both complaining that this ‘treatment’ not only reinforces the idea of menopause as deficiency disease, but also appears to offer women an over-simplified choice as to whether to grow old or not. However, Greer’s argument that menopausal women should strive for ‘serenity and power’ (through an invisibility emphasised by donning dark and shapeless garments) stands in sharp contrast with the experience of Florida Scott-Maxwell, who found ‘that as we age we are more alive than seems likely, convenient or even bearable’ (159). In The Measure of my Days, the latter writes of the passion, rage and intensity of old age as part of her ‘reward and undoing’ (33, 94). A Jungian analyst, Scott-Maxwell might, one would have thought, have achieved ‘serenity and power’ in later life if anybody could. It may be that Greer will live to regret her words: her appearance on various television programmes, from Celebrity Big Brother (Channel 4 2005) to the BBC’s Grumpy
Old Women (2006), would tend to indicate that serenity is no longer something she aspires to.

There is, however, some useful material in Greer’s book. She comments, for example, on the lack of a rite of passage to mark female ageing. Almost the only ceremony in Western cultures to mark the onset of later life is retirement, and this rite passes many women by because of the character of female work, which is often domestically based, part-time, piecemeal or otherwise unseen. The ‘negative’ event of the menopause, (the period that never arrives), generally goes uncelebrated (Greer 39). Indeed, the menopause is a cause of dread for many women, because of the medical discourses that represent it as an illness and the ideology that presents it as a ‘magic marker’ on the map of decline (Gullette 1997 98). Kathleen Woodward is critical of Greer’s desire to configure menopause as a ‘transition from being reproductive to being reflective’, and considers her guilty of ‘an oddly archaic biological essentialism’ which is ‘both retrograde and anachronistic’ (1999 xiv). Certainly Greer’s analysis fails to speak to a great many women, tending as it does towards supporting heteronormativity and decline narratives. A good many self-help books on how to grow old, however, are even more superficial and irritating. Suzanne Braun Levine, for example, in The Woman’s Guide to Second Adulthood: Inventing the Rest of Our Lives (2005), insists throughout that women become someone else entirely as they pass through midlife: ‘you’re not who you were only older’ is her refrain (13+). While old age does inevitably bring some transitions, it may be more useful to frame them in terms of continuity punctuated by diachronic identity shifts, rather than characterising older age as ‘rupture,’ ‘decline’ or ‘mutilation.’ One question I hope to answer is whether texts by second wave lesbians and feminists document more continuity – or perhaps positive transitions – and fewer ‘ruptures’ in the identity of later life.

Concluding remarks
Marginal groups, then, can offer us all paradigms for ageing, but even these paradigms are a vehicle for the tension I have described. Since cultural gerontology has begun to ponder issues of gender, it has become clear that
women have the edge biologically, but are, in comparison to males, socially disadvantaged. Betty Friedan has argued that, although they are more likely to be institutionalised, women age better than men, and live longer. Social scientists Arber and Ginn, on the other hand, in *Gender and Later Life* (1991), conclude that although women enjoy greater longevity than men, they actually have worse health, and are more likely to be poor and live alone. Friedan interprets women’s greater frequency of medical visits as showing ageing females to be more aware of their bodies, and more ready to seek medical help (Friedan 135). However, Friedan, Arber and Ginn all agree that sociologists, gerontologists and feminists have paid insufficient attention to the inequality in life expectancy between the sexes. Friedan concludes that women, more familiar with change during the course of their lives, are better at reinventing themselves in the upward years. This is backed up by Elizabeth Grosz, who comments on the relative locations of women and men in the Symbolic order: she speculates that only men can inhabit a stable position within the social, and that women hold a more tenuous or mobile place in it. Friedan argues – and I agree – that this very instability and marginality become advantageous for women, especially women of minority identities, for they are more practised at enacting the ‘movement in and out of ideology’ that enables detachment from injurious labels; in other words, they are resistant to interpellation. If age is a socially constructed category, then, a subject inflected by difference, already de-centred, is in a better position to resist age ideologies and normative life-course expectations.

Other social gerontologists have challenged the age ideology generated in their own discipline: for in the social sciences, the ‘life cycle’ has tended to be seen as ‘experienced through structured discontinuities, as a series of age-grades, stages, generations and cohorts’. As recently as the late 1980s, for example, two social scientists represented five of these ‘stages’ by the natural-biological labels ‘Full Nest I, II and III and Empty Nest I and II’ (Hockey and James 2003 23). Instead, sociologists Jenny Hockey and Allison James propose that ‘identity is itself not a unitary aspect of selfhood. More accurately, we can think of it as a negotiated, unstable assemblage of ideas and perceptions within
which ‘age’ competes with other imperatives such as gender, class and ethnicity’ (2003 4). For them, as for Gullette, ageing is ‘a social as well as a physical process which is infinitely varied and variable’ (5).

The texts against which I test theories of age identity are wide-ranging in form: some are fictional; others take the form of life-writing or poetry. They have in common a certain time frame – the last third of the twentieth century and the first few years of the twenty-first – and having been written by older lesbians and feminists. Gullette has argued for the power of ‘fictional events’ – and this includes creative literature of all kinds – to exert influence upon cultural attitudes to ageing. I shall build on this idea, suggesting that minority accounts of older age have a particular kind of power that can be usefully channelled into age theory.

Kathleen Woodward confirms that ‘the experience of growing older is . . . profoundly shaped by the meanings which are ascribed to aging’ (1999 xiii). These meanings do not remain abstract, but affect us in material ways, and theoretical debate is an important arena for interrogating and challenging them. I propose to continue the dialogue that already exists between the age critics who have gone before. For ‘[a]ge . . . can no longer be omitted from the lists of the great categorical oppressions’ (Gullette 2004 122). Feminism has recognised that gender difference has an impact on ageing; and bringing sexuality into the equation offers another axis of reference. De Beauvoir’s dismal view of female old age has served as a touchstone in my choice of texts for this project, partly through a will to revision, for attitudes to ageing have changed for the better since she wrote *The Second Sex* and *Old Age*. None of my authors would consider herself to have ‘no future;’ nor, I hope, would they view the biological changes of older age as ‘mutilation.’ I have critiqued these texts about lesbian experience in order to channel the literatures of age identity in a new direction, to generate further paradigms for ‘learning to be old’ (Cruikshank 2003), and to counter the forces of age ideology.

Sexual difference makes a difference in the final category of othering: age. We may not be able to escape the power of ideology, but there remains the possibility of being ‘elsewhere or otherwise . . . [enacting] a different kind of
This different kind of interpellatory turn produces a different kind of subject, one who harnesses a ‘shifting consciousness’ of difference in order to become resistantly aged. In developing this theory of minority ageing, I focus on the challenge that lesbian feminist texts have posed to age ideology. This, then, is my contribution to queer theory and age criticism: to find the interstitial space where these two areas of study intersect – the ‘in-between worlds’ of old age.
III

Beyond the meridian of fifty: diachronic identity in the work of May Sarton and Doris Grumbach

_The great thing about getting older is that you don't lose all the other ages you've been._
Madeleine L'Engle
www.womenshistory.about.com

_We must recognise what the past suggests: women are well beyond youth when they begin, often unconsciously, to create another story._
Carolyn Heilbrun
_Writing a Women’s Life_ (1988) 109

**Introduction**

For women in the developed world, the years between forty and seventy now have a good chance of being what Marilyn Pearsall has called ‘a developmentally interesting process’ (11). The ideology that attempts to convince us otherwise, however, is still prevalent in all areas of existence. While it may be convenient to divide a lifetime into culturally determined ‘ages’ or ‘stages,’ to me it is counterintuitive to partition the life course in this way. I take issue with the developmental model of female experience, echoed by Greer in her ‘seven ages of woman,’ which attempts to reduce women’s lives into sections. Such an attempt is, in any event, doomed to failure, since it refuses to acknowledge the multiplicity of either feminine or female experience. In Greer’s paradigm, midlife, incorporating menopause, is labelled ‘the fifth . . . stormy passage’ (56). During the ‘stormy passage’ of turning fifty, she argues, a good many public figures have exemplified ‘female recognition of a change.’ She mentions Josephine Baker, Nina Berberova and Helene Deutsch, whose lives all took a significant ‘turn’ at that age (56). However, most women in their middle years cannot be neatly categorised; furthermore, many will testify that radical changes can occur at any age. They may, indeed, continue to take place in the years between
menopause and death, a period that is mentioned only briefly in *The Change*, but which for some women – as greater longevity becomes commonplace – will represent half a lifespan.

The years after 'the meridian of fifty,' long considered the least interesting time in women’s lives, nonetheless have a certain importance as the threshold of older age, a time when, in the words of social gerontologist Margaret Cruikshank, we are ‘learning to be old’ (2003). This period tends to shape attitudes to our own ageing, to bodies and psyches that are showing traces of the passage of time, and to the cultural messages we absorb about this process. Margaret Gullette considers these years to be a time when the influence of age ideology is especially pernicious:

> [the] belief that ageing is a mid-life phenomenon, the interpretive practice of reading our own body and mind for signs of decay that have always been identified abstractly beforehand, telling a life-course narrative contained by the gross plot options of the system (peak, entrance, decline) – these are major features of the curriculum. Even our *feelings* are learned. (1997 6)

Although women are interpellated differently once in midlife, it does not follow that they experience any internal difference; they do, however, come under pressure from age ideology to interpret experience in terms of the ‘gross plot options’ Gullette identifies.

The category ‘midlife’ contains a good deal of fluidity; for some writers, it centres on the fulcrum of menopause, a topic I develop further in Chapter IV. For others, it extends from the reproductive years into old age: indeed, the familiar appellation ‘a woman of a certain age’ means, ironically, that the age of the woman in question is anything but certain. It may well be a period of transition in terms of life-course identities, or a time when women, as Heilbrun suggests, ‘begin . . . to create another story.’ De Beauvoir saw the middle years in terms of ‘rupture,’ the passing of fertility and sexual attractiveness to men representing, for her, an irrecoverable loss. Other texts depict more continuity in female midlife, a continuity that troubles a cultural imaginary that has become congealed around the stereotypes of women’s midlife and ageing. In this model, transitions may occur; they may be positive or negative, but are not necessarily
related to biological age. And yet biology remains an inevitable yardstick in the measuring of age identity: midlife women are those who, as Mary Russo puts it, have ‘exceed[ed] the mirror of reproduction’ (1999 24). For Russo, the reproductive imperative is the ‘mirror’ that reflects the female subject back to herself as ‘woman,’ taking her unambiguous place in the Symbolic through that role. She writes of ‘the dominant fiction of chronological aging . . . that plots our lives,’ and points out, further, that ‘[b]efore we consider acting or not acting our age, it is necessary to ask: how old are we?’ Such calculations, she avers, are ‘always social and always about the Other.’ We plot our age, Russo suggests, in comparative terms. Moreover, she raises the question: ‘Are we ever only the age we are?’ (25).

Gullette’s theory of diachronic identity may answer Russo’s question. The idea that multiple selves develop across a life course goes some way to resolving the contradictions that abound concerning the female transition into old age, variously depicted as gateway, continuity or rupture. Inevitably, there will be as many versions of the middle years as there are individual women; any generalisations, such as Suzanne Levine’s claim for a complete overturning of identity – ‘you’re not who you were only older’ (13) – will ultimately be undermined by their claims to universality. On the other hand, the idea of a processual self that continues to gather a series of identities across time may make sense of the multiplicity of experience:

Theorists rightly propose that we possess multiple selves. But so far that means only synchronic, simultaneous selves bumping hips. These multiples look pretty static from the point of view of age studies. We can be multiple not just simultaneously but – crucial to any complete accounts of selfhood . . . – sequentially. (Gullette 2004 126-7, original italics)

Thus each subject is ‘a package . . . of achieved selfhood’ (128), accommodating possibilities of both continuity and change. For Gullette, despite the accumulation of identities over time, certain qualities and bodily behaviours remain uninterrupted throughout life. She muses: ‘If I couldn’t be the same embodied self, I cannot wish to have an earlier bodily surface’ (128). For if the composite self of midlife and older age encompasses all earlier selves, whether approved or rejected, then any absolute return to an earlier moment of the life
course would mean the loss of those identities accrued since. Gullette’s is a powerful argument against age-passing, and her view of diachronic co-identities as ‘possessions’ or ‘achievements’ persuades us of the value of ageing, reconfiguring the upward years as something far more than a decline narrative.

This way of re-thinking age has a particular application to lesbian narratives, even – and perhaps especially – those whose experience encompasses a heterosexual past. Such stories are often typified by radical shifts in both sexual and other aspects of identity, giving stronger purchase on notions of a processual selfhood developing over time. To theorise lesbian life-texts along these lines not only offers paradigms for ageing consciously, in defiance of decline ideology, but also overturns the dismissive construction of same-sex desire as ‘just a phase,’ one that the subject will ‘grow out of.’ Judith Roof comments that ‘lesbianism is depicted as immature – as a stage, as pre-oedipal, undifferentiated, and therefore unsatisfiable’ (117). The life-texts that lesbians produce, however, show the converse of this model: for a great many lesbians, it is their youthful succumbing to heteronormativity that is later perceived to have been ‘just a phase.’ But it is important to acknowledge the ways in which occasional narratives that reverse this sequence – those in which a lesbian or queer identity moves towards a heterosexual episode – can also signify the transitions of diachronic sexual identity. I return to this theme in the next chapter.

Lesbian writing about midlife can be particularly fruitful, not just for paradigms of conscious ageing but in terms of countering age ideology. I include both fiction and life-writing in this examination of the years post-midlife, and my sample texts include protagonists who both succumb to age ideology and find ways to challenge it. With a view to interrogating both perspectives, I consider May Sarton’s *Journal of a Solitude* (1973) and *At Seventy* (1984), alongside her novel, *Mrs. Stevens Hears the Mermaids Singing* (1965). I follow this with an analysis of Doris Grumbach’s thematically linked texts, the novel *Chamber Music* (1979) and the journal *Coming into the End Zone* (1991). Both writers are unusual in their unflinching scrutiny of the issues facing women – and
particularly lesbians – as they age, and portray life transitions and the morphing of sexual identity in both their fictional and autobiographical texts.

**May Sarton, Mrs. Stevens and the crossing of boundaries**

Belgian-American poet and novelist May Sarton is herself a fine example of Gullette’s ‘diachronic identities’. An immigrant whose parents were refugees of the First World War, she grew up in Europe, unevenly bilingual, and was always ambivalent about including herself in fixed categories of identity. For example, she described herself, at various times in her life, as both bisexual and lesbian. Sarton wrote and published poetry from the age of seventeen; she also worked in the theatre, and later taught literature and creative writing. By midlife she had established herself as a novelist and memoirist who also gave annual lecture tours, reading her work all over the United States. In many ways, her life-text encompassed what Rosi Braidotti, writing of ‘nomadic subjects’ in the book of that name, has termed ‘the affirmation of fluid boundaries, a practice of the intervals, of the interfaces, and of the interstices’ (6). May Sarton showed a clear apperception of her nomadic, interstitial status as a peacemaker and a traverser of boundaries. Towards the end of her life, she wrote:

I have been for forty years a builder of bridges . . . between one kind of life and another, between Europe and America for example . . . another between the homosexual and the heterosexual life; between solitude and communion with others. (Endgame 227-8)

Later, in an interview with Karen Saum in 1982, she added: ‘between the old and the young’ (Conversations 111).

At a certain point in her middle years, Sarton became concerned about transparency: she realised that her writing had thus far created a mythologised version of her life; and there does seem to have been a split between the public figure of Sarton as a builder of bridges and the conflict and bitter arguments her biographer Margot Peters described (1997). Sarton was, of course, not alone in this: life-writing critics have also recognised the constructedness of the narrated self. Paul John Eakin points out that ‘the selves we display in autobiographies are doubly constructed, not only in the act of writing a life story but also in a lifelong process of identity formation of which the writing is usually a comparatively late phase’ (ix). Sarton was unusual in her recognition of this double construction; she began to aim for more transparency by including ‘all facets . . . the conflicts, the loves, the rages, the political angst too’ in order to
give readers the sense of ‘a far more vulnerable, involved and unfinished person’ \( (J \ of \ S \ 124) \). To achieve this, she turned to the immediacy of journal writing and away from the more controlled and censored medium of memoir. \textit{Journal of a Solitude} (1973), her first published journal, recorded daily thoughts and events, mood swings, love affairs, successes and failures. Carolyn Heilbrun, Sarton’s critic and friend, considered \textit{Journal of a Solitude} to mark a watershed in women’s life writing. She commented that Sarton had previously written in ‘the old genre of female autobiography, which tends to find beauty even in pain and to transform rage into spiritual acceptance . . . . [I]n ignoring her rage and pain, she had unintentionally been less than honest’ (1988 12). Heilbrun was right: Sarton’s previous memoir, \textit{Plant Dreaming Deep}, is a cheerful and humble account of her restoration of a dilapidated farmhouse; and cheerfulness and humility were only tiny parts of Sarton’s complex character, for she could also be depressive, arrogant, short-tempered and, occasionally, snobbish. \textit{Journal of a Solitude}, writes Heilbrun, ‘deliberately retold the record of her anger. And, above all other prohibitions, what has been forbidden to women is anger, together with the open admission of the desire for power and control over one’s life’ (13). Sarton crosses another boundary by flaunting this taboo. She describes her overblown rage against a visiting friend who had inadvertently offended. Sarton lost her voice the next day:

\begin{quote}
The punishment fits the crime perfectly. I feel crippled, unable to speak, having uttered horrible things. These angers are crippling, like a fit when they happen, and then, when they are over, haunting me with remorse. Those who know me well and love me have come to accept them as part of me; yet I know they are unacceptable. \( (J \ of \ S \ 16) \)
\end{quote}

This transparency, a willingness to share with the reader the anger and depression that haunted her, is, I suspect, one of the reasons Sarton is so widely read. Her writing is understood at the level of affect: reader response research indicates that Sarton and her readers ‘model the intersubjective nature of literary performance . . . [engaging in] a dialectical process, a creative partnership between author and reader’ (Pohli 216-7).

Importantly, however, in \textit{Journal of a Solitude} Sarton has not just aimed for transparency, but has also validated solitude. Sarton not only chose her
solitary status, but took the risk of writing about it. Heilbrun offers these insights into Sarton’s decision, first made in the rigidly heterosexual matrix of 1950s America:

The celebration of solitude was something altogether new . . . not misanthropy, but a choosing of the work over the social and professional benefits of a different kind of life. For a woman to choose solitude, and to understand and express its terrors and beauty was close to unique when May did it . . . . May Sarton was forty-five when she began living alone . . . . From that day to this she has lived alone, experiencing the magnificent conflict of solitude: the need of outer stimulation, even the welcoming of it, and then, immediately it is granted, the intense longing for those times when “the house and I are alone.” (1994 9)

Sarton’s journals express this conflict repeatedly. She considered herself ‘an outsider and a stranger in every respect’ (Conversations 102); for example, despite her success in later life, Sarton continued to bemoan the lack of critical acclaim for her poetry. However, it would be a mistake to see her as isolated, for the importance of friendship is celebrated in all her work. By ‘solitude,’ she meant ‘living alone’ rather than being removed from the social, which the journals show she was not: phone calls, visits from friends and correspondence with readers punctuated her days. Sarton’s midlife seems to reply to Martha Kirkpatrick’s question as to whether lesbians experience ‘a different middle age . . . because reproduction and child rearing have not structured the phases of their adult lives’ (135).

This reality, perhaps ironically, sometimes leaves lesbians freer to structure their own ‘phases.’ Lesbian ontology precludes what Heilbrun has called the ‘marriage plot’, which means being the lesser part of a traditionally unequal dyad, the heterosexual pair. Writing in the 1980s, Heilbrun argued that when women marry they ‘put a man at the centre of [their] life and to allow to occur only what honours his prime position . . . the result: [their] own desires and quests are always secondary’ (1988 20-21). Perhaps this is less true twenty years on; but, in Heilbrun’s view, a woman who consented to such a pairing became an ‘unambiguous’ woman; for ‘men can only be men if women are unambiguously women’ (Deborah Cameron qtd. by Heilbrun 20). Sarton, on the other hand, created for herself ‘another story . . . a quest plot’ (Heilbrun 121).
One of Sarton’s ‘quests’ during the writing of *Journal of a Solitude* was the possibility of new love. To protect her privacy, the object of Sartons’ affections is described only as ‘X’. In the journal, Sarton challenges one especially dehumanising aspect of age ideology: the assumption, ‘imposed by a puritanical ethos, that passionate love belongs only to the young, that people are dead from the neck down by the time they are forty, and that any deep feeling, any passion after that age, is either ludicrous or revolting’ (*J of S* 76). The account of this failed relationship – for the affair with ‘X’ ends badly – is nonetheless a testament to her continued capacity for attachment; not only can a woman nearing sixty still fall in love, but she still grieves when that love is lost. Sarton muses: ‘It looks as if I were “meant” to be alone, and that any hope of happiness is not meant. Am I too old to acquire the knack for happiness? Too old, perhaps, ever to take in another’s life to share with mine on a permanent basis?’ (*J of S* 132)

Much as she longed to share her life with a loved one, Sarton also described herself as an ‘impossible creature,’ implying that she was perhaps too set in her ways to admit a partner into her life harmoniously (2). Ambiguity, then, was not just a theoretical position for Sarton, but infused all aspects of her experience. ‘On the surface my work has not looked radical’, she wrote, ‘but perhaps it will be seen eventually that in a “nice, quiet, noisy way” I have been trying to say radical things gently so that they may penetrate without shock’ (*J of S* 76). Heilbrun complains of ‘women’s failure to speak profoundly to each other’ (1988 43); she believed that ‘there will be narratives of female lives only when women no longer live their lives isolated in the houses and the stories of men’ (47). Sarton, by refusing the marriage plot, living her life as an out lesbian, and documenting the struggles of her upward years, not only became the ‘ambiguous woman’ of Heilbrun’s thesis but refused to succumb to age ideology’s ‘wizening’ effects.

Sarton has often referred to herself – and to women poets in general – as ‘le monstre sacré,’ the choice of writing over procreation seeming in some way ‘unnatural’ or monstrous to her, as it perhaps did to many of her generation. This idea is nuanced and updated by Jackie Stacey, who comments on lesbian
non-reproductiveness as ‘monstrous’ in cultural perceptions. As a lesbian poet, then, Sarton was doubly a sacred monster, living most of her life as a creative single woman in a culture where such women – especially if they are also lesbians – are located on the margins. This is also the position of her character Hilary Stevens, who speaks ruefully of her childless state as ‘the full monsterhood’ (189). For Sarton, women who do not mother may be monsters, but it is difficult to be successful at both cultural production and procreation.

This ambiguity pervades the novel Mrs. Stevens hears the Mermaids Singing. The text is often hailed as a ‘coming out’ book, which must have taken courage to publish in the mid-1960s, before second wave feminism had lent respectability to lesbian narrative. It is also the novel in which Sarton most fully explored her own feelings about her future ageing, making her central character, Hilary Stevens, around seventy, while Sarton herself was in her early fifties. This separation in age between writer and protagonist is mirrored in the text as a division between ‘young Hilary’ and ‘old Hilary’, between whom there is a constant internal dialogue. The performance of diachronic identity theory emerges from that initial split: indeed, Sarton presents Hilary as moving fluidly between multiple selves early in the narrative, before she has even got out of bed:

Lately Hilary had observed that she seemed to be two distinct entities, at war. There was a hortatory and impatient person who was irritated by her lethargic twin, that one who had to be prodded awake and commanded like a doddering servant, and who was getting old, seventy as one counted years. (12)

Sarton critic Renée Créange has suggested that for Hilary Stevens ‘[t]wo voices, that of the energetic mind and that of the weary body, compete in her head’ (in Hunting 1982 86). But this is not a simple binary division as Créange has assumed; for the first Hilary mentioned in this passage, who ‘observes’, makes a triad, the third being the impartial witness passing comment on the other two ‘at war.’ Early in the day, Hilary finds herself exhausted after unearthing a large rock from the soil. Her psyche, at times of such physical stress, is at its most divided: young Hilary thinks feeling exhausted and dizzy is ‘such a nuisance’, whereas old Hilary is ‘frightened of death’ (53). These are not the only
competing identities in Hilary Stevens: she also experiences herself as divided between woman and boy (170); this is a productive split, however, for ‘the two married within her to make poems’ (215). Also among Hilary’s selves are her public and private personae, signified by her appellation in the text as ‘Hilary’ when she is gardening or talking to friends, and as ‘F. Hilary Stevens’ while in her professional capacity as successful writer.

The narrative describes a day on which Hilary has agreed to be interviewed by two journalists. During their colloquy, Hilary wanders off several times to gather her thoughts and to reminisce about the memories the interview has reawakened. This device stretches the suspension of disbelief to its limits, but functions in the text to enable the development of further aspects of her identity: private and public, past and present, wife, lover, and friend. Stevens’ attitude to her ageing shows more apparent contradictions: at one moment she protests ‘I’ve earned being old . . . . Don’t deprive me of what I have earned’ (215); but a few pages later she comments on her age ‘heavily’ and ‘with disgust’ (217). Hilary Stevens may appear to contradict herself; but closer inspection reveals her as merely multi-faceted, and the conflicting parts of her are not so much warring factions as a performance of Gullette’s thesis. Just as Hilary has ‘earned being old’, so Gullette insists that our ‘storied identities feel like possessions . . . . Achievements of [our] telling and of [our] aging. Such achievements deeply and rightly matter to people’ (2004 127). In the same way, Gullette argues, certain co-identities rise into the ascendant at certain times, and others retreat (127), just as Hilary Stevens is troubled by her ageing at one point in the narrative, and proud and happy about the ‘achievement’ of being old at another. Gullette writes of ‘co-identities aging together’ (127), an idea that is nicely enacted by Sarton’s novel.

A chain of ‘sequential selves’ is recorded in the narrative, a series of co-identities that are also ‘achievements,’ gathered and remembered over a life course. Hilary looks back fondly on the years spent with husband Adrian, who died suddenly in a riding accident. The reminiscences of one day incorporate a panoply of selves; this process is not entirely comfortable for Hilary, who ‘could not approach one element in the past, without raising all its elements, without
being assailed by ghostly presences’ (MS 97). In her memory of her governess, Phillippa Munn, ‘Hilary, the Hilary now over seventy who was also Hilary at fifteen, saw that that episode . . . when the Muse had made her appearance for the first time . . . was perhaps the key to everything’ (97). For the youthful Hilary had been in love with Phillippa, and the only outlet for her feelings was poetry. The co-identities of Hilary Stevens – wife, lover, poet, lesbian, old woman – are all brought into the present for the reader through the media of memory and reminiscence. As Sarton points out, the septuagenarian Hilary is ‘also Hilary at fifteen;’ and other identities, accumulated over a life course, emerge in an afternoon’s remembering, both private and public. These memories are not all pleasant: a period in hospital, for example (115-124), adds to Hilary’s selves a person who dwelled temporarily in ‘the kingdom of the ill’ (Sontag 1983 3); and her reflection on the process, in a private moment in her bedroom, is that it ‘was like an earthquake, throwing up lava and pieces of rock and rubble; the whole past in eruption’ (131). Her first mature love affair with a woman, Willa MacPherson, also arises as a painful and buried memory ‘making its way up through layers and layers of consciousness’ (131); physical illness is a theme here – as it in Grumbach’s novel – for Willa’s severe illness created a distance between the two women that no effort on Hilary’s part could bridge.

This curiously fragmented narrative, broken up by Hilary’s absences from the room, reflects the mosaic effect of different aspects of self. The day is framed by two interactions with a young friend from the village, Mar. Hilary confesses to him that, when she was his age, she ‘wanted to be a boy’, and that it was ‘that boy in [her] who wrote the poems’ (217), a split Sarton has also claimed for herself. Hilary thus emerges as a complex character whose sequential selves include a certain gender ambiguity, an ambiguity reflected in Sarton, who has said in an interview: ‘I wasn’t consciously feminist because in a psychic, not physical, sense I’m afraid I thought of myself as a man. I felt it was the masculine part of me that was the creative part.’

This theme of shifting and competing identities continues with Hilary Stevens’ ‘mirror scene.’ Kathleen Woodward points out that aspects of self are reflected by various levels of mirroring: literal, cultural, or by peers. The midlife
subject’s anxiety about ageing is not created by the ‘mirror’ but it is reflected by it in ways that can be painful, for the inside-outside split in age consciousness may go unnoticed until we are brought face to face with an altered appearance. If, as Woodward asserts, ‘old age is in great part constructed . . . as a social category’ (66), then it follows that the reflected image of the subject looking no longer young is a reminder not just of age but of the ideology which positions age as debility and decline. Or, as Woodward puts it: ‘The mirror our culture holds up to the elderly contains the feared image of death . . . . The subject denies this identification rather than embraces it . . . . What is whole is felt to reside within, not without, the subject’ (67). This disjunction between an ageing body and a psyche apparently unchanged by the passage of time can create an uncomfortable sense of fragmentation. However, this feeling may be somewhat assuaged by reconfiguring the selfhood of age as a pageant of co-identities emerging over a life course; and to survey in the mirror what Audre Lorde termed one’s ‘myriad selves’ may, in this model, be affirming rather than the opposite.

Hilary Stevens does not enact the mirror scene precisely as Woodward imagined it: instead of rejecting the mirror, or denying any identification with her ageing self, she shifts in and out of this identification, rather as de Beauvoir envisaged. The latter proposed that the human subject could only grapple with this ‘insoluble contradiction’ by ‘waver[ing] from the one to the other, never managing to hold them both firmly together’ (1972 290). Hilary Stevens is creative with her co-identities, allowing them to engage in dialogue. When on rising Hilary ‘look[s] into her own eyes, shallow and pale in the morning light,’ she tells the image:

“God, you look awful . . . old crone, with hardly a wisp of hair left, and those dewlaps, and those wrinkles.” Merciless she was. But there was also the pleasure of recognition. In the mirror she recognised her self, her life companion, for better or worse. (13)

Against the shock of her appearance in age is counterpoised, then, the pleasing familiarity of the sight of the embodied ego, or what Gullette describes as ‘my native mind-body . . . [which] works for me here as a sign of continuity,
wholeness, and change: whatever I currently know as me-ness’ (2004 128). The use in Sarton’s text of the well-worn phrase from the Christian wedding ceremony, ‘for better or worse’, implies a commitment to oneself, or what another of Sarton’s characters calls ‘the genius of self-creation’ (Mrs. Stevens 196). In a performance of both the mirror phase and diachronic selfhood, Hilary can at one point see her own reflection in a Venetian mirror, and simultaneously ‘a glimpse of herself as Sargent had captured her, in the drawing over the mantel, at twenty-five. There stood Age with Youth, like a ghost, suspended over her head’ (MS 37). That the mirror is from Venice reminds us of two more identities produced by Hilary’s past, a history divided between America and Europe. Furthermore, the juxtaposition of images of Hilary at twenty-five and at seventy shows clearly the sequential selves of age and youth, an image also reiterated by pictures of the older and younger Sarton on the cover of her journal Encore. Hilary’s attempts at integrating these selves, her intention of continuity, and a critique of age ideology, emerge in the statement: ‘in spite of it all, false teeth, falling hair, wrinkles, I am still myself. They haven’t got me yet’ (13). Sarton’s protagonist interrogates that ‘they’ in her own internal monologue: ‘Who were “they” exactly[?]’ Hilary does not answer her own question, except to suggest that ‘they’ are ‘the enemies.’ In the context ‘they’ are most obviously the unfriendly critics who have not allowed Stevens/Sarton into the canon. However, since Hilary is also pondering her changed appearance, I am inclined to identify ‘them’ with the perpetrators of age ideology, peddling insistent messages of age as decline and disintegration.

**Doris Grumbach and the music of the chamber**

Caroline Newby Maclaren, the fictional protagonist of Doris Grumbach’s *Chamber Music* (1979), performs – like Hilary – the theory of ‘sequential selves’ in ways that are specific to lesbian identity formation, abandoning a heterosexual incarnation in favour of sexual relations with women. More remarkably, this imaginary woman did so soon after the turn of the twentieth century. This experience, a shifting of the object of desire in adulthood or midlife, is rarely fictionalised. Both Grumbach and Sarton, however, embraced this transition in
their own lives – Grumbach’s marriage to Leonard Grumbach having ended in 1971 and her long relationship with Sybil Pike having ensued – and risked making it central to their narratives. In part because of its historical setting, *Chamber Music* implies the secrecy of an othered sexuality through its frequent use of terms such as ‘closet’ and ‘silence.’ Caroline Newby finds that, in deep old age, silence is no longer necessary, for sexual mores have changed over time, showing how diachronic identity across a long life can, in part, respond to a shifting social climate.

As well as providing exemplars of diachronic identity, and a precise enactment of Woodward’s ‘mirror phase,’ *Chamber Music*, like *Mrs. Stevens*, deals with the division between public and private life. The thematic content includes an interplay of words, music and silence; but this text also implies that the breaking of silence is not necessarily safe, for language can signify betrayal. While diachronic identity emerges as a theme in Grumbach’s novel, the way it is conveyed contrasts with *Mrs Stevens*, which records the reminiscences of one day; Grumbach’s Caroline, on the other hand, looks back over a lifetime to recall her youth and adulthood, co-identities thus emerging in chronological order. Perhaps the most important similarity is that both protagonists, after an early marriage, move on to have primary relationships with women, even though their experiences of marriage are quite different: Caroline looks back on her marriage with a sense of ‘wasted life.’ She records: ‘I grieved for [Robert’s] long absence from my conscious life, and mine, I think, from his’ (156).

*Chamber Music* is the fictional memoir of Caroline, written in her nineties, beginning with her childhood in late nineteenth century Boston. The older Caroline, remembering the ‘scrim of silence [that] surrounded what really happened in our lives . . . intend[s] to put down extraordinary truths’ (3, 5). She is conscious that she ‘write[s] in the air of freer times’ (5), and, in any event, that those who might be offended by her narrative are mostly dead. Caroline grew up suffocated by her mother, ‘whose life had closed too early’ after her husband’s death (17). Caroline finds solace in music (9), taking piano lessons with the eccentric and mute Mrs. Seton. At a musical soirée, Caroline meets the promising young composer, Robert Maclaren, and later agrees to marry him.
despite certain misgivings intuited from his metonymously ‘arrogant nose’ (18). After ‘brief and . . . perfunctory’ engagement (18), and a wedding unattended by either of their mothers, Caroline and Robert go to live in Frankfurt, where he is studying. This ‘marriage plot’ clearly has an inauspicious beginning; but Caroline, dazzled by her husband’s talent, refuses to read the omens. Robert’s mother, for example, in a bizarre oedipal twist, turns out to have shared her son’s bed until Caroline’s arrival (25).

This is a deeply unsatisfactory marriage, in which even the common ground of musical ability becomes a source of conflict, for Robert cannot bear to hear Caroline play the piano, so disruptive is it to his creative process; Caroline, meanwhile, puts its failure down to her sense of herself as ‘deficient’ (36). Robert’s career means moving from one continent to another, and then from town to town; and Caroline’s friendships are invariably sabotaged by these moves or by Robert’s intolerance. Worse, he becomes ill with syphilis, contracted from his pre-marital relations with a fellow musician, Churchill Weeks. As his health deteriorates, Caroline employs a nurse to help take care of him; this woman, Anna Baehr, stays on at the house after Robert’s death and the two women become lovers. They also run the Maclaren Foundation, funded by donations to the estate by admirers of the successful composer; their home becomes a summer community for young musicians and composers. Even after the demise of this project, Anna and Caroline live on in the farmhouse until Anna is killed by the influenza epidemic of 1918, during which she insists on nursing those affected.

Caroline’s sequential selves unfold, from nonagenarian narrator back to child, naïve young woman and bewildered wife. Her final identity emerges after Anna’s death, and does not seem to change much over the ensuing forty-five years: for ‘there would be no second resurrection for [her], no third chance at life’ (208). She resigns herself to ‘[e]ndurance, waiting, survival, the slow, inexorable growth of a sense of loss and cruel grief until it floods the mind and drowns what is left of the self’ (208). Anna’s remains are buried beside Robert’s, and Caroline continues to tend the graves, ‘creating the illusion of a loving wife who faithfully remembered her husband’ (209). She has long maintained silence
about her relations with Anna, but through the ‘memoir’ she finally reveals that her marriage was a sham: details of her own sexuality, and the real nature of Robert’s illness – kept a secret from Caroline herself until Anna enlightens her – also emerge through this record.

The myth of Robert, however, immortalised in the American imaginary as a brilliant composer, pursues Caroline long after his death. The book also serves as a final rupturing of the myth; by writing the account of her life with Robert that the Maclaren Foundation has requested, his wife finally allows the truth to emerge. In defiance of the mores of the epoch she was born into, which would dictate that she ‘present the historian with only those facts which would contribute to an orderly picture’ (4), Grumbach’s protagonist opts for ‘unaccustomed openness’ (4–5). Caroline is not concerned about how she is perceived, since she ‘will not be here to witness the astonishment of the reader’ (5). The fictional frame of the novel renders the changing attitudes that accompany a long lifespan; Caroline is ‘freed by [her] survival into extreme old age’, when, furthermore, ‘all the witnesses . . . are dead’ (5).

While *Mrs. Stevens* shows the inverse mirror stage quite literally – by introducing a scene where Hilary engages in a dialogue with her reflection – *Chamber Music* represents it in subtler terms. Caroline only begins to ‘create another story’ when she sees herself reflected in the person of Anna’s health and physical integrity; hitherto, Caroline’s sexuality and bodiliness have been all but forgotten in her loveless marriage. Her marriage to Robert, informed by his subsequent illness and death, is described by the imagery of sickness and decay; her relations with Anna, on the other hand, are described in terms of ‘glowing life’ (154).

Anna’s gift for growing things is emphasised throughout, and by implication her beneficent effect on the development of those around her. An expert on the folklore of horticulture, she insists on attaching strands of horsehair to saplings, for example, to kill pests, so that the insect carcasses become ‘part of the useful soil’ (152), and even uses human hair as a fertiliser. These methods at first appear quaint or repellent to the fastidious, city-bred Caroline, but in time this view of mortality becomes part of Caroline’s own credo;
she finds herself irreverently wondering, as her husband is buried, whether ‘anyone had thought to line the grave with human hair in order to promote luxuriant immortality’ (157).

Anna waits for the waxing moon to plant vegetable seeds; and turnips, she maintains, should be sown naked, for ‘if it is warm enough to be without any clothes it is then warm enough for the seed to be sown’ (150). Her bodiliness and close relation to the land contrast with Caroline’s intellectual interests: while Anna pores over gardening manuals, Caroline reads out excerpts of George Eliot’s *Middlemarch*. (No doubt she identifies with Dorothea, who also married a man for his talent and lived to regret it.) It is during one of these evenings that Caroline realises her desire to be with her friend is a sexual longing, and not just a wish for companionship; when Anna explains that ‘in one English county farmers sit naked upon the ground to plant their barley’, Caroline’s response is ‘a startling, unaccustomed vision’ of Anna stripped of her clothes. Although Caroline ‘[i]mmediately . . . suppressed this desire, put it away from [her], telling [her]self [her] emotion was curiosity’ (150), it was the beginning of her undeniably sexual love for Anna, a feeling which, at first, she could ‘in no way comprehend’ (151).

The garden, in Anna’s care, enriched by tea leaves and scraps of old leather shoes, protected by horsehair and banana skins, ‘flourished as Robert declined’ (153). The imagery of glowing life, health and growth accompanies Anna’s presence, while Robert, helpless and incontinent, his bones fleshless, unable to eat or move, ‘lay still, like a stone,’ only moved by a servant for Anna and Caroline to change his soiled sheets (153). The contrast between health and morbidity is sometimes stark: Anna is engaged in weeding the garden at the moment of Robert’s death (153). Inevitably, Caroline is drawn to Anna’s abundant life and health, and away from the dying Robert. Her relationship with Anna is Caroline’s ‘one great love,’ the ‘afterlife’ she anticipates in a formal letter, which is never passed on but later found among her papers. There is nothing narcissistic about Caroline’s love for ‘the bursting healthy life’ of Anna, who ‘filled the silences of a lifetime’ for her (204-6). Still, however, their relationship is not discussed, since ‘[a] fitting vocabulary . . . did not then exist, or at least, if it did,
Anna and [Caroline] did not know any of its words’ (190). The mirroring of her own body in Anna’s means, for Caroline, that ‘[t]o my own inadequate self I assumed her lovely flesh. It was the very opposite of narcissism – it was metamorphosis’ (169). ‘Now I know another like myself’ is Caroline’s simple interpretation of their love (169).

The protagonists of both *Chamber Music* and *Mrs. Stevens* successfully disrupt the whole gamut of life-course imperatives. Neither has children, and thus they do not fulfil the roles of ‘mother’ or ‘grandmother;’ they may have subscribed to a heterosexual economy by marrying early, but later find greater satisfaction and comfort in their relations with women. Yet each maintains earlier selves – if only in memory – as she adds further elements to her sequential identities. Hilary remains ‘Mrs. Stevens,’ and Caroline still runs the Maclaren Foundation in honour of her husband’s memory. Both perform Woodward’s mirror stage, though in distinctly different ways: Hilary is torn between bemoaning her changed appearance and taking stock of her achievements; whereas Caroline, product of a Protestant nineteenth century, rarely looks at herself in a mirror but instead sees her newly emerging sexuality and bodiliness reflected in her lover, Anna. Russo’s ‘untimeliness in relations between women’ is to be found here; Greer’s ‘seven ages,’ on the other hand, are not. The specificity of difference is an aspect of this untimeliness: if Hilary Stevens is busy and productive in her upward years, Caroline Maclaren is the opposite – grieving her ‘one great love’ and waiting for death.

**The Journals**

Sarton and Grumbach both produced life writing as well as fiction, and it is in these most personal of age narratives that their differences are most marked. While both depict an interstitial view, their perspectives on what it means to exist ‘elsewhere and otherwise’ are not aligned. The clearest example of this disparity emerges in the journal each wrote to mark her seventieth birthday: Sarton’s *At Seventy* (1984) and Grumbach’s *Coming into the End Zone* (1991). Grumbach and Sarton were friends as well as colleagues in later life: in *End Zone*, for example, Grumbach describes a visit she and her partner Sybil Pike made to
Sarton’s home in Maine (47). They later moved to Maine themselves, exhausted by their fearful existence in Washington, DC, where they had been subject to the random violence of city life. These crimes did not seem to be a consequence of homophobia; Grumbach was protective of her private life, and in any event two old women living together do not invite much comment, protected by the invisibility that hides older lesbian sexuality from view. Indeed, in direct contrast to Sarton, who was fairly public about her sexuality, Grumbach implies her lesbianism more subtly: in her journals, Pike is described as her ‘friend’ or ‘housemate’ (1991 17).

While these texts indicate certain attitudes, it would be a mistake to imagine that all aspects of their authors are contained in them: as Gullette has pointed out, the life writing of age will inevitably, while providing insights, still constitute a discourse; journals may have a contract with ‘the truth’, but the writer’s decisions on what to include and what to leave out, and how to present the ‘facts,’ renders every protagonist an unreliable narrator to a greater or lesser extent. According to Paul John Eakin, we ‘know perfectly well that life certainly isn’t a story, at least not in any simple, literary sense, and we also know that a person isn’t a book’ (99). A life does not produce a narrative, then, so much as narrative produces an identity; Eakin suggests that the self is ‘narratively structured’ (100). Both Grumbach and Sarton were aware of this narrativisation of the self: Barbara Frey Waxman suggests that Sarton engages in ‘sleight of hand to make elements of her life disappear, censoring some events and relationships while foregrounding others’ (1997 61). Sarton considered language itself unreliable, and claimed to ‘envy the painter who does not have to use elusive, sometimes damaged, often ambivalent words’ (At 70 50, original italics). On the other hand, Sarton valued the process of journal writing: ‘I find that keeping a journal again validates and clarifies’, she asserts (50). Grumbach has similar doubts about the ‘autobiographical pact.’ She muses: ‘Reading the journals of others forces me to wonder how much truth ought to be included here. Even if I aim for what seems to me to be the truth, will not the very process of putting it into words and setting it down fictionalize it?’ (End Zone 159). She continues to meditate on the wisdom of ‘open[ing] all the sores and
secret miseries of one’s life, the misdoings and meannesses,’ and concludes: ‘[in] print, I would prefer to appear better than I am’ (159).

No journal or memoir, however honestly written, gives a complete picture of its subject; but its value is not necessarily in its contract with the truth. Rather, the life writing of older age needs to show that age identity is still in process, thus countering the ideology that presents oldness as monolithic or fixed. Importantly, Grumbach and Sarton show themselves as still adding to their store of identities as they age. Barbara Waxman emphasises the ways in which both writers are ‘multivocal’ and ‘multivalent’ (1997 59), and describes Sarton as continually ‘reinventing [her]self’ (58). The result is precisely that this mosaic, exemplifying the collection of sequential selves Gullette describes, helps to undermine age ideology’s pernicious influence.

Sarton and Grumbach remind us that two older women, even though they may be friends, live in the same culture and share the same sexuality, may not have similar attitudes to ageing. While Sarton ‘love[s] being old,’ (At 70 10), Grumbach anticipates the ‘turn’ of her seventieth birthday with dread, despite the fact that she expects to grow old with a loving partner, in contrast to Sarton’s more solitary ‘end zone.’ Grumbach writes of her feelings ‘a few days before we will make our trek to Maine to celebrate (the word is not exact) my seventieth birthday’ (37). By contrast, the seventy-year-old Sarton reports saying, during a public talk, that she feels ‘more myself than I have ever been. There is less conflict. I am happier, more balanced, and . . . more powerful.’ On reflection, she writes, it would have been ‘more accurate to say “I am better able to use my powers”’ (At 70 10). ‘I have always longed to be old,’ the journal continues, ‘and that is because all my life I have always had such great exemplars of old age, such marvellous models to contemplate’ (11). She goes on to mention several of her mentors: Marie Cloisset, who wrote poetry under the pen name Jean Dominique, theatre director Lugné-Poë, poet Basil de Selincourt, and actor-director Eva La Gallienne, all indomitable figures who continued to work indefatigably well into older age.

Even so, despite Sarton’s happiness at being seventy, an ambivalence about ageing creeps in. One difficult aspect of her attachment to older role
models was that inevitably she had a good deal of loss to deal with as she aged. She felt the deaths of loved ones keenly, and at the same time acknowledged in this an ‘enormous human egotism . . . . I felt . . . sort of rage’ (in Sherman 1993 265). Sarton not only grappled with feelings about death – like Simone de Beauvoir, she found unconscionable ‘le moment de la mort – ce moment où tout à coup la personne n’est pas là’ (in Sherman 268) – but also attempted to age consciously, in ways that challenged the ideology of youth-worshipping America. Sarton was conscious that a considerable part of the ‘decline’ of old age is determined by culture. At the same time as trying to disrupt this ideology, however, she was, like all of us, contained in it, and this ambiguity is palpable in the journals. _At Seventy_ documents some inevitable, unwelcome changes in her body: ‘these mornings when I brush my hair before going down to get breakfast I have to face wrinkles, the first sign of old age’ she writes. ‘It’s not easy to accept, but I remind myself that they do not really diminish the beauty of an old face . . . and an old face that looked too young would be troubling. Still, I do mind’ (At 70 306). She records a similar ambivalence about her bodily alteration earlier in the journal: ‘one mourns one’s young face sometimes, it has to be admitted. I now use a night cream’ (At 70 61). But in the same paragraph, reflecting on photos to be used in a book, Sarton asserts that ‘my face is better now, and I like it better. That is because I am a far more complete and richer person than I was at twenty-five . . . . Now I wear the inside person outside and am more comfortable with myself’ (61), she goes on, applying, as Waxman comments, ‘verbal skin cream’ to her feelings about her appearance (1997 73). In this ambivalence about her ageing body Sarton maps yet another version of the mirror stage. Engaged in the personal and cultural work of coming to terms with her changing appearance, she meditates on what Macdonald called ‘the meaning and the politics of the lives of [older] women.’ Sarton’s journal records the ways in which woman’s place in culture, as Susan Sontag pointed out, depends heavily on appearance: ‘[m]uch harder than for me, of course, must be the wrinkles of a woman who has been a real beauty, her identity bound up in that beauty and the homage it elicited’ (At 70 306).
Grumbach, too, reveals a literal and painful ‘mirror moment’ in her meditation on seventy-ness. She continues to view her birthday lugubriously, even in the midst of it: ‘The terrible Twelfth goes on . . . . A more suitable way to celebrate this dread event would be alone, not in society’ (*End Zone* 52). During the day, as ‘[t]he sun moves to the other side of the house’, Grumbach writes of going indoors to change, for she is cold in the sudden chill. The sun’s movement ‘to the other side’ may imply something other than mere astronomy. It is as though the transition to seventy is a movement, for her, to the dark side of culture, the chilly margins. While changing her clothes, Grumbach does ‘an unusual thing. [She] look[s] skeptically, exploringly, at [her] body in the full-length mirror’ (52). What she sees is not reassuring, and, unlike Sarton, she cannot find any balm to soften this image of ‘the pull of gravity on the soft tissues of . . . breasts and buttocks . . . bones that seem to have thinned and shrunk. Muscles appear to be watered down’ (52-3). Her insight into age ideology does not help: ‘I have been taught that firm and unlined is beautiful,’ Grumbach admits (53). She knows she has been ‘taught,’ but she has learned that particular lesson so well that its influence is difficult to undo. ‘Shall I try to learn to love what I am left with?’ she ponders. The excess of infinitives here, distancing her from possibility, and the verb ‘try’, whose semantic field generally expresses an attempt that is doomed from the outset, betray the hopelessness of ‘learning to love’ her altered body. She confirms: ‘It would be easier to resolve never again to look into a full-length mirror’ (53). Grumbach’s mirror scene ends in rejection of the mirror: or, as Woodward says, ‘the narcissistic impulse directs itself *against* the mirror image’ (1991 68). In this she is similar to her protagonist, Caroline Newby, who rarely looks in a literal mirror but instead finds her embodied self reflected in Anna. In *Chamber Music*, the mirror is elided, or morphed into the lover; furthermore, it depicts a positive mirroring rather than the negative response of Grumbach’s seventy-year-old self. For her, the wish ‘never again’ to see her reflection imitates – but in the opposite direction – the desire of the infant subject to see itself mirrored; Woodward speculates that ‘the mirror stage of old age may precipitate the loss of the imaginary. Where then would we be located? Outside the mirror?’ (69). Woodward is ambivalent about
the results of rejecting one’s reflected image. On the one hand, she suggests that ‘such narcissistic hostility allows the elderly to be rejected as a class more easily’ (70); conversely, she muses that ‘being repelled by . . . one’s own body may be part of the process of accommodating death in the aging body . . . a process through which we acknowledge the reality we would like to reject but cannot’ (71).

‘Turning’ seventy, like ‘turning’ menopausal, is a moment at which human subjects are interpellated as different; at these points ideology attempts to locate us in the discourse of the ‘life-course decline narrative, which requires an event as its pivot’ (Gullette 1997b 177). Grumbach describes the ‘turn’ of becoming seventy as another of these pivotal transitions: ‘Today I ‘turn’ seventy. A strange verb, suggesting to me what happens to wine when it becomes vinegar. Will I turn in some way other than years?’ (48). And later she records: ‘I have survived that day. I have made the turn’ (61). The ambiguity of the process is clear in Grumbach’s prose: becoming seventy is not, for her, a cause for celebration but something to ‘survive;’ and she wonders whether she will ‘turn in some other way than years,’ as though she is aware that, at seventy, she may well turn into another kind of subject. Furthermore, this would not be a positive change: the example she gives is wine becoming vinegar, in the same way that food going bad is described as ‘on the turn;’ the same expression may be jokingly applied to a shift in sexuality, another moment of altered interpellation.

A similar ambivalence is palpable in Sarton’s writing; she, however, in contrast to Grumbach, strives to counter age ideology by avoiding gloomy speculations about ageing, for example through her unusual claim that she has ‘always longed to be old’ (At 7011). However, even Sarton, who is something of a Pollyanna about attaining seventy, acknowledges that ‘[p]reviews of old age [are] not entirely accurate’ (37). In part, her upbeat tone in At Seventy is due to a new love interest: Sarton attributes her ability to write poetry again to this woman, undeterred by her beloved’s lack of availability (192-3, 233). Before meeting her – again, the object of her desire remains anonymous – she had been resigned to the sea as her ‘final muse,’ even though ‘one cannot fill a well
with an ocean’ (35). Sarton had always depended on what she called ‘the excitement of the “love affair” as motor power’ (Peters 205), and this need for affairs of the heart to fuel her creativity dwindled only slightly when she was ‘safely “old”’ (At 70 10).

Sarton’s optimism provides a sharp contrast with Grumbach’s depressive tone, which is relieved only by a tinge of humour at her own negativity. It is as though Sarton were more aware of age ideology, whereas Grumbach succumbs to its negative propaganda. Yet some of Grumbach’s struggles are palpable: repeated break-ins to her car and Sybil’s bookshop in Washington, D.C. became so intolerable that Grumbach feared walking from her car to the house alone. She did not carry a bag when shopping, just some loose change in her pocket. This level of fear, which older people frequently live with in cities, is rarely recorded in literature. Grumbach and her partner are among the more fortunate: they have the resources to escape the city, and they do. Despite Grumbach’s misgivings – ‘How is it possible to change everything? Will it work?’ (EZ 147) – they sell their home in Washington and buy a dilapidated house in Maine with sea views. Grumbach resolves to ‘[a]dapt psychically to moving and difference’ (153), as she did once before, in her fifties, when she left her thirty-year marriage and a tenured teaching job to set up home with Sybil Pike in another city. Change feels more difficult to her at seventy: indeed, judging by her record of visits to Uxmal, in Mexico, she views the older as a sort of underclass. In her youth, Grumbach made the climb of 365 steps to the top of the Temple of the Dwarf and ‘imagined [her]self a member of the priestly caste, performing sacred rites on the elevated platform for hoi polloi at [her] feet. But in old age, [she] become[s] part of the people, respectful and worshipful at the bottom’ (77).

Despite her doubts and anxieties, Grumbach moves to Sargentville in the spring after her seventieth birthday; after all, having ‘survived that day’ (61), she can survive moving house, and finds she enjoys the ‘boundless wonder of . . . isolation’ in Maine. The new home is ‘a haven, a hermitage, a place of quiet privacy and solitary silence’ (231). Grumbach has again shown herself to have what Waxman terms ‘late-life courage in non-conformity’ (1997 90). Grumbach’s
subsequent memoir, *Extra Innings* (1993), looks back at the 'intensely despondent days' that were associated with turning seventy (*EI* 9). She hopes, in the process of writing, to 'come upon some answers to the insistent questions of old age;' and yet, gloomily realistic as ever, she acknowledges that, more likely, 'a commonplace record of insignificant exterior doings and interior musings are [her] only possible response to the great philosophical questions' (9). In point of fact, Grumbach studied philosophy at college, switching to English and later completing a Master's in mediaeval literature; she has no difficulty in addressing abstract questions, and shows an informed attitude to 'matters of cosmic significance' (9). Her answer to the 'insistent questions', however, does prove to be in the mundane and everyday: 'the intrusion into our daily lives of niggling irritations and petty trifles' (9). She is still 'struck by the dubiousness of the whole enterprise of autobiography,' questioning the meaning of words like '“truth” and “fact” [which] keep insinuating themselves into every entry’ (14).

She considers the experience of publishing *Coming into the End Zone* to be akin to childbirth, with ‘the initial delight at the sight of the product, fully formed and seemingly perfect, [giving way to] the usual postpartum depression’ (*EI* 13).

For Grumbach, despite her 'postpartum depression' about the book, the move to Maine achieved what it was supposed to: it freed her of the fear that accompanied city life. Instead she records the 'dailiness of the Cove', the changing seasons, and the delights of watching the region’s wildlife (13). She discovers that the important things have been transplanted with her: her work, Sybil's bookshop, and their relationship. Moving to another part of the country does not change Grumbach into someone else; the point is that, despite her anxiety as to whether she has the flexibility to accommodate change, she does so. Transferring her life to another state and a different way of life explodes her own myth of what being seventy means: ‘This should be the age of settled decorum, stability, even sedentary acceptance of what one has or is left with’ (*EZ* 147). Grumbach could add to her evolving co-identities – student, wife, mother, teacher, writer, lesbian, radio broadcaster, city-dweller – that of someone who lives at the coast, deals with change, moves on in spite of the accumulated anxieties of age.
Both Grumbach and Sarton, in these journals – Grumbach’s life writing is labelled ‘memoir’ but is rather what she calls a ‘journal-jotting procedure,’ grouping chapters by month (ET9) – examine the myths surrounding seventy-ness, or, as Waxman writes, each of them ‘seeks to understand the personal meanings of being seventy, the concept of being old in relation to her own multivocal senses of herself’ (1997 59). Each ‘inhabits many subject-positions’, Waxman continues. ‘Writers of journals and memoirs seem especially drawn to depicting fragments or prismatic facets of the self as well as instances of the self in conflict with the self’ (62). Gullette would no doubt agree: the theory of diachronic identity is especially applicable to journal writing. She suggests that ‘in telling our state-of-being, we find some co-identities disliked but admitted; some discarded or defunct; some unchanged; some improving; some in flux of new importance; some about loss and some about gain’ (2004 127). Thus our sequential selves incorporate inner schism and conflict, the possibility of the ‘rejected’ or ‘failed’ identity, alongside Waxman’s ‘fragments or prismatic facets’ of self.

**Conclusion**

The writing of age identities produces a gathering together of multiple personae, a portfolio of co-identities collected over time. This parade of selves is mirrored back to us in myriad ways. Waxman’s interpretation of Woodward’s ‘mirror phase’ is that ‘the individual is informed, with a shock of recognition, of her own old age through the mirror reflection of others . . . even more than she is taught aging through bodily ills and physical limitations’ (1993 64). Waxman continues by paraphrasing the interpellatory paradigm: ‘If her social world sees [a person] as old and treats her as old, she is, on one level, old. The reverse is also possible: an octogenarian friend will not perceive or treat Sarton as old’ (64). Interpellation, then, the label of ‘oldness’, is never simple or complete; the responsive turn, like ‘turning’ fifty, or seventy, or any age loaded with cultural significance, means that the subject submits to interpellation, but not entirely.

While Waxman finds it ‘onerous’ to read Grumbach’s reports of herself as a ‘crotchety, complaining, decaying old crone’ (84), she also acknowledges the
success of Grumbach’s compensatory techniques: when she loses her keys, Grumbach deals with the problem through the power of thought – by mentally re-tracing her movements over the morning – rather than exhaust herself by searching, ‘a double triumph over aging’s forgetfulness’ (EZ 17). Most crucially, both journal-keepers recognise becoming seventy as ‘a stage of development or rite of passage’ (Waxman 1997 63), even though this rite is enacted more or less internally.

Gullette insists that ‘it is illogical and damaging to keep “aging” in artificial conceptual isolation from our multiple identities’ (2004 124). The particular strength of Sarton’s and Grumbach’s writing is their inclusion, not just of many facets of a life, but of the development of selves over time, the ‘portmanteau’ effect of these collected identities, and the continuities of selfhood which accompany subjects into older age. Their collective body of writing, furthermore, while it has been analysed as ‘age literature,’ has rarely been interrogated as documentation of specifically lesbian midlife and ageing. I hope that looking for examples of processual identities in their work may uncover useful information about some women’s ability to refuse hetero-sexual imperatives at a certain stage in adulthood as part of the counter to age ideology. The idea that the endlessly reiterated moment of interpellation loses some of its power as we age, and that the subject is less contained and docile over time, may go some way toward explaining the increased ability to ‘live in one’s body resistantly’ (Gullette 2004 109). Grumbach and Sarton enact the unexpected: they do not conform to Greer’s ‘seven ages,’ nor even to their own prejudices about what it means to be midlife or older. Sarton falls in love again at seventy; Grumbach moves to the ocean. Both bear out Gullette’s claim that the autobiography of age will offer us ‘truly new accounts of . . . being and becoming’ (1997 14).

De-essentialising age and sexual identity opens up new possibilities for agency and choice. Despite the discursive and social production of subjectivity, subjects do have some choice in the process of identity formation, choices which go largely unrepresented in discourses about sexuality. It takes both agency and courage to fly in the face of life-course prescriptions, and develop age identities which deviate from imperatives and archetypes of ‘grandmother’ or ‘crone.’
These transgressions, and the writing that describes them, constitute the 'untimeliness' that Russo writes of. The paradigm shift into another – often more marginal – sexuality which some women choose in midlife is just one example of 'late-life courage in non-conformity.' The model of diachronic identity offers a route into theorising this under-interrogated aspect of female experience, one that may follow the demise of a heterosexual marriage or simply come about as the result of a growing identification with women. (Some women may experience other kinds of transitions in their sexual identity, and these are equally valid expressions of midlife/older selfhood.) Furthermore, the 'portmanteau’ version of age identity means that older women need not be stripped of sexuality along with other aspects of identity, and reminds us that the precise character of their sexuality may have been *chosen*, and in later life at that. Moreover, Gullette’s theory imbues older women with a more complete and complex selfhood, one that has not necessarily abandoned past incarnations.

The life course, then, contains limitless possibilities for shifts in identity, shifts that do not cease in midlife, but may continue and be seen as a gathering of selves in older age. Its 'ages' and 'stages' cannot be prescribed or fixed, for development of the self is as infinitely fluid as identity itself. I have read Grumbach’s and Sarton’s texts as recording both sexuality and age; they speak to us of profound differences, of the multiplicity that must necessarily be a part of feminist age theory, and at the same time are valuable as counterconstructions to decline ideology. These writers made visible the lived experience of older lesbians and their processual gathering of co-identities; and this representation may go some way towards countering the invisibility that Copper and Macdonald complained of. The interstitial worlds of female ageing are not, after all, ‘nowhere to be seen . . . not recognisable as a representation’ (Lauretis 25). It is simply that we must unearth them from the ‘in-between worlds’ of age narrative.
IV

A certain age: menopause, discourse and deviance in the writing of June Arnold and Anne Herrmann.

Menopause is animated by the discourses and practices that construct it as an object for study. These discourses and practices are themselves locked into particular social and historical conditions.
Kwok Wei Leng (1997) 261

Whether heterosexual or lesbian, women are more at risk from discourse that makes them out to be the “menopausal” gender than from menopause itself.
Margaret Morganroth Gullette (1997) 206

Introduction: menopause as construct

The ideology of gender is permeated by notions of femininity as inherently or ‘naturally’ reproductive. ‘Ages or ‘stages’ of the life course are invariably divided up in terms of changes in reproductive status; as in Greer’s paradigm, woman is defined by whether she is pre-reproductive, of reproductive age, or post-reproduction. We know ourselves, medical and gender discourses continually inform us, because we have the capacity to produce offspring. This is borne out, unsurprisingly, by many women’s attitudes. In a recent programme about older parents screened on ITV1, Britain’s Oldest Mums and Dads (2006), women repeatedly justified their desire to produce offspring in their fifties and sixties by well-worn phrases such as ‘you’re not a complete woman’ without children, or ‘until I had a baby I hadn’t fulfilled my purpose in life.’ Some were on their second family, and already had teenage or adult children from a previous partnership, yet still described themselves as ‘desperate’ to produce a child with their most recent partner, and had invested in expensive IVF procedures to that end. These women are a testament to the extraordinary pervasiveness of ideologies telling us the feminine role is completely imbricated with procreation. As Althusser pointed out, ‘subjects “work,” they “work by themselves” in the vast
majority of cases, with the exception of the “bad subjects” (Althusser 302-3). Are non-reproductive women, then, among the ‘bad subjects,’ ideology’s failures?

Even feminists have had difficulty in sidestepping the particular cultural trap that defines woman as essentially reproductive, perhaps because it masquerades so successfully as ‘natural.’ Germaine Greer is not alone in this. Writing in the 1990s, sociologist Shulamit Reinharz also links the idea of life-course stages with women’s reproductive status:

[W]hen a girl reaches puberty the appearance of the monthly cycle ushers in a new age of responsibilities and possibilities. It signals membership in the community of potentially reproductive women. As the monthly cycle reappears, it becomes a reminder of the passage of time and its circularity. Menstruation provides a continuous message about generational connections, and the choices of making or not making new lives. Later, menopause is a reminder that a new life stage is beginning and that death awaits us. (Reinharz 77)

This hermeneutics of female cycles attempts to constitute positive messages about bodies: ‘woman’s body [is] a source of knowledge, insight and wisdom’ (77). The result, however, is essentialising, implying that all female-embodied subjects are somehow born with these qualities. It leaves no room, furthermore, for the possibility that, for some women – and not all women can or do menstruate – monthly bleeding cycles are not necessarily about ‘the choices of making or not making new lives,’ but may simply indicate the maintenance of a healthy uterine environment. Joining the ‘community of potentially reproductive women’ is offered as a lure, something – like a club – to be a ‘member’ of, implying that a gathering of supportive females is ready to welcome the teenage girl who bleeds for the first time into their cohorts; nothing, in reality, could be further from most young women’s experience. Even more importantly for my purpose, the cessation of menstruation has little or nothing to do with ‘death await[ing] us all,’ since most menopausal women in Western cultures can expect to live another thirty or forty years before relinquishing their subjectivity to death.

Such an attitude underscores the ideology that suggests female equals reproductive: and the idea that menopause presages death bespeaks rather the
cultural importance of the death of this role, of motherhood or the potential for it, supposed to give meaning to feminine existence. This is an aspect of age ideology that is particularly insidious, and affects almost exclusively women. Simone de Beauvoir, for example, on reaching midlife, found it ‘strange not to be a body any more’ (1963 657). Did she mean no longer a reproductive or sexual body? Or that men will no longer find her attractive? The latter question is often her criterion for meaningful existence in her gloomy ponderings on what old age means in the female life course. For some women – perhaps the ‘bad subjects’ I have mentioned – the end of mothering possibilities must come as a relief; for others, men’s attention may not be high on their list of priorities.

What, then, does the menopause signify for the lesbian subject, for whom reproductivity and men’s desire may well have been irrelevant for some or most of adulthood? Sexuality and reproduction, for her, will at the very least be viewed as separate issues, not inevitably linked as they are for her heterosexual counterpart. Catharine R. Stimpson takes this argument further, suggesting that lesbians may have a special understanding of postmenopausal states, for they have already explored a sexuality free from the possibility of reproduction, a condition that heterosexual women will not enter until their menopause is over. (1982 270)

Lesbians may not, of course, be childless; but Stimpson’s point is that if they do have children they will be from a previous partnership, deliberately conceived by donor insemination, or perhaps the result of a sexual encounter with a man, not the result of accustomed sexual activity. For lesbians, menopausal meanings will not necessarily centre on the loss of reproductive powers; for them the postmenopausal condition will, for the most part, signify continuity rather than loss. Psychoanalyst Martha Kirkpatrick’s paper ‘Lesbians: A Different Middle Age?’ suggests that older lesbians for whom motherhood was not a possibility, like other women who are infertile or have elected to be childless, have usually come to terms with that loss earlier than middle age. Curiously enough, postsurgical depression following hysterectomy or the onset of menopause is less likely to occur in childless women than in mothers. Having invested all one’s energy in motherhood seems to make a woman more vulnerable to a pathological experience of loss at this time. (147)
Perhaps the relative equanimity with which lesbian subjects face midlife is in part explained by Kirkpatrick’s findings: for the passing of a reproductive capacity that has gone unused is perhaps not such a loss after all. (And of course, as Kirkpatrick points out, lesbians are not the only group of women who may need to reconcile themselves to childlessness.)

On the other hand, there is no doubt that midlife is seen as a transitional phase into older age, the menopause tending to serve as a flashpoint for the bodily changes that signal this period of alteration: and for the lesbian subject this may still present issues to grapple with. This apparently straightforward bodily event – the cessation of menstrual bleeding – is embedded in myth, superstition, theory, conflicting medical practices, and a host of other discourses#. Now as much as ever, the female body has become a semiotic site for cultural meanings; and the tension between the biological and the cultural is felt nowhere more keenly than in the discourses surrounding menopause. Furthermore, the content of many such discourses has become so naturalised as to seem like a given. De Beauvoir wrote of ‘the depression natural to the change of life’ (1976 63); even she, feminism’s first analyst of gender as construct, sees menopausal depression as ‘natural.’ Lesbian feminist theorist Anne Herrmann, on the other hand, points out that

for the medical profession there is nothing “natural” about menopause in the first place. On the one hand it doesn’t appear “in nature,” since in all other species the female reproduces until she dies. On the other hand it is a relatively recent phenomenon in human history, an occurrence, among such large numbers of women, of only this century. (9)

The relative recentness of menopause as a socio-biological phase explains why its meanings and treatment are still under discussion. The lack of agreement in menopausal discourses is what lends interest to this transition; for, even among feminists, there is no consensus on the place ‘the change’ should take in women’s lives. Age critics need to enter into this debate. Does their menopausal self constitute a further co-identity for some women? Those who have a difficult time with fluctuating endocrine levels may well feel that it does; and even those who do not suffer may regard it as suffused with personal, social or cultural meanings, the threshold to older age.
Overall, feminism has done much to challenge medical and media constructions of menopause, characterised as the onset of decline and decay, attempting instead to reconfigure the climacteric as the gateway to a journey of maturation and self-discovery. Indeed, so much has now been written on menopausal discourses and the contested terrain that surrounds them that, rather than being the taboo subject it once was, the issue has, if anything, tended to become overdetermined. The very variability of menopausal experience – a continuum running from the non-event some women experience to years of discomfort and distress – makes the subject a slippery one; certainties are simply not available in discussion of menopausal changes. This very lack of fixity serves to underscore impressions of female-embodied midlife as troubling to medical systems and discourse.

I hope to ascertain what a lesbian-feminist perspective – the ‘in-between worlds’ of menopause, if you will – can add to these meanings. The question is a difficult one, since clearly no one perspective unifies lesbian experience or opinion. All identity is constantly in flux, including age identity: and lesbian identity may be as unstable as any other aspect of selfhood. Our engagement with our life-texts is nuanced by personal transitions – shifts, as it were, ‘in and out of ideology’ – as well as by the life-course expectations of developmental theory. As I commented in the previous chapter, lesbian ontology lends itself particularly well to examination in terms of diachronic identity. Catharine Stimpson’s claim that ‘lesbians may have a special understanding of postmenopausal states, for they have already explored a sexuality free from the possibility of reproduction’ may over-simplify the case, for a good many lesbians have also the experience of heterosexual marriage relationships before leaving ‘the houses and the stories of men,’ thus having experienced all aspects of their sexuality in ways that those of a more static sexual orientation cannot claim. There is a particular complexity, then, to the evolution of lesbian co-identities that can usefully be harnessed in interrogating and subverting the ideologies of age.

I began to ponder the meanings of menopause some years before my own, using my partner’s curiosity about her incipient ‘change’ as a vehicle. She
collected a folder of material – much of it originating from traditional or complementary healing methods – on the female climacteric, in an attempt to construct her own discourse to counter the medical models available. Not wanting to be contained within them, and not satisfied with the ‘death of the womb’ paradigm, she worked toward reconfiguring the process along personal and feminist lines: for her, as for many women intent on rethinking this time in our lives, it became ‘the pause.’ Even this way of interpreting menopausal experience is not entirely satisfactory, however, being still a temporal metaphor. If feminists hope to undo the ‘discourse that makes [women] out to be the “menopausal” gender,’ a more radical rethinking is needed: menopausal change may perhaps be shaped as simply another co-identity, one that facilitates the transition into older age in a useful way.

Since the female body at this time ‘disturbs identity, system, order,’ it comes as no surprise that medical discourse strives to contain and delimit it. Australian medic Wendy Rogers suggests that ‘medicine prescribes and proscribes, lays down rules for bodily parameters and still shrouds many of its acts in incomprehensible rituals, reducing the horror of bodily decay to changes on an x-ray or specimens in the pathology lab’ (230). This attempt at sanitising rituals has echoes of Judith Roof’s argument, that ‘configurations of lesbian sexuality embody the conflicting impetuses of representational insufficiency and recuperation’ (4). Menopausal lesbians, then, will be doubly subject to the ‘recuperative’ forces of cultural representations and medical discourse and practice.

Such praxes construct menopausal bodies as pathological, and they do so for a number of reasons: to maintain power over bodies, because of the troubling character of the female-embodied subject in this in-between state; to exploit a niche in the market; and to provide a response to women’s anxieties, which, ironically, are largely produced by medical discourse in the first place. Margaret Gullette’s commentary is particularly incisive on the subject of endocrinal intervention into menopausal bodies. She objects to the place menopause has taken up culturally, as a kind of fulcrum or critical moment in the ideology of decline. In her chapter ‘Menopause as Magic Marker,’ she suggests
that the proliferation of such discourses – which she calls the ‘menoboom’ – has already
done its job on the relevant generation of women. Within our age/sex system it will have produced for “menopause” a cultural consolidation, a discursive phenomenon in which for a space of time . . . a set of beliefs and issues and verbal formulas and tropes and binaries become fixed as the only terms in which talk on a particular subject makes sense to the speakers. (1997 98)

While menopause is represented both medically and in the female imaginary as ‘deficiency disease’ it is difficult to see how this will change. Gullette is right to be indignant about menopause as discursive fulcrum: the ‘life-course decline narrative,’ she claims, ‘requires as its pivot a critical moment, an event. The event crudely divides all women’s lives into two parts, the better Before and the worse After, with menopause as the magic marker of decline’ (98).

Language is crucial both in the construction of such discourses and in its counterconstructions. And yet it is difficult to challenge the authority of language: menopausal experience has become so medicalised that women collude in the use of doctorly jargon to describe their bodily changes, and viable alternatives do not come readily to mind. With medical language so entrenched in everyday usage, part of the work of counterconstruction may be consciously to revert to signifiers that resist this tendency.

Perhaps, then, the best recourse for feminist resistance to such damaging discourses is to harness the authority of the written word for counterconstruction. Medical historian Kwok Wei Leng has examined some of these competing discourses and the language in which they are embedded. She comments on the ‘closed thought system’ of endocrinal medical management (264); furthermore, the medical vernacular of this system – couched in terms such as ‘management’ and ‘non-compliance’ – bespeaks an attempt to render bodies docile. However, Kwok is also critical of some feminist counter-discourses for their own ‘closed’ ways of thinking. By positing the HRT-free menopause as ‘natural’, she complains, ‘the feminist model . . . is similarly embedded in a problematic mode of essentialising . . . woman, taking her to be the truth of experience’ (Kwok 261). Kwok has conflated all feminist discourse into a
theoretical monolith; but I have to agree with her criticism of Greer’s *The Change*, which contains the very scrambling of constructionist and biological arguments that is so common in menopausal discourse, and so difficult to untangle.

Greer’s text sets out to explore the feminist possibilities in women’s experience of ‘the change.’ The prescription of hormone treatment for women who have not yet ceased menstrual bleeding, she asserts, ‘as part of a strategy for deferring the ageing process . . . [is the] dippy and dangerous side of menopause medicine which peddles eternal youth’ (88), and she is enraged – as I am – by the frequency in western hospitals of unnecessary gynaecological surgery (180). However, her valorisation of what is ‘natural’ in womankind results in a kind of biological essentialism that sits uncomfortably with those theorists – from de Beauvoir onwards – who have convinced us that woman is made, not born, and indeed that the very concept “woman” is a socially constructed category. This confusion extends to the question of whether the menopause signifies death or new life: ‘[a]t menopause as never before a woman comes face to face with her own mortality. A part of her is dying’ (142) she claims, on the one hand; and on the other: ‘The passionate, idealistic, energetic young individual who existed before menstruation can come on earth again if we let her’ (61). This very aporia, I suggest, is at the centre of the debate about age or decline or progress. Greer ends *The Change* by urging that ‘[t]he chrysalis of conditioning has once and for all to break and the female woman finally to emerge’ (440). Greer’s reader, if she is able to pass over the apparent tautology of ‘female woman,’ still faces the question: what would be left of the embodied female subject if the ‘chrysalis of conditioning’ were to be shattered ‘once and for all?’ The analogy of nature – the woman is implicitly likened to a butterfly, since she emerges from a ‘chrysalis’ – is a metalanguage of which feminists should be suspicious, and furthermore is not in any sense applicable to the highly acculturated present-day female subject. It must be apparent to Greer that we cannot step outside the realm of the social; the notion that we can exist in some way ‘free’ of ‘conditioning’ is flawed from the outset.
Greer’s ‘female woman,’ if she succeeded in emerging from the social, would find herself in an untenable position.

Greer writes, furthermore, of ‘the greatest adventure of all, growing old’ (419), but seems also to be recommending that the ageing female subject leave her body behind as she embarks on the journey: ‘she can at last transcend the body that was what other people valued her for, and be set free both from their expectations and her own capitulation to them’ (430). Any attempts to ‘transcend the body’ are doomed to failure if Elizabeth Grosz’s ideas about subjectivity as embodied hold good. Greer risks sounding as though she does not value her own body, and thus, since body and psyche are inseparable, her own self. Feminists rethinking menopausal meanings would perhaps do better to strive towards the production of counterconstructions, rather than attempting to invoke ‘nature’ as an argument.

There is no doubt, however, that menopause has been unhelpfully ‘animated,’ as Kwok puts is, by medical configurations of it as ‘the death of the womb.’ Such discourses have an effect on women: Gullette points out, in my epigraph, that we are ‘at risk’ from this ideology. A more rigorous counterconstruction than Greer’s is provided by Roe Sybylla, who, after Foucault, argues against observing medical history in terms of truth or error, suggesting instead that ‘[t]he pertinent question is why particular aspects of knowledge are searched for in the first place, and promulgated in the second’ (203). If menopause is represented as the biological border between ‘youth’ and ‘age,’ then it is hardly distinct from what is disturbing about older age – the central problem Gullette defines as ‘decline narrative.’ Or perhaps the main focus of feminist counterconstruction should be the ways in which menopause has become situated as loss (of fertility, sexual attractiveness, and even ‘femininity’ itself), a theoretical paradigm that generates much of the anxiety surrounding the menopause.

The harnessing of the monstrous feminine is another strategy that has been deployed by some feminists: Mia Campioni, for example, challenges the modern interpretation of a uniquely female changing body/sex/mind [that] has left us with “menopause” as a purely technical problem of improper hormonal secretion dominated by the dread of aging and loss of
sexual vibrancy, with no concern for its specifically female symbolic meaning in the social order and with a total denial of its potential self-enhancing prospects. (77-78)

Campioni suggests that we identify the potential for the ‘repulsive subject’ in rethinking menopausal changes. Such figures, she argues, including the ‘abjectal personae’ of old women in horror movies, ‘are characterized by possessing terrifying, destructive, and secretive knowledge/power’ (97). Monstrous images of female ageing have been exploited and interrogated by photographers Rosy Martin and Jo Spence, among others. Figuring menopausal women as grotesque, and thus disruptive to ideologies of femininity, may be preferable to representing ‘the change’ as a time of overwhelming loss.

Theorist Fiona Mackie concurs with this opinion, and is also critical of the ‘loss’ model, suggesting that the reasons for it are political. She suggests that there is a ‘powerful prevailing construction of menopause as misery . . . one is regaled with social expectations that speak only of loss – loss of womanliness, of childbearing, perhaps of sexuality; “death” of the womb, the ovaries, loss of menstruation and so forth’ (21). On the other hand, positive experiences of menopause, and claims for it ‘as a bodily experience of transition,’ tend to be silenced (1997). This is borne out by my experience. I recently mentioned to an acquaintance that, as a result of researching this chapter, which has involved reading the word ‘menopause’ many times a day, the meaning of it seemed to have seeped into my cells and brought on my own climacteric. In response, she gave me a sympathetic head-tilt and said ‘oh dear,’ as though my dog had died. My protestations that the onset of this process felt perfectly fine and appropriate fell, I suspect, on deaf ears. Whether it will lead to ‘a bodily experience of transition’ remains to be seen.

In response to the menopause discourses configuring this quite ordinary bodily experience as a time of loss or pathology – discourses with which midlife women are inundated – Gullette favours the strategy of keeping representations of menopause proportional to its place in a whole life-story, or better yet, since women need to be reinscribed as indelibly diverse, in many different whole-life stories. What we convey thereby is our sense of the continuities in our lives, or the discontinuities unrelated
to menopause. Thus we discursively override both the biologist and the pessimism of the menoboom. (1997 102-3)

She goes on to point out that to maintain silence is not enough as a strategy of resistance in the face of the overwhelming medicalisation of this event. However, she proposes that ‘[o]ur discourse should use that promising, speaking “silence” as a truth that on the whole nothing happens. Or that if something does happen, our adult competence manages it handily’ (103, original italics).

Critic Kwok Wei Leng agrees; she comments that the menopausal subject has been produced as ‘a new category . . . with a pathology to match’ (Kwok 262). Arguing that feminist ‘naturalness’ and ‘experience’ are equally constructed categories, Kwok opens the field for other possible counterconstructions (263). The problem with nature, she points out, is that ‘when we go to nature and its normal body, it is sometimes not there . . . [and] the menopausal body itself is not as fixed as it is hoped to be . . . nature turns out to be culture all along’ (265-6).

**Menopause narrative**

This relationship – between biology and culture – is at the centre of my enquiry, and I hope to elucidate it through textual analysis. Despite the extraordinary amount of medical and feminist discourse on menopause, however, it proved difficult to find much fictional work centring on menopause as transition – or, for that matter, as anything else. For the most part, in both novels and life-writing, menopausal women are either invisible or not portrayed at all – ‘one of a number of missing commonplaces,’ as Elizabeth Kincaid-Ehlers has pointed out (24). The paucity of creative writing on menopausal experience may be because of its ambiguous status: for if it is not an illness, or brought about abruptly by surgery, then writing on the subject does not qualify as ‘autopathography;’ and if it is merely ordinary, not traumatic enough to qualify as a ‘progress narrative,’ then why write about it at all? Kincaid-Ehlers points to life-stories from the past, such as that of Margery Kempe and Alisoun of Bath, both mediaeval midlife women; these narratives portray women ‘of a certain age’ without mentioning the menopause specifically. There are also a number of midlife progress narratives:
Sarton’s *Crucial Conversations*, in which a central character leaves her marriage at fifty to give free rein to her creativity, is an example, but in this text the protagonist’s midlife transition is again not linked explicitly to the menopause. Reference to the female climacteric is, for the most part, simply elided, unless mentioned in collections of autobiographical essays which have been specifically commissioned, in which case women have been *asked* to write about the menopause. *A Certain Age* (1993), edited by Joanna Goldsworthy, is one such; and it has the advantage of including the experiences of women who sailed through ‘the change’ unperturbed, thus refuting the myth of nightmare which has grown up around the process.

‘Fictional events’ and life writing offer the most effective counters to this paradigm, in part because they are more accessible and easier to digest than medical treatises, and more likely to be read. My analysis of menopausal writing by feminists includes a brief look at Elizabeth Berg’s *The Pull of the Moon* (1996) and a more in-depth reading of June Arnold’s *Sister Gin* (1975) and Anne Herrmann’s *A Menopausal Memoir: Letters from Another Climate* (1998). Berg’s novel, a pro-woman text in a heterosexual frame, still represents menopause as reproductive loss. By contrast, the latter two texts are written from a lesbian or queer perspective and emphasise the non-reproductive character of lesbian midlife transition. It is as a result of this different placement, I suggest, that texts by lesbians often move ‘in and out of ideology’ in the vacillating motion of Lauretis’ argument.

Berg’s rather lightweight novel, *The Pull of the Moon*, takes literally Greer’s recommendation to ‘disappear for a while, to go bush, in order to reflect’ (431). This text, recounted in the first person by menopausal housewife Nan, takes the form of a series of letters to the husband she has left behind. Thus it does not threaten the ‘marriage plot:’ the entire narrative refers back to this male partner, to whom she fully expects to return. The story sees Nan moves from a sense of loss – ‘I saw Kotex in the drugstore the other day and began to weep’ – through an exploration of her affective state – ‘I have felt for so long like I am drowning’ (2-3) – to something like the ‘serenity and power’ of Greer’s thesis. This is achieved by staying out in the woods for a night and conquering
her fear of the dark (and, implicitly, various other fears at the same time). This is not an important book in countering age ideology, but it does contain one small, triumphant challenge to age-passing. Waiting in a salon to have her hair coloured – (clearly an integral part of ‘going bush!’) – Nan has a conversation with another woman who claims she prefers grey hair, and is not sure why she has hers covered up. As a result, Nan spontaneously demands that her hair be re-coloured grey by the stylist (106). The result is a confrontation with the hairdresser, who calls the manager to resolve the dispute. Nan demands that he train his employees to ‘be a little more human, to understand that when you came into a beauty parlor when you were fifty you felt naked and invisible both’ (107). Other women join in the fray, telling the manager how often they have gone home from the salon, looked in the mirror and wept. The result of this dialogue is that the manager, in recompense, invites the unskilled Nan to cut his hair; she sets to work on him, with predictably disastrous results (109-10).

This delightful fantasy begins with a clear demand to undo the work of culture; Nan wants the synthetic colour removed from her hair in order to reclaim the greyness, the first signifier of midlife. It emerges into a discussion about the powerlessness of women in a beauty industry intent on helping women to age-pass, and culminates in a curious disruption of power relations, one that is, I would suggest, fairly unlikely to happen in lived experience. This gain (in personal power) is offset by some of Nan’s losses: her menstrual periods, her confidence in her own sexual attractiveness, the need to buy Kotex. The narrative enacts Greer’s argument precisely: ‘There may be danger in taking time to be alone to reflect,’ she counsels, ‘and perhaps to grieve for times that can never return and, worse, bitterer, time that was wasted, but there is more danger in not taking it’ (431).

To represent menopause in such simple terms seems to avoid the issues of construction and discourse formation. If menopause had not been constructed as loss, for example, women might not need ‘time out’ for grief, to get over, as in Nan’s case, the absence of sanitary towels in their lives. (These seem a curious thing to mourn: I was disgusted to receive a free sample of them in the mail recently. Initially I wondered why marketing departments do not
check the recipient’s date of birth before sending out such products, but then
realised that this was merely another example of the discourse that considers
reproductivity the norm). The mourning thought to accompany childlessness
surely takes place – if at all – at the point of transition out of one’s thirties,
since, after all, few women are fully reproductive right up to the moment of final
ovulation. By our early fifties, unless reproductive technology is used, the
probability of childbearing has passed.

However, it is not enough to dismiss menopausal experience with the idea
that ‘nothing happens.’ Mackie’s argument about menopause as ‘transition’ – the
hint that ‘something of worth lies here’ – may mean that we take on another, or
several, co-identities at this time. This does not necessarily imply rupture, I
suggest, or the complete personality overhaul implied by Suzanne Levine’s
‘you’re not who you were only older’ (13 +). But useful changes in behaviour,
the letting go or disruption of modes of being that no longer serve us, as well as
a growing awareness of the importance of embodiment – what Mackie calls ‘a
language that emanates from experiences of bodiliness’ (22) – are likely, and
desirable, at this time.

**June Arnold’s Sister Gin**

This idea – that the menopause itself may constitute part of a progress narrative
– is firmly embedded in the most radical fictional text I found on the subject:
June Arnold’s *Sister Gin*. Indeed, at the time it was first published (1975),
dealing with the topic of menopause in fiction was a fairly transgressive move.
This book, despite its status as a 70s lesbian classic, proved difficult to come by,
perhaps because of its quirky style and the taboo character – at that time – of its
subject matter. It also refused to conform to second wave insistence on positive
portrayals of minority groups, for it depicts midlife lesbians as chaotic, addictive
and unhappy. Interestingly, its main character is redeemed to some extent by
the menopause and her transition into older age, ultimately offering a good
counterconstruction of the menopause-as-nightmare model, and from a lesbian
perspective.
Its author, June Arnold, was born in 1926 in Greenville, South Carolina; she came of age in the forties and spent her youth playing the part of white Southern belle. She attended good universities, married classmate Gilbert Arnold, and had four children (The Handbook of Texas Online 1). When her marriage ended and she – like contemporaries Doris Grumbach and May Sarton – began to have same-sex relationships, Arnold moved to New York City with her children. There she began to write, producing four novels of which Sister Gin was the third, and later founding the press, Daughters Incorporated, in Vermont. Apart from her first novel, Applesauce, all Arnold’s books were initially published by Daughters Inc. (HOTO 1); this may have been a wise move, for it meant that, like Virginia Woolf, Arnold was not reliant on the judgments of a publisher in order to see her work in print. Sister Gin is a bold and outrageous novel, which Stimpson has called ‘a fiction, a comic polemic, a bawdy tract, and a call to rebellion’ (270). It is not just ambitious in its subject matter, the treatment of lesbian relationships and menopausal embodiment; it is also somewhat unusual in form. Some sections, reflecting the internal world of protagonist Su McCulvey, are printed as a column to the right of the page with only odd phrases in the usual configuration, aligned left. It is difficult to imagine a non-feminist publishing house agreeing to produce this book; indeed, it provokes the question of how many imaginative and ambitious novels about the menopause have never made it beyond an editor’s slush pile.

The novel describes a relationship between two women, Su and Bettina, who have lived together in the southern town of Wilmington, North Carolina for two decades. Su is fifty and works; Bettina is forty-six and does not. Stimpson opines that ‘Sister Gin valorizes lesbians’ (270). It is difficult to see where she gets this idea, considering that the protagonists are such anti-heroines. Bettina is unhappily overweight and bronchitic. She also hates the house, originally Su’s, and has never really unpacked; she chain-smokes, never gets dinner on time, and drinks to excess. Su, a playwright manqué, works as a book reviewer for a local newspaper. She is miserable in their relationship, and wants to leave Bettina, but lacks the courage; and she is problematically menopausal. Bettina acknowledges her partner’s suffering in terms neither empathic nor constructive:
'I don’t see how you can stand it' (28). In the course of the narrative, Su falls in love with their older friend, Mamie Carter, and they become lovers. She does not initially leave Bettina however; for a time she decides her love for Mamie was misguided, ‘a fantasy,’ and instead quits her job and attempts to write her play. Bettina, meanwhile, goes to work for the same newspaper her partner has just left. She curbs her drinking and overeating, and loses most of excess pounds. It is now Su’s turn to stay home with just the dog for company: just as Bettina did in this situation, she abuses alcohol and fails to get dinner on time. The title of the novel is a reference not just to her increasing dipsomania but to Su’s alter ego, Sister Gin. This mysterious character leaves challenging notes for Su around the office: her raison d’être is to express ‘all that Su has tried to repress’ (Stimpson 270). The elusive Sister Gin even offers a closing critique on the novel’s (admittedly deficient) treatment of racial issues, leaving the reader wondering whether Sister Gin is really Su’s alter ego, or Arnold’s.

Although Su and Bettina find some kind of equilibrium in their relationship for a time, it is still unsatisfactory. But much of Su’s energy during this period is sublimated into the political theft of pornographic magazines: using the pretence of a hot flush to distract the storekeeper, she and her ex-colleague, Daisy, remove bundles of offensive material from the shelves. Ultimately, Su leaves Bettina and establishes a relationship with Mamie Carter. Meanwhile the latter runs for office as local councillor and loses dismally, partly because Su has by this point discovered her own anger and unleashed it on all the wrong people.

The positive use of a menopausal ‘symptom’ for feminist resistance, and the inappropriate displays of rage that make or break political campaigns, indicate of the tone of this novel, which overall is hilarious and bizarre. There are, however, serious intentions here only thinly masked by humour. The novel is interesting, for example, in its ability to render different points of view: told in the third person, the narrative begins from Bettina’s perspective, but she does not prove to be the central character, a position reserved for Su. Furthermore, the tension I have referred to – between lived bodiliness and cultural discourse – infuses the entire text: while embodiment is foregrounded, the complex interplay with acculturation in these characters is never overlooked. Thus '[b]oth
psychical and social dimensions . . . find their place in reconceptualizing the body, not in opposition to each other but as necessarily interactive’ (Grosz 1994 23). We are first introduced to Bettina through her physical – and psychic – discomfort: her aches and pains, the productive rattling of her bronchitis, the sense of the sheets against her body as she languishes in bed in the afternoon, are palpable. The reader also has a sense of Bettina’s animal and atavistic self: in her perception of pain Bettina is ‘like early woman,’ and when she lays her hand on her belly, that body part is described as ‘puffed up high like a whale’ (Arnold 4). Similarly, Su’s depression over her situation – a relationship that has outlived its shelf-life and a job where she dare not write her honest opinions – is ‘at first . . . unreal,’ but later she sinks ‘into its factness with a thud’ (16).

Menopausalness is refreshingly explicit: Su’s ‘hot flashes’ have a prominent place in the narrative. They are described in various guises: for example, while enquiring of Bettina’s mother, Luz, about the welfare of her tomato plants, Su experiences in her body a wave of heat sparked from her uterus, rising rapidly to her face which began its blush immediately the question was asked – a blush strangely appropriate to Luz’s vestigial shame at being so intensely involved with a vegetable that was certainly redder and juicier (when ripe) than any other. (28)

The awkwardness of Su’s relation to both her own and her partner’s mother gives rise to frequent flashing and flushing, for both Luz and Shirley are unaware that Su and Bettina are – or once were – lovers. Here Su’s stress-related hot flushes are juxtaposed with the tomatoes Luz is ‘involved’ with, and that fruit is constructed as sensuous and even ‘shameful.’

Su also has hot flashes in situations of suppressed anger or embarrassment: they seem to serve as a release mechanism for any kind of emotional excess. At one point in the narrative, simply uttering the taboo word ‘lesbian’ brings on ‘a prickle of clammy sweat’ (61); at others, her flushes function as a hypersensitive super-ego, catching her out in insincere thoughts. When she is reflecting on her tenderness for a previous lover, Kip, for example, ‘the flash got her straight on the pretension. She spoke out loud and heard her voice tinny, her words bland, deceitful, oblique’ (54). Work situations she feels
unable to cope with cause ‘a tiny discharge of a small overload after which the load would build back up almost immediately to the same intolerable pressure’ (39). The imagery of hot flash as electrical circuit which is ‘overloaded,’ and has to ‘discharge,’ chimes with the idea of labelling these moments of overheating as ‘power surges,’ a strategy through which some feminists have sought to reclaim the process. One book, Joan Callahan’s Menopause: a Midlife Passage, has a photo by Aimee Tomasek on its cover showing a group of midlife women in front of a power station. They hold a banner emblazoned with the words: ‘They are Not Hot Flashes . . . They are POWER SURGES.’ This kind of conscious counterconstruction is an example of what Gullette intends by exhorting us to resist the ideology of age: for if menopausal bodies enact the ‘flashes’ of electrical circuity, then feminist resistance may involve reconfiguring them as another kind of electrical apparatus. The phrase ‘power surge,’ containing the signifier ‘power’ and harnessing its double meaning, juxtaposed with ‘surge,’ implying a potent rising up, brings about a shift in the meanings of those words used for ‘symptoms,’ and enables a re-thinking of this complex biological and cultural phenomenon.

The American usage ‘hot flash’, with its already electrical imagery, is of course more easily converted to ‘power surge’ than the British English ‘flush,’ which, implying water, would presumably just blow the circuits. And yet the idea of ‘flushing’ also has a place in Sister Gin, where Arnold offers the notion of women as

water-shedders. Women’s bodies collect and dispense fluids. From tears over lost love to flashes from absenting hormones, we drip onto the ground, wet our surfaces, slip and slide through our race to grab one another on a layer of fluid . . . . We sweat more than we drool, vomit more than we feed, let loose a greater volume of tears than birthwater, more waste urine from bar drinks than menstrual blood from refused pregnancies – we drip and piss and sweat it out from one year to the next. (54)

This passage offers an analogy of female bodies as soft machines (rather than hard-wired, as in the ‘power surge’ trope); and the ‘refused pregnancies’ of this passage echoes Stimpson’s idea of ‘a sexuality free from the possibility of reproduction.’ Furthermore, this fluidity – the breaching of physical boundaries
by liquid – again resonates with Elizabeth Grosz’s notion of *Volatile Bodies*. Grosz posits an embodied subject in process: for her, bodies ‘are not inert . . . . They generate what is new, surprising, and unpredictable.’ She goes on to write of ‘the ability of bodies to always extend the frameworks which attempt to contain them, to seep beyond the domains of control’ (1994 xi).

This leakiness and volatility is well understood by Arnold. *Sister Girl’s* protagonist, Su, declares herself ‘fuzzy, immature, obscene, excessive, loud, and . . . not even drunk . . . . See that splash sloppy Su made? Dribbling all over herself. Messy! I’m a palsied old woman and an impetuous young one, I’m skipping the middle altogether’ (56). This ‘skipping’ of midlife echoes the lack of representation of women in their middle years, and of midlife actresses who remain unemployed unless they ‘pass’ as older or younger (Rogers 234). The dichotomy of menopause – that woman in this phase of life is perceived as both monstrous by lack (of hormones) and by excess (the body escaping the boundaries determined for it) – shows here in Su’s conflicted and uncharacteristically out-of-control behaviour, and in the third-person address by which she refers to herself. Su feels out of control because both her body and psyche seem to be running amok; and this raises questions about whose control she has slipped from: ideology’s, or her own. Perhaps they are inseparable, since the need for ‘self-control’ is one that subjects introject, the demand of culture that women do not breach ideologically established bodily and behavioural boundaries. Menopause, then, becomes neither symptom nor cause, but an inextricable knot of the embodied and constructed. The difficulty is to disentangle the knot, to unpack the menopausalness in a way that distinguishes the construct from the experience – almost impossible when ‘experience’ is also a constructed category. This difficulty lends an interesting tension to Arnold’s text.

For Su, however, menopause is a time of transition and process. Her new-found messiness and excess come as a relief (for both her and the reader) from the hitherto repressed correctness of her life. The idea that lesbians, already othered, deal better with being further categorised (as menopausal, midlife, old) does not hold good for Su; rather, she compensates for her deviant
sexuality by being painfully contained in other areas. In her relationship with Bettina, for example, whom she longs to leave, Su struggles to break the internal boundaries that limit her, her moral code preventing her from abandoning a woman who could not cope alone. Through the bodily unravelling that for her typifies the menopause, Su becomes sick not only of Bettina but also of ‘the half [of herself] that behaves . . . [which is] more like three-quarters or ninety percent by now’ (57). Her frustration is expressed in the writings of the imaginary Sister Gin, and by her menopausal sweats, which seem to leak through physical boundaries to compensate for her inability to break bounds in other ways. Pre-menopause, Su had ‘long ago surrendered to the loneliness of being right . . . . Everything in her life had been corrected and she had felt, at the beginning of summer, that if something didn’t change soon she would hand in her days and quit’ (7).

Finally, ‘biology’ decides for her that some kind of life transition is inevitable. ‘The change was the change, although at first she had not been sure it had come at all – in the terrible heat of downtown June a hot flash could easily pass’ (7). Is this lack of conviction emblematic of Su’s own ebbing confidence, or perhaps just evidence of the uncertainty all menopausal women experience at first? Has menstrual bleeding really stopped, or is it merely irregular? And must we ‘pass,’ like Su’s hot flashes in June, as not flushing, not menopausal, and normalised? Indeed, many heterosexually active women who experience an early ‘change’ understandably think they may be pregnant.

It is partly the lack of clarity delineating menstrual cessation – since it is only identifiable in retrospect – that renders any ritualistic celebration of menopause so difficult. In 1985, however, artist Ann Stewart Anderson and fifty-two of her colleagues attempted such a celebration in artwork by making *The Hot Flash Fan*, a large collage marking women’s experiences of ‘the change’ (see Fig. 2). Finding no example of art portraying this aspect of female identity – for although representations of reproduction are legion, its opposite tends to be elided from visual culture – they based the images on questionnaires distributed among women, creating a vast ‘fan’ of twelve panels to reflect different aspects of menopausal experience. ‘Making it,’ reflects Anderson, ‘became an eminently
significant personal rite of passage’ (207). The postcard version of the fan I received from the Kentucky Foundation for Women describes the collage as including ‘appliqué, embroidery, couching, beading, trapunto, quilting, paint and photographs.’ This plurality of media, I surmise, reflects Anderson and friends’ endeavour to depict women – even those sharing a particular moment in the creation of age identity – as, in Gullette’s words, ‘indelibly diverse.’

Like Anderson’s ‘fan,’ *Sister Gin* shows menopausal bodies and psyches both in negative and positive terms. Arnold’s Su McCulvey struggles with her climacteric, but also finds a new freedom and exhilaration in taking risks at this time. When she finds herself in jail for her porn-removing exploits, for example, ‘[h]er blood, freed from its chore of creating uterine linings she had to then slough off, charged through her veins like spring torrents from grandmaternal mountains’ (177). Su wants this period to be ‘the beginning of something.’ And yet the ideology of menopause as loss also finds a place, for Su’s mother, Shirley, ‘stopped having the curse just after Hubertjunior died.’ The death of her son blurring with her inability to produce another child,
Fig. 2. Ann Stewart Anderson in collaboration with 52 artists: *The Hot Flash Fan: a visual depiction of the myths and facts about menopause* (1985).

Courtesy of the Kentucky Centre for Women.
Shirley, like Elizabeth Berg’s protagonist Nan, felt the time of her menopause to be ‘just one big year of loss’ (78). Discussing their experiences does not bring the two women closer, however. Su is disappointed to discover this, for she had hoped she and Shirley would somehow get along better ‘now we were both creatures in the same physiological class, at least common creatures’ (106). This biological connection, it turns out, makes little difference to a lifetime of miscommunications.

The result of attempts to inform her mother of her sexuality is equally dismal: Su wants the two of them ‘to be able to talk’ (78), whereas Shirley’s perception is that Su merely wants to ‘analyze and argue until I’m left with nothing to say – I haven’t changed my mind underneath, I’m just whipped down’ (79). Su’s fantasy is to ‘throw herself into her mother’s arms and sob into her neck . . . crooning I love you, stroking I’ll help you, kissing I am you’ (79). But in repressive Wilmington this is not going to happen; and this inability to communicate is reflected in Su’s other relationships, despite her belief in the importance of ‘talk.’ With Bettina, Su clings to habit; and Mamie Carter, her secret love object, cannot even hear Su, who does not speak loudly enough to penetrate the older woman’s deafness.

This series of impasses in Su’s life – the feeling that ‘if something didn’t change soon she would hand in her days and quit’ (7) – is in some measure resolved through the irresistible force of her menopause. As a result of it, for example, she finds her memory faulty, and this makes her job more difficult, for as a journalist she has never needed to take notes until now, having had an almost eidetic recall of interviews (37). In desperation, she obtains some oral contraceptives; because ‘birth control pills have estrogen in them,’ they must, she reasons, be helpful in the ‘deficiency disease’ she is suffering (41). Significantly, she does not get this medication from a doctor; instead she manages to access the drug while avoiding a first-hand encounter with medical discourse (41). Bettina opposes Su’s use of the pills at all, let alone without medical supervision: ‘Don’t you know you can get a blood clot?’ she remonstrates, and later ‘It’s just not natural’ (41). Su simply replies: ‘We don’t do anything else that’s natural. We don’t get fuzzy when the weather turns cold’
Despite this insight, Su feels that she is disappearing: in response to
Bettina’s protests that she still loves her, Su counters: ‘There’s nothing to love,
for godsake. I’m not even here’ (43). The invisibility that midlife woman
experience is enacted, for her, internally.

Emphasising this perception, Su no longer sees her own face in the
mirror. One episode rendered in the asymmetrical ‘column’ format is Su’s
version of the mirror phase (58-60): it shows the moment when Su looks in the
mirror and sees, looking back at her, a facsimile of her mother’s. The scene
invokes Freud’s *doppelganger*, an idea Woodward uses to suggest that ‘to see . . .
one’s own aged body with a shock of recognition is to experience the *uncanny*’
(1991 63, original italics). This passage of *Sister Gin* reads almost like prose
poetry, signifying a spilling forth of Su’s feelings about her unconscious struggle
with constructed ageing; she looks in the mirror, and, ‘sight tracing like fingers a
path on each side of a nose she suddenly saw on another face . . . . Mother’s
nose grown long and bulbous, mother’s pursed lips whose purselines remained
etched beneath her pale lipfuzz even when she relaxed her mouth’ (58-59).

The fact that Su has grown to resemble her disapproving mother serves
only to bring into relief the unsatisfactory character of their relationship. For
knowledges about ageing seem to be communicated down the generations;
women who cannot communicate with their mothers may find it harder to know
what it means to grow old. Anne Herrmann suggests that ‘[w]henever someone
mentions menopause, someone else mentions her mother’ (13). Although there
may be some advantage to knowing something of the genetic makeup that will
affect us as we age, there are no certainties in hereditary biology, and conscious
ageing is at least as well effected through colloquy with peers. But the myth
that through our mothers’ experience we can know what to expect still persists.
Perhaps in compensation for the maternal closeness she longs for but is denied,
Su embarks on an intimacy with another older woman: Mamie Carter is exactly
the same age as her mother, seventy-seven. In the safety of this new love – not
for nothing is it called ‘the first flush’ – Su learns to experience her sweats as
positive, ‘welcom[ing] the flash which centered her whole extraordinary body in
a fever of change’ (130). Words such as ‘welcome’, ‘centered’, ‘extraordinary’
and ‘change’ here replace the pejorative terms often found in medical discourse: ‘failure,’ ‘degenerate,’ ‘atrophy,’ ‘death’ and ‘decline.’ The novel offers a counterconstruction to such ideology by re-defining the signifiers of menopause, midlife and age itself; and the ‘fever of change’ signals the introduction of new co-identities to Su’s sequential selves. From being repressed and correct, she falls in love, sheds inhibitions, finds her anger and becomes politicised.

Even so, when she has a further unexpected menstrual bleed Su wonders how to ‘accept the joy that whipped through her whole self, carrying the vivid proof that she was young again . . . proof that love is life-giving.’ (190). Her ambivalence about her menopausal self is evident. Mamie Carter, on the other hand, is whole-hearted in her valorisation of older age: even Bettina, she speculates, ‘will be all right when she reaches menopause . . . as soon as her body stops being under the moon’s dominion. The child and the old don’t go by clocks and don’t know fear’ (189). This is an attractive aphorism even if it holds little truth – for, as far as fear goes, Grumbach had the opposite experience in her inner city life – but it typifies the sanguine attitude of Mamie Carter to just about everything. The idea that women are freed from ‘the moon’s dominion’ is interesting, and implies, perhaps, that the menopause can free us from other kinds of dominion as well.

One subplot of Arnold’s narrative imagines older age as a time when female subjects can finally grasp political power. In it, Mamie Carter and a group of her friends disguise themselves in unlikely clothes and wigs, and set out to capture and humiliate men who have committed rape, who were then, as now, rarely brought to justice. They tie these miscreants to a board and leave them in a public place, then alibi each other by claiming to have been playing bridge (134-41). This vigilante group takes revenge on a man who has attacked Almeta, the sister of Miss May, who has worked as a servant in Bettina’s family for years. Arnold seems ambivalent about the potential subplot centring on the African-American characters, May and Almeta. Only at the end does the voice of Miss May emerge, like an afterthought. Arnold has externalised her own conflict about this undeveloped commentary on race, allocating the dialogue to Su and Sister Gin. The latter has the final word: ‘You just can’t speak for Miss May,
that’s all. Let her go on out the door’ (215). This makes for a slightly weak ending: the inclusion of May and Almeta as fully fleshed-out characters might have been better, but Arnold’s hesitation to ‘speak for’ her black characters may well be the explanation.

Su knows nothing of the exploits of the older women, although her own direct political action is comparable, if on a smaller scale. She develops a number of new selves in the course of the narrative: menopausal woman, angry political animal and lover, for example. All these aspects of identity can be seen in terms of interpellation, but menopausalness is perhaps the most powerful example of a negative ‘hailing.’ Wendy Rogers describes the climacteric as a ‘physiological tap on the shoulder to remind [one] of the approach of old age’ (234), and this image strikingly resembles Althusser’s interpellatory moment, the hailing by a ‘divine performative’ (Butler 1997 110), which is in reality a process rather than an event, endlessly reiterated to establish and then maintain subjectivation. It is often represented by a responsive turn, as when Grumbach ‘turns’ seventy. In considering interpellation, however – including being hailed as menopausal – it is useful to remember that it is always incomplete. Citing Mladen Dolar, Butler asserts that ‘there is a part of the individual that cannot successfully pass into the subject, an element of “pre-ideological” and “presubjective” materia prima that comes to haunt subjectivity once it is constituted as such’ (in Butler 1997 120). This is the unsubjectivated fragment, a remnant of being that ‘haunts’ the subject. In Su’s case, the remainder is perhaps embodied by Sister Gin, who brings about the transition that frees Su from a lifetime of ‘correctness’ and enables her to write the honest but scandalous reviews that get her fired. This aspect of personhood refuses full interpellation.

Ultimately, then, her body leading the way in its sloppiness and excess, Su also allows her psyche to resist the pressure to behave like a Southern lady. Butler poses the question:

Is there a possibility of being elsewhere or otherwise, without denying our complicity in the law that we oppose? Such possibility would require a different kind of turn, one that, enabled by the law, turns away from the law, resisting its lure of identity, an agency that outruns and counters the
conditions of its emergence. Such a turn demands a willingness not to be
– a critical desubjectivation – in order to expose the law as less powerful
than it seems. (1997 130)

Perhaps Su’s chaos should rather be seen as a ‘critical desubjectivation,’ one that
welcomes the possibility of enacting a ‘different kind of turn;’ and the ‘willingness
not to be’ may describe her feeling of being ‘not even here.’ In this instance,
refusing interpellation may mean – rather than sacrificing a place in social
systems – refusing to be defined by menopausalness as a totalising identity.
Instead, as Gullette suggests, women may emphasise continuities, and see the
menopause as just one (often quite minor) event in the complexity of processual
identity (1997 102-3). We can also enact a ‘different kind of turn’ by refusing
the discourse of loss, deficiency and disease which has shaped midlife
experience. Resistance may be enabled by narratives about midlife women
which emphasise continuity and difference in form and genre as well as content.
Inevitably, holding out against life-course imperatives that limit the possible
identities we inhabit means facing another set of problems: how to both be and
not be ‘menopausal’ simultaneously, and how to interpret our own menopausal
processes in defiance of the existing discourse.

Su, though an ambiguous heroine, emerges as a fine example of midlife
rebelliousness. Catharine Stimpson suggests that she ‘happily accepts the
heritage of the deviant, aging woman . . . . She is rebellious, energetic,
courageous, and happy’ (271). Stimpson continues:

Sister Gin dramatizes a pattern of behaviour that we might valuably
practice. It opposes the fallacy of bodily reductionism, but it assumes that
the body is a domain to inhabit, passionately or dispassionately, as we
will. The transgressions against the flesh that we must avoid are cultural
denigration and cruel, political domination. Sister Gin also asserts that we
may re-envision and revise our world and its systems, including those that
say what menopause is. (271)

Herrmann’s Menopausal Memoir
Anne Herrmann has also produced a text that ‘re-vision[s] and revise[s] . . .
what menopause is,’ for her ‘different kind of turn’ was enacted while
unconscious on an operating table. Written in a similar epistolary form to Berg’s novel, *A Menopausal Memoir: Letters from Another Climate* (1998) includes – unlike *The Pull of the Moon*, which merely addresses her husband – letters to friends, family and lovers past and present. These missives take the form of autobiographical essays documenting the radical pelvic surgery that catapulted Herrmann into menopause at the age of forty-three; this abrupt transition meant that she was ‘out of developmental sync, entering midlife prematurely’ (86). A successful writer and academic, Herrmann found herself othered among her cohort of midlife feminists by this experience; she points out that

> [m]ost stories about menopause barely mention hysterectomies. Most stories about hysterectomies assume the presence of a supportive partner, inevitably male. Most feminists assume that every hysterectomy is unnecessary and could or should be avoided. (11)

Herrmann is acutely aware of the ways in which their reproductive capacity defines women: ‘even if never exercised, [the] possibility remains the difference that constructs sexual difference’ she asserts (4). In medical discourse and practice, ‘the potential for reproduction remains the focus when treating the female body medically, [so that] any anomaly or aberration will necessarily be made subordinate to it’ (4). Herrmann had been plagued since adolescence by endometriosis, which caused painful periods and occasional excruciating episodes of ruptured ovarian cysts – the latter going undiagnosed for years. Nonetheless, she found that her sense of loss about her uterus and ovaries was overwhelming and confusing. She was ‘[m]ourning the loss not of a family member, but a part of the body. Not as body part but as female body. Mourning not a lost potential for motherhood, but of one’s body image as female’ (1). And yet the removal of internal organs ‘is not amputation in as much as the lost body part is not visible, like a breast’ (9); nor does it interfere with sexual pleasure (8­9). Because she had never wanted children, Herrmann implies, her grief about her reproductive organs did not seem quite justified.

Herrmann’s meditation on her sudden climacteric was written as a way of making sense of this ‘mourning.’ The loss of ‘one’s body image as female’ is key to the deprivation she felt, since the uterus and ovaries are often viewed as
crucial to embodied femininity. And since women’s reproductive potential is
considered the *sine qua non* of that femininity, it follows that the organs needed
for such a role have become emblematic of embodied womanhood.

Furthermore, Herrmann did not agree to a hysterectomy beforehand, but
expected only to have some ovarian cysts removed; opting for surgery had been
a difficult decision, preferable to medication only because of the pernicious side
effects of the only drug available. Her surgeon decided on a hysterectomy and
oophorectomy in the middle of the procedure, because of the high level of
endometrial material she found in her patient’s abdomen. ‘Could she have
preparing me better psychologically,’ Herrmann wonders, ‘in that we never talked
about the severest case of a benign condition, only about the possibility of
malignancy?’ (8). Only when she recovered consciousness did Herrmann
discover the devastating outcome of the surgery. The irony of having given up
her womb and ovaries, and her need to grieve them even though they had not
been put to reproductive use and had caused her so much pain, emerges in
‘Letter to the Reader: Mourning and Memory.’ Herrmann records: ‘I had lost the
organs . . . that from an early age I never intended to use’ (3). Both shock and
the sense of a loss that she had not chosen, and that was not under her control,
must have added to the trauma of surgery.

For her, however, the hysterectomy re-evoked another loss: the death of
her mother. ‘I lost my mother in my twenties,’ she writes. ‘Recovering from the
loss of my ovaries and uterus made me remember, one more time, the loss of
her. I imagine an improbable dialogue with her, in the form of a letter’ (1). This
‘improbable dialogue’ is the second letter of Herrmann’s memoir: others are to
the reader and her ex-partner, among others; the final letter is to herself.

Because of the precipitate character of her climacteric, Herrmann, after
the surgery, has ‘finished menopause and has barely begun to understand
middle age’ (3). Advised not to begin the HRT that she would need for the rest
of her life until three months after the operation, she underwent terrible
insomnia, fatigue and mood swings during that time, even more distressing than
the dysmenorrhoea the surgery set out to remedy. This, perhaps, more than any
other aspect of that distressing experience, must have shown her that women
do, after all, ‘need’ our reproductive organs in order to maintain a good endocrinal balance. The often drawn-out process of menopausal changes was, for her, telescoped into an unconscionably short time: ‘Will I have done the work of seven years in a year and seven months?’ she muses (98). For Herrmann, the shift in interpelling that accompanies menopause must have been shocking in its suddenness. But bodily changes, initially anyway, dominate her experience. Pain is replaced by exhaustion: ‘Strategies for pain management developed over a lifetime become useless . . . . A fatigue is known to set in after hysterectomies that is qualitatively different from any previously experienced, and often not outlived’ (10).

The disruptiveness of this change, and her relative youth, set Herrmann apart from the vast majority of menopausal experience. This is not the only way in which she is different: a linguist and academic theorist, the bilingual daughter of immigrants to the US, her mother Swiss and her father Russian, she is also othered by her sexuality: ‘I never considered myself straight, even when I had male lovers, even now that I have a male lover,’ she claims (106-7). Herrmann is othered, then, even among those already other: among menopausal women she is the one that enacted ‘the change’ differently, surgically, at forty-three, before she was ready; and in the lesbian community she is also an oddity, reverting to sexual relationships with men when same-sex relationships become unsatisfactory. Her assumption of the label ‘queer’ reconciles the latter anomaly, at least politically; on a personal level, reconciliation is not so easy. She writes to a college friend of ‘a sexuality in limbo, between asexuality and bisexuality, one that could only resolve itself through the expression of same-sex desire’ (44), even though that expression later proved unsatisfactory in its turn. The friend, the letter implies, had found Herrmann’s emerging lesbianism difficult to encompass, her mission in life being to ‘defend . . . [normativity] single-handedly’ (46).

Elsewhere Herrmann expresses an ambiguity about her sense of gender: she describes herself as the ‘oldest daughter who never quite becomes a son . . . . (What would it mean to be a daughter?)’ (60). Often mistaken for a man in shops, she ponders: ‘What . . . is it that still makes me so certain of the
gender I belong to?’ That this is framed as a question undermines the ‘certainty,’ and her lack of the reproductive organs that designate femininity, along with her refusal of the ‘marriage plot,’ further underscores this uncertainty. Herrmann straddles several linguistic traditions, in the same way that she crosses boundaries of gender and sexuality. The two issues are parallel in the text, and at times explicitly linked:

When I write of how for most women the most important affective ties are with other women – even as they are expected to choose a man and make him their emotional centre – I am practicing my feminism. But I am also seeking a language for my queerness. (45)

She feels at a disadvantage in talking to her father, since they communicate in the now unfamiliar language of Swiss-German (56); with some other family members, however, she can be understood only in French. Herrmann is aware of occupying an interstitial position linguistically, sexually and in terms of nationhood: she grew up being called ‘Anneli’, detesting ‘the Swiss diminutive that prevents anyone (especially those marked by feminine endings) from ever growing up . . . . Growing up made me nameless, at least in a language where I could only be little or old’ (55). In the English language she has finally found a kind of home: ‘My one hope was English, where words remain ungendered’ (55).

Herrmann’s linguistic and sexual hybridity may more helpfully be seen in terms of diachronic identity. Thus ‘identity over time [is] made up, for each subject, of all its changeable and continuing selves’ (2004 125). Gullette declares that these selves are ‘connected in different ways, or intermittently, but sometimes barely at all, to a sensuously material body’ (125). Thus we can be ‘multiple not just simultaneously but . . . sequentially’ (127, original italics); and the connection of identity with the bodily is, according to Gullette, often rather tenuous. That ‘sometimes barely at all’ might be freeing for a woman who, like Herrmann, finds her bodiliness problematic; it may also explain why people often experience themselves as being some age other than their biological one. Elsewhere, Herrmann expresses ‘certainty’ about her gender identity, notwithstanding her ambiguous body, minus its reproductive organs.
By extension, when Herrmann writes of her hysterectomy – a time of transition, just as it is for the fictional Su McCulvey, albeit a sudden one – the experience changes her but does not elide her previous identities. She sees her present identity as still encompassing other aspects of a complex self:

- At the time I was still mourning the loss of a partner.
- I consider myself a feminist.
- I identify as queer.
- Am I telling too much?
- Have I already told all? (11)

Multiple selves, both synchronic and diachronic, are revealed piecemeal in the text: her heterosexual past, the several languages into which her childhood experiences were necessarily translated, and even – a courageous decision this – her current male lover, ‘someone I have known for twenty years . . . who doesn’t mind that I no longer have a womb’ (27, original italics). As Gullette affirms, ‘age identity’s “community of selves” is panoptic enough to incorporate . . . ghosts’ (127). Herrmann describes one such ‘ghost’ in her final chapter, ‘Letter to Myself,’ as the self she ‘can barely remember, racked by menstrual cramps; suffering from PMS symptoms . . . between temper tantrums and deep despair . . . The feeling that only by ripping off my skin could I escape these fetters I was in’ (99). In Gullette’s schema of diachronic identity, the ‘barely remembered’ embodied self who was so often in pain is still present in memory, the dis-membered remembered. Such unwelcome selves may not always be found in conscious awareness, but are likely to be held in the unconscious with other repressed material. For Herrmann, her past, suffering persona is a previous identity which has already faded from memory to the point where recall is difficult.

Herrmann’s narrative does not shy away from dealing with the subject of grief. ‘Mourning involves not just grieving the lost object, as in a miscarriage, nor a lost opportunity or unrealizable potential, as in infertility. The body itself is both the cause of grief, as body part, and its primary participant, as uncontrollable affect or “moodiness,” often diagnosed as depression’ (10). Herrmann’s body, she seems to say, was both the site of organ removal and the receptacle for her resultant distress. She felt deprived, understandably, of the
developmental stage of menopause. Her meditations include a consideration of what an organically occurring menopause might mean compared with her own experience:

What does it mean to have entered that stage in the operating room? To have it coincide with the recovery from major surgery? To experience it only as hormonal deficiency? To recover and in the process to know that one will not be back where one started? And to not know where that might be? (10)

These are difficult questions to answer. But perhaps from Herrmann’s experience we have something to learn about menopause in general, since she reconfigures the ‘normal’ climacteric as a benign process, at least compared with her own, presenting it as a shift in hormone production rather than ‘only as hormonal deficiency.’ Her text, then, shows up the majority of women’s menopausal changes in a positive light. Anthropologist Emily Martin confirms this, citing two doctors with an optimistic view of the climacteric:

It would seem that although menopausal women do have an estrogen milieu which is lower than that necessary for reproductive function, it is not negligible or absent but is perhaps satisfactory for maintenance of support tissues. The menopause could then be regarded as a physiological phenomenon which is protective in nature – protective from undesirable reproduction and the associated growth stimuli. (Jones & Jones qtd. by Martin 52)

It is reassuring to remember that post-menopausal women have an endocrine production that is still ‘satisfactory for maintenance of support tissues,’ counterconstructing the usual jargon – ‘atrophy’, ‘failure’, and so forth – that is the stock-in-trade of most medical discourse. The relatively subtle alteration in oestrogen levels, instead of signifying the ‘death of the womb,’ provides a ‘protective’ endocrinal environment for the midlife and older woman. Herrmann really did experience the ‘death’ of her uterus, showing how difficult that loss is when it actually happens, and serving to put the usual endocrinal changes into perspective.

Amid the proliferation of feminist counterconstructions of menopause I have invoked fiction and life-writing by lesbians, whose texts may offer a specific view of menopausal experience and thus show this transitional phase as
potentially enabling for both body and psyche. Stimpson’s argument is relevant here: for if lesbians, embodying a ‘sexuality free from the possibility of reproduction . . . have a special understanding of postmenopausal states’, then this understanding may have some general insights to impart. Herrmann, who despite her history does not identify as lesbian, offers us another version of this argument: she claims that

[t]here is something about sex being permanently divorced from reproduction, not temporarily, not gradually, but instantly and irrevocably, that, for a woman, cannot be experienced sexually except in relation to another woman. (Herrmann 106)

It appears contradictory, then, that Herrmann chooses a male partner for her first post-hysterectomy sexual relationship. Admittedly, she had been painfully rejected by her most recent female partner, who ‘wondered, although never enough to want to know, what it would be like to make love to someone who no longer had a cervix’ (27). Beyond that, this shift in sexual preference – another co-identity in her collection of selves – is explained thus:

Sex will never again be coupled with the fear of pregnancy, with the psychological and social responsibility of conception, with an unwanted maternity and its irreversible effects. In that sense, the hysterectomized woman has become more like a man. In that sense, to be with a man can be a choice again. (106)

This meditation on post-surgical-menopause queer sexuality is self-analytical rather than logical, or possibly contains a body-based logic that defies rational norms. For example, Herrmann claims that her sudden loss of/freedom from reproductivity ‘cannot be experienced sexually except in relation to another woman.’ Perhaps only another woman can understand the meaning of such a change, the relief or pleasure that ensues in sex that does not risk conception, and the shift in identity that results. But Herrmann goes on to say that the removal of the threat of conception frees her to choose to be with a man again, an apparently contrary idea, since sex with women would also mean the same freedom. Her experience suggests that identity is, for her, predicated on reproductive status as well as sexuality. In this last passage, however, she implies – as she has elsewhere – that she feels ‘more like a man’ in the absence
of female reproductive organs; elsewhere she claims to believe, along with Simone de Beauvoir, that ‘[a]ging masculinizes’ (25). When she is mistaken for a male because of her thinness and short hair, Herrmann surmises that ‘it would have to be a gay man they are mistaking me for’ (67). Perhaps by configuring herself as a gay man in a sexual relationship with another man, Herrmann’s sense of her queer identity remains intact. Elsewhere, she configures her current relationship as ‘[t]he “confirmed bachelor” and the hysterectomized woman. A different kind of “queer” couple’ (27, original italics). Clearly, queer identity and community are important in sustaining the courage of non-conformity, and this may be a further reason for persisting in defining herself as queer or transgendered.

Perhaps, post-hysterectomy, Herrmann is more comfortable with a partner from the past, well known and therefore implying less risk of rejection. Her lover is someone she has known for twenty years, ‘someone willing to eroticize my scar.’ But surely it is also significant that he ‘reminds [her] of a woman’ (27, original italics). Whatever the motivations for a shift in sexuality such as this, the changing configurations of identity described in Herrmann’s book offer another textual example of sequential selfhood. Her movement from heterosexual to lesbian identity and on to ‘queer’ shows midlife female selfhood as multiple, fluid and unfixed, and counters notions of identity as merely synchronic. As if to remind the reader of this slipperiness, Herrmann, like Grumbach, who felt that the ‘process of putting [her life] into words and setting it down [must] fictionalize it,’ questions the authenticity of ‘experience:’

As a feminist I have spent most of my life thinking about the relationship between bodies, gender identity, and the category of experience, asking, how do we know that what we have had is an experience? As a literary theorist I have thought about what counts as an experience and how it enters language, losing its relationship to the real by acquiring the attributes of representation. (2)

At the end of the narrative, a further note of doubt enters: ‘I’m telling you stories. Trust me’ (107). Herrmann seems momentarily doubtful, but elsewhere is quite confident about the political value of her story. However, if only because
her menopausal transition is so ‘out of sync,’ this narrative is informative about menopause in general because of its very specificity.

Ironically, after her surgical menopause Herrmann feels more corporeally authentic than she has ever done: ‘Now . . . I live in a body that at long last feels like my own’ she writes (107). Because of the pain associated with her menstrual cycle, Herrmann can only live comfortably in her body after her reproductive capacity has been disabled. She connects this with her ambivalence about mothering. ‘It took me years to attach not wanting children to wanting to be with a woman,’ she says, and adds a collection of anecdotes about women who have found it difficult to commit to parenthood (25-26). This ambivalence about mothering – and about mothers – may be an aspect of lesbian ontology: Judith Roof has commented that lesbian writers often ‘represent the lesbian character as an orphan, as illegitimate, with mixed parentage, no original relationship with a biological mother, and no link to a patriarchally blessed beginning’ (109). For Herrmann, it seems that some primal feeling moved her toward same-sex relationships as a guaranteed avoidance of reproduction, a search that culminates in non-procreative heterosexual activity.

More importantly, it is significant that Herrmann felt her body finally ‘felt like her own’ post-menopause, even the ‘unnatural’ variety. She comments that ‘[n]atural menopause spans an average of seven years. Much maligned in terms of what it does to women, it is often ignored in terms of what it does for women’ (10). This echoes the assertion quoted by Emily Martin, that a postmenopausal endocrinal environment is ‘protective,’ and raises questions as to whether there is something ‘protective’ for the psyche that also emerges at this time. Suzanne Levine, for example, comments on the research of Dr. Francine Benes, which indicates that midlife women ‘and adolescents – and no other age group – experience new brain growth . . . in the medial temporal lobe . . . . This augmented brain activity plays a crucial role in helping us synthesize what experience teaches’ (27-28). This is the phenomenon Levine labels ‘second adulthood.’ While it is too simplistic to put all midlife transitions down to biology, this is a fascinating development in neuro-science and one that may work in tandem with ideas of diachronic identity and later-life subject formation.
**Conclusion**

Herrmann’s and Arnold’s texts both show the theory of diachronic age identity at work, while ensuring that midlife women do not become defined by our menopausalness, as though this were all we are or might become. They configure menopause as part of a ‘developmentally interesting process’ and as offering possibilities for useful transition; thus they disrupt the predictions of life-course narratives, which suggest that all women experience at midlife is the sense of loss associated with the ‘empty-nest’ paradigm. They also, paradoxically, both underscore the potential for continuity in lesbian or queer ontology at midlife and interrogate the possibility of menopause as sudden, an example of the ‘rupture’ Simone de Beauvoir spoke of. Fiona Mackie, in examining the ‘silencing’ of menopausal experience as a positive transition, points out the ways in which ‘dominant codes operate as mechanisms of power and thus need to be unmasked.’ Thus, she continues,

> the very force with which dread, horror, death mark the menopausal portals might suggest that something of worth lies here, from which the mechanisms of the dominant code strive desperately to point people away . . . . The pervasive pressure toward hormone replacement treatment, as a way of basically avoiding the whole change, would not have been nearly as powerful, were it not that such negative interpretations prevail. (21)

Menopausal transition, argues Mackie, may offer a chance for change and renewal; for something so shrouded in negativity must hold some kind of promise. Some women adopt health-giving practices they have not previously needed: in her case this meant yielding to a need for rest, ‘the demand for [which] as an inbuilt and ongoing quality of bodiliness’ she had never before listened or responded to (24). The primary texts in the chapter would tend to confirm the idea that ‘something of worth’ is available to us through the bodily and psychic experience of the menopause, if only we were allowed to get on with it. While most cultural representations of menopausalness encompass ‘heavy preponderances of dread, exile, silencing and doom . . . indicating only horror lies ahead,’ Mackie insists that ‘it would be silly to accept this surface analysis’ (21). This is her personal take on the change: freed from ‘the slightly
paranoia-inducing effects of my natural estrogen-menstruation cycle, I neither
mourn nor regret its passing . . . which releases me into another aspect of
myself (28-29, italics added). A new sequential self – one more for the portfolio
– is the result of this particular ‘passing.’

Medical discourses will no doubt continue to ‘animate’ menopausal
processes, enveloping the climacteric in a particular language which tends to
frame experience. Such discourses do literally ‘animate’ female bodies: women
may initially adopt medical jargon to describe bodily changes as a way of
countering the doctor-patient power asymmetry, only to discover that these
words have become so internalised that we can find no other terms for our
experience. As a result, our bodies may actually feel or perform these
‘symptoms;’ not only do we contribute to our own medicalisation in this way, but
‘experience’ becomes inextricable from the language it is couched in, blurring the
boundaries still further between biology and culture.

Even though many women find that ‘nothing happens’ when their periods
stop, medical discourse persists in telling us that something is bound to happen,
and something bad at that. Gullette remarks of these discourses: ‘making an
invisible absence into huge social graffiti and keeping the ink fresh in the public
view requires an immense textualizing apparatus’ (1997 101). The
counterconstruction of menopause will not necessarily be effected by dismantling
this apparatus, but by exposing the ways it seeks to shape us discursively and by
generating viable alternatives.

Sister Gin and Menopausal Memoir both provide counter-moves to this
discourse by showing the tension between biology and constructedness. Each
text, furthermore, challenges ‘cultural consolidation . . . a set of beliefs and
issues and verbal formulas and tropes and binaries [which] become fixed as the
only terms in which talk on a particular subject makes sense to the speakers’
(Gullette 1997 166, original italics). The texts diverge, however, in their social
and historical contexts: Sister Gin, set in the 1970s, places its lesbian characters
in a small, conservative community. Herrmann writes from the very different
topography of West Coast academia and 1990s queer; her ideas about
menopausal identities are informed by lesbian feminist thinking on politics and
subjectivity. She suggests that ‘to “politicise” menopause has meant seeing it not as a hormone deficiency disease but as a developmental stage’ (86). Her text refines and nuances earlier lesbian-feminist counterconstructions of ‘the change,’ such as *Sister Gin.* Even more radically, menopause can be divorced from temporal ways of thinking altogether: Herrmann configures usual menopausal experience – in contrast with her own – as a process that releases women into a new aspect of identity, another sequential self to be welcomed into the ‘portmanteau.’ These two very different lesbian feminist representations of menopause provide a particular perspective on the tension between embodied and cultural aspects of women’s experience. They may also offer a map for ‘living in one’s body resistanly,’ a route toward counterconstruction and continuity in the midst of the ideology that surrounds ‘the change.’
V

The storehouse of memory: age, remembering and subjectivity in the work of Jane Rule and Joan Barfoot

Introduction

Over a life-span memory tends to become more erratic. On the face of it, this may make subjectivity more vulnerable, for it would seem that ‘[m]emory and subjectivity are inevitably joined’ (Baxter vii). The ‘narratives that keep our lives going forward’ may be disrupted if memory fails us, as Brennan points out in the epigraph to this chapter. Is the human subject with no memory still a subject? And yet perhaps it is rather the case that memory is not as essential as a basis for personhood as the above citations imply.

Cultural anxiety about memory loss, however, must be recognised as one of the building blocks of decline theory. Fear of a failing memory is an aspect of older age that underscores the idea of decline, one that helps ‘decline muscle on,’ in Gullette’s words (2004 29), although she does not mention dementia anxiety specifically. Such an anxiety is the more difficult to counter precisely because some individuals do develop memory-loss, and the condition can be distressing; thus this particular fear is more justified than, say, worry over appearance. But it is nonetheless an aspect of the age ideology that ‘wizens the middle years.’ Needless worry about Alzheimer’s syndrome and other kinds of dementia is much more endemic than the conditions themselves. My mother, for example, who at eighty-three is able to do mental arithmetic at an extraordinary speed, worries that her (quite ordinary) lapses of memory are signs of dementia. Alzheimer’s is not as prevalent as this anxiety might lead us to believe, affecting
some 6 people per 1000 of the population across all cultures and ethnicities (Morris 7.09.04). Some memories, then, do falter in old age, and I do not mean to romanticise the experience of memory-loss. But it is important that the real difficulties of forgetting do not become ideological fodder. The texts analysed in this chapter, therefore – Jane Rule’s *Memory Board* (1987) and Joan Barfoot’s *Gaining Ground* (1978) – suggest that forgetting can have odd benefits and pleasures, or even be a way out of ideology.

The theory of diachronic identity implicitly uses memory as its basis, since sequential selves must generally be held in memory for the collection of identities Gullette describes to be meaningful. Yet perhaps this apparently simple formula can be questioned. Just because a subject’s ability to remember is impaired, and they can no longer access latent or unconscious memories of a previous aspect of being, does it mean that that self no longer exists? Is it enough that *someone else* still remembers the ‘lost’ identity? As the unreliability of human memory is so well documented, and since advancing age has a tendency to exacerbate its fallibility, perhaps our own sense of past selves becomes shaky too, meaning that co-identities may be either left behind or idealised. On the other hand, memory is important: for if I cannot remember who I am, the narrative of my life may be lost. It will therefore be more difficult to resist both age ideology and the potential erosion of identity.

Memory, however, is not just an individual process. As well as recalling what originates from personal experience, we all hold memories that are cultural, reinforced by external messages. The difficulty of extricating one category from another is parallel to the problem of knowing how much we are aged by biology and how much by ideology. Memory is aided in some areas by culture, and impeded in others: photos and documentary records mark events sanctioned by the dominant ideology, yielding the prompts to memory which ensure that these rituals are remembered, and sometimes supporting dwindling personal recall. Environment serves as another prop to memory; journeys to childhood locations can provoke memories of infancy, for example. As a result, exiles and refugees may find it more difficult to remember their past, or may determinedly try to reconstruct the past with whatever of their old environment can be transported.
Older people in care with dementia may find that the few remaining markers are lost, making them exiles of a different sort. This loss may profoundly threaten their sense of self: for 'fictions we call narrative and memory are at the foundation of our beings’ (Brennan 54). Age ideology seeks to naturalise this state of affairs.

The power of such ideology was unwittingly demonstrated by the National Institute of Health’s advisory panel in 1989. Their treatise on dementia contained the indictment: ‘[Alzheimer’s Disease] dissolves the mind and steals the humanity of the victim, leaving a body from which the person has largely been removed’ (qtd. by Morris 2004). Little wonder that fear of memory-loss is so prevalent; no one wants to be ‘a body from which the person has been removed.’ And yet life writing by the partners of Alzheimer’s survivors shows that, in fact, much ‘personhood’ remains, and that moments of intimacy occur between partners even when one suffers from dementia: John Bayley’s Elegy for Iris (1999), later adapted to the film Iris, is a famous example. Such narratives suggest that those with little or no memory do retain subjectivity, but become othered or decentred; they may thus be regarded as what G. Thomas Couser has termed ‘vulnerable subjects,’ in the book of that name (2004).

Confused older subjects are not the only ones with defective memories, for it is well documented that human recall in general tends to be unreliable. All narrators have to demand their readers’ trust, even in life-writing with its apparent contract with ‘the truth;’ for it is twice translated, through the processes of memory and language. May Sarton found words ‘elusive, sometimes damaged, often ambivalent’ (At 70 50). There is a curious shame in forgetting even in relatively minor ways – when names of things and people suddenly elude us – as though remembering or forgetting were somehow a moral issue instead of ordinary human processes, both in their different ways unavoidable and painful.

Perhaps forgetfulness is not so much a moral issue as an ideological one. As an example of ‘external’ memory, I was recently reminded by my cousin of a phone call I received on my wedding day, thirty years ago. I apparently ended the call by saying ‘I can’t talk now – I’m getting married.’ I had no recollection
of this event. Though now retrieved from the ninety percent of life’s doings we obliterate, this is still a partial memory, since the caller’s identity is lost. But perhaps it is ideologically significant: it seems that, at this crucial moment of submission to normative forces, my attention was elsewhere.

Perhaps in future I will re-forget this fragment of reminiscence; for we do not know how much more unreliable our memories will become. These are the ways in which memory is constructed on a personal level, like the stories of infancy which we cannot remember but have heard described or seen in photos. Paul John Eakin suggests that all memory is constructed, that children learn what is memorable and narratable from an early age and that this process enables us to develop a storied self, even though ‘[t]he notion that autobiographical memory is socially and culturally constructed may at first seem counterintuitive’ (110). Some memoirists conflate the remembered with the externally recounted with complete insouciance. Sarton mentions the house at Wondelgem in Belgium where she was born, the house her parents fled in wartime; she was a baby at the time, and had no recollection of it, but writes of the house as though it were familiar (AWOL 58-9). Isabel Allende describes the house where her mother was born: conscious of the aporia, she says: ‘My first memory of Chile is of a house I never knew’ (19). If all memories are constructed, then experiences that are someone else’s may still qualify as personal memory.

One of the delights of reading memoir is that participating in another’s life-text means a process of collaborative remembering. Nancy K. Miller found that during this process ‘identifications with the stories not about [her] . . . came to feel like a rediscovery of [her] own life and memories, like a haunting’ (2002 1). This relational interpretation of life writing comments on the fluidity of the form, incorporating ideas of the unsteady boundaries of self and other, and their effect on the reader’s own sense of identity. Miller confirms that memories are not just personal but also cultural and historical; a life is inextricable from the tribe or clan that contains it.

All this is significant for the study of age ideology and age identity. A ‘good’ memory is valorised in most cultures; someone forgetful is an example of the ‘bad’ subject. Simone de Beauvoir, influenced by the decline theory that
suggests this faculty will let us down in age, was suspicious of her memory, mistrusting it as a way to relate to the past; she perceived distance from an event as bringing confusion, not clarity. Instead, for her, ‘memory is defined as a form of archival research’ (Woodward 1988 98), and her life-writing was based on minutely kept diaries. De Beauvoir seems to have been more worried than most that her memory would fail her, and suddenly so: she lived in fear that ‘the influence of decrepitude would keep [her] from grasping [her] subject: that moment when, hard upon a still vibrant past, the decline sets in . . . Perhaps it is too soon; but tomorrow it will certainly be too late’ (1963 v). In most people’s experience, however, if decline is going to ‘set in,’ it is part of a process rather than the abrupt transition de Beauvoir envisaged. Furthermore, the outlook for sufferers of dementia is now more hopeful: medication can slow its development, offering the hope of prolonged cognitive function.

As a consequence of this anxiety, de Beauvoir perceived reminiscence as contemptible. Her ‘memoirs’ are not actually derived from memory, and as such are largely devoid of affect or interpretation. She was scornful of those who turn their attention to the past; rather, her existential position meant that she valorised activity; projects for the future were all. ‘Thus,’ as Kathleen Woodward points out, for de Beauvoir ‘the elderly are doubly damned . . . they lack a future and they lack an unobstructed vision of the past.’ The only value of memory in de Beauvoir’s view was ‘the retrieval of the factual record’ (Woodward 99).

De Beauvoir’s contempt for memory returns us to precisely why, despite its unreliability, memory is often politicised as important for older subjects: those who wish to retain a sense of self, age ideology suggests, must hold on to their mind even if their bodies are deteriorating. In a sort of circular thinking, it even appears that we must have the ‘good’ memory this ideology recommends in order to be able to challenge that ideology and its propensity for ‘identity-stripping.’ And yet, since memory can be unreliable at any age, perhaps we would be influenced less by decline narratives if we saw the fallibility of recall on a continuum, better earlier in life, perhaps, but by no means necessarily disappearing as we age.
Unreliability can be a positive asset, furthermore, in creative written forms from life-writing to fiction, offering an aspect of the interstitial or in-between, ‘defy[ing] teleological, economic, linear models in favour of messy, subversive, non-linear ones’ (Brennan 61). There is no doubt that we invoke imagination and the memories of others to embellish, improve and create narratives to fill the gaps in our own recall. For, as theatre director Herbert Blau points out, ‘[t]here is a sense in which the voids of memory with age are an opening into imagination’ (19). Toni Morrison offers another link between memory and fiction:

I depend heavily on the ruse of memory . . . because it ignites some process of invention, and . . . because I cannot trust the literature and the sociology of other people to help me know the truth of my own cultural sources. It also prevents my preoccupations from descending into sociology. (214)

Memory’s very instability, then, for Morrison, is more than a vacuum into which imagination rushes: it actually ‘ignites’ the creative process. Morrison values the personal above the theoretical; its being grounded in memory stops her work from ‘descending into sociology.’ Memory, for her, is the basis of imagination, showing the complex interaction between the two processes.

I wish particularly to consider representations of forgetting in fiction, for these seem to counter the ideology of old age as decline and fear and offer other, more creative, possibilities. Margot Livesey comments on the negativity that surrounds forgetfulness, personifying it as the ‘dark sister [of Mnemosyne], Amnesia . . . viewed with suspicion and fear: a harbinger of senility, evidence of trauma or, at the very least, a sign of transgression’ (in Baxter 20). The forgotten does have a transgressive quality, which I hope to turn to advantage, like my pre-nuptial phone-call, which momentarily disrupted the predictable and normative character of the wedding ritual. The anxiety surrounding the forgotten resonates with the cultural anxiety about the marginal, grotesque and interstitial. Forgetfulness can be seen, then, as the abject of discourses on memory, a facet of subjectivity we do not want to face, in the same way that older age is an aspect of experience rejected by youth. Blau acknowledges the particular anxiety surrounding forgetfulness, an anxiety that age ideology can
only encourage: ‘as we fear a loss of being with age, there is also, with so much more to remember, an anxiety about forgetting.’ But he also acknowledges ‘the necessity of [forgetting] . . . . We think we’re putting things aside – out of caution, fear, tact, dismay – only to find they’re no longer there.’ Blau continues: ‘Where is our life when it is not being remembered – or remembered as being?’ (19, original italics). I hope to acknowledge the forgotten, despite its slipperiness, as an aspect of experience that dwells in the interstitial spaces of memory and narrative. As Charles Baxter humorously points out: ‘The forgotten resists narrative and confounds it. We don’t even have a name for the antimemoir, though oubliette comes close. “I am writing an oubliette. Its pages are blank”’ (x).

Some forgetting may occur because the memories are unpleasant, and are thus relegated to the unconscious with other repressed material. Thus the ageing self may – on the basis that diachronic identity presages future selves – become the persona most likely to be ‘forgotten.’ I have mentioned Kathleen Woodward’s speculation on the repression of age, and hence of our own ageing (1991 60). Although there are personal advantages to this denial, she argues that age-related issues must be faced so that the ‘ideology associated with old age as decline [may] be brought to consciousness’ (61). But it is not only ageing – the not-yet-lived – that we repress; Miller suggests we also have trouble re-evoking the bodily experience of youth: ‘Reaching back at sixty . . . I cannot get back into my fifteen-year-old’s body’ (2002 22). Since lapses of memory tend to be filled by the imaginary, Miller is only able to imagine what it felt like to be fifteen. Little wonder, then, that an ‘antimemoir’ proved hard to find; authors rarely describe in life-writing events that they cannot remember.

I have therefore focussed on ‘fictional events’ for this exploration of ageing and forgetfulness. Memory Board and Gaining Ground offer insights into the workings of the human memory and its relation to both culture and personhood. While both novels emphasise the psyche as the repository of an unreliable memory, a strong sense of embodiment is also prominent; the body emerges as still the primary site of personhood, even when memory has been lost or repressed. Barfoot’s Gaining Ground follows the history of a housewife
turned hermit whose memories of her past are all but eradicated by her transition into a solitary life, only to be retrieved years later through an encounter with her adult daughter. The second text, Jane Rule’s *Memory Board*, is the tale of an older woman with almost total loss of memory, and the struggles of her partner to keep her safe in their home. In both, forgetting is transgressive; in the first, memory is restored by events, but seen as unwelcome; in the second, the problematic of irretrievable memory loss is resolved by ingenuity and love. Both books centrally portray a woman affected by loss of memory, and the vulnerability of the human subject when memory fails; furthermore, each writer uses the imagery of animals to suggest the ‘deterioration’ of subjectivity. Moreover, in both texts memory loss or repression emerges as a transgressive disruption of age ideology and expected life-course narratives.

**Joan Barfoot’s *Gaining Ground***

Lesbian and feminist fiction proves to be a particularly rich source of material on memory and ageing. *Gaining Ground*, originally entitled *Abra*, was Canadian novelist Joan Barfoot’s first novel. The later title is more apt, suggesting by its double meaning both personal progress and the acquisition of land, both of which are significant themes in the text. The narrative portrays a woman who rejects at a stroke the standard female roles of mother, wife and caregiver. I have argued throughout for lesbian narrative’s challenge to the discourses of age, in part because of lesbian ontology’s frequently non-reproductive status; and most of the protagonists whose stories I analyse are not engaged in parenting. Barfoot’s heroine, Abra Stephens, goes a step further, however: she has married and had children, but leaves both husband and family when the children are young and, more unusually, avoids all contact. Not content with this rejection of her reproductive role, she also removes herself from society almost completely.

This ‘unfeminine’ behaviour may explain why *Gaining Ground* has been somewhat neglected by critics. One of the few theorists who has commented on it, Heidi Slettedahl Macpherson, speculates that the ‘relative paucity of critical
articles on *Gaining Ground* . . . may be indicative of the difficulty of accepting a plot predicated on the abandonment of children’ (93). The protagonist crosses a boundary of acceptable feminine behaviour in other ways: Margot Livesey’s idea of forgetting as ‘a sign of transgression’ is a central theme of the book.

This is no ordinary midlife progress narrative, then: Abra Stephens’ isolation is so complete that she has all but forgotten her own name. Few narratives are predicated so thoroughly on the protagonist’s hermetic status. And yet this book is a part of their cultural memory of the 1970s for many feminists; indeed, it would be easy to represent it as a romantic escape narrative, a sort of feminist *Walden*. Heidi Macpherson acknowledges that ‘Canadian women writers of the 1970s and 1980s did capitalize on a form of feminism which sought to locate woman’s essential nature in the wilderness, away from the Culture which came to represent patriarchy’ (92). The Canadian wilderness in particular, as Margaret Atwood has pointed out, has come to be regarded as ‘active, female and sinister’ (35), offering a counterpoint to urban life and civilization, which are seen as masculine and influenced by culture. However, a close reading of *Gaining Ground* indicates that Barfoot has consciously avoided this kind of essentialism: Abra’s cabin ‘is not . . . primitive’ and its setting ‘is not an outback, a wilderness; [she] do[es] not have an interest in “roughing it”’ (19). Barfoot’s protagonist is ‘accustomed to comfort’ (19); her escape is from prescribed gender roles, not electricity or plumbing.

The narrative suggests that time, memory and subjectivity itself are all ideological constructs; it follows that, when the protagonist ‘goes bush,’ the trappings of subjectivity are left behind. Abra, living self-sufficiently in her cabin, has side-stepped the roles that trapped her in marriage. The novel begins:

My name is Abra.
My name is Abra.
I had almost forgotten that; the naming of things lost its importance here, with no one to hear them named.
And so, until just now – you see I am remembering time as well – “Abra” was gone. Now she is here again, as are so many other things, memories, and I do not know any longer. I thought the struggling time was over. I had forgotten it. I had forgotten so many things. (1)
Abra relates her story from a present where time and memory are re-awakened by her daughter Katie’s return; her pain and confusion are palpable. Time and memory, along with most of the other signifiers of the culture she has left, had become irrelevant to Abra until now, including the need to attach a signifier to the signified of her own personhood. Is this a way of avoiding interpellation? Certainly that moment of hailing seems, for Abra, to have ceased, for interpellation depends on being named repeatedly. Perhaps the ‘turn’ into ideology has been reversed by Abra’s second ‘turn’, out of ideology and into her cultural wilderness.

By this point in the narrative Abra is ‘no longer young’ (9), although we do not know her exact age since she has ceased to record time. The text here points up one of the most obvious ways that ageing is constructed by culture: in order to know our biological age, we have to map the passing years. Only the seasons mean anything to her, because she grows her own food. We know only that she ‘can no longer assume that the parts of [her] body are in good order,’ and ‘can feel things breaking down gradually, so that one might never notice if it were not so important to keep track of these things’ (9). Her ability to feed herself depends on her body’s capacity to dig and plant; her appearance no longer has meaning for her. In this as in other ways, Abra has eluded not just ideology in general but age ideology.

Age ideology’s lack of power over her is shown, further, by Abra’s complete rejection of mirrors; she thus avoids the ‘mirror stage’ that generally haunts woman’s midlife. The dresser in her bedroom has only ‘a kind of broken-off stand, for a missing oval mirror at the back’ (21); significantly, in the space for a mirror, that accoutrement is ‘missing’. In fact, Abra does not ‘miss’ the mirror at all. She has cut her own hair for a decade without any visual cues, and only knows it is grey because that is the shade of the hanks that fall to the floor. She can feel, but not see, that it is uneven (22). Abra’s body remains a semiotic site, for one human being’s glance at another always reveals certain signs; her neighbours can still read the roughly cropped hair and work clothes. It is a site – and sight – to which Abra is mostly oblivious, but she knows it must signal age and eccentricity. At moments, since shunning subjectivity is never complete,
self-consciousness returns, and Abra finds herself ‘watching this person who was also [her]self, [with] ridiculously cropped hair although [she] had never seen it’ (118). The text is written in the first person, but, throughout, there are moments of oblique mirroring in which Abra is both subject and object, agent and witness of a subjective splitting. The mirror thus persists in haunting her, a tenacious reminder of age ideology even on her remote smallholding.

However, her daughter, Katie, reappears without warning, now a young woman. She had been among Abra’s ‘forgotten things’ and, with her, both self-consciousness and a sense of time, memory and language return: from Katie’s age now, Abra deduces that she has been at the cabin for nearly a decade. The memories constructed through the ‘marriage plot,’ and since left behind, return with uncomfortable vividness: ‘The memories collapse on me, striking me, and I have no protection against them. I think, “I do not want to cross over into this, it cannot be of any use,” and then I am into it anyway, quite helpless’ (24). The ‘crossing over’ suggests transgression, the boundary Abra has traversed by abandoning her family; the memories that ‘collapse on’ her show ideology’s return. Importantly, she has also transgressed by forgetting.

The memories, as they return, are ‘painful,’ even though she is ‘unconnected with them’ (24). Abra is ‘surprised to find them lying so close to the surface’ (11); she claims not to have deliberately suppressed memory, over the years alone in her cabin; rather ‘it seemed quite natural that all the past should die, as the person who lived it did’ (12). Elsewhere, she speaks of her past as ‘discarded’ (16). Barfoot’s heroine was once entirely enmeshed in raising her children, but she left notwithstanding. Most midlife progress novels confirm life-course expectations through predictable ‘empty nest’ plots: Doris Lessing’s *The Summer before the Dark* (1973), in which the protagonist leaves home and achieves self-actualisation after her offspring are grown, is a good example. *Gaining Ground* sets itself apart from these narratives by having its heroine walk out in the midst of the marriage plot; Abra, unusually, sets out to empty her own nest.

Abra is presented as more sympathetic than this aberration might imply. Her desertion is, we understand, out of character. She had hitherto worked in
dead-end jobs to support her husband, Stephen, while he was studying; and once the couple had children she was a devoted, even over-protective mother. Abra’s impulse to leave seems the more surprising precisely because she had so far complied so docilely with marital imperatives. Furthermore, she has bought the cabin with money secreted away from a legacy, funds she unconsciously clung to as a vestige of financial independence. She must hide her escape, the text implies, or she would have succumbed to pressure to stay. Ideology suggests that Abra was an ‘unnatural’ mother in her will to abandon her children; on the other hand, her actions become more comprehensible when we bear in mind the ‘unnaturalness’ of heteronormativity. By defecting, Abra has become a ‘bad subject;’ but she left only when performing the ‘good subject’ became intolerable. Macpherson writes of ‘the “unquestionability” of the “feminine” role in relation to society. A novel which questions this role so radically, and which envisions breaking free from it, exposes the ideology which affirms the “naturalness” of the nuclear family’ (94).

Abra had engaged unquestioningly with the marital contract. As memories of that time return, threatening to overwhelm her, she tells the story of her marriage:

It was what I had always expected for myself, what I had, I suppose, been taught to expect . . . . I know I never doubted how it would be, although I am unsure how I saw the self I know fitted to the life I saw. The vision, I had, unquestioned, what was it?

No, not a vision but an assumption. A vague, undetailed picture of me, children, husband and house, comfort, security. But none of it, I see now, had any shape or form. (35)

Having felt terrified the night before her wedding, newlywed Abra is left with a sense that ‘the event was over and reality was ahead and inconceivable’ (37). This formless ‘reality’ – little wonder she had been unable to envisage it – does become horribly real as she moves into Stephen’s home. In the town where he is studying, with no social contacts or purpose beyond that of being a wife, she takes on a menial job. Marriage inevitably puts women second, she learns; but the illusion of being central to the plot of her life is created momentarily by the ritual of courtship and the marriage ceremony itself (Heilbrun 1988 21). Heilbrun calls marriage ‘the most persistent of myths imprisoning women,’ which both
defines woman and encloses her (77). To escape, Abra performs Heilbrun’s injunction that ‘the old story of woman’s destiny, the marriage plot, [should] give way to another story for women, a quest plot’ (121).

Abra’s ‘quest’ flies in the face of both gender and age ideologies. Before fleeing to the cabin, her enactment of femininity had been impeccable, ‘a portrait of happiness’ (27). But this gender performance became, in Abra’s case, a conscious struggle. Her physical response to her children’s bringing her breakfast in bed was nausea; she would eat the food ‘despite a pinch of dread in [her] stomach.’ Even this simple act required ‘gearing up for the performance’ (61). And, on the point of departure, she realises that what she ‘had assumed was real about [her] life had turned out to be a mask and a charade, a play in which [she] performed, admirably on rare occasions, but without truth’ (91). Like many women, she had simply assumed that she would marry and have children; for women are defined by the capacity to mother. ‘To be a childless adult,’ Nancy Miller asserts, ‘represents a peculiar form of marginality in a culture dependent on identities of generation’ (Miller 2000 65). If women’s sense of worth is predicated on reproduction, a woman who has had children but walked away from them disrupts the very definition of femaleness, perhaps even more than those who simply remain unreproductive. By leaving, Abra defies those ‘identities of generation’ that dictate she should also become a grandmother.

It is not uncommon for women to be separated from their children, of course, for all sorts of reasons. Abra’s particular disruption of parental norms lies in her ability also to forget her offspring. In retrospect, she realises the oddness of not having wondered about Katie and Elliott after she left: she has never imagined what they would be doing, or pondered the effect of her departure. Once in her new location, Abra’s ability to forget is immediate – though not quite complete, for her Katie’s advent is enough to bring these repressed memories back to consciousness. The return of recall is not as instant as its loss, however: the young woman who turns up at her gate is initially just ‘the girl,’ as her ex-husband, when he visited, was merely ‘the man.’ And, significantly, when Abra, now re-acquainted with Katie, considers what she is curious about, she seizes on the fate of the family dog before she thinks to
enquire about her ex-husband or son. The dog, of course, is long gone; but her identification with the animal is more immediate than her curiosity about people, implying how removed from the social she has become. This animal imagery continues throughout. There is a suggestion that Abra, removed or rather ‘fallen’ (7) from culture, had also lost her status as subject: she describes herself as having become ‘an animal, which is a fine thing, and now after so many years I am going back, pulled back by Katie and words and time and memories, into a person, a thinking, rationalizing, remembering person, and it is not comfortable’ (117). Her discomfort at being ‘pulled back . . . into a person’ is another indicator of Abra’s depleted subjectivity.

Although the text does not make clear precisely why being an animal is ‘a fine thing,’ it is implied that, as an animal, Abra is a more embodied and instinctual being, free from cultural influences. If memory and thought are said to separate human from animal, Abra has shaken off these faculties to the point where her subjectivity is in question. The split between animal and human echoes the division between the biological and the constructed. For Abra, there is also a psychic division between her present and past; the way that the past has now become overwhelmingly present through the resurgence of memory is denoted in the text by the bracketing of current events; at this point, memories have become all-important and the present has receded into insignificance (42-43).

Abra’s awareness of the process of remembering, and of the split this has produced in her, is acute. She records: ‘I see that remembering has separated me from [the environment]; that looking back at myself as an object of my memory has made everything I saw then an object as well, so that I have lost the unity. It is part of my confusion now, my disorientation’ (13). In exile from the past, Abra finds that the familiar markers on the map of her life course have been lost, washed away by the recall of past events. Not only does Abra feel split by this subject/object confusion, but in places, the memories, not Abra, become the subject of the narrative: phrases like ‘[t]he memories forage on into the next years’ (63) indicate that Abra has lost her agency and taken on a passive role in the face of her unwelcome re-membering of the past. The verb
'forage' implies both searching for food and eating it, almost as though Abra is being devoured by her memories. ‘Foraging’ is also an activity associated with animals, thus both continuing and disrupting the imagery of beasts: while Abra is no longer an animal, her memories have somehow taken her place as bestial. Elsewhere in the text, Katie accuses Abra of becoming more flora than fauna: ‘If you don’t care, you’re just a vegetable, you’re just like your cabbages out there, sitting around waiting for the sun to shine or the rain to fall’ (181). ‘Vegetable’ is the label sometimes applied to those who are comatose or brain-damaged, implying that the person has relinquished subjectivity. In Katie’s view, her mother’s life, removed from the social, is ‘not real,’ for ‘people are what make life worth living.’ For Abra, however, the unreality belongs to the life she has fled; in her isolated existence on her smallholding, she feels ‘free’ (181).

The text underscores memory’s close connection with subjectivity. Abra, in shaking off her personhood, takes on certain animal characteristics. Certainly much of her way of life suggests her closeness to the rhythms of nature. But animals must still have memory of a kind: the ability to learn from experience, and certain acquired behaviours around gender, mating and feeding are essential to survival. Animals are social, furthermore: most live, hunt and travel in packs. They also, according to neurobiologists, show certain kinds of consciousness. The ‘animal’ analogy falters a little, then: animals do not draw in a sketchbook or write a journal in their leisure time, as Abra does while snowed in. (This journal may even become the narrative of the novel, though this is not explicit.) Ultimately, Abra cannot avoid being a human organism with the capacity to meditate and consider.

Perhaps Abra is not so much an animal as an outsider; still human, she has reinvented herself as abject. Interpellation has all but broken down in her story; yet she is still labelled by nearby townsfolk, who consider her ‘something else, from another world, doing something utterly foreign to them’ (143). Apart from occasional trips into town for provisions, she has no social contact; people leave her alone, but watch her for signs of difference or madness. Thus in defiance of decline theory’s imperative to age-pass, Abra does the opposite: she deliberately assumes the abject status of age while still in midlife. Judith Butler
describes the ambiguous position of the subject in relation to social norms:

‘Where social categories guarantee a recognizable and enduring social existence, the embrace of such categories, even as they work in the service of subjection, is often preferred to no social existence at all’ (1997 20). The opposite is true of Abra, who prefers ‘no social existence at all’ to being ‘embraced’ by the social categories ‘wife’ and ‘mother.’ Furthermore she is, ironically, liberated by forgetting her entrapment in these roles.

Though an outsider, Abra still has agency, the power that is pivotal to subject formation. She is free to make decisions within the sphere of her cabin and smallholding; and arguably she has more autonomy, including jurisdiction over her body, than she had in her previous incarnation as housewife. Conversely, as a parent, wife and carer enacting prescribed roles, Abra was ‘lost’ (41). Butler refers to this loss of the self, writing: ‘we must consider the part that loss plays in subject formation . . . a loss that cannot be owned or grieved, which forms the condition of possibility for the subject’ (1997 24). Elsewhere Abra describes her state while married, depressed and unable to fill her time except with endless cups of coffee, television, and sleep, as having ‘the hidden places . . . all eaten away [by] some deep-buried worm,’ so that ‘there was nothing left to root me to what I had or what I was’ (66). The animal imagery in this part of the text is more ambiguous: the worm that has eaten away some part of Abra’s selfhood is not ‘a fine thing’ but a parasite. The verb ‘root’ here seems to characterise her as more vegetable or tree-like than animal. Abra sees her transition out of her feminine role into hermetic existence as an ending: ‘like driving head-on into a brick wall, knowing it was over, reduced to the core of person that does not think or know . . . in the brilliant last moment’ (86). She sees a friend’s suicide as another kind of flight, ‘the thing she had to do at that particular time’ (73). For some women, we must conclude, the price of being produced as a subject is simply too high; sometimes death or, in Abra’s case, abjection – an almost complete exclusion from the social order – is preferable.

With the return of memory, Abra considers whether her ‘turn’ into isolation was the result of a mental breakdown. By this point in the narrative she
thinks of her past self in the third person; this ‘splitting’ of her consciousness has become habitual since the advent of Katie, time and memory:

. . . she made her life, she must live with the consequences, she created these other people and their need for her, and now she must fulfil them. And that is normal.

It is not normal, it goes against all instincts, it is – well, it is mad – to turn away from that. It is a breakdown, something that requires help.

Here, Abra lacks confidence in her evasion of normativity as an authentic movement towards ‘the core of person that does not think or know,’ or what Macpherson terms an escape ‘from identity into body’ (99). However, as ‘the crack widen[s]’ and there is more space for the new Abra in this internal debate, she sees that ‘everything else, everything outside of [her] had broken down . . . [whereas she] had been put together’ (Barfoot 140). Abra’s movement here, a sort of psychic re-membering, may also be understood through Elizabeth Grosz’s premise, that the subject is grounded so entirely in the bodily that any psyche-soma division is unthinkable. Abra’s transition into solitude, accompanied by the feeling that she has been ‘put together,’ is an example of diachronic identity at work: housewife and hermit are aspects of self added to the portfolio. Even when Abra has ‘forgotten’ her past, the wife and mother in her prove only to be repressed selves, held latent in her unconscious. Identity does not imply unity or fixedness; rather, ‘self and memory are emergent, in process, constantly evolving, and both are grounded in the body and body image’ (Eakin 20). Abra had ‘lived against [her]self’ in ‘that other life’ (Barfoot 120), whereas now she lives with herself, lives in her body more fully, and is more attuned to the self ‘grounded in the body.’ The process of shifting so suddenly and radically from one identity to another is, as Macpherson points out, ‘difficult to portray’ (99).

Abra, rather than losing her subjectivity, has instead reconfigured it by ceasing to perform her gender, not just on the superficial levels of appearance and mannerism but in the deeper sense of the matrix of her life. Judith Butler has argued that ‘gender is . . . a construction that regularly conceals its genesis; the tacit collective agreement to perform, produce, and sustain discrete and polar genders as cultural fictions’ (1991 140). Gender is a mimetic copy of itself,
a performative state; and Abra’s girlhood assumptions about her future conformed unquestioningly to this set of imperatives. But the hold of ideology weakens as she ages. Most women gradually cease to enact their gender; but Abra’s refusal to perform is not a slow transition, but rather a radical overhaul of feminine meanings. By refusing the marriage plot, she becomes another example of ‘ambiguous woman.’ Abra plays out this ambiguity through transgression. Ideology dictates that a woman separated from her children should, at the very least, hold them in memory: but Abra refuses this remembering. She has transgressed twice, by leaving her offspring and then by forgetting them. This double transgression is what has marginalised her, even more than her isolated existence.

Abra Stephens, though not a lesbian protagonist, effects a complete rejection of heteronormativity. The heterosexual economy that threatened to limit and define her has been left behind, along with all other social contact; Abra has instead chosen a life which, though bleak and monastic, offers her an autonomy and self-sufficiency, a bodiliness and contact with seasonal changes that her previous existence denied her. This ‘fictional event’ is not intended as a pattern for living; it is, however, an appealing feminist fantasy. Does post-Abra really escape ideology? The reader, pulled in by this second-wave fairytale, waits to see if Abra will be taken hostage again. As in the best fairytales, environment plays a magical part in Abra’s story, enabling her forgetfulness. Contemplating her escape, she recalls: ‘[t]here was no past here. The cabin held me’ (105). After the re-appearance of Katie, Abra asks for three days alone to decide her future; during that time, she transgresses once more by re-forgetting her daughter, and is ‘startled’ when Katie shows up again, wanting an answer (193). Katie’s impulse is to dig up the relics of Abra’s past, like the archaeologist she aspires to be (Macpherson 96); her mother prefers to leave things buried. Little wonder that their conflict is so intense.

But the spell of the cabin proves temporary after all: Abra’s escape is not complete. In the face of her daughter’s accusations – ‘[y]ou are the most – selfish person I’ve ever met . . . . You’re not human . . . . You’re crazy’ – Abra finds that ‘[i]t hurts. [She] feel[s] battered.’ As a result of this attack she sees
herself through Katie’s eyes: ‘I catch her vision, and what I see is a middle-aged woman with chopped grey hair and brown withering skin and bewildered eyes that are quite mad’ (194). Here, finally, having rejected literal reflection for so long, Abra has her mirror moment: she finds herself painfully mirrored in Katie’s perception – as not just ageing and careless of appearance, but with eyes that are ‘bewildered’ and ‘mad.’

Most texts show the mirror phase as ambiguous: whether the mirror is ultimately liberating or offers only entrapment remains unclear, and Gaining Ground is no exception. For Abra, ignoring her appearance is implicit in her refusal to perform the feminine; thus her moments of self-consciousness, when she sees herself reflected in Katie’s gaze, are the more devastating. This is in part because they signify a slipping back into the normativity she has rejected; but they are also moments of splitting, when the subject momentarily occupies conflicting co-identities. As a result of ‘seeing what [Katie] must see’ Abra slips back to a previous persona: ‘Years roll back and I am shocked, I am the old Abra looking at this one. I am mother and wife and this apparition of the Abra who has come from that is more than horrifying’ (194). For a second, post-Abra is not real, but an ‘apparition,’ like the menopausal Su McCulvey who is ‘not even here.’ The past Abra’s response is: “my God, I must put myself together, straighten my hair, put on new clothes, I can’t let people see me this way.” I am quite frantic’ (195).

In this vulnerable state, Abra agrees to return to the city and live with her daughter. She begins to pack her belongings, guided by Katie’s arm around her shoulders, which Abra regards with ‘fleeting distaste.’ The gesture is made ‘with responsibility rather than with caring,’ for Abra seems to have ‘become something rather frail and vulnerable – old’ (195). Here the key to ‘oldness’ is the pliability of its meanings: it can describe chronology, or how we experience ourselves, as well as biological age. Abra is momentarily the ‘old’ or ‘previous’ Abra, the midlife housewife she would have become in the ‘old’ life. This scene – mother and daughter involved in the packing of belongings – shows the fragility of Abra’s resolve to reinvent herself. Wondering how she will fare back in the world, she wonders: ‘Was I really changed, or just protected?’ (175). Abra
hurries through the process of packing, ‘because it is urgent to get it over with, get away from here, stop being mad’ (196). The result of refusing ideology – of forgetting – is insanity; no other explanation is possible.

Once in Katie’s car, however, Abra struggles with the seat belt – an unfamiliar invention that shows how far technology has moved on since her previous life – and when Katie straps her in, this same ‘safety’ belt becomes a metaphor for entrapment. Abra is ‘struggling, fierce now and full of fear, not just panic but far-deep fear, to get free’ (197). Finally free, Abra is at first disorientated; she ‘know[s] again; the rest has been an aberration’ (198). This ‘knowing’ is a returning to the self, a final ‘turn’ away from ideology and the limited existence marked out as feminine. She attempts an explanation to the weeping Katie, and returns to her life in the cabin.

Despite the unsettling character of Abra’s failure as a mother, the reader applauds her decision to stay in the cabin. I relive this moment of relief each time I come to Abra’s decision in the text: as she scrambles out of the car, she at first finds her vision blurred. Then, ‘suddenly it clears. I can see it all, and I know. I think, “what have I been doing, what can I have been thinking of?”’ (197). Abra can now ‘see clearly,’ the ubiquitous metaphor for understanding. It is as though she has passed some kind of test. Ideology, the novel confirms, is almost impossible to resist; if we stand outside it, we relinquish full subjectivity and the social. Perhaps this refusal can only be enacted in the imaginary: living outwith one’s culture ‘is made possible [in literature] by a belief that stepping outside of ideology, impossible in the world of the reader’s reality, is permissible, even honourable, in the fictional world’ (Macpherson 99). Abra’s ‘stepping outside’ is a triumph for one imaginary woman over the dictates of subjectivity; she effects that ‘movement in and out of ideology’ that de Lauretis exhorts feminists to strive for.

Memory, in Barfoot’s text, is not just ideologically constructed but also an unwelcome reminder of cultural norms, to the point where the return of ideology into Abra’s life is signified by memories which flood in and threaten to engulf her. In response, her body reacts by seeming suddenly frail and ‘old.’ The contradictory loss of bodily power as she hovers on the edge of a return to
culture reinforces the tension between subject and animal in Abra; and her struggle is a metaphor for that other tension, between age as biology and age as construct. Her transgression against ideology is not just the physical removal of herself to a remote cabin; her ultimate transgression is forgetting, a transgression against subjectivity itself.

**Jane Rule and Memory Board**

Another view of forgetfulness is introduced by North American writer Jane Rule in this novel, set, like *Gaining Ground*, in Canada, Rule’s adopted country. A pivotal character in *Memory Board* lives with Alzheimer’s syndrome. This is a radical departure in itself: memory-loss is not a common subject for fiction, perhaps because the fear of it is so much the stock-in-trade of age ideology. Equally extraordinary is that Rule’s text describes a relationship between two women in their sixties, rare in the youth-centred lesbian fiction of the time. Protagonists Diana and Constance have lived together as lovers and partners for many years.

Rule’s text sets out to allay cultural anxieties about memory-loss. Rather like May Sarton, Rule began to achieve recognition for her writing only in midlife, perhaps because her early novels had no obvious readership: most are tales of alternative family structures, which did not conform with the separatist vision of 1970s and 80s radical feminism. This preoccupation shows itself in, for example, *The Young in One Another’s Arms* (1977), which tells the story of Ruth Wheeler, who has lost an arm in an accident, her elderly mother-in-law and a number of lodgers, one of whom, unusually for white writers’ work of the time, is African-American. This group moves to an island to live as a community. *Against the Sea* (1972) is also a narrative about an off-beat family configuration, the elderly and disabled Amelia, her great-nephew and a pregnant teenager they have taken in; and *After the Fire* depicts a larger community, whose members support and sustain each other, crossing barriers of age, class and race. Marilyn Schuster says of Rule’s characters that ‘the outcasts who form these communities evolve an unwritten social contract that protects their outcast status, rejecting blind, brutal conformity to a dominant norm’ (443). She made
this statement some years before the publication of Memory Board, but it is
nevertheless a fitting description of Constance’s protected status in the
household. Rule creates narratives about the deviant and abject: they are
foregrounded in her fiction, in contrast to their marginal position in the wider
world.

Clearly, Rule understands issues of difference. She has also echoed
Barbara Macdonald’s theory about the ‘disappearance’ of sexual identity for older
women, but has construed this invisibility positively: ‘Some of [my increased
success] has to do with my being over 50 . . . people are not so titillated by
your sex life when you’re over 50’ (in McKend 20). In other words, older women
are perceived as having no sexual identity, resulting in a lessening of the anxiety
usually surrounding lesbianism. This is the converse of the perception that
lesbians tend to be defined primarily as sexual beings, perhaps in part, as Rule
suggests, because of the ‘titillation’ factor; and perhaps it is true that this
perception changes as they age. I will develop these thoughts in the next
chapter, which deals directly with issues of sexuality.

With characteristic insight, Rule complained: ‘In the academy I am
dismissed as a marginal writer not because some of my characters share my
sexuality but because I am a lesbian, therefore somehow mysteriously
disqualified from presenting a vision of central value’ (in McKend 17). And yet
Rule’s ‘vision’ is particularly interesting from the perspective of age studies across
sexualities, since her fiction almost always includes older characters. Memory
Board centres on three protagonists: Diana Crown, retired doctor and full-time
carer; her partner, Constance, who suffers from almost complete loss of both
short- and long-term memory; and David, Diana’s twin brother. The narrative
deals with the part memory plays in identity and subjectivity, the creation of
families or communities configured in ways that disrupt the nuclear norm, and
the importance of the relational in overcoming disability. Rule is also ‘concerned
with the “country of great old age, a flat and windy plain”’ (After the Fire 27).
Told in the third person but from shifting points of view, the text begins by
describing the early relationship between Diana and David, and their almost
complete estrangement in adulthood. As a result of David’s marriage to Patricia,
a woman too homophobic to countenance dealings with her lesbian sister-in-law, he and Diana have met just once a year, on their birthday and in secret, for some thirty years. The rift is so complete that David’s daughters and grandchildren do not know their aunt exists. The twins resume contact after the death of David’s wife. Initially, Diana is doubtful of the value of reinstating this relationship: ‘No point. No point. No point,’ she repeats to herself after a visit from David and his subsequent letter; he has become ‘no more to [her] than a painful memory’ (29). Here memories – like Abra’s – are ‘painful,’ invoking the difficult past of this sibling relationship. Interestingly, it is partly at Constance’s insistence that Diana and David re-establish their closeness; for, despite her Alzheimer’s, she has a good deal of insight into its implications. Since the illness is likely to progress, Constance would like Diana to have a brother around ‘for when [she] can’t any longer keep [Diana] in mind’ (30). Ultimately David moves out of the home he shares unsatisfactorily with his daughter and her family, and takes up residence with Diana and Constance. With his support, the women’s lives open out to encompass new possibilities: they even go on holiday for the first time in years.

The retired David has outgrown a tendency towards chauvinism he showed in youth; as a child, he had wanted his sister to be ‘a negative, a shadow self, a perfect inferior, available to him at all times when comparison was to his advantage, otherwise invisible’ (2). What does remain in adulthood is a preoccupation with bodiliness, which Diana shares: she finds, for example, that working as a medic during the war has ‘shaken her sense of the integrity of the body, that vast complexity of cellular intelligence in its fragile sack of skin’ (244). The instability of Diana’s body as she ages is contrasted with her confident and carefree younger self: the ‘hardware’ Diana needs to function, including a cane, dental bridges, hearing aid, glasses, and a ‘row of pills’ are the signifiers of advancing age (19). These appliances are not viewed negatively but with wry amusement: Diana muses that the body, ‘precisely because it does fail . . . it is worthy of our various obsessions with it’ (220). Before we are introduced to her physical vulnerability, however, we know that the most important aspect of Diana is her connection with Constance: for the first thing she does on waking is
to ‘touch . . . Constance’s face, and there [are] the dark worlds of her eyes, always the first territory of the day’ (19). Rule portrays a physical intimacy between the two women: when, after a sleepless night, Diana returns to their shared bed, Constance ‘turn[s] and welcome[s] her into a sleeping embrace, the body’s memory flawless’ (28). Memory is an embodied function, then, not just a neurological process; muscles remember certain movements, like dance steps from childhood that can still be performed in midlife.

Diana and David remain, as they age, very different subjects: Diana comments to her new-found niece that her father ‘only looks made up to be old . . . I’ve taken growing old seriously. For him it’s just an act’ (90). The idea that David performs his ageing, whereas Diana and Constance, by virtue of their infirmities – Diana’s arthritis, Constance’s Alzheimer’s – are more authentic residents in the ‘other country’ of elders is significant, not necessarily of gender difference but of the multiplicity of age identity. Issues of gender do pursue women into later life, however: Gullette has pointed out that ‘discursively speaking, only women age’ (1997 105, original italics). Diana and Constance are thus doubly marginalised, through their status as lesbians and as old women. The fact that Diana was a doctor before retirement, a traditionally male profession with the concomitant power and financial rewards, serves only to emphasise her loss of status in retirement: now she is still a full-time caregiver, but unpaid. A friend considers David to be ‘in danger of simply falling through the cracks of old age’ (116–7). In reality, it is Diana and Constance who run this risk; significantly, the worried friend does not know they exist. Men, once widowed, attract concern – for old women are expected to grow old alone, and statistics indicate that they do: according to sociologists Sarah Arber and Jay Ginn, older women are more likely to live alone than men, will be poorer, less likely to own a car, have less chance of re-partnering and are more liable to reside in nursing homes through a shortage of carers (128, 159–163).

The phrase ‘falling through the cracks of old age’ echoes Barfoot’s description of Abra as having ‘fallen’ from her place in the social (Barfoot 7), in turn redolent of the original ‘fall’ from grace. Rule’s phraseology is also consonant with Lauretis’ theory that interstitial perspectives flourish in the ‘chinks
and cracks of the power-knowledge apparati’ (25). Already invisible as a lesbian couple and unseen by their estranged family, Diana and Constance live in the gaps between cultural axes, the ‘in-between worlds,’ in a number of ways. Constance, particularly, is multiply marginalised, being old, not native to Canada (she is originally from London), lesbian, and with a failing memory. As I have suggested elsewhere, such interstitial subjects may be well placed to challenge age ideology, always assuming they have a voice. Diana and Constance, through their loving and creative acceptance of the latter’s memory-loss, refuse to succumb to decline anxiety. Ironically, Constance, because of her constant forgetting, may even be unable to hold age ideology in her thoughts long enough to be influenced by it.

Like *Gaining Ground*, Rule’s book raises the question of whether the person with little or no memory can still lay claim to subjectivity. Just as Abra, after her ‘fall’ from ideology, perceives herself to be more animal than human, Constance sometimes sees herself as less than human. On the day after David’s first visit, for example, she is found in the garden, ‘stymied, her memory board in her hand. Some days . . . she was like a child’s toy, needing to be wound up every few minutes’ (31). Here Constance’s ‘deteriorating’ subjectivity is suggested by likening her to a plaything, unable to move unless its clockwork mechanism is ‘wound up.’ The aide-memoir that actually prompts her gives the book its title: the ‘memory board’ is a small slate on which the day’s tasks are written, providing Constance with her itinerary. But it is necessarily Diana who is responsible for the memory board’s daily inscription. The result of this is a peculiar kind of closeness between the two women, ‘the limitless intimacy of Constance’s need’ producing an almost symbiotic dependence (21). While Diana’s analogy for her is the ‘child’s toy,’ Constance likens herself to a domestic pet. Diana attempts to reassure Constance of her personhood – she is still ‘a lovely woman’, she insists. In response, the latter complains:

I feel more like a dog . . . If only I had nothing to do but be interested in my bodily functions, distracted into barking by anything that moved, into wagging my tail at any sight of you, I’d be fine. But by the look on your face, I can see that more is expected of me. (32)
The consciousness that in fact separates Constance from animals – her insight into her condition – makes her disorientation painful, again echoing Abra’s uncomfortable re-membering. Diana’s invitation to her partner to accompany her on errands, and wait in the car while Diana shops, is met by a similar comparison: ‘That’s a good, doggy thing to do. Leave me a crack of air and I’ll growl at strangers.’ Diana has learnt that ‘self-disparaging jokes [are] . . . one of Constance’s weapons against falling into stupefied depression or . . . into a past she [can’t] find her way out of’ (32). This canine analogy also resonates with the imagery of animals that pervades Gaining Ground. However, choosing the dog – the most socialised and acculturated of beasts – for this metaphor sets up a less straightforward comparison between animal and human. Constance is represented not by wildness, but by the creature that commonly signifies love and faithfulness; furthermore, her position of relative centrality in the household invests her with a certain power. Despite the canine comparison, Constance is conscious of her condition, and this insight is what saves her from any potential loss of self.

A contrast inevitably emerges between Constance’s lack of recall and David’s and Diana’s still clear memories of childhood, often retrieved or reawakened by their developing relationship. A survivor of wartime trauma – she lost her mother and sister in a bombing raid – Constance now relies on Diana for signposts to her past and well as her present. She comments: ‘it’s very peculiar to have your memory located outside your own head,’ and this dislocation of Constance’s memory is part of the symbiotic character of the two women’s existence. She acknowledges that ‘Diana is remarkably truthful, but it’s still her version of the truth’ (103). Thus Constance is a fictional version of G. Thomas Couser’s ‘vulnerable subject,’ someone whose disability becomes the reason for someone else to tell their story. Constance’s version of her history has given way to Diana’s. McKend comments on the power asymmetry inherent in their situation: ‘Once Constance loses her memory, Diana must become her jailer, locking Constance in the house so that she will not wander, and locking her into Diana’s own “version of the truth”’ (McKend 201). This ‘external’ memory asks interesting questions of diachronic identity theory. Is the existence
of previous aspects of being threatened by the individual’s inability to remember them? Or is the question of whether Constance’s co-identities remain in her own memory irrelevant to their continued existence? I would argue that these personae remain extant as long as another person who is close to the subject retains them: it is enough, then, that Constance’s sequential selves are held in Diana’s memory, and that Constance has enough cognitive function to recognise the description of her youth. She continues to exist as a narrative self because Diana reminds her of her life-text: Constance’s ‘storied self’ is shored up externally in such a way that identity survives. But this raises further problems: what would Diana’s own potentially impaired memory in the future – or her death – mean for Constance’s identity? Could she hand over the safekeeping of these memories to someone else? Perhaps, ultimately, with no-one close enough to remind them who they are, people with dementia do lose some sense of identity and selfhood.

Not all the consequences of memory-loss are problematic, however. For example, Constance, who in youth was not content with monogamy, cannot now remember her other lover, Jill, even though she is still a friend and regular visitor to the house. This leads to a kind of harmony, which, according to Diana, is achieved only in age, ‘where the needs of the flesh, though humiliating, were rarely competitive . . . an accomplishment that came out of failure’ (165). Bodily changes and a lessening of sexual desire accompanied by other physical needs – for support, domestic help, personal care – have clear advantages in this case, for Jill is no longer a threat to Diana and Constance’s relationship. A lack of recall has more difficult implications, however: when she is distressed, Constance has no idea why, the cause of her sorrow ‘locked out of reach in the storehouse of [her] memory’ (184). Constance, like Abra, is ‘no longer caught up in the flow of time, as surprised and dissociated from the emotions and events as if they were no more than a story in a book’ (184). Even David, who spends more and more time with the two women, seems for some time to be ‘invented by Diana’ (184); he has to be newly introduced to Constance at each meeting – a good reason for him to reside with them full time.
The subject with reduced memory has a particular relationship to the bodily changes of old age, which have the potential to continually surprise. (In the same way, those with dementia forget the death of loved ones, and must relive their loss each time they are reminded.) The disclosure of her ageing body is thus astonishing to Constance; and her particular ‘mirror phase’ is enacted while trying on swimsuits. She notices, reflected, her ‘slight flesh sagging under the draping skin.’ Her response is: ‘I’m melting away’ (164). Here is the contrast between the mirror stage of infancy and that of later life: for whereas the ‘child joyously celebrates the recognition of its specular image’ (Grosz 1990 36), the midlife subject registers dismay. In Constance, surprise adds to her response, for her dim memory has not recalled the body’s alteration. Only when she puts on a wrap is Constance ‘restored . . . to herself’ (164), as though in specular confrontation with her reflection she had been removed from herself. And yet this ability to be split may also confirm Constance’s subjectivity: Grosz comments that Lacanian mirror theory ‘announces the inherently divided, split subject, a subject divided between itself and its mirror reflection’ (1990 15). Taking someone’s capacity for experiencing division as a criterion for subjectivity thus argues for Constance’s continued personhood. Despite her vulnerable and marginal status, and without memory as a reminder of identity, Constance speaks to her reflection in the mirror, reminding the reader that she is a speaking subject. This moment in the narrative also emphasises the importance of the body in subjectivity. Grosz’s addition to theories of subjectivity is her claim to ‘wager . . . that all the effects of subjectivity, all the significant facets and complexities of subjects, can be as adequately explained using the subject’s corporeality as a framework as it would be using consciousness or the unconscious’ (1994 vii). In this model, while a person remains embodied – that is to say, still alive – their claim to subjectivity is still intact.

Constance, though a decentred and vulnerable subject, finds advantages in her lack of recall. She is, for example, often pleasantly surprised at daily events. Furthermore, because her recollection of environment is so uncertain, Constance is unperturbed by the garden fence installed by Diana to prevent her wandering off. Again, although the decision to introduce locks on the insides of
doors is Diana’s, Constance is no more a imprisoned than her partner, who knows that ‘the possessor is as trapped as the possessed’ (132). Constance, oblivious to these changes, is not troubled by them as Diana is.

David also takes on a protective role: a happy addition to the household, he also finds himself ‘in some quite simple way in love with Constance’ (179). The earlier triangular relationship between Diana, Constance and Jill has been reconfigured to include Diana’s twin; and this triad provides comfort and stability for all three. David, the most central male character in the narrative, shows how a fluidity of identity can be turned to advantage: his ability to adapt to his surroundings, and her inability to remember him, means that he is, for Constance, ‘anybody I want you to be’ (255). This provides a corollary to the idea that diachronic identity can reside in the memory of another: it can also be created, Rule’s narrative suggests, by the unreliability of someone else’s memory. David becomes whoever Constance desires through her imaginative perceptions of him; and this ability to people her environment at will underscores the centrality of Constance in the household.

Although memory might, at first glance, seem to be an important aspect of personhood, it may be more useful – and accurate – to see it as just one aspect, and not a sine qua non. Psychologist Ulric Neisser’s model of selfhood proposes five ‘aspects of the self,’ aspects that are ‘so distinct that they are essentially different selves’ or different ‘kinds of self-specifying information’ (in Eakin 22, original italics). According to Eakin, Neisser identifies them thus: the ecological self, the self in relation to its environment; interpersonal selfhood, that is, engagement in interaction with others; the extended self, that of ‘memory and anticipation . . . existing outside the present moment;’ the private self, conscious of experiences available to no one else; and the conceptual, aware of diverse forms of self-information that ‘posit the self as a category, either explicitly or implicitly’ (Eakin 22-23). Neisser even speculates at what ages the respective ‘selves’ develop – the first two in infancy, the others at three, five, and so on. In a sense, then, this paradigm may almost act as a model for the evolution of diachronic identity in childhood.
It is interesting that the ‘extended’ self is seen not only as diachronic, but also as extending both forward and back in time: it includes not just memory but ‘anticipation.’ An awareness of potential future selves is encompassed by this function, a faculty that Constance possesses, shown by her concern for Diana in the event of her own condition worsening. Indeed, she shows herself more realistic in this than de Beauvoir, who was convinced she would experience a ‘moment when . . . decline sets in;’ Constance, through experience, knows that our faculties deteriorate gradually. But memory, though implicated in organizing what we know about ourselves, becomes in Neisser’s model only a small part of the system of ‘self-specifying information’ which determines personhood.

Constance may be lacking in one area of the ‘extended self,’ recall of the past, but she does have ‘anticipation’ and functions adequately in the other four zones of subjective existence. This theory of selfhood is helpful in that its ‘fivefold modelling counters the tendency toward an oversimplifying reification that is one of the principal drawbacks of self as a term, a reification that obscures the multiple registers of self-experience’ (Eakin 22). The number five seems to be almost arbitrary, and is not intended as an absolute. Eakin points out that we may well ‘detect overlappings and slippage’ among the five selves, and that it is quite possible to add to the number; Gullette would argue that the number may be infinite, echoing Audre Lorde’s ‘myriad selves.’ This is not to imply that old age is, as Shakespeare would have it, ‘second childhood and mere oblivion;’ this over-simplification does not help us to understand age identity, and denies the complexity of the processes the ageing subject is engaged in. Jenny Hockey and Allison James remind us that

> [v]ery elderly people are patently not children. None the less, within contemporary western society old age is often popularly associated with childhood through both verbal and visual images . . . . Within this image the two social categories, positioned at either end of the life course, share the experience of dependency. (1997 135)

The ‘experience of dependency’, in all its complexity, is beautifully depicted in Memory Board. As in other Rule novels, dependency is not necessarily a negative state. Furthermore, she does not hesitate to depict mothers and older women in her narratives. In this she counters Judith Roof’s
argument, that lesbian characters are often portrayed as having ‘no original relationship with a biological mother’ (109), a tendency that is detectable in much lesbian feminist writing. This phobia – Copper calls it ‘mother-flu’ – must in part be responsible for the absence of older women in many second-wave lesbian novels. It may, however, be symptomatic of another cultural anxiety: the need to avoid a certain ‘doubling (too many women) that typifies the perverse excess’ of lesbian representation (Roof 22). Furthermore, Roof’s thesis underlines the idea that most lesbians see themselves not only as unreproductive – that is to say, unlinked to future generations – but also as unlinked to previous ones. Constance and Diana have both avoided motherhood; their household might be arranged differently if either or both had children. In contrast with David, whose two daughters have each produced further offspring, Diana and Constance have only each other for support. Their domestic situation is reconfigured with the arrival of David, however, creating one of the alternative family structures that are such a preoccupation in Rule’s work.

Even this family has its power asymmetry, however. Rule has claimed: the ‘long tradition of fiction with a central character around whom all others must find their secondary place supports hierarchies I don’t find interesting’ (in Schuster 443). However, in contradiction to this statement, she wrote Memory Board almost entirely from Diana’s and David’s point of view. Constance may be a pivotal character, but only occasionally does her perspective appear in the text, emphasising her uncertain sense of self. She seems at times central to the household, and at others marginal. And yet Rule must have been acutely conscious of the tendency to marginalise those whose are mentally or emotionally different, as well as subjects with deviant bodies. Or, as Eakin points out, ‘[a]fter Foucault, we hardly need to be reminded of the potentially disciplinary dimension of this regulation of identity, especially when it is a question of labelling the individual as healthy or normal’ (141). ‘Bad’ subjects, those who refuse normativity (even though this refusal may be, as with Constance, beyond their control) tend to be punished, at the very least by being interpellated as other. Memory Board offers alternatives to this ‘chastisement,’
which is so often unconsciously enacted in the form of elder abuse – a subject I revisit in more detail in Chapter VII.

Diana and Constance are, at the start of the narrative, marginal even to their family – an analogy for the wider culture. Their isolation underscores the removal of older women and the memoryless from common view; old lesbians tend to be dealt with in culture by denial – ‘there are no gay pensioners.’ Rule’s text contains a wonderfully subtle critique of age ideology. Diana is concerned about her brother, for example, when he proposes to move in with herself and Constance: she wonders how it would be ‘for David to move out of the house of a growing family into this mortal climate’ (251). The ‘mortal’ climate – implying their house has the ambience of death – is something Diana has accepted; even though she and Constance are both only in their sixties and may have many years left, she views their future as decline, a movement towards death. The text also emphasises Gullette’s argument that ‘discursively speaking only women age’ (1997 105, original italics); for David remains relatively unscathed by age ideology and, indeed, by biological ageing, seeming only to ‘perform’ his age.

Constance, on the other hand, is ‘thrice unseen,’ by virtue of her age, sexuality and memory-loss. Ultimately, however, Memory Board affirms that marginalisation does not reduce or nullify subjectivity; rather, it suggests that ideology’s attempts to produce Constance as a subject of reduced agency can be resisted. The apparent randomness of ideological hierarchies is pointed up by Diana, who offers her left-handedness as an excuse for discrimination. Her attitude to such prejudice is that it is best ignored. However, the text suggests that challenges to injustice are achieved neither in isolation nor through political activism; Rule’s implied solution, here as elsewhere, is the support of re-invented communities living in loose familial structures. Constance, like the rest of the household – and also in common with Abra – moves ‘in and out of ideology, [enacting a] . . . crossing back and forth of the boundaries – and of the limits – of . . . difference’ (Lauretis 25).

Interestingly, the protagonists of both sample texts – one lesbian, the other an outsider in other ways – reject the reproductive female role in different ways: Constance is non-reproductive through circumstances, while Abra has
children but refuses to raise them. As a result, a certain continuity – one that disrupts the norm – typifies the onset of older age for both characters. Even though Abra’s midlife is disrupted by her daughter’s arrival, she does return to her self-sufficient life in the cabin, to greet old age, we imagine, with equanimity. Thus the fictional constructions of an outsider life course reconfigure developmental models; a sexuality – or asexuality – that remains unconnected with reproduction undergoes no radical shift when reproductivity ceases. Indeed, Abra’s previous co-identity as mother is one she has rejected almost entirely: she claims to have ‘no reaction to the word “daughter,”’ and her perception of the mother-daughter bond is that ‘all we have in common . . . is our blood background and our femaleness’ (178-9).

**Conclusion**

In this and a number of other ways both texts offer themselves as counterconstructions to age ideology. Memory-loss, for example, is frightening precisely because it is constructed as rendering older people non-subjects or ‘vegetables’ – and even this ‘vegetative’ imagery is redeemed, in Abra’s case, to signify alternative ‘roots’ and a productive connection with the earth. Both texts, but particularly *Memory Board*, challenge dementia anxiety, a pernicious aspect of decline theory. Both Abra and Constance are forgetful; but the fear surrounding the loss of recall is defused in these narratives, which show amnesiac characters retaining personhood and the ability to sustain or re-form relationships. They do not forget in similar ways, however; if anything their movements are in different directions. Abra has removed herself from both culture and ideology and ceased to enact her gender role; she finds that, with the deliberate loss of everything she has hitherto known, memory, too, escapes her – or perhaps more accurately she escapes memory, only to have it flood back when her daughter tracks her down. Constance’s loss of memory is more ordinary; senile dementia is common if not fully understood, although recent research suggests a hormone or enzyme deficiency may cause it (Porter 2006). Constance is protected by Diana and David, whereas Abra is ‘held’ by her cabin, as far from family as possible. The subjectivity of both characters is in question,
since that attribute is often predicated on the ability to remember. The imagery of animals is invoked to suggest that individuals devoid of memory may somehow be sub-human or ‘bad’ subjects; however, if we take Grosz’s model of subjectivity, which holds bodiliness as more important than psychic competence, personhood, for both women, is still intact. This is ultimately borne out in both texts: Abra finds that the relational is again possible; Constance is drawn further into the centre of her ‘family’ as David and Diana reclaim their kinship.

Memory Board and Gaining Ground both explore the issues surrounding forgetfulness and its effect on subjectivity; they also nuance the debate about ageing as construct. Could it be, for example, that for some Alzheimer’s sufferers the loss of memory is partly constructed? For an older person with a failing memory, removal to a care facility may exacerbate the condition. May Sarton’s partner Judith Matlack was one such: Sarton describes visiting her in a shoddy nursing home where Judy was more confused than ever. Even a pleasant care environment may be disorientating, so different is it likely to be from the person’s home. Thus the disruption of cognitive function, which may begin as a biological process, can be exacerbated – that is, partially constructed – through circumstance.

For both Abra and Constance, then, forgetting is transgressive. Abra’s rejection of memory is an aspect of her ‘falling’ – perhaps ‘leaping’ would be a better term – from culture and ideology. For Constance, on the other hand, Alzheimer’s is a medical condition, not chosen but dealt with as creatively as possible. For both, however, the prompts to memory are external: Constance is reminded what to do by Diana, or by her ‘memory board,’ and Abra is retrieved from oblivion by Katie’s arrival. Because of this, each of them has a particular perspective on ageing; yet, ironically, each remains oblivious to age ideology.

Age identity is configured in these texts not in predictable ‘ages’ or ‘stages’ but rather as fluid and constantly morphing, even in older age; and this fluidity suggests a life-course ontology embodying the multiple and sequential selves of Gullette’s thesis. For women – and old women are no exception – are, in her words, ‘indelibly diverse.’ Memory may be an important medium for the subject’s self-knowledge, helping us recognise the sequential selves that develop
over time; but even if memory is fallible, these identities still exist, either in the unconscious or in the memories of others. Grosz emphasises the resistant qualities embodied in this fluidity: ‘the subject’s lack of a stable, finalized identity, its lack of a hold on the semiosis constituting language, and its lack of a (chain of) objects provide the conditions of the possible *resistance* to the expectations of the symbolic’ (1990 189, original italics). Abra’s and Constance’s very ambiguity and instability constitute their challenge to decline theory. If forgetting is transgressive, both cross the boundaries of the prescribed; and this very forgetfulness paradoxically provides a basis for their resistance, freeing them from age ideology and enabling their refusal of prescribed life-course progressions.
VI
Talking of desire: ageing and sexuality in the writing of June Arnold and Mary Meigs.

A woman of seventy is no longer regarded by anyone as an erotic object. Venal love is very difficult for her to find.
Simone de Beauvoir, *The Coming of Age* (1973) 516

[O]ld lesbians, when they are noticed at all, are perceived only through their sexuality.
Margaret Cruikshank, *Learning to be Old*:
*Gender, Culture and Aging* (2003) 121

**Introduction**
The representation of older women as sexual beings is pivotal to this project, and here I examine the theme of older sexuality in lesbian writing. Age critics such as Gullette and Woodward have complained that the discourse of ageing as decline has focussed too much on biology, as though the psyche of the female subject somehow fades away after midlife. While I appreciate their point – that age ideology seizes on physical changes to underscore its message of decline – I also believe that counterconstructions of ageing must not ignore bodies. However, rather than engaging with arguments about whether or not old bodies are frailer or functionally less competent, I intend to tackle one of the underlying anxieties about ageing, which centres on desexualisation and the loss of fertility. I will argue that sexual desire and sexuality remain important for many older people, and that erotic activity is an important aspect of older bodiliness. In order to test this theory, I undertake a further analysis of Arnold’s *Sister Gin* from the point of view of sexuality, and also incorporate an examination of Mary Meigs’ *The Time Being*.

Recognition is emerging in popular culture that sexuality can remain undiminished in age, and that the hopes, fears, delight and disappointment as relationships begin and end are also just as strong as in youth. Representations of older sexuality in writing have become more common in the past three
decades in literature. Some good examples are Doris Lessing’s *The Summer before the Dark* (1973), *Love Again* (1995) and *The Grandmothers* (2003), Jane Juska’s explicit tale of email dating, *A Round-Heeled Woman* (2004), and J. M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace* (1999), the account of a midlife academic’s fall from grace as a result of his sexual exploits. The idea that older subjects are still sexuate beings has lost its taboo status, and these texts re-embed sexuality into late-life ontology, and render the erotics of age visible. Such texts work towards countering age ideology’s attempt to render older subjects sexless.

Visual and popular cultures, however, have been slower to depict older female sexuality positively. Hanif Kureishi’s film *The Mother* (2003) provides a rare exception: the narrative shows May, a woman in her sixties, who is widowed and has an affair with a feckless builder; the latter is also in a disastrous relationship with May’s daughter. The central character, beautifully played by Anne Reid, ultimately realises that her life still holds more possibilities than looking after her grandchildren or clandestine love affairs. There is no promise of happy-ever-after at the end of this film; instead it culminates in a moment of recognition. May is seen, in the final sequence, packing her suitcase and setting off to an unknown destination. The affair serves as a catalyst for her future, rather than being an end in itself; there is, mercifully, no ‘marriage plot’ here. This film is an outstanding vehicle for the sensitive depiction of older female sexuality; but it also serves to show the paucity of cultural products in this field. Television only perpetuates the lacuna, offering mostly stereotypical images of old women: Dot Cotton and Pauline Fowler are about as good as it gets. Old women are rarely presenters of news or current affairs programmes, nor do they advertise products unless aimed at their cohort. Margaret Gullette points out that, in popular culture, ‘the ideal age for feminine pulchritude is dropping toward thirteen’ (2004 23).

Writing on older lesbian sexuality – with the potential to balance both negative stereotypes and an overwhelmingly heterosexual point of view – is in a minority. Perhaps the double othering inherent in describing those old and differently sexual inhibits the publication of this material, but such literature warrants closer examination. May Sarton, in *Journal of a Solitude* (1973),
grumbles about the ‘puritanical ethos’ that suggests ‘people are dead from the neck down by the time they are forty, and that . . . any passion after that age is either ludicrous or revolting’ (76). She continued to remind readers of the continued existence of older sexuality into her eighties. *At Eighty-Two* describes her experiencing, in one night, ‘three separate erotic dreams.’ She adds, however: ‘it was unpleasant’ (180).

The central difficulty of lesbian ontology in this area is the aporia between invisibility and titillation. Older lesbian sexuality tends to go unrepresented, but once discovered it becomes central to cultural perceptions. Cruikshank has flagged up the problem neatly in my epigraph: ‘old lesbians, when they are noticed at all, are perceived only through their sexuality’ (121, italics added).

Older lesbians have a choice then, between ‘passing’ and thus remaining invisible, or else coming out and attracting prurient interest. Barbara Macdonald struggled with this: she complained that she was seen as devoid of any kind of sexual identity once she reached her sixties. She complained of the outsider status that accompanied either position, older age or lesbianism: she was troubled by ‘never knowing when people would turn away from me, not because they had identified me as a lesbian, since I was no longer thought of as a sexual being, but because they had identified me as old’ (5). There is a complex interaction between the two categories and cultural attitudes to them, which emerges in Macdonald’s text: her lesbianism, for example, is invisible, whereas her age is unmistakable; or, more precisely, while signs of ageing can be read ever more plainly on her body, signs of sexuality – of any kind – tend only to diminish. Since she felt othered by being allocated to either category, Macdonald found herself in a no-win situation. In old age as in other ages, heterosexuality is mostly assumed. Macdonald correctly surmised: ‘we can’t really escape having a heterosexual image of aging forced on us in the next ten or twenty years’ (90).

I suggest that the literature of lesbian feminism may offer alternatives to the limited sexual roles and archetypes age ideology has given us, and provide a useful paradigm for ageing in general. Lesbian and feminist writing risks the disruption of life-course narratives, refusing to let them take a predictable shape;
the work of these texts is to re-embed older female sexuality in the cultural imaginary. The novels examined here remind us that the sexualities of older women may well be outside the normative, and challenge archetypal models of being. Both texts suffer from a central dichotomy: while sex between older lesbians is portrayed as unproblematic, the relationships themselves are fraught with difficulty. *Sister Gin* and *The Time Being* represent older lesbian relationships in detail, and refuse to idealise them; in fact, they both depict extraordinarily destructive relationships. This makes them, paradoxically, useful for my purpose, precisely because they depict such relationships as redolent of sexual mess and confusion. As a result, they show the preoccupation with age to be secondary.

They also underline sexuality as an important aspect of age identity. But sexuality, like other facets of identity, is not fixed at any age, being rather part of ‘a negotiated, unstable assemblage of ideas and perceptions’ (Hockey 4). The very fluidity of sexual identity makes my sample novels – especially *Sister Gin* – all the more bizarre and chaotic. Furthermore, they show the complex – and sometimes vexed – relationship between lesbian ontology and reproduction. As with the menopause, midlife may be a pivotal time for grappling with such issues, as much for lesbians as for their heterosexual counterparts.

Psychoanalyst Martha Kirkpatrick, who in the 1980s conducted a series of interview-based studies on lesbian mothers, suggested that lesbians may experience ‘a different middle age . . . because reproduction and child rearing have not structured the phases of their adult lives’ (135), although she goes on to point out that a great many lesbians have been married in the past and/or have children. Perhaps for lesbians who are mothers it is not ‘reproduction and child rearing’ that shape the life course, but rather the difficult transition of leaving a marriage, struggling with custody arrangements, and possibly taking on the relative poverty of single parenthood in order to live as lesbians. Kirkpatrick ponders: ‘That women might lead long, apparently successful heterosexual lives and then turn to homosexuality in mid-life seems hard to explain’ (138). For me, such a change does not require ‘explanation;’ one might just as well seek to explain why these women ever married. Such transitions are surprisingly
common: a workshop on older lesbian sexuality I facilitated recently consisted of fourteen women, all lesbians between about forty and seventy, about half of whom had experienced marriage and/or motherhood. This reality reconfigures the notion that same-sex love is a developmental phase denoting immaturity; instead, for these women – and I include myself – heterosexuality proved to be the ‘passing phase.’

Kirkpatrick further proposes that ‘the stigma of middle age has less sting for those who have coped with stigma throughout their life’ (141). According to her research, lesbians in midlife and older have solid friendships, are creative, and have a strong sense of purpose. Furthermore, Kirkpatrick discovers, older lesbians are rarely ’isolated’, as the stereotype would have us believe (138). There seems to be a sharp divide between de Beauvoir’s gloomy predictions (‘Never again a man’) and the more optimistic attitudes to older love affairs found in some lesbian writing, such as the two primary texts I analyse here. De Beauvoir herself recognised this split. In her fifties, she lamented her own appearance: ‘I often stop, flabbergasted, at the sight of this incredible thing that serves me as a face . . . I loathe my appearance now’ (1963 656). And again: ‘Never again a man. Now, not my body alone but my imagination too has accepted that. In spite of everything, it’s strange not to be a body anymore’ (657). And yet, at a decade later, she claimed:

The notion that women’s sexual drive continues for a long time is confirmed by the observation of lesbians. Some continue their erotic activities well into their eighties. This proves that women go on feeling desire long after they have stopped being attractive to men. (1973 518)

De Beauvoir, too, seems to have considered that their experience of sexual relationships differed between heterosexual and lesbian women, in more than the obvious ways. A lesbian sexuality, she implies, already different, somehow ages differently as well. The fact of de Beauvoir’s own bisexuality was carefully elided from her memoirs, and evidence of it only emerged in her posthumously published Letters to Sartre (1991). De Beauvoir seems to have had difficulty in imagining an erotic matrix independent of male desire; but there is no reason to think that her own ‘erotic activities’ with women ceased as she aged. Most importantly, she attempted to develop a theory of older women’s sexuality and
to politicise older age. She bemoaned the fact that ‘[n]either history nor literature has left us any worthwhile evidence on the sexuality of old women. It is an even more strictly forbidden subject than the sexuality of old men’ (1973 520).

_Sister Gin_ and _The Time Being_ answer de Beauvoir’s complaint, by proffering some ‘worthwhile evidence’ on older female sexuality. These texts also disrupt discourses of older age as fixed, bound in habit and ritual, or devoid of desire, and present older lesbians as adventurous, willing to take risks, and capable of love and desire. Moreover, they implicitly contain the idea of sequential selves that shift and are re-invented over time. Both novels show sexuality as pivotal in the resolution of other issues, for understanding age identity, illuminating age ideology, and pointing up the particular agenda of lesbian feminist values and ethics.

**Themes of sexuality in Arnold’s _Sister Gin_**
I have already explored Arnold’s novel in Chapter 4, focussing there on its treatment of menopausal chaos and transition. The central characters, Su and Bettina, lurch from stultifying boredom to crisis and back, and from repression to excess. But while Su and Bettina wrestle with the question of menopause, other characters are used as ciphers for the meaning of sexuality in late life: they are Su’s and Bettina’s mothers, Shirley and Luz, and above all Mamie Carter Wilkerson, who at seventy-seven is still possessed of a powerful sexuality, capable of luring Su away from an established relationship. Mothers and older women are often elided from such narratives, as Judith Roof points out; and the reasons for this are complex. She identifies one factor as the avoidance of a taboo: ‘the lesbian omission of the mother removes the threat of mother/daughter incest and perceives woman-to-woman sexual relations as relations between different individuals’ (117). Arnold deals with the problem by addressing this ‘threat’ directly. For example, after one especially difficult interaction with her mother, Su, ‘halfway between rage and tears,’ realises that Shirley ‘thought when I touched her I was going to seduce her’ (_SG_ 107).
What Su does not realise is that Shirley has an inchoate but long-buried lesbian sexuality of her own. In response to Su’s clumsy attempts to come out to her mother (a confession, it seems, some thirty years overdue), Shirley flees, without a word to anyone, to visit her old school friend and erstwhile love-object, Marietta. In her presence again, she remembers:

Marietta’s face as a little girl wrapped around her eyes and cheeks in a kiss of brown and white: the brown of Marietta’s eyes and hair and the off-white of her nine-year-old skin had fixed those colours into her soul in the fourth grade. No other colours had ever held the beauty of that combination for her; for nearly seventy years that glow of brown and just-off-white ruled her taste and banished all other colours, all, to the realm of the slightly fake. (88)

Marietta is described in this sub-plot in loving terms, with words like ‘kiss’, ‘glow’ and ‘beauty’, and Shirley’s delight at sharing a bedroom with her friend, showing the importance of this relationship. It is too late, now, for Shirley to act on her love for Marietta; instead, she has an unexpected moment of jouissance in – of all places – the dentist’s chair. While staying with Marietta, she goes to have a broken bridge replaced, and the new one is briefly held in place by a female dental assistant. In response to this woman’s touch, and a little hazy from the anaesthetic (then administered by gas rather than injection), Shirley experiences ‘[t]he forces of joy . . . massing on the edges of her brain, expanding in a pure and thoroughly sensual happiness; the [assistant’s] finger moved slightly and she felt her whole body being rocked inside. She gave herself up to its lulling’ (93). Curiously, the dentist joins in the fantasy: ‘Here, the spot is farther up, not down there... Don’t you read Ms. magazine?’ The rhythm of the following paragraph replicates the rhythm of an approaching sexual climax: for Shirley,

the crowd of pleasure . . . built up to such an intense peak that there was no way she could stop it, no way to retrieve consciousness, no way to feel that firm female finger as anything other than . . . "Oh!" she gasped as her ravenous blood rushed to her face . . . and rushed and rushed until she was totally finished. (93)

The repetition of ‘no way’ and ‘rushed’, and the alliterative pulse of the words ‘feel’ ‘firm female’ and ‘finger’ leave the reader in no doubt of the outcome of this particular dental encounter; the only one taken by surprise is Shirley, who ‘squeezed her eyes shut and knew there would never be a way to open them
again’ (93). To overcome her guilt and shame, she tries to convince herself that ‘[i]t was rape’ (93-4).

The hermeneutics of dentistry, as Margaret Gullette has commented, have a growing significance in later life. Elsewhere in *Sister Gin* the instability of teeth signifies decline: Luz’s dentures are ‘teeth in a very limited sense of the word’ (22) and Su’s teeth, even though they are her own, can ‘barely be trusted to sever a celery stalk’ (23). As Gullette comments, ‘classic midlife discourse’ interprets the loss of a tooth as a representation of death (1988 2), and dreams of shedding teeth have long been associated with anxieties about power or potency, an idea of Freudian origin. But such interpretations can be overturned, and often are: Margaret Drabble’s character Frances Wingate loses a tooth while away from home, and takes the loss to signal new beginnings; on her return, she is re-united with her lover, Karel, whose old dental accoutrements she has carried like a talisman during their separation (Gullette 1988 2). June Arnold, more radical still, equates dentistry and sex, and leaves death out of the equation entirely, at least until after the event. Furthermore, Shirley’s encounter is both feminist and lesbian: against the dentist and his sexist jokes, Shirley and the assistant are united, part of ‘one untouchable safe sea of women’ (Arnold 92). It is also a strangely anonymous moment of sexual congress: the dental assistant has no name, making their union almost like a ‘trick’, defined by Jonathan Dollimore as ‘a fleeting (homoerotic) casual encounter’ (314). Death re-enters the frame in Shirley’s mortification after the event: ‘[t]he shame of her own thoughts left her pale and tongue-tied, which she felt as a lump of death’ (Arnold 94). Chastened by the adventure, she returns home to her dreary husband, Hubert. It seems that Shirley, after a lifetime of habitual heterosexuality, does not quite have the ‘late-life courage in non-conformity’ to act on her desires, at any rate beyond this bizarre and comic encounter with the dental nurse.

The older women depicted in the narrative all have their own ‘indelibly diverse’ sexualities. Bettina’s ‘mummy’, Luz, is portrayed as making a fetish of certain salad vegetables. ‘She was of a generation which remembered when tomatoes were considered poisonous; as a child she was warned against the
luscious juicy red balls as if they were love apples’ (27). As an infant, Luz had defied the injunction not to eat them, and dreamed that, because she had survived the ‘poison,’ she ‘was chosen by the devil to poison others’ (27-28). There are clear parallels in the text with the ‘forbidden fruit’ of the Christian creation myth: Luz, in childhood, stole some tomatoes from the vine of a ‘heretical gardener,’ and subsequently – not only because she had eaten the ‘forbidden’ fruit, but also because chosen by the devil – fell from grace. Luz, after speaking of her tomatoes, is left with a ‘vestigial shame’ (28). At the same time, she is a little naive about the ways of the world: she asks Su and Bettina to explain the meaning of the expression ‘f­u­c­k me,’ as she struggles with the idea of ‘to fuck’ as ‘the verb transitive’ (25).

While her mother attains a certain sexual gratification from garden products, Bettina, at forty-six the youngest of the main characters, is reduced to auto-erotic activity fuelled by a fantasy of her lover (4), for recently, in Su’s words, they ‘haven’t been very close’ (111). ‘Closeness’, here, seems to be a euphemism for sexual activity. Sex is not the same as intimacy, but most relationships need at least one or the other to survive: by this stage in their failing relationship, Su and Bettina seem to lack close contact of either kind. The reader’s first encounter with Bettina shows her still in bed in the afternoon, fighting the desire to masturbate. At the same time as her ‘finger slip[s] down to the depression below her knapsack to a very low unnoticeable mound,’ she is both looking forward to her partner’s return from work and, at the same time, consumed by insecurity, wondering: ‘suppose [Su] never came back?’ (5). Bettina’s pubic mound is dwarfed by her belly, which is ‘puffed up high like a whale . . . her knapsack on front, holding all her belongings for hugging’ (4-5). Whether this ‘hugging’ is done by Bettina herself or by anyone else is not clear. In any event, her genitalia’s being ‘dwarfed’ by her stomach is significant: Bettina’s bodily excess, caused by indolence, food and alcohol, has subsumed any real expression of her sexuality.

And indeed, if Su fulfilled Bettina’s worst fears by never coming back, no one would blame her. Their relationship is unravelling, in part because the contrast between Bettina – described as a woman of ‘normal excess; she did
everything in excess, even nothing’ (12) – and Su’s contained correctness has become impossible to sustain. Bettina is even excessive in her lack: her own neediness means that she detests plants because of the ‘unrequited care they demand . . . hates[s] all demanding things as reflections of herself’ (153-4). Elsewhere, she is characterised as having a ‘breast which works in reverse to suck back juices from your mouth’ (69). The message is clear: Bettina is leech-like, draining those around her without giving anything back. The only reason Su does not leave her is that Su is unravelling in her own right, struggling daily with menopausal flushes and the interventions of the irrepressible Sister Gin. ‘I don’t love you any more!’ Su whispers inaudibly to Bettina, lacking the courage to say it aloud; and ‘the . . . statement shocks[s] her heart into missing a thump’ (7). Bettina, however, would not really be surprised by this information, since she has long ‘collected omens against the day their love would end’ (6), never having the confidence to believe in the permanence of this two-decade relationship. The narrative deals with the aftermath of an argument: during their discussion, Su wonders aloud, with shaky logic: ‘Which of us is going to kill the other first?’ (10). Bettina’s passivity – still dozing in the late afternoon – is contrasted with Su’s entrance, ‘dressed like the outside world’ (5); and Bettina’s insecurity makes her, perhaps, all the more difficult to abandon. The scene is set for a crisis in their relationship.

This flashpoint – the catalyst for change in both Su and Bettina – proves to be Su’s growing attraction to Mamie Carter, ‘college roommate of Bettina’s mother in an era when to graduate from Radcliffe was, for a Southern woman, a brand like a brainmark’ (11). Now, in her seventies, ‘she looks[s] an old forty,’ having ‘looked forty at forty’ (11-12). There are hints in the text that Su looks to Mamie Carter as a role model: she ‘adored her and often wished she were she’ (14), despite Mamie Carter’s ‘antipathy’ to Su, which is only based on the older woman’s difficulty hearing anything Su says. Enlisting the help of her ‘obscene anonyme’ Sister Gin (100), Su writes a letter to herself acknowledging her love for Mamie Carter, even though she knows her infatuation is ‘preposterous’ (70). Bettina, aware of Su’s desire for their older friend, gives permission: ‘You can have an affair with Mamie Carter if you want to but please don’t leave me,’ she
pleads, losing her last shred of dignity (113). Elements of farce and surrealist
comedy in the text only thinly disguise its serious themes of love, sex and loss.

Significantly, Su’s and Mamie Carter’s love for each other is finally
consummated towards the end of an autumn day, pointing to the later stages of
the life course. Theirs, however, is a last phase redolent with erotic activity. ‘I
think I am in love with you, Mamie Carter,’ Su declares (127), and in response
the older woman’s ‘bright elfin face smiled broadly and did not answer’ (128).
Even here, a certain ambiguity is maintained: ‘[h]ad she heard?’ Su and the
reader are both left wondering. The protagonist even doubts her own existence:
‘Su felt herself suddenly dead. She doubted that she had spoken’ (128). In the
same way that she felt herself disappearing under the weight of her hot flushes
– ‘I’m not even here’ (43) – Su now feels her reality to be shaky when her
beloved does not hear her declaration of love. And yet this quietly-spoken
character must be used to people not hearing her significant declarations, since
she frequently utters them – to her mother, Bettina and Mamie Carter – in an
anxious and inaudible half-whisper. As the story progresses, Su rediscovers her
voice and bodiliness along with her sexuality and anger.

Once she has acknowledged her love for Mamie Carter, it is as though age
and mortality have become objects of desire (128). Su finds ‘that she ha[s] left
her amorphous dully-young fifty-year-old body behind and drifted through the
definite world of the dead, the epitomized grave, the capsule of self which
carried in its concentrate all the love she had ever sought’ (128). The language
used in this passage valorises age in exactly the way that youth is generally
valorised, as a kind of satire that compares the certainty of old age (‘definite,’
‘capsule’ and ‘concentrate’) favourably with midlife, which is ‘amorphous’ and
‘dull’. Su realises that ‘Mamie Carter did not need to hear [her declaration of
love]; she would know’ (128); age has an omniscience that does not depend on
the senses alone. ‘I know,’ Mamie Carter confirms, although she later jokes: ‘I
just wanted to get you into bed where I could hear you’ (131).

Ageing flesh is portrayed in positive terms: the ‘silk bones of Mamie
Carter’s hand’ contrast with ‘her dimpled flesh, infinite dimples winking in their
softness, skin so old it had lost all abrasives . . . vulnerable, nonresilient, soft
forever’ (128). Mamie Carter’s breasts ‘hang . . . now from the base of [her] breastbone like soft toys, too small to rest a head upon, fit for a hand to cuddle very gently like the floppy ears of a puppy’ (129). Mamie Carter’s body is not praised for being firm or youthful, but for being what it is: seventy-seven. There is an aporia here, however, for in the midst of this passage glorifying ageing female breasts, the language is redolent of youth: ‘soft toys’ and ‘pupp[ies]’ signify the other end of the life-course. Although Jenny Hockey reminds us that ‘elderly people are patently not children’ (1995 135), here old age is described in terms of its opposite, infancy. Arnold’s imagery, however, works against the ‘sans everything’ model: for Mamie Carter, old age is anything but ‘second childhood and mere oblivion.’ Instead, her body is described in terms both comic and tender, evoking a desire to stroke it, just as people are drawn to caressing puppies. These breasts are appealing in ways that are sensuous and sensual, rather than maternal. Arnold develops the comparison between age and youth: in Mamie Carter’s words:

It’s the special quality of age that it alone has available to it, to its brain, its recall, the majority of the person’s life. Only in age can one brain be all ages. Because a woman in the middle can look forward and backward, she will naturally see that youth is to anticipate, to expect, and age is to possess, to claim, to have available. (189)

This idea foreshadows the theory of diachronic identity, which posits that the ‘portmanteau’ of selves is something to possess with a certain pride. Mamie Carter goes on to say: ‘if old age could be beautiful, life would hold no more terrors’ (129); and she seems, herself, to embody that quality. In the magical environment of Mamie Carter’s bedroom, ‘[t]here is no more beautiful word in the language than withered’ (133). Mamie Carter is committed to pleasure, even at the moment of her death: for she will ‘die of a suppressed giggle – like a clot of air suddenly blocking the brain, the giggle would lodge at an opening and hold back life’ (163).

Even Mamie Carter’s hearing aid is eroticised: Su has a longing to smell the now faint combination of smells hovering in the area between Mamie Carter’s ear and hair: shampoo and oil, her hair and her skin, perfume mixed, if her hearing aid was in place, with metal and
plastic, with its lingering presence if Mamie Carter had thrown it off, irritated by its distortion and static. (183-4)

Later in the same encounter, Mamie Carter ‘lean[s] her head to one side, exposing half of the triangle containing Su’s future, unobstructed by the tiny button from Nu-tone’ (186). The ‘triangle’ is a curiously sexual image here, suggestive of female genitalia; and the ‘tiny button’ is like a clitoris. Furthermore, this area ‘contains Su’s future.’ Perhaps such accoutrements are only romanticised by those who do not have to wear them; for while Su has constructed the ‘triangle’ of skin behind her beloved’s ear as an object of desire, Mamie Carter ‘throws off’ the hearing aid in irritation.

Although sex is such an important theme in *Sister Gin*, the characters have great difficulty in talking about it. Su and Bettina have failed spectacularly to come out to either mother: Su’s tentative exploration of the statement ‘we’re lovers, Mother,’ is characteristically spoken so quietly that it goes unheard (75). She tries, more audibly, ‘we’re not lovers, Mother,’ and Shirley is shocked even by this half-truth. A more determined attempt to come out to her mother is effected the next day. ‘I’m a lesbian, you know,’ Su states. ‘The last two words were included as a buffer, so lesbian would be surrounded with palatable monosyllables’ (77). Shirley’s response is confusion. At first she assumes her daughter is making an excuse for not having children. Shirley next reiterates the homily that Bettina and Su could both find a male partner if they took a little trouble with their appearance. The humour of this passage also betrays some sadness: for Su’s attempt to be closer to her mother backfires horribly. Shirley’s idea of ‘talking’ is the exchange of inconsequential gossip. As a backdrop to this conversation is Su’s uncanny awareness that her own face is becoming like her mother’s. She kisses Shirley goodnight on leaving, and later, in her own mirror moment, sees ‘[i]n the bathroom mirror . . . the face she ha[s] just kissed – her own, drawn, gray, hollow-eyed’ (77).

Su’s own homophobia – rather than Shirley’s – emerges as the reason her coming out is so difficult. In a note to Sister Gin, Su declares: ‘Lesbianism. I hope I never hear that word again’ (102-3). She proceeds to scribble ‘a heavy felt-pen black line through lesbianism until it was dead. Then she fold[s] the
paper several times and put[s] it in her purse to throw it away safely at home’ (103). The words that express deviance are not safe – even heavily crossed out – to be left in the trash. Su’s defence against this kind of self-disgust is to go out for an evening with a male friend, Jerry, who, like other masculine figures, such as Hubert, barely appears in the text and features only in fleeting references.

In the novel’s brief second part, Su initially gives up on her love for Mamie Carter, deciding it has been only ‘a fantasy,’ and that ‘Bettina need[s] her’ (159). At the same time, having been fired from her job for producing the negative reviews Sister Gin has prompted her to write, Su begins work on her play, and takes to drinking heavily – moving from ‘Sister Gin’ to ‘sisterly gin’ for her support (197). Bettina, meanwhile, gets a job. This role reversal only furthers their unravelling: Su ultimately leaves Bettina just before Bettina leaves her, and resumes her relationship with Mamie Carter, living alone, however; for, true to her respectable white Southern roots, the latter maintains that living together ‘wouldn’t do’ (184). An interesting aspect of this partnership dance is its implicit comment on diachronic identity, and the ways that shifting sequential selves are in part determined by the relational. Su, for example, recollects her previous lover, Kit, who expected the (then youthful) Su to be nothing but ‘a healthy animal, young and non-parental’ (51). Su, who would have liked to be a little parental to both Kit and her daughter, Sherry, was hurt by this expectation, but conformed nevertheless. With Bettina, on the other hand, until things fall apart, she is painfully correct, finally growing ‘tired of being right.’

Partly in reaction to years of being the breadwinner and the responsible one, Su finally yields to her attraction to ‘decadence in all its forms, including extreme old age’ (33), personified in the figure of Mamie Carter. After a struggle to free herself of repression and fear, the reader might hope she would develop into a more fulfilled midlife, write a successful play and grow old happily beside Mamie. This novel overturns such easy formulae, however, and Su instead becomes a failed playwright, generally somewhat the worse for both drink and rage, which replaces the anxiety of the past: ‘Mamie Carter had given her
freedom from fear, and now she missed fear’ (167). Her bodily correctness has also deserted her:

Her hair needed cutting. Her clothes seemed not so much put on as there – cloth which somehow found a connection around her body one way or another. Her body no longer looked the correct weight even though it had changed little; there was something about the way it padded after Su’s head or fell into a chair below her elbows that made it appear not to be correct in anything at all. (161)

Su’s body, in this passage, has become dog-like, a degenerate echo of the ‘healthy animal’ she once was, her body ‘padding after’ her head and ‘falling’ into chairs. Unlike Constance’s ‘doggy’ quality in Memory Board, however, Su’s canine status implies a bodily deterioration. Furthermore, her head and torso do not function in unison: integrity of movement seems to elude her.

While Su and Bettina reinvent themselves, the older characters – Shirley, Luz, Mamie Carter and friends – undergo less radical changes. Mamie Carter already contains a plethora of identities garnered over a lifetime, some of which seem contradictory. An intellectual, vigilante, mother and lover, she also becomes a politician; and she both argues for the importance of alcohol in killing off precise quantities of brain cells and also, paradoxically, gives it up for Lent (13, 186). Mamie Carter is well aware of the mutability of age identity: she considers it ‘a terrible thing that the mind knew no age at all, could dart from seventy-seven to thirty-two in a fraction of a second without oneself even being aware’ (119). The narrative shows her, undeterred by being in her eighth decade, running for office on the Board of Commissioners for New Hanover, and losing heavily. ‘Her defeat [was] magnificently aided by Su, who discovered her anger just after she began campaigning’ (196). Su’s shifts of identity move her from repression, through drunkenness, into rage. From being ‘not really a member of the Women’s Lib movement, of NOW or anything . . . not a political person’ (38), Su becomes politicised: her version of direct action is to steal pornographic material from newsstands, using her hot flushes as a distraction (170-1). She remains cynical about the possibilities for feminism in this sleepy Southern backwater, however: ‘How can you belong to your sisters in a town like Wilmington?’ she wonders. ‘There’s nobody here except wives’ (169). Her
timing is poor, however, from Mamie’s point of view: it turns out that expressing one’s new-found anger ‘will result in loss of love, yes. And votes’ (197).

Interwoven with issues of ambivalence towards reproduction and parenting is a courageous examination of female rage. Su, during her time with Kit, had been shocked to see her partner’s anger directed at her daughter, Sherry. It was, for Su, ‘the first time she had had broken for her the myth that those angel faces provide their own deterrent to evil, the first time she had ever questioned the assumption: why, you look at that darling little baby and you just know no one could possibly want to hurt it’ (49). From then on, the scene was ‘like a scar across her own inner forehead.’ Furthermore, ‘Su knew she should rescue Sherry from her mother but she could not move – not to take action against her lover’ (49). Caught in her fear of Kip’s rage, and stuck in her role of ‘healthy animal,’ Su ‘knew in her toes that she was acquiring knowledge that would take a lifetime to justify’ (50).

Mamie Carter, who has adult children from her earlier marriage, finds that her offspring are still a cause of anxiety. Her daughter, Imogene, is extricating herself from a disastrous marriage to one Clayton Everett Eagle the Third, who after only three years of wedlock is suing Imogene for half her property – property that came from her family in the first place (117-8). When she says ‘Mother, I’d like to kill him,’ Imogene is not speaking hyperbolically; she is quite seriously planning Clayton’s murder, and has agreed terms with a contract killer. Their conversation leaves Mamie Carter ‘feeling strangely like a murderer also’ (121). This murder is never carried out: instead, Mamie and her friends practise the same ‘witchcraft’ on Clayton that they have with certain unconvicted rapists. The local paper reports that he was found ‘tied, partially nude, to a piece of plywood . . . [t]he most puzzling clue was a note pinned to his shirt reading, Shirley Temples Emeritaæ’ (132). In a delightful irony, Su reads the article in Mamie Carter’s presence, unaware that her lover was responsible for Clayton’s public humiliation. Presumably, he subsequently withdraws all claims on the Wilkerson fortune.

Bettina, on the other hand, is only a surrogate parent. Though childless herself, she is protective towards her younger sister, Adele, even though the
latter is now married with ever-increasing numbers of children herself. In her, Bettina sees ‘the little girl she took everywhere for ten years and chaperoned for another five, . . . the child she felt she had had when her mother indicated that she didn’t mind at all if Bettina, then ten, took over baby Adele in all her manifestations’ (66). Even in that context, it is somewhat inappropriate for the sodden Bettina to urge her sister: ‘Baby, please watch your drinking.’ And Bettina knows it: she ‘wishe[s] she did not say things like she was now going to say.’ Adele, in her turn, is critical of her older sibling, accusing her of being ‘the original drunk of the family, the family drunk, the town drunk . . .’ (67). These relationships are not simple; the complexity of the characters’ interactions parallels their ambivalence toward reproduction and parenthood.

Despite moments of southern gothic and confusion in the plot, this delightful, brave and funny novel shows the ways that older women’s repressed desire comes to the surface. Ironically, though, Barbara Macdonald was roundly critical of *Sister Gin* in her essay ‘The Power of the Old Woman’ (1983). She declared:

> the women in mid-life are depicted as crazy, funny, disorganized, unable to get along with each other, unable to get their act together, always complaining about their physical ailments, and the old women are also funny and crazy but nevertheless organized, united, more willing to take risks, and physically . . . strong. (93)

Macdonald goes on to say that ‘it is such a good story that I smile with remembered pleasure as I write this and nearly forget how ageist it is. But ageist it is’ (93). I find it difficult to agree with her, and even Macdonald admits that Arnold’s novel is ‘a good story,’ which offers ‘a strong Yes to society’s No’ (93). *Sister Gin* came in for some negative criticism in the 1980s: at the time, feminism insisted that only positive images of lesbians could counter the stigma of the past, a stigma that novels like Radclyffe Hall’s *The Well of Loneliness* had only perpetuated. *Sister Gin*, though genuinely thoughtful on the subject of older age and informed by the radicalism of the 1970s, flew in the face of the second-wave credo that ‘all women are wonderful.’ Su and Bettina are anything but wonderful; they drink, their lives are a mess, and their relationships are, at best, shaky. However, the text, even in its gothic reaches, offers surprising and
original characters rather than stereotypes, whose rage, insecurity and fear inform their actions and motives. Arnold’s novel also shows the struggles towards feminism – and self-actualisation – of midlife women trapped in an oppressive environment; and it documents the sexuality of older women, including that of mothers, in ways that are rare for the period.

**Mary Meigs and The Time Being**

Written some two decades after *Sister Gin*, Meigs’ *The Time Being* (1997) deals with similar issues of chaotic relationships and the sexuality of older age. More realistic and more frankly autobiographical than *Sister Gin*, Meigs’ narrative is based on her experience of falling in love by correspondence with a woman in Australia, while Meigs herself was based in Canada. Though long-distance relationships have become a commonplace in the twenty-first century through internet dating, ‘Marj’ and ‘Kate’s’ story is remarkable both because it took place in the only-just-computer-literate 1990s and for the age of its protagonists: mid-seventies and late sixties respectively at the relationship’s inception. Like *Sister Gin*, *The Time Being* paints a picture of a new love and a love unravelling: the difference here is that Meigs’ novel shows the start and demise of the same relationship, and contains a strong sense of foreboding, and of the mutability of desire, from the outset.

Diachronic identity is also a theme of *The Time Being*, but presented as the collection of selves that are gathered over a lifetime rather than the clashes and splits inherent in midlife crises. Marj and Kate contain their younger personae, their ‘best’ and ‘worst’ selves, rather than undergoing radical shifts in the course of the story. Also like *Sister Gin*, *The Time Being* presents lesbian ontology as defined neither by reproduction nor post-reproduction, enabling lesbian age identity to configure itself in modes that are free of life-course ‘stages.’ The two texts show other thematic similarities: for example, the effect of alcohol, which acts as a catalyst for the relationship’s downfall, appears in both: while Su and Bettina ‘drank away their sexual attraction’ (Arnold 54), Marj and Kate row about who drinks what, when, and with what result. Most
crucially, both novels portray the sexuality of older lesbians, re-embedding this aspect of female ontology into the discourses surrounding age.

In other ways, the novels are profoundly different. Whereas *Sister Gin* is humorous and bizarre, with slightly exaggerated characters and unlikely plotlines, Meigs’ story is told with sober realism. Her protagonists – products of cheap 1990s air travel – engage in international friendships, unlike Arnold’s women, who rarely set foot outside Wilmington. Meigs’ novel checks the fantasy world of Arnold’s narrative. Its closeness to lived experience emerges not just in the style and genre of *The Time Being* but also in its political vision: her characters write novels and poetry, make films, and go to conferences, their attempts to change the world embodying the values of the post-Reagan and Thatcher era. This is a more nuanced politics than that of Arnold’s characters, who take the law into their own hands through somewhat implausible direct action – stealing porn and pillorying rapists.

Meigs, a Canadian writer, artist and film-maker, lived in Montreal until her death in 2002, at the age of eighty-five. She was working on a book about ageing at the time, *Beyond Recall*, which I have been unable to trace; it seems likely it remains unpublished. *The Time Being* came into print only five years before her death, showing her readiness to embark – in her mid-seventies – on a new relationship with a woman on the other side of the world. In this openness, however, there is also a touch of naïveté: for surely it is excessively sanguine to hope that a relationship begun at a distance, with so much scope for projection, and based so little on bodiliness, might succeed. Such relationships are often predicated on anxiety about intimacy, the closeness that is grounded in the dailiness of shared lives. ‘Marj’ and ‘Kate’ seem to be untroubled by such doubts.

Their relationship begins when Marj receives a letter from Kate, who has seen Marj in the film, *Strangers in Good Company*, a low-budget docu-drama which has become something of a lesbian cult classic. Names have been changed in *The Time Being*, but otherwise the text remains close to Meigs’ experience, so much so that it is difficult to consider it anything but life-writing. (Similarly, in the film mentioned above, Meigs plays a version of herself.) Kate’s letter is buried for several months, but Marj finally unearths and answers it. Kate
is a teacher in Sydney, a lesbian, intelligent, passionate, keen to engage in a correspondence followed by phone calls; after a time, the two women declare themselves in love, and arrange to meet. Marj flies to Sydney, and passes a long visit with Kate, meeting her friends, seeing Australia, and attending a conference. Their differences are evident during this trip, but only emerge as insurmountable when Kate visits Canada. Marj’s poor planning, Kate’s fatigue (she has recently undergone surgery, but the twenty-four hour flight from Sydney to Montreal would be exhausting in any event), plus the tiring round of travelling and celebrations Marj has organised, prove to be their undoing: they part barely on speaking terms. The disappointment of both women is palpable.

The importance of writing *per se* is a pivotal theme of the novel, which describes the interleaving of two life-texts. It is significant, for example, that Marj and Kate initially ‘meet’ through the exchange of letters. However, the gap between what is imagined/written and what actually happens in the two women’s lives becomes crucial to an understanding of the relationship’s failure. This disjuncture between hope and reality adds to the ominous note that is present throughout. The outcome is never a secret from the reader, no doubt because Meigs was writing the beginning of their relationship at the same time that she was living its demise. She records ‘resum[ing] work on *The Time Being*, not the time with Kate that has just passed, suffocated and gasping for breath, but their newborn time, the beginning through a chance dialogue between two old women, each imagining the other with growing joy’ (144). The book itself is a site of conflict, for *The Time Being* was originally planned as a joint project in which ‘[e]ach of [them] would keep her voice’, a book that would render ‘the juxtaposition of tenderness and passion and time in relation to’ both (16). Ultimately the project becomes Marj’s alone when they separate: or, more accurately, it becomes two books, for Kate claims that she will write her own account – a book I have not been able to trace. The book they intended to write together, ‘which should have joy as its essence’ (37), was spoken of before the two women ever met. The fantasy of a shared life-text is seductive but difficult to achieve: the precedent, for Marj, has been set by several women she knows, couples who have produced collections of poetry together. (She was probably
familiar, also, with Barbara Macdonald’s and Cynthia Rich’s jointly written book, *Look Me in the Eye.* Marj, in a dream, sees ‘two books, close together in a single block; their titles were Truth and Real’ (37). She interprets these books as representing her voice and Kate’s, which would ‘separate and merge . . . [and] follow [their] bodies’ rhythms’ (37). Her friends are doubtful about this shared project, and indeed by the time Marj/Meigs starts to write the book, the relationship is in decline. This situation is reflected in the language, which presages disaster from the outset: ‘clouds’, ‘rocks’ and ‘flotsam,’ the vocabulary of a stormy sea, is the favoured metaphor for the irreconcilable differences that threaten Marj and Kate’s new love (11, 17, 12). Ultimately, the linking of their lives has become, instead of the ‘soulmateship’ they hoped for, a shipwreck on the ‘sharp rocks just under the shining surface’ (16-17).

Ownership of material is also an issue here: once freely given, it turns out that the narrative of one’s life is impossible to take back. Kate would ‘come to think of the gift of her life story with sick regret’ (38). No longer a ““duet for two voices in unison” . . . in due course their book together will divide into two books, each a monument to their love, and to the discovery of their differences’ (17). Just as painful is their argument about what Marj should include in her narrative: ‘If you leave out the love affair, there’s a wonderful story of a growing FRIENDSHIP . . . potentially a much better “read” . . . between elderly women, much more universally appealing,’ Kate insists. In her opinion, Marj’s account of their lives as lovers is a ‘huge literary blunder’ (148). Marj is angry that Kate wants to ‘cut . . . out [the] heart’ of her book; Kate is indignant about the literary use of their intimacy, which she sees as private; she characterises it as ‘deliberate plunder’ (149). The ethical problems of writing about an intimacy such as this, when the relationship is over but the other person is still living, come into sharp relief. Meigs perhaps considered it enough to change the name of her lover; Kate did not. Both felt themselves to be right. Marj is left to complete the project alone, and *The Time Being* becomes a book within a book; for writing it is part of the narrative, and sheds light on an aspect of the conflict between them. Its title, intended to imply their ‘time’ of ‘being’ together, instead becomes prophetic of the affair’s unravelling, resuming its idiomatic meaning:
something provisional, or a short-term arrangement. By the end of the tale, their 'time being . . . has become time choked with dust' (134).

Selfhood here is also depicted as diachronic, for a recurrent feature of age identity is its mutability. Before they meet, Marj and Kate discuss the fact of their oldness, and decide that they are ‘‘two elderly women’’ in whom reside the great lovers in their prime’ (13). Both implicit and explicit in The Time Being is the idea that a fully engaged sexuality is possible in the upward years, but also that previous selves are ‘contained’ or ‘reside in’ the aged self. Marj feels she is falling in love, and Kate deals with this possibility not on an emotional level, but ‘as she addresses every important and difficult question; she seeks evidence and logical explanation’ (13). Their differences emerge even before they meet, but are accentuated by time together: identity, it seems, is not just diachronic, but also relational. In response to Kate’s criticism, a series of Marjes emerge: ‘when a charge is made, Marj feels her identity changing, like Wittgenstein’s rabbit-duck, the image that can be either rabbit or duck, depending on how you look at it’ (138).

Sex and sexuality, while presented as important issues in age identity, are in fact marginal to the relationship’s failure. Though Marj is aware that falling in love at seventy-five may cause amusement, she finds that, the day after she and Kate have made love, she ‘inhabits her new-old body uncritically, spreads herself from the inside out, freed from her ingrown imagination which has exaggerated the sharpness of her bones and the irreversible signs of old age’ (35). The ‘new-old’ body underscores the co-existence of different aspects of embodied selfhood, often experienced in consciousness at the same moment. In a rather conventional shift into earlier sequential selves – for sexual desire is frequently seen as rejuvenating – ‘they are young, they are going to make love with the lithe movements of youth, they will forget the daytime facts of age, their young faces will approach each other’ (33). Older age is part of ‘daytime’ reality, to be forgotten when night comes: this notion implies a curious periodicity of shifting identities. On the other hand, Marj’s prophecy that ‘old age will save [her] from desire in its usual sense’ (33) is a positive construction of erotic love between elders. The aporia of youth and age is played out in the sexual coming
together of Marj and Kate, as ‘[t]heir two dissimilar bodies recognize a long, predetermined assent’ (28). They are not too old to make love; but the text concedes to cultural norms enough to link sex with youth. On the other hand, the hope that they ‘are too old . . . to be repeating the youthful patterns’ of destructive behaviour also proves to be unfounded (67).

Rather like Sarton, who says in her documentary film, *A World of Light*, that she wanted to ‘make old age into a work of art’ (Meigs 117), Marj imagines she and Kate can ‘make their love into a work of art as they live it’ (23). Meigs has in a sense succeeded in this, but perhaps not in the way she intended: she acknowledges that this fantasy was a ‘perilous belief’ (23). However ill-starred this central relationship was, it is important that narratives of older lesbian sexuality are available on bookshelves so that the sexuate character of old subjects be reintroduced into the discourses of age. Indeed, as with *Sister Gin*, the very disastrousness of the relationship supports my argument: Marj and Kate do not cling to each other as a ‘last chance’ at happiness. The mess they create argues against age ideology in all kinds of ways. They do not aim for ‘serenity’, companionship, or the comfort of habit. There is no doubt that the connection between ‘Marj’ and ‘Kate’ is both passionate and erotic. The narrative opens with Meigs’ description of their love:

the story that is born in the imagination, the vision of phantom bodies growing close to one another, precisely touching with imagined hands that rove knowingly, and the awful daring of imagined mouths joining lightly, then with a passion that sends tremors coursing down the two bodies, so many miles apart. (9)

Alongside the acknowledgement of desire, here, is the recognition both of distance – which makes the bodies ‘phantom,’ the hands and mouths ‘imagined’ – and of the risk they are taking. The idea of the old engaging in erotic activity is difficult to countenance precisely because the juxtaposition of the sexuate and the mortal is an image that has long troubled the western cultural imaginary. Queer theorist Jonathan Dollimore argues that this connection, like all ideologies, does not announce itself. ‘Some things remain unknown not because they are occluded or unspoken, but because they circulate constantly and visibly as
commonplaces . . . [T]he commonplace works as a kind of disavowal, allowing us to see and not see at the same time’ (xii).

It comes as no surprise, in the light of this taboo, that Marj and Kate initially have doubts about acting on their desires. They have surmised, before the event, that their love will be ‘a delicious exchange of sweet sensuality – like radiant heat, not necessarily sexy,’ and that ‘[o]rgasms are not compulsory’ (94, 34). However, the ‘awful daring’ enables them to overcome their ‘love-angsts’ (14): both women realise that sex will be ‘the affirmation of their embodied life together . . . They are lovers now’ (34). Meigs’ protagonists disrupt the life-course model whose discourses dictate the activities and roles appropriate to each developmental stage. Age ideology offers women in their sixties and seventies limited roles, generally those of ‘grandmother’ or ‘crone.’ Marj and Kate sidestep both, remaining creative, politicised, loving – in short, women still in process. Greer’s ‘seven ages’ do not allow for the phase ‘elderly lover.’ An older lesbian sexuality is in every sense beyond the ‘mirror of reproduction,’ reconfiguring the relation between sex, oldness and parental roles.

Perhaps as a result, *The Time Being* does not depict embodied oldness as a problem. A friend of Marj’s writes: ‘Isn’t it exciting that life gets better and better as you get older?’ (24). Age encompasses the selves of earlier times, and Marj and Kate delight in their physical intimacy: ‘[e]ach is newly known and unknown to the other, each is exploring a new world with old maps, has suddenly urgent questions about wants and needs’ (34). It is not the sexual ‘wants and needs’ that cause this relationship to fail, but emotional and social ones. Instead of the hope they both nurtured, that ‘[t]hey will never quarrel,’ and that their ‘differences might enrich [them], rather than give pain’ (18, 93), these differences prove disruptive and distressing. In contrast to the carefully planned itinerary that Kate organised for Marj when she visited Sydney, Marj’s arrangements for welcoming Kate in Canada are chaotic, resulting in exhaustion and conflict; when it turns out that the friend who is to meet them and help with their luggage is waiting on the wrong dock, Kate accuses Marj of being ‘arrogant and self-centred’ (107). The two women find themselves, like animals at the zoo, ‘in an unlivable habitat’ (139).
As in *Sister Gin*, alcohol is another cause of dissent. For Kate, Marj’s discomfort with ‘drinkie-time’ seems ‘a huge denial of myself’ (80), and Marj’s refusal to take more than fourteen drops of brandy makes her seem a puritan and a killjoy. The teetotal Marj, however, regards the brandy bottle ‘with dislike; it was her enemy, a kind of Iago who would turn Kate against her.’ She notices a ‘connection between brandy and the intemperate decibels of logic’ (91, 93). For Kate’s pre-prandial drink is often followed by a ‘logic session,’ a debate in which Kate becomes more and more angry. Although ‘[t]hey have been, with love in their hearts, preparing a map for disagreement,’ the map is of no help when the full extent of their incompatibility emerges: ‘somehow they are facing each other and collide before there is time to stop’ (18). Like the ‘old maps’ – reflecting old bodies? – of their new love, the ‘map for disagreement’ underscores ways in which geography is central to the narrative: for if Marj and Kate are to live together, one of the women must change continents. Their discussion about this – before they even meet – does not go well. Kate floats a third possibility:

“We might think of living in England,” she says, on the telephone. Marj answers, “I don’t want to live in England.” Silence. One of Kate’s silences. Then she says, “I can dream, can’t I?” Kate is staking out her space of dreaming; she wants Marj to enter it, to roam there with her freely, and Marj refuses to set foot in it. Is this [Marj’s] profound yielding of autonomy? (25)

This self-deprecat ing passage shows Marj/Meigs taking at least partial responsibility for the break-up. She finds that it is one thing to promise over the phone a ‘profound yielding of autonomy,’ and quite another to imagine moving to Europe, even in fantasy.

One of the most glaring differences between the lovers is their respective attitudes to both their own sexuality and to the lesbian communities they live in. Marj has already noticed ‘the faint mockery in Kate’s voice that marks the distance she puts between herself and the lesbian world,’ but is still surprised when her questions about Kate’s ‘relationship to the lesbian world community’ stir up a storm of conflict (53). Kate, it turns out, pretended that she and a
previous partner were “‘best friends’ . . . [and] successfully practised the art of “half-hiding”’ (54). Work colleagues who knew of her sexuality, she imagined, would be sad [for her] because she had read textbooks which stated that homosexuality was abnormal or was a communicable disease. She knew that this was the general view. If people didn’t show symptoms of dislike or horror it was because they didn’t know that she was “one of the unmentionables.” (54)

This reply stirs up ‘panic’ in Marj, born of a guilt that she has asked the question rather than worries about Kate’s internalised homophobia. For Marj, the lesbian community ‘is my family . . . my world’ (55). But Kate ‘wants to show that Marj will have more fun with her, than with them’ (55, original italics). She is not pleased or curious but angry when Marj suggests Emily Dickinson was a lesbian: ‘Where is your proof?’ she demands (66).

Kate’s ability to remain closeted – to act the part of ‘best friends’ with her partner – is based on her talent for performance, which proves a further challenge for the relationship. Performativity is a theme throughout: for example, Kate first sees Marj on film and is drawn to the ‘character’ she sees on screen. There is even a hint of their love as mutual performance. When Marj dons Kate’s dressing gown, the latter ‘look[s] Marj up and down . . . “It looks nice on you,” she says. It is the first of her invitations to Marj to wear her, to play her part, it is a bit of the theatre that will bring about a communion of identities’ (37). Later, Marj finds Kate’s ability to perform a closeness which neither feels deeply troubling: ‘Does she think that she is on stage again, playing herself as heroine, playing soulmateship with Marj?’ (118).

Even worse, both women feel the need to pretend perfect harmony at social occasions; in Canada, after a fight, ‘the two of them have exactly three minutes to transform themselves into apparently loving friends’ (139). Kate leads these performances, ‘playing the lover . . . fully aware of her audience . . . inviting Marj to join her as her happy partner’ (114). For Kate this is not hypocrisy, but ‘the hard work that [goes] into her public performances;’ she reproaches Marj for not appreciating the effort (114). Eventually, such clashes of opinion make them irreconcilable, despite the good wishes of friends, ‘who wish them well and who love the idea of love’ (142).
The pain of their separation is described in the text through vivid imagery: ‘In Canada Marj remembers how love seemed then to drain from her heart, to be replaced by cold liquid like embalming fluid’ (91). ‘Cold liquid’ suggests the shock of freezing water, or the counter-aphrodisiac of a cold shower; ‘embalming fluid’ goes a stage further, the language of the mortuary implying that their relationship is now a corpse. Meigs here evokes the link between the age of her protagonists and death like the ‘mortal atmosphere’ of the Crown household in *Memory Board*. The ambiguity remains: does the analogy of ‘embalming’ suggest the death of their love bears any relation to the protagonists’ proximity to death? Perhaps the two things are inseparable: for there may be an inflexibility in the psyche of older age that makes compromise more difficult. Perhaps Marj and Kate would have been able to work out their conflict if they had been, say, thirty-five and twenty-eight when they met, instead of seventy-five and sixty-eight. This is perhaps an imponderable question, but, significantly, Meigs herself does not pose it. Rather the text implies that their love was simply doomed from the outset, that the differences were insurmountable, and that the ‘sharp rocks’ under the surface would scupper their ‘ship’ sooner or later. Certainly the ending was more painful because of the high hopes and joyful imaginings both held at the start.

**Concluding remarks**

A number of thematic and stylistic similarities link *The Time Being* with *Sister Gin*, even though they were written some twenty years apart and are so different in tone. Both, although they draw on autobiographical material, are fictionalised and written in the third person. It is almost inevitable that the reader confuses Meigs with Marj, and June Arnold with Su McCulvey. The process of writing is included as an aspect of the plot in both cases, although it is treated differently: Meigs allows herself to examine the literal production of *The Time Being* in her narrative, while Arnold has her protagonist write plays and book reviews. Both novels also effect a dialogue with other writers on age: May Sarton’s *As We Are Now*, for example, is mentioned in Su’s reviews, both positively and negatively; Meigs comments on Sarton’s documentary film, *A World of Light*. There is also a
direct dialogue, though less explicit, between Arnold’s and Meigs’ texts. Meigs, writing of older lesbian lovers, separated by an ocean, whose relationship fails over differences, ‘wrongness’ and alcohol, tests and modifies Arnold’s novel, whose lovers, in contrast, are held together by geography but also come apart because of wrongness, difference and drink. Most importantly, both novels allow older women a sexuality that age ideology attempts to wrest from them.

Both narratives develop the idea of incorrectness: their protagonists have imperfections of both excess and lack, which make them excellent anti-role models. While Bettina incorporates both extremes, excess and lack, Su loses her correctness in the course of the narrative; Marj, similarly, is ‘forgetful,’ ‘imperfect,’ and aware of her ‘wrongness’ in the exacting eyes of Kate (133, 128, 132), who wants to get their relationship ‘absolutely right’ (96). Where Su is ‘sloppy’, Marj is ‘slapdash’ (106). This wrongness and sloppiness are expressed in the characters’ bodiliness: while Su and Bettina morph into different aspects of themselves, and even change shape, seeming to change places in the uncomfortable dance that is their relationship, Marj and Kate are more stable in their differences, which emerge gradually to cause their undoing. For the latter pair, identity is slightly more established, but contains the sequential selves each has collected over a lifetime: Kate the teacher, sophist, drinker, performer, planner, and Marj the writer, teetotaller, performer, and ‘slapdash’ organiser of exhausting holidays. However, Marj can slide into another aspect of self in response to criticism, hinting at a continued shifting of sequential selves into older age (138).

Marj and Kate, like Su and Bettina, are realistically imperfect characters; their slipping into other aspects of self actually contributes to the chaos of their relationships, overturning the age ideology that demands serenity, habit and fixity of identity in elders. It is also significant that *Sister Gin* was written in the 1970s when, as Macdonald pointed out, feminism had ‘just come of age; she [was] barely twenty-one’ (33). (Arnold herself, on the other hand, would have been in her late forties when her book appeared). Indeed, since Macdonald wrote those words in 1979, and *Sister Gin* was first published in 1975, the feminism of that time might almost be said to be adolescent, with all the
discomforts of that developmental stage. Certainly a more nuanced voice typifies the feminist stance of *The Time Being*, published in 1997; the characters, too, have come of age and come to age: coincidentally, the twenty-two years that separate their publication dates are echoed in the characters’ age differences: Kate is sixty-eight in comparison to Bettina’s forty-six, and Su is in her early fifties, against Marj’s mid-seventies. This comparison may be fanciful, but it reflects changing attitudes over those two decades. Cultural norms are powerful imperatives, and while Arnold could get away with a representation of midlife lesbian sexuality, including Mamie Carter as the novel’s only ‘practising’ lesbian over seventy, Meigs, in the more liberal 90s, was arguably able to go a step further and portray two women lovers in their (much more) upward years. The humour of Arnold’s writing is perhaps an attempt to lighten its radical message: that women in the most conventional of settings may be lovers with other women, even – or perhaps especially – when they are old.

This is the crucial cultural work of both novels: they depict age identity as inclusive of sexual identity. Furthermore, that sexual identity may well be an othered or ‘deviant’ one. As Dollimore says, ‘the idea of deviation – itself the conceptual heart of the idea of perversion – is about a movement which is dangerous or subversive: to deviate = to go astray’ (xvii). Arnold’s and Meigs’ characters are deviant old women, perversely pursuing sexual desires that refuse heteronormativity. Their relationships are problematic, perhaps in part because these characters embody a sexuality that is placed at the margins. This taboo was of course stronger in the past: there are novels – I have already mentioned Hall’s *Well of Loneliness*, for example, and, more recently, Anna Wilson’s *Cactus* (1980) – whose narratives imply that happy and stable lesbian relationships have been all but impossible for certain generations. Does age play a part in the difficulty? Certainly, in *Cactus* the older pair of ex-lovers cannot find a way to live together; but then, in this depressing story, the younger couple also run into problems.

The idea that the relation between old bodies and any kind of sexuality is inherently problematic has a certain currency. This prejudice emerges even in the writing of some gerontologists, whose work might be expected to
deconstruct age ideology rather than shore it up. Age critic Mike Featherstone, for example, exhibits a certain age-sex anxiety when he recommends cybersex for elders as a way to elide the physical body from erotic transactions. Sex in a chat room, he asserts, ‘enables the avoidance of being identified as an elderly person . . . Within the confines of the virtual world, everyone can potentially look as youthful, fit and beautiful as everyone else, provided they purchase or design the necessary simulation’ (230-1, 238-9). Featherstone takes it as given that everyone wants to appear ‘youthful, fit and beautiful,’ and that having an old body is best left out of the equation. It is this simple assumption – youth is good, old age is bad – that underpins all decline theory, and that he resolutely refuses to question.

While ‘virtual’ sex may have a leveling effect by removing physical disability, Featherstone’s idea presupposes that the participants have the means and desire to acquire the necessary technology; in the present economic climate, with pensions (in the UK, at least) lagging so far behind wages, his theory tends towards elitism. Furthermore, such a notion ignores the importance of companionship and intimacy, and these are, arguably, the aspects of closeness most valued by older subjects. Featherstone’s argument also rather misses the point that sexual activity has its source in the body; the elision of bodiliness in his scenario creates a kind of disembodied sexual subject. Perhaps a good many people do want to avoid being seen to be old, and cybersex may well become a commonplace for future generations; but the suggestion that this is an answer to bodily infirmity and loss of youthful appearance needs, at the least, to be extremely circumspect.

There is a further reason, I suspect, to urge older bodies to achieve only virtual union, one almost certainly buried in the gerontophobic unconscious: it sidesteps the spectacle, so troubling to the cultural imaginary, of sex and (near-) death in close proximity. It is interesting to speculate whether this cultural discomfort is more intense in response to same-sex coupling or less so, and this question is addressed in the subsequent chapter. Given the already othered character of lesbian and gay sexuality, I would surmise that the old and queer carry a double stigma. The narratives emerging from this experience are
especially well placed to undermine the ideologies that deny older sexual bodiliness and create anxiety by associating sex and death.

The texts I analyse here do not allow ideology to ‘wizen the middle years.’ Instead they depict a lesbian sexuality that both delights in its deviance and remains undiminished by age. Meigs’ words incorporate the ambivalence and delight of the older lesbian lover, with the slightest twinge of age anxiety: ‘Post facto, [Marj] will smile – a smile tinted with the old ineradicable guilt and, because she is seventy-five, a small new fear – that she will provoke smiles herself’ (35). The inward smile of new love is juxtaposed with the potential for malice, the grin of other’s ridicule. Relationships continue to be problematic in older age; age alone is not a reason to settle for an unsatisfactory relationship. But perhaps the wisdom of age also allows us to recognise love’s imperfections. Even Su’s and Mamie Carter’s relationship has its difficulties, including their age difference: ‘Don’t you dare die, Mamie Carter Wilkerson,’ Su pleads inaudibly to her lover’s back (130).

Bodies do change as we age. But these bodies need not be viewed as ugly or burdensome, as Featherstone implies. Furthermore, to attempt the elision of such bodies by electronic means resonates uncomfortably with the cultural erasure of older lesbians. Terry Castle suggests that ‘by looking at . . . ambitious and self-conscious literary works [we can] fully appreciate the way in which the apparitional lesbian is “brought back to life” – imbued with breadth, heft, and charisma – in the later twentieth century lesbian imagination’ (55). Meigs’ and Arnold’s protagonists – indeed, all old lesbian characters imbued with full bodiliness – rather than ‘seeming to “wave off” the intrusive pleasures of the flesh . . . cannot help but also signal . . . that fall into flesh which is to come’ (Castle 65). Marj and Kate, Su, Bettina and Mamie are all irresistibly incarnate, putting forward their own arguments against the ideology of age that seeks to disembody and de-sexualise older lesbians, and by extension all women in their latter years.

Until recently there was a lacuna where the narratives and legislation about older lesbians and gays should have been. A social worker friend employed in a London borough in the 1980s offers a fine example. Interviewing
a potential colleague, she asked him what provision should be made for gay pensioners. His amused answer was: ‘There are no gay pensioners!’ He did not get the job, of course; and it is crucial that such questions continue to be asked. It is encouraging, in a small way, to note that people who believe older sexualities should be acknowledged in all their variety occupy minor niches of power.

The furtherance of this kind of political consciousness also takes place through the narratives of older lesbian experience. For, as Kirkpatrick surmised, lesbians do have ‘a different middle age,’ and perhaps it follows that they also have a different old age, not in any essentialised sense, but in terms of their place in the social scheme and of attitudes to female roles and reproduction. By offering particular and different perspectives, writing by older lesbian authors can illuminate more general issues of ageing and age identity. In particular, narratives of old lesbian sexuality show that all women remain sexual beings into their upward years. Mary Russo believed that ‘[a]ge and aging are insufficiently interrogated in feminist theory perhaps because until recently old age for women exceeded the mirror of reproduction’ (1999 24). Her argument is that fertility methods enabling post-menopausal women to bear children offer a useful disruption to life-course narratives. My argument is the converse. Because lesbian sexuality stands already outside ‘the mirror of reproduction,’ it allows lesbian experience to configure itself differently, moving ‘in and out of’ the ideologies of gendered ageing in the process. The examination of lesbian feminist texts offers a chance to refigure the relationship between age, sexuality and reproductivity. Not only do such texts ‘disrupt the developmental model of a woman’s life and emphasise an untimeliness in relations between women’ (24); they offer a route towards the reinstatement of sexuality – and sexual difference – in the interrogation of age identity.
VII

The dialogue with death: considerations of mortality in work by Marilyn Hacker and May Sarton.

Dead is dead yes
dead is really dead yes
to be dead is to be really dead
yes to be dead is to be really dead.

*Gertrude Stein*, Making of Americans (*1995*) 498

The end of the subject and of meaning
is surely promised by death

*Jackie Stacey*, Teratologies (*1997*) 79

*Introduction: a continuum of perspectives*

Death, as both Stein and Stacey remind us, is the unequivocal end of subjectivity. Meditations on one’s own mortality tend to evoke feelings of anxiety and anticipated loss; indeed, psychologist and spiritual teacher Ram Dass points out that ‘it is nearly impossible for the Ego to imagine its own demise’ (33). Does this imaginative feat get easier as we age? And should we struggle towards an apperception of our own mortality, or persist in the comfort of denial? Clearly, this is an area of existence – like ageing itself – where experience and attitudes vary vastly.

It may be useful, since diachronic identity is a model I have used throughout, to consider that aspect of the processual self that comes to contemplate death; and based on such a hypothesis, it seems that this facet of selfhood may develop at any age, or not at all. In this sense, then, death need not be just the province of the old: young adults and those in midlife may be equally haunted by their own mortality, or that of others. When Gullette claims that ‘[a]ge identity’s community of selves is panoptic enough to incorporate . . . ghosts’ (2004 127), she implies that there are some aspects of self we reject or deny, but which continue to haunt us nonetheless. Gullette’s phrase can be also be used to consider mortality as one of the ‘ghosts.’ The ‘dead’ selves of the past may co-exist in the psyche with the dead self of the future; and the
ambivalence with which we consider our own mortality echoes the ambivalence or denial felt towards certain past identities.

Jackie Stacey flags up the ways in which western medical discourse insists on a straightforward and unconditional preference for life; any ambivalence in this regard is heavily proscribed (241). Elsewhere she writes: ‘Within a system that seeks to control life, death can only be recorded as a failure’ (27). In her terms, ambivalence – the unflinching scrutiny of death, and even a leaning towards it in preference to life – becomes an act of transgression. This ambivalence emerges in various forms in the theoretical writing I have referred to. Although texts by age critics Macdonald and Copper, Gullette and Woodward engage, for the most part, in an amicable dialogue, reaching approximate agreement on the political issues surrounding age, when it comes to mortality and its relation to older age these thinkers show a marked divergence of opinion.

The four thinkers’ attitudes are roughly bifurcated. Macdonald and Woodward consider death as something inevitable to be faced with courage, and to see age’s increasing bodily vulnerability as part of that process. Copper and Gullette, on the other hand, are indignant about the common association of death with old age, considering it to be a further manifestation of age ideology. Copper complains that ‘the assumption that we mid-life or older women are preoccupied with death is ageist. The old should not be seen as standing with death at their elbow’ (84). She was particularly outraged to find ‘that virulent stereotype – the age/death connection – unabashedly expounded in a group committed to exploring . . . ageism!’ (84). For her, any consideration of mortality, even by older women themselves, showed the kind of age prejudice she abhorred; and those who wished to examine feelings about death were not welcome in her ‘age consciousness’ meetings. Copper resented the implication that only older people die. Death does not hover near the cradle, the motorcycle, the toxic workplace, high bridges or battlefields. Death is a forbidden subject with all but the old, who are expected to bear the burden . . . my own demise is as distant from my conscious mind as it was when I was twenty. (84)
The result, she argues, in this version of age ideology, is that ‘[t]he old are seen as half-dead already’ (85). Gullette takes up the refrain, two decades on: ‘Aging discourse slides into dying discourse without critique,’ she writes (2004 107). The problem, for Gullette, originates in an excessive focus on the bodiliness of ageing: ‘It’s as if the body got gradually more natural, more bodily over a lifetime. Not slowly more expressive . . . but quickly more fearful’ (107, original italics). The ageing psyche, she argues, is ignored, and decline theory is often confirmed by the inevitability of mortality: ‘Decline always has the death card up its sleeve’ (107). The answer, for Gullette, is the construction of counternarratives as a way of ‘living in one’s body resistantly’ (109). The anxiety that links death with age also receives comment from life-writing theorist Nancy K. Miller, with a slightly different slant: she suggests that this fear becomes deflected onto the signifiers of age. For her, it is ‘possible to see the anxiety about appearance that often haunts one’s fifties as a way of displacing – or postponing – the crisis of mortality’ (2002 108).

Conversely, Macdonald and Woodward configure bodily changes as central to a processual life-course, and see mortality as the last of these shifts and thus merely ordinary. Death, they argue, because we are mortal, concerns us all. It is something to be grappled with, considered, and understood, not rejected as either ageist or part of decline ideology. For Macdonald, consideration of death meant coming to terms with her body in transition, a body which she realised had two jobs, ‘to make sure that I live, and to make sure that I die. All my life it has been as busy with my dying as my living’ (114). Her own mortality did not fill her with dread; on the contrary she, like May Sarton, ‘like[d] growing old’ (19), and felt that pondering her demise was integral to that process. At times, Macdonald viewed the physical changes of age as exhilarating:

I had not thought that it could be like this. There are days of excitement when I feel almost a kind of high with the changes taking place in my body, even though I know the inevitable course my body is taking will lead to debilitation and death . . . . My own body is going through a process that only my body knows about. I never grew old before; never died before. I don’t really know how it’s done. (19)
This view of mortality configures age’s embodied shifts as positive, because organic and necessary. Macdonald’s sense of wonder at her body’s particular knowledge emerged, she felt, from a connectedness with her foremothers: ‘I belong to all the women who carried my cells for generations and my body remembers how for each generation this matter of ending is done’ (19). Kathleen Woodward also connects theories of mortality with this generational ‘mirror.’ She confirms and nuances Macdonald’s appreciation of embodied ageing as signifying mortality in a useful way, asserting that although ‘we may wish to reject our body in old age . . . we may find the strength to accept it through a kind of familiarity with its images reflected to us in the bodies of generations older’ (1991 71). Woodward continues:

At the same time there may be a limit beyond which we cannot go. At this limit . . . being repelled by (or even disinterested in) one’s own body may be part of the process of accommodating death . . . . This would be a process through which we acknowledge the reality we would like to reject but cannot . . . a process which is a sign of achieved psychic organization, not failure. (71)

The mirror stage does not cease to affect the ageing subject until she is very close to death, Woodward argues, citing Simone de Beauvoir’s account of her mother’s demise. Towards the very end of her life, Madame de Beauvoir ‘had passed beyond the mirror stage of old age: “She had not asked for a mirror again: her dying face did not exist for her”’ (Woodward 1991 71). The ‘limit beyond which we cannot go,’ then, is reached at the point of death: this rejection of one’s reflection, Woodward implies, means the mirror phase is complete, implying that the subject has achieved acceptance of, or at least resignation to, its passing out of existence.

The literature of age identity contains examples of both poles –acceptance and rejection of the older self as mortal – as well as writing which locates itself in the space between. My own feelings on death are aligned with Macdonald’s and Woodward’s, perhaps because my psychotherapy training encourages acknowledging all aspects and processes of the life course. But I am not beyond being moved by other perspectives: Having Our Say (1993), for example, the joint memoir of Bessie and Sadie Delany, claims to be an account of the sisters’
‘First 100 Years.’ Published when they were 103 and 105 respectively, the book’s title jokingly suggests that they may have another century apiece; being over a hundred does not necessarily mean death becomes a preoccupation. Clearly, this claim to endless longevity is tongue-in-cheek. While the book is vaunted as being about ‘living “forever,”’ the sisters are not naïve about death, or about anything else: these two extraordinary African-Americans both had professional careers – Bessie as a dentist, Sadie a teacher – and survived a century of racism only slightly attenuated, in their opinion, by the civil rights movement (282-3). Bessie’s closing words indicate both surprise that her story might have general appeal, and a thoughtfulness about her mortality informed by her Christian beliefs:

Truth is, I never thought I’d see the day when people would be interested in hearing what two old Negro women have to say. Life still surprises me . . .

I’ll tell you a little secret: I’m starting to get optimistic. I’m thinking: Maybe I’ll get into Heaven after all. Why, I’ve helped a lot of folks – even some white folks! I surely do have some redeeming qualities and that must count for something. (298-9)

An insouciance about death characterises the Delany narrative. Surely anyone of 103 would have thoughts about mortality; but it would be simplistic to find this attitude ageist. These two unmarried sisters lived together from cradle to grave, performing Carolyn Heilbrun’s theory that ‘there will be narratives of female lives only when women no longer live their lives isolated in the houses and the stories of men’ (1988 47). The book is not just a record of two extraordinary lives, but also shows how narratives of the ‘in-between worlds’ can offer more general paradigms for ageing.

Heilbrun’s own collection of essays, The Last Gift of Time (1997), explores her preoccupation with death in some detail, aligning her with Macdonald and Woodward in this theoretical paradigm. From her sixties onwards, Heilbrun found herself, like Keats, ‘half in love with easeful death’ (207). She was troubled by ‘the ultimate indifference of the dead’ (205-6), but also found herself seduced by that indifference. Though drawn to dying herself, she could not bear to contemplate the death of her husband (210 -11); ultimately, her suicide was a way to avoid that loss. Choosing one’s own time and mode of death is perhaps a
way to reclaim a modicum of power in the face of an otherwise uncontrollable process.

Heilbrun’s and the Delanys’ texts may at first appear polarised, one work exhibiting an overriding fascination with death, and the other almost refusing to countenance the possibility. Further examination, however, suggests that the life writing of these three women expresses rather an ambiguity, or perhaps a vacillation of perception. Doris Grumbach’s meditations on death show this ambiguity more explicitly. She considers it dangerous to gaze too directly into the abyss of mortality, not condemning the linking of old age and death as ageist but finding the process too disturbing to her equanimity. Thinking of the aphorism ‘[d]eath and the sun are not to be looked at steadily,’ Grumbach realises that she has made that very mistake. ‘Yes . . . I looked at death too steadily and too long. I held it aloft and reviewed it from every angle, like a potter with his pitcher mounted on a rotary stand, like Hamlet with Yorick’s skull’ (EI 91). Her analogies underscore her ambivalence: in the first, death is a work of art, both beautiful and useful; in the second, it is shown by the familiar signifier of an empty skull, the original container of the human mind. Death’s ambiguity is encapsulated by Grumbach’s prose; mortality remained, for her, ‘the great mystery, life’s great puzzle’ (91). She even attempted to turn her always-anticipated demise to her advantage by imagining that she would be dead long before the advent of undesirable commitments: ‘I say yes to invitations issued a year or so in advance because I am quite certain I will not be alive when the time comes.’ Her more pragmatic partner, Sybil, points out that it might be preferable simply to say ‘no’ at the outset (EZ 72)! On a more serious note, much of Grumbach’s preoccupation with mortality comes from the loss of several of her closest friends from AIDS, the gay community’s most pressing reminder of death in the later years of the twentieth century.

Perhaps all meditations on death are located at various sites along a continuum, best configured as ambiguity/ambivalence rather than any fixity of perspective. It seems likely that the processual self makes a transition, at some point in the life course, into a subject conscious of its mortality: this may not be the final co-identity in the ‘portmanteau,’ for such an awareness may develop at
any age – including childhood – at a moment when illness, danger or disability threatens. This aspect of identity does not belong exclusively to one’s upward years; it may either be diffused across the life course, or be a sudden recognition in response to circumstances.

On the other hand, it is perhaps inevitable that, for the majority, personal considerations of mortality are likely to occur in midlife or older age. Lesbian and feminist texts on this aspect of existence also struggle with the question of frailty and mortality, the more so because frequently invested in representing women’s strength, sexually exuberant youth and autonomy: vulnerability and dependence can become surrounded by shame and difficult to acknowledge. And yet the often differently configured life course embodied by female experience when not bound to archetypal ‘stages’ lends interest to these minority accounts; such lives may include marriage and childrearing, as they did for Marilyn Hacker, for example. But then they also involve divorce, alternative parenting structures and reinvented family groups. Child-free lesbians, who are not defined by the roles of ‘mother’ and ‘grandmother’ in later life, tend to rely on friendships and other relationships as their main support, like the older May Sarton, cared for by her ‘minions.’ For old lesbian communities, different perspectives on dying, final care, funeral celebrations and mourning may tend to fall outside mainstream conventions, defining a specific relation to death and its rituals. Sarton has again provided some of the primary texts in this chapter, for the novel As We are Now and her late journals contain a wealth of material on her thoughts about death and dying.

**Marilyn Hacker’s Winter Numbers**

Alongside these accounts, Hacker’s poetry offers a fine example of midlife perceptions of illness and mortality; and I begin this analysis with her work in order to remain consistent with other chapters, where midlife generally appears first. Hacker, a lesbian poet and editor, was born in New York in 1942, the only child of working-class Jews. A child prodigy, she skipped some years of high school and went to university at 15 (Campo 1). She has published poetry since 1967, and her verse has won much critical acclaim. With an affinity for Europe
akin to Sarton’s, she spends most of her time in Paris, and her verse often evokes the *arondissement* in which she lives. Married before she was twenty to sci-fi writer Samuel R. Delany, Hacker had a daughter, Cleis, in 1974. The marriage was clearly not a great success. In the literary journal *Ploughshares* critic Raphael Campo writes of them: ‘[i]n the next decade, she and Delany (soon separated) would both become known as outspoken queer writers’ (2). Her work encompasses thoughts on sexuality, the politics of exile, cancer, death, survival and the holocaust, with poems that both emphasise and question the ways in which death can be a presence at any point in the life course. Her Jewish heritage, the early death of her father, and the prevalence of cancer and AIDS among her friends recall the continual presence of mortality. Hacker’s own encounter with life-threatening illness – she developed breast cancer in her forties – provides further material for her extraordinary verse, and reminds us that we can find ourselves in dialogue with death at any age.

Even more importantly for my purpose, her writing sets out to examine mortality wherever it threatens; she faces the anomalies of death head-on, whether through violence, illness or suicide. For Hacker, it is not enough to commemorate the dead, although some poems do mark the loss of friends and colleagues. But she is more interested in the presence of death *before* it happens. Jarringly vernacular language is often embedded in her formalist verse; the juxtaposition of pedestrian observations with the stark facts of dying shocks the reader at the same time as it strives to make mortality ordinary.

Hacker’s poetry straddles several points on the continuum of ambivalence I have described: indeed, her stance goes some way to resolving the polarised positions of Macdonald/Woodward and Copper/Gullette. On the one hand, she is troubled by death; on the other, she does not associate it with older age. On the contrary, it is the ‘young-middle-aged’ that Hacker singles out as proving especially mortal. Thus her poetry both positions itself as compromise – mortality is important, but it is not the sole province of old age – and offers a counterconstruction to the age ideology that characterises oldness as mere deterioration and death.
The collection *Winter Numbers* (1994) opens with the poem ‘Against Elegies,’ which interrogates her peers’ – and even their children’s – proximity to death. Arranged as a dozen carefully constructed twelve-line stanzas, it begins, bleakly:

James has cancer. Catherine has cancer. Melvin has AIDS.
Whom will I call, and get no answer?
My old friends, my new friends who are old, or older, sixty, seventy, take pills with meals or after dinner. Arthritis scourges them. But irremediable night is farther away from them; they seem to hold it at bay better that the young-middle-aged whom something, or another something, kills before the chapter’s finished, the play staged. The curtain stays down when the light fades.

Morose, unanswerable, the list of thirty- and forty-year-old suicides (friends’ lovers, friends’ daughters) insists in its lengthening: something’s wrong. The sixty-five-year-olds are splendid, vying with each other in work hours and wit. They bring their generosity along, setting the tone, or not giving a shit. How well, or how eccentrically, they dress! Their anecdotes are to the point, or wide enough to make room for discrepancies. But their children are dying. (1-24)

The abrupt shift in metre, from the loose iambic pentameter of most lines to an occasional shorter line – only two or three ‘beats’ – signals a jarring statement of mortality: ‘Melvin has AIDS,’ for example, or ‘But their children are dying.’ Her response to the prevalence of suicide among her acquaintance is that ‘something’s wrong.’ The idea of suicide must be difficult to grapple with for anyone born a Jew during the Second World War, although survivor guilt, often leading to suicidal tendencies, must also be familiar to her. However fervently we might hope for ‘a good death,’ Hacker reminds us that there are no guarantees: ‘No one was promised a shapely life / ending in a tutelary vision’ (‘Against Elegies’ 85-6).
Hacker addresses head on the cultural anxiety surrounding the association of sex and death, rather than allow this taboo to remain, as Dollimore put it, ‘occluded or unspoken’ (xii). Indeed, Hacker rather reconfigures the sex-death connection as sex-love-death, riskily locating the issues side by side in poems such as ‘Dusk: July.’ Here, her longing for her absent lover is imbricated with the knowledge of their ageing and mortality:

. . . I would love my love, but my love is elsewhere. I would take a walk with her in the evening’s milky pearl. I’d sleep with my arms around her confident body,

arms and legs asprawl like an adolescent. We’re not adolescents. Our friends are dying and between us nothing at all is settled except our loving.

We’ve loved other bodies the years have altered: knuckles swollen, skin slackened, eyelids grainy; bodies that have gone back to earth, the synapse of conscience broken.

Softly, softly, speak of it, but say something. We are middle-aged and our friends are dying. What do we lie down beside when we lie down alone, together? . . . (13-28)

The caution surrounding a taboo of death haunting a still sexually vibrant midlife is acknowledged here with the words: ‘Softly, softly.’ The ‘synapse of conscience broken’ implies that the (neurological?) link between deeds and their repercussions is lost; the dead have no superego. Conversely, there is the need to ‘say something,’ to break the silence that surrounds this disruption of life-course expectations: ‘We are middle-aged and our friends are dying.’ The final stanza again connects longing, love and mortality, along with an affirmation of life in the present:

. . . I just want to wake up beside my love who wakes beside me. One of us will die sooner; one of us is going to outlive the other, but we’re alive now. (57-60)
The final section of *Winter Numbers*, 'Cancer Winter,' confronts the specific struggle of women against breast cancer. Its opening lines link even more explicitly the mortal and sexuate character of existence. 'Year's End' commemorates the deaths of Audre Lorde and Sonny Wainwright. It begins:

Twice in my quickly disappearing forties
someone called while someone I loved and I were
making love to tell me another woman
had died of cancer.

Seven years apart, and two different lovers:
underneath the numbers, how lives are braided,
how those women’s deaths and lives, lived and died, were interleaved also.

Does lip touch on lip a memento mori?
Does the blood-thrust nipple against its eager
mate recall, through lust, a breast’s transformations
sometimes are lethal?

Now or later, what’s the enormous difference?
If one day is good, is a day sufficient?
Is it fear of death with which I’m so eager
to live my life out

now and in its possible permutations
with the one I love? . . . (1-18)

Here, age anxiety and fears of death – implied by Hacker’s ‘quickly disappearing forties’ – is juxtaposed explicitly with sexual love. More specifically, the observation of ways in which breasts change during erotic activity gives rise to comment on the more sinister bodily alterations that herald the onset of cancer. Through metonymy – the ‘recall’ of disease is apportioned to the ‘blood-thrust nipple’ – the question is raised: what is the extent of the body’s knowledge of the growth of malignant cells inside it? Do we carry some kind of intuitive wisdom about our own demise? Hacker implies that sex – grounded in the corporeal – also acknowledges that bodies are frail and ultimately mortal: ‘Does lip touch on lip a memento mori?’ The loving bodies that conclude this poem generate a hymn to the deceased friend, a variation on the metaphor of sex as music:

Each time we went back to each other’s hands and
mou[ths as to a requiem where the chorus
sings death with irrelevant and amazing
bodily music. (37-40)

A certain degree of foreknowledge does seem to be a strand of Hacker’s poetry; if death is a preoccupation for her, death by cancer – and specifically breast cancer – seems to take prime position in the anxiety and mourning her poems express. Audre Lorde died of a malignancy in her breast – ‘[f]ifty-eight-year-old poet dead of cancer: warrior woman / laid down with the other warrior women’ (‘Year’s End’ 27-8) – and it was a similar malignancy that threatened Hacker’s own life and health. Hacker explores the meaning of confronting death in midlife from a lesbian feminist perspective; and, furthermore, she does it in poetry, despite Susan Sontag’s assertion that ‘[c]ancer is a rare and still scandalous subject for poetry; and it seems unimaginable to aestheticize the disease’ (24).

However, since the 1970s when Sontag dismissed cancer as unsuitable poetic subject matter, the genre of ‘autopathography’ has reconfigured illness – and close encounters with death – as material for life-writing. G. Thomas Couser suggests that this process accompanies the destigmatisation of ill-health and disability and the emergence of identity politics, the idea that people’s ‘politics are . . . based in some shared attribute – such as race, ethnicity or gender’ (8). By politicising illness and addressing issues of mortality in childhood or midlife, autopathography undermines age ideology’s unthinking association of old age and disease. Cultural anxiety about death can be implicitly critiqued in this genre; otherwise, however, it may simply serve to normalise death as life’s drama. Academic and cancer survivor Jackie Stacey is critical of ‘heroic cancer narratives,’ stories of triumph over adversity in which ‘the continued chaos and disorder [and] . . . pain’ are somehow lost (15).

Hacker’s perspective – informed by her lesbian-feminism as well as her Jewishness – is more challenging. The sonnet crown, ‘Cancer Winter,’ records her transition from meditations on death to the struggle with her own mortality. She is forced to shift her position from observer to actor: ‘. . . I thought / I was a witness, a survivor, caught / in a maelstrom and brought forth, who knew more /
of pain than some / but learned it loving others . . .' (V 6-9). Now, Hacker finds that

. . . It's become a form of gallows humour
to reread the elegies I wrote
at that pine table, with their undernote
of cancer as death's leitmotif . . . (V 1-4)

The first sonnet in the sequence describes the dusk of a particular day: '. . . night / falling fraternal on the flux between / the odd and even numbers of the street' (I 12-14). From here on, the reader enters a particular twilight zone. There is an abrupt transition from the lyrical but foreboding language of nightfall, which parallels the general anaesthetic, into the prosaic: ‘I woke up, and the surgeon said, “You’re cured . . .”’ (VII 1). And yet the high cost of being ‘cured’ (a curious word to use for a condition with such a high incidence of recurrence) is immediately apparent. Hacker is ‘. . . [s]trapped to the gurney’, with an ‘. . . ache [she] couldn’t quite call pain / from where [her] right breast wasn’t anymore . . . ’ (2, 7). The economy and careful construction of the language show that this poetry is crafted; no outpouring of emotion, indeed very little explicit affect, is to be found in these lines. There is a connection here between the controlled skill of the surgeon, the patient ‘out cold’ on the operating table, and the cool, controlled voice of the poet: feelings have been excised, like Hacker’s right breast. The creative construction of verse parallels the cultural construction of medical discourse and practice: the inscription of the female body by surgery echoes the inscription on the page. Despite feeling ‘. . . incomplete / as [her] abbreviated chest . . . ’ she records her experiences unflinchingly (VIII 5-6).

Jackie Stacey has theorised her own experiences in *Teratologies* (1997). She comments on the particular position of the lesbian who suffers from cancer: there is a special relationship here, she claims, drawing parallels between ‘deviant cells’ and ‘deviant desires’ (78). She goes on to explore the manifestation of these particular sources of cultural anxiety in the taboo character of the very words ‘lesbian’ and ‘cancer:’ or what she calls the ‘L’ word and the ‘C’ word. ‘To witness responses to the C word and/or the L word . . . is to be confronted by a deep sense of the horrific. In being so rigorously
disavowed, both are constituted in relation to psychic revulsion’ (72). Stacey describes how doctors managed to break the news to her about her own malignant tumour without ever mentioning the ‘C’ word, using instead euphemisms such as ‘nasty;’ she compares this to the multiplicity of terms available to describe, or rather avoid describing, the condition of lesbianism. Stacey’s autobiographical essay, like Hacker’s poetry, is a powerful counterconstruction to age ideology that harnesses the specificity of lesbian experience. Stacey points out that the non-reproductive status of lesbianism has a particular relation to death in the cultural imaginary. Just as ‘death infect[s] life,’ she argues, lesbian ontology infects gender ideology:

Homophobic discourse constitutes lesbian sexuality not as deadly in any literal sense perhaps, but certainly as non-life-giving. Most sexual encounters aren’t life-giving, of course, but the idea that they might be, or could, or would be, still matters. Reproductionless sex tastes of death in a culture governed by the heterosexual imperative. (81, italics added)

Following Stacey’s argument, there is a particular kind of political challenge in the lesbian subject’s consideration of her own death. There are certain advantages to being ‘reproductionless;’ I have suggested that a lesbian midlife may be typified by greater continuity, freedom from the anxiety of parenthood or loss of role, and more possibilities for what Sarton calls ‘self-actualisation.’ On the other hand, being childless may mean isolation and the probability of dying alone; but the importance of friendship in lesbian communities indicates that this probability is no higher for lesbians than for other older women (Kirkpatrick 138). Indeed, networks of support in lesbian communities may be preferable to dependence on relatives when ill, because free of the resentments and stresses inherent in biological families.

The ‘chaos and disorder’ of illness that Stacey describes has a prominent place in Hacker’s work, but is structured – perhaps in part made safer – by her precise verse forms. The fact that she was in midlife when she underwent her mastectomy offers a further challenge to the decline narratives that ineluctably link illness and death with oldness. Hacker suggests that the idea of biological age requires revision in the context of cancer, since proximity to death cannot be measured in years: for her, a sick friend is ‘. . . aging with other numbers: /
“stage two,” “stage three” mean more that “fifty-one” / and mean, precisely, nothing . . . ’ (‘Against Elegies’ 44-6). The ‘precisely nothing’ here flags up the medical jargon of ‘stages’ as a series of empty signifiers. Like the categories – ‘ages’ and ‘stages’ – of developmental age theory, these ‘stages’ of a tumour’s growth fail to translate, in the lay imaginary, into images of a precise bodily state. Furthermore, they offer little indication of prognosis.

Hacker’s own language conjures more accurate mental images. She mentions, for example, ‘the day I meet / the lump in my breast . . .’ (‘Against Elegies’ 58-9). Her lump is anthropomorphised, elevated to the status of personhood: that she does not ‘find’ the lump but ‘meets’ it implies an important relationship will ensue. The cultural tendency to describe illness in terms of metaphor – breast lump as ‘person,’ cancer cells as ‘invaders’ – has been commented on by Susan Sontag, among others, and later by Stacey. Sontag pleads against the use of such analogies – ‘illness is not a metaphor’ (1977 3) – but in fact renders disease as analogy herself, beginning Illness as Metaphor with the imagery of ‘emigrat[ion] to the kingdom of the ill’ (3). This contradiction demonstrates the difficulty of resisting such prevalent cultural tropes: the body as battleground, death as failure or defeat, surgeons as heroes all proliferate in the narratives of illness and recovery (Stacey 11, 27, 160). Donna Haraway flags up how some texts evoke the language of civil war, describing the immune system as ‘the lethal mobile squads of killer T cells that throw chemical poisons into the self’s malignant traitor cells’ (in Stacey 160). Such language is now so commonplace as to go unnoticed, to the point where it has become difficult to think of the struggle with cancer as anything but a ‘fight.’ Stacey points out that it is ‘not metaphor of which we should be wary per se, but the cultural uses to which it . . . [is] put’ (63). Hacker’s poetry does not resist metaphor: rather, it seeks to reconfigure the imagery of cancer not as battle or heroic survival, but as mortified flesh juxtaposed with a live and sensual bodiliness. Thinking of her lover, she writes:

... She kissed my breasts, and now one breast she kissed
is dead meat, with its pickled blight on view.
She’ll kiss the scar, and then the living breast . . . . (IX 12-14)
Hacker, by placing this troubling vision of decay – ‘dead meat’ and ‘pickled blight’ – alongside the comforting fantasy of her partner’s continuing attentions to her ‘abbreviated’ body, reminds us of the ambiguity of survival. She anticipates a continuity of her sexuality post-mastectomy: at the same time, she must learn to live with her amputation, aware of the missing breast as a bodily lesion. Elsewhere, troubled by her own use of ‘cancer as death’s leitmotif,’ Hacker realises she needs ‘to find another metaphor’ (Winter Numbers V 10), for if cancer is a signifier for death, implicitly her own life is threatened.

There is a particular ambiguity when the cancerous cells develop in a breast, for the breast is not only the clearest outward sign of sexual difference in a clothed adult body, but also has contradictory meanings in terms of its functions, which are firstly erotic and secondly connected with reproduction; for in western cultures the splitting of women’s roles means we may be viewed as mother or as object of desire, but rarely both. Perhaps in lesbian relationships breasts can be taken out of this unhelpful binary and reconfigured as having other cultural meanings: a source of sexual pleasure and comfort, roles not necessarily either to do with the male gaze, or maternal – linked with ‘feeding’ or ‘giving.’

Stacey has found other significations: she comments on ‘the breast as the physical manifestation of the enigma of femininity because of its unsuitability for x-ray techniques’ (156). Other feminist theorists have suggested that breasts are ‘too soft, too irregular in composition, and too changeable to image clearly’ (Stacey 156). Hence the science of radiography’s tendency, until recently, to try to adapt the breast to the limits of the x-ray rather than develop suitable technology – one example among many of the female body’s not fitting male-generated systems. Ironically, the female breast has also been fetishised as a symbol of desirability. Personal accounts like Hacker’s and Stacey’s are well poised to shape and make sense of the experience of being diseased in a breast, with all its cultural meanings. In the complex tangle of theory about illness, ageing and death, these texts provide ‘spaces through which to maneuver, spaces through which to resist, spaces for change’ (Smith & Watson 23).
‘Winter Numbers’ also shows how the embodied self of youth is held in consciousness at other ages, and Hacker’s sense of feeling betrayed by her body; for ‘small, firm breasts, a twenty-five-year-old’s’ (VI 14), were the reason that a mammogram did not show up the lump. Overcoming her cancer meant Hacker must let go of at least one sequential persona: ‘. . . To survive / my body stops dreaming it’s twenty-five’ (VIII 13-14). This rejection of her younger self is not entirely possible, however. Two sonnets later, we read: ‘No body stops dreaming it’s twenty-five / or twelve, or ten when what is possible’s / a long road poplars curtain against loss. . .’ (X 1-3). Despite Hacker’s illness, ‘what is possible’ prevails, enabling her to resist a midlife death. As an antithesis to Barbara Macdonald, who trusted her body to know how to die, Hacker implores some nameless deity: ‘I don’t know how to die yet. Let me live’ (X 14).

Hacker did not die of her cancer, and has lived into her sixties, perhaps to become one of the ‘splendid’ sixty-five-year-olds she writes of. But for her, thoughts on mortality and survival are inevitable reminders of her connection with those who died in the Holocaust. The sonnets commemorate ‘each numbered, shaved, emaciated Jew / I might have been. They wore the blunt tattoo, / a scar, if they survived, oceans away’ (IX 11-13). She associates the tattoos of survivors with her own mastectomy scar, and wonders irreverently: ‘Should I tattoo my scar? What would it say?’ (IX 14). The development of this fantasy emerges later, but Hacker fails to imagine anything beyond the pedestrian for her tattoo: ‘K.J.’s Truck Stop’ or ‘the French version: Chez K.J. / Les Routiers’ (XI 2, 4). When she visualises her own future, she does not baulk at the bodiliness of her loss:

. . . I won’t be wearing falsies, and one day
I’ll bare my chest again at Juan-les-Pins,
round side and flat, gynandre/androgyne,
close by my love’s warm flanks . . . . (IX 5-8)

Hacker’s rejection of ‘falsies’ underscores her rejection of passing, and evokes Audre Lorde’s indignation at the scrap of lamb’s wool she was expected to wear in her bra post-mastectomy (1980 34-6). Both poets refused to hide their bodily imperfections, a refusal which closely parallels the rejection of age-passing. The
tight, well-structured verses, on the other hand, both contrast with and contain the physical asymmetry they describe.

‘Winter Numbers’ concludes by marking Hacker’s return to work. It is no longer ‘winter,’ but her body is not entirely ‘cured,’ as the surgeon promised. Hacker is by now ‘. . . tired of terror and despair / and having to be brave.’ She wants an ‘unexceptional unmarked life’ (‘August Journal’ 18-20). And yet, she recognises, what is truly exceptional is ‘. . . to die in bed / at ninety-eight, not having been gassed, shot, / wrung dry with dysentery, drowned at birth / in a basin for unwanted girls . . .’ (21-5). Hacker’s poetry subverts age ideology by pointing up the possibility of death during midlife, youth or infancy. The old do not have death at their elbow, particularly: rather, we all do, for no-one is exempt from bodily instability.

Hacker’s writing offers a paradoxical reassurance against death by speaking the unspeakable and confronting mortality directly, thus reducing its taboo. She configures cancer in midlife as something that can be survived; and, furthermore, the process of writing her illness and survival is made conscious in the poems. Stacey has described writing as a tactic for survival: for her, ‘part of [the] motivation . . . has doubtless been to take revenge on the illness. In the retrospective recounting, the power relations appear to be reversed. Perhaps the writing is a way to bring the self back to life’ (24). If the threat of cancer is what Kristeva called ‘death infecting life’, then textual production may indeed help to reinstate the boundaries. Stacey perceived her book as ‘connected not only to life but also to death,’ and speculated that she perhaps felt ‘safer with a text between the two’ (24), configuring the process of writing as not just vengeful but also protective. Elsewhere she muses: ‘Cancer brings death into life, not just by its ultimate promise, but by the transformations it imposes on the adult body’ (91). Hacker makes conscious the transformations of the body, describes unflinchingly the result of her amputation, and goes a stage further, by imaging her altered body as still sensual, capable of love, desire and sexual response.

**May Sarton – dying and resistance**

Other circumstances can also ‘bring death into life.’ May Sarton’s powerful novella, *As We Are Now* (1973), shows how ambivalence about death can, in
some older subjects, be a response to adverse circumstances. This text de-essentialises the age-death connection, and also responds to Gullette’s complaint that ‘important information about how women resist the prescribed in a culturally defined moment is relatively inaccessible’ (1997 114). The novella shows Sarton’s insights into certain socially constructed aspects of older age and their potentially harmful effects on subjectivity.

Inspired by Sarton’s visit to a friend in care (At 82 138), the book centres around the imaginary experiences of seventy-six-year-old Caro Spencer, a retired maths teacher. A little frail after a heart attack, she is installed in an isolated nursing home by her brother and sister-in-law. Oddly – for older women actually outnumber men in nursing homes by two or three to one – Caro is the only female resident. Initially she is lively and engaged, and in the first weeks of her stay there are moments of hope provided by tentative offers of friendship. Her connection with fellow-resident Standish Flint sustains her, and a letter from an ex-pupil is cheering; but Harriet Hatfield and her daughter, Rose, who run the home, never post her replies. Caro also befriends a visiting clergyman, Richard Thornhill, and his daughter, Lisa; she hopes that conditions will improve as a result of their intervention. Instead, Caro is blamed for an inspection by the authorities, and her visitors are turned away. She resists in the only way left when all agency has been taken from her. Though she has long believed that ‘suicide is a kind of murder, an act of rage’ (19), Caro, as hope dwindles, finds her views changing; the narrative shows her movement from ambivalence toward death to ambivalence about her unbearable life.

The narrative is told in the first person in the form of a journal, a series of notebooks where Caro records her days, as a way to shore up identity. As things deteriorate the diary becomes more important, a means of clinging to whatever sense of self and fragments of dignity remain. Over and above the difficulty of losing her home, independence and familiar landmarks, Caro encounters both physical and emotional abuse. After losing her temper, for example – she becomes enraged on behalf of Standish, whose medical needs are neglected – Caro is sedated and confined to a windowless room. Her response is to feel overwhelmed by shame at her anger, which, like Sarton’s own tantrums, has
haunted her since infancy. ‘All my life anger has been my undoing, and now I must pay for it,’ Caro writes (42). Despite attempts to reassure herself that she is ‘full of unregenerate anger and sometimes inhabited by sacred fire’ (44), isolation makes it difficult to put her rage into perspective, and she is full of self-recrimination and remorse. Her humiliation has echoes of her youth:

Since my outbreak I feel so unlovable, beyond the pale. And this is childhood again. How many times was I sent to bed without supper because I had a tantrum? And how is it that through all my life I never came to terms with this anger inside me? (43).

Is this the reason that old age is construed as ‘second childhood and mere oblivion?’ In the relative powerlessness of the latter years, elders may be subject to infantilising ‘punishments’ merely for expressing opinions or affect. Thus ‘second childhood’ is not the result of biological ageing, but constructed by institutionalised living, which strips identity and agency from elders. And Caro knows the difference:

Probably I think so much about childhood here, not because I am in my second childhood (What a myth that is – children have hope!) but because the humiliations are the same as the humiliations children suffer, like being treated as if they knew nothing or were incapable of adult emotions. (60-1)

As her situation worsens, Caro succeeds in harnessing her rage for survival: ‘I hold myself together with anger, and perhaps also with a sense of being an outsider and wishing to remain so’ (75). Thus Caro resists her oppressors, overturning stereotypes of both older age and childhood as times of dependence and passivity.

She records other dehumanizing practices at ‘Twin Elms,’ such as ‘a house law that doors must not be closed. The women [who run the place] are always in and out of every room, and no one ever knows when they are listening’ (18). Caro resorts to locking herself in the bathroom for privacy and solace: ‘The bath is my confessional. I can weep there and no one will see me’ (18). It is significant that there is not a ‘rule’ about closed doors – for rules are made to be broken – but a ‘law,’ suggesting the implacable structures of ideology. The lack of privacy here evokes Foucault’s Panopticon; and the institution, remote and uninspected by any authorities, takes on certain aspects of Althusserian state
apparatuses. Once interpellated as old, the residents are caught in a particular subjectivity from which the only escape is death. Caro is aware of her self being taken from her, an erosion that is painful in its suddenness. She comments: ‘Old age, they say, is a gradual giving up. But it is strange when it happens all at once’ (14). One critic has described Caro’s descent into depression as the decline into ‘social death, which in turn, leads to psychological death’ (Bair 207); she resists this at first, in the same way that Hacker resisted the ‘social death’ of cancer.

The men in ‘Twin Elms’ have taken up attitudes of despair: the first one Caro sees, ‘ha[s] his head in his hands’ (11). These are creatures damaged by suffering, and the imagery of animals is aptly used to describe them. It is power, on the other hand, that has dehumanised the Hatfields. Here, though, unlike the analogies in Memory Board and Gaining Ground, the beasts these characters are likened to are inimical: the men are ‘amoebas,’ and Harriet and Rose are ‘mice or spiders,’ an attempt, perhaps, to render them small and harmless (71, 15). The harmlessness of such creatures, however, belies their predatory nature: Caro regards the Hatfields ‘as another species that flourishes on the despair and impotence of the weak’ (15), and she wonders whether ‘a person who has complete power over others does not always become wicked’ (16). The allegiances within the home are complex: Caro and Standish are allies, and against them stand the proprietors and the other men. This distribution of power, rather than a simple male-female split, seems to be divided along lines of social status; and, unusually, the women – with the exception of Caro herself – are in charge.

In the early days, Caro clings to a sense of herself despite her impotence: ‘Whatever I have now is in my own mind,’ she writes (14). Critic Jane S. Bakerman comments on the way Sarton ‘dramatizes what the steady loss of power does to the human spirit, finally showing that some assertion of power . . . even a deadly one, is essential’ (146). Caro clings to her journal like a talisman: ‘the notebooks are [her] touchstone for sanity (AWAN’94). Later, even language has lost its power: ‘Words . . . words . . . words . . . I reread that last passage and it was dust and ashes’ (101). Contradicting this statement, the
words do still have power for the reader, evoking the ‘dust’ and ‘ashes’ of the Christian burial service. Ultimately, Caro is ‘stripped down to nothing’ (130): like Abra Stephens, she no longer knows what day it is (62), but, unlike Abra’s, her confusion and forgetfulness are involuntary. Mistrust compounds her loss of a sense of time: even when her torturers tell her the date, she does not believe them (122).

Ironically, the relationship that seems to be her salvation leads to Caro’s ultimate despair. She develops a passionate friendship with Anna Close, a farmer’s wife who is briefly in charge of ‘Twin Elms’ while Harriet is away, and the first person there to take a real interest in Caro. Kind treatment restores Caro to herself, and she feels hopeful again. However, a letter from Caro to Anna is intercepted, and the result is scorn and more chastisement: she is, in the words of Harriet, ‘a dirty old woman . . . . This is no place for queers’ (106). Caro’s destruction is complete, and she loses her remaining will to live. Having begun her narrative with the claim: ‘I am not mad, only old. I make this statement to give me courage’ (9), she now questions her own sanity. ‘I have been murdered’, is her conclusion, ‘murdered in the most cruel of ways possible’ (107). By now, Caro has been ‘thwarted . . . in two important ways . . . in trying to act, to exercise her power of will and self overtly, and in trying to feel, to exercise her power of emotions’ (Bakeman 153). Agency and affect, Bakeman argues, are both crucial for subjectivity. All Caro can cling to is her suicidal plan: when Lisa brings her an Advent wreath, Caro saves the candles ‘for other purposes . . . part of [her] arsenal of matches, lighter fluid and other combustibles’ (117). She withdraws entirely from social contact.

At this point, her diary becomes, Caro claims without irony, ‘The Book of the Dead. By the time I finish it I shall be dead’ (10). When Harriet finds the journal – which mentions Caro’s plans – and starts to read it, Caro returns from the bathroom and discovers her. She reports feeling ‘such a flood of fierce strength rise in me that I must have lunged at her like a wild animal, torn the copybook out of her hands and in doing so knocked her off balance so she fell to the floor’ (132). This episode provides Caro with the impetus she needs: she locks herself in the bathroom with her notebook, and waits until everyone is
asleep. She then shuts the diary in the refrigerator, and sets the fire that will bring about her own demise and that of ‘Twin Elms.’ No longer intent on life, she embraces death:

It is strange that now I have made my decision I can prepare for death in a wholly new way. I feel free, beyond attachment, beyond the human world at last. I rejoice as if I were newborn . . . . I see, now, that death is not a vague prospect but something I hold in my hand, that the very opposite is required from what I thought at first. (125)

Caro had wanted to meet death ‘fully [her]self’ (40); this proves not to be possible, and ultimately the power to bring about her own death is all she has left.

Caro is now interpellated as old, mad and deviant, cursed by her love for Anna, shamed by Harriet, and isolated. She yearns for obliteration of feeling:

. . . . I long to be put out of my misery. At least [at the State Hospital] they have drugs. I would be put to sleep, I suppose, kept in a state of lethargy. Wouldn’t that be better than my present anxiety – am I a dirty old woman? – guilt, and despair. I have spoken, I feel, lightly of despair before this episode. Now I know more about it . . . . There is a point of no return, a point when the only question is whether to choose to starve to death or to use a more violent means. (107)

Now Caro, too, is more bestial than human, for after ‘a very few days here, one begins to feel like an animal in a cage’ (22). She knows that ‘age is not interesting until one gets there, a foreign country with an unknown language to the young, and even to the middle-aged’ (23); but this insight does not save her.

Like the cancer that Hacker and Stacey write about, oldness is culturally regarded as ‘death infecting life’. For ‘it is not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite’ (Kristeva 4). This is the negative aspect of death’s ambiguity: it is seen as contaminating life rather than being an organic part of a processual life course. Caro is harmed by this association: she is not ill, merely unable to cope alone. But as a result of her abjection, she no longer believes in her subjectivity: ‘I do not address myself any more as Caro. Caro is dead. I cannot say “pull yourself together, Caro,” for that person has ceased to exist’ (109). The repetition of her
name contradicts the meaning here – an insistence that Caro’s subjectivity has broken down. But she actually names herself three times, perhaps in an unconscious attempt to reinstate interpellation.

The ambiguity of mortality is a pivotal theme in Caro’s story: for her, paradoxically, death represents both the end of agency and a final seizing of power. Caro knows this: ‘[d]eath by fire will come as an angel, or it will come as a devil,’ she asserts, ‘depending on our deserts’ (133). Caro’s movement from optimism to despair, between, in her words, ‘ripening towards death’ and suicide (78), parallels the continuum I began with: a range of ways to characterise mortality, from incubus to ally. The poles of this continuum are personified by the characters of Standish Flint and Richard Thornhill. Caro argues with the clergyman about her friend’s rejection of food: ‘Mr. Flint is committing suicide. That means refusing his medicine . . . and . . . starving himself. Would you deny him the privilege of dying as fast as he can?’ (57). Caro’s vacillation is evident, however, for she contradicts her own argument, insisting Standish see a doctor rather than helping him die. Her view also conflicts with that of the church: ‘You are asking me questions I cannot answer,’ is Richard’s response (57). During another conversation, she confides to him that she is ‘thinking of terrible things.’ She was wants to know if he ‘believe[s] in damnation’ (131). Caro adds that she does, but is going to ‘risk it . . . when the snow falls’ (131). This dialogue can only be a confession of intent; she even asks ‘Can you forgive me now?’ (130). Richard does not try to dissuade her; perhaps he too can see that death is her only recourse.

Caro’s story underscores Betty Friedan’s findings on nursing homes: experiments show that, even without abuse such as Caro suffers, loss of autonomy for older subjects results in more illness and earlier death. When residents are offered increased agency and choice, they display marked improvement in mental alertness and tend be healthier and live longer (Friedan 87-9). This research found that ‘environments which induce “mindlessness” . . . finally create the mental deterioration implied by the false connotation of the old as “senile”. . . . [I]n the extreme, mindlessness may lead to death’ (Friedan 88-9). Thus the ‘detachment’ and decline associated with age are constructed, as
Sarton’s novella implies, by age ideology and the discourses and practices of institutions.

May Sarton, like Caro, found in the writing of journals an instrument for the avoidance of ‘detachment’ and continued survival: in *After the Stroke* (1988), for example, she claimed that writing her life facilitated healing. As she aged, Sarton sometimes feared the loss of words: forgetting them made her feel ‘disorientated, as though words were markers on maps that tell me where I am’ (*End 36*). One of the powers of language, then, is to retain identity and orientation in the ‘foreign country’ of old age. There are other similarities between Sarton and her protagonist: both are older lesbians as well as feminists, each showing her own kind of independent spirit and a refusal of normative roles. Although Caro does not experience desire for another woman until her seventies, she has always considered herself ‘different, because [she] never married’ (20); although, again like her creator, she had an affair with a married Englishman in her youth. The traversing of a continuum in relation to one’s own mortality may also be traced in Sarton’s life writing, perhaps not with the clarity of *As We Are Now*, but in ways that are consistent with the messiness of lived experience, and which reward analysis. A definite change of tone is detectable in the trajectory of the late journals, from *At Seventy*, where Sarton claimed exuberantly that she ‘love[d] being old’, to the last three journals of approximately a decade later, *Endgame: a Journal of the Seventy-ninth Year* (1992), *Encore: a Journal of the Eightieth Year* (1993), and *At Eighty-Two: a Journal* (1996). (She also produced a volume of poetry in her upward years, *Coming into Eighty*).

The ambiguity surrounding death, and an ambivalence towards mortality similar to that of the fictitious Caro, emerge more clearly as Sarton’s life-text progresses. She produced the late journals in spite of her increasing bodily instability; writing, it seems, was so imbricated with her identity, even in old age, that retirement was never an option. Perhaps more importantly, Sarton’s final journals exhibit an ambivalence towards life: ‘it is an extraordinary life I am leading,’ she complained in *At Eighty-Two*, ‘because it is all the time impossible’ (306).
Sarton has politicised older age through these journals. Margaret Gullette argues that the autobiography of age offers ‘truly new accounts of being and becoming,’ and is a crucial tool in resistance. And those who, like Sarton, remain free of archetypal female roles – wife, mother, grandmother – produce the most ‘truly new’ of these accounts. Kathleen Woodward points out that Sarton ‘has lived her life as an artist and as a woman on the margins’ (1980 113). From midlife onwards Sarton lived alone, as I have remarked in Chapter III; she was acutely aware of her potential isolation, but clung to her independence nevertheless. In old age she experienced a particular tension: her failing energies and uncertain health made it difficult to deal with her new-found success and the demands upon her time that resulted. However, she kept a large house and garden (with a good deal of help both paid and unpaid), continued to write, and maintained numerous friendships. But despite the fact that ‘Sarton ha[d] been shoring up evidence against the possible ruins of old age by imagining positive models of aging’ (Woodward 109), her latter years were not easy.

Sarton did not achieve what age critic Margaret Cruikshank has called ‘comfortable ageing,’ troubled as she was by illness; for her, poor health seemed to interrupt the processual self, rather than being included as one identity among many. Sarton offered her thoughts on this difficulty in an interview: ‘Growing old is . . . a very interesting process . . . . But when you’re sick – sick as I was, everything is taken from you at once . . . . I leapt into old age suddenly, without having that slow preparation, by being so ill’ (Conversations 153). She found that physical instability has a powerfully negative effect on identity, and threw her back into conventional definitions of old age as decline. Furthermore, she had doubts as to whether she could retrieve the sense of self she had lost: ‘To manage such a passive waiting life for so many months I have had to bury my real self,’ she wrote, ‘and now realize that bringing that real self back is going to be even more difficult than it was to bury it’ (After the Stroke 56). The discrepancy between her desire to work and her actual capacity was distressing. But this difficulty can affect us at any age: Jackie Stacey struggled to sustain her intellectual work while undergoing chemotherapy. Sarton strove to reclaim a
sense of self – predicated always on her writing – after each bout of illness, using the writing of a journal to facilitate recovery; as Stacey claimed, ‘writing is a way to bring the self back to life’ (24).

However, in her final decades Sarton suffered increasingly from poor health: like Hacker, she underwent a mastectomy due to breast cancer, and later developed metastases in her lung as well as heart fibrillations. This difficulty was another dimension to her ambivalence around work, life and death: she now felt exhausted and ill, and writing seemed a superhuman effort. She found decisions difficult, and had an important one to confront: she could either continue working, with the reinforcement of identity that implied, or cease to write and possibly lose her sense of self. Sarton never fully resolved this conflict, which remained with her to the end; she did continue to work, and her final journal, *At Eighty-Two*, was published after her death. Sarton believed in the redeeming power of work: she said she considered ‘the most fatal thing in American life [to be] the arbitrary retirement age’ (*Conversations* 1974). But struggling to work while she was ill she found overwhelmingly difficult.

Sarton also worked hard at keeping friendships alive. Her relationships often spanned a lifetime; they both supported her and enabled her to resist the myth that elders inevitably inhabit a shrinking social world. Janice Raymond has commented on the pivotal importance of friendship for lesbians, and comments on the long and often unreported history of female connectedness:

> Women have been friends for millennia. Women have been each other’s best friends, relatives, stable companions, emotional and economic supporters, and faithful lovers. But this tradition of female friendship, like much else in women’s lives, has been distorted, dismantled, destroyed . . . dismembered. (4)

There is no reason for the intensity of female friendship to be diluted with age, as Sarton’s life and work indicate. Barbara Frey Waxman describes her as ‘the fulcrum of relationships with women both younger and older than herself’ (1993 37). Through Sarton’s talent for intergenerational friendships, Waxman suggests, she created

a discourse of friendship between elder and younger that pulls elders in from the margins of society to enjoy a full emotional life, while at the
same time escorting younger people briefly into “the foreign country” of old age for contact with a land that they will someday inhabit. (37)

These relationships not only ‘pulled [her] in from the margins,’ but also helped Sarton maintain the ‘rich life’ she wrote about. However, they also produced further conflict as she aged, for she felt isolated without her friends, but found entertaining exhausting. Carolyn Heilbrun calls Sarton ‘an anomaly . . . [who] bravely lived the inevitable contradictions of her chosen life, wailing her complaints the while’ (1997 69). In part this conflict was resolved by a younger friend, Susan Sherman, who offered practical help as well as editing collections of Sarton’s letters.

Sarton found it difficult to rely on others for help, and this feeling runs deep in western cultures. Margaret Cruikshank critiques the high value placed on rugged individualism, which tends to make dependence and frailty in older age negative and even shameful qualities. Other cultures cling less to the imperative of ‘independent living’ in older age. She points, as an example, to ‘the lives of American Indians, many of whom are accustomed to dependence and reciprocity throughout their lives, in contrast to whites’ (14). As a result the need for assistance in older age is not a cause of shame. Cruikshank bases this argument on the work of Dr. Sally Gadow, who specialises in the philosophy of nursing, especially geriatric nursing. Both appreciate

Florida Scott-Maxwell’s description of “fierce energy” possible through frailty, when the life force appears in full strength . . . . The idea that the life force does not depend on physical energy is arresting. It implies that frailty is relative and contingent instead of a fixed quality. (Cruikshank 15)

Cruikshank suggests, with a nod to Gadow’s essay ‘Frailty and Strength: the Dialectic in Aging’ (1986), that a certain level of vulnerability is crucial to rounded subjectivity, and this perspective is preferable, in my opinion, to striving for ‘successful’ or ‘productive’ ageing.

Ram Dass, born Richard Alpert, echoes this idea. After suffering a stroke in his sixties, Ram Dass has lost most of his mobility and now uses a wheelchair;
he also needed many hours of physiotherapy to regain intelligible speech. With ‘the point of view of a disabled person’ (209), he points out that ‘needing help . . . makes us feel diminished, because we value self-sufficiency and independence so highly’ (106). The ego holds on to power, he suggests, by refusing to depend on others, and the result is a cultural anxiety about retirement, frailty and older age in general (111-3). In point of fact, he argues, interdependence is merely another aspect of the self at any age.

Arguably it was partly dependence anxiety that gave rise to second wave feminism’s valorisation of health and physical strength, and in the light of women’s history of enforced dependence, this is understandable. However, its result was the kind of ableism that labelled Barbara Macdonald ‘unable to keep up’ and segregated her on demonstrations. And indeed, what of the women who physically cannot ‘keep up’? Today I would be one of those women, but thankfully consciousness of disability has moved on in the ensuing two decades. Cruikshank’s and Gadow’s argument encompasses more recent thinking about physical incapacity. If ‘frailty is essential to the making of a self,’ then the recognition of vulnerability becomes an important step in the development of full personhood and diachronic identity. Through this recognition, Gadow and Cruikshank argue, human subjects find some tolerance towards their own and others’ frailty; and this may usefully work against the othering and abjection of oldness. As a result, ‘rugged individualism’ and ‘successful’ aging may not be the overriding values by which a life is judged. Instead, the incorporation of frailty into a more complex and inclusive picture of older age – a frailty relative and contingent, but also free from shame – may become acceptable rather than frustrating and distressing. The same argument may be applied to the recognition of mortality; for in my opinion such a cognisance need not diminish the life force of the older subject, nor be regarded as ageist, but can rather add another dimension to the processual
Fig. 3. Front Cover of May Sarton’s *Encore: a Journal of the Eightieth Year* (New York: Norton, 1993).

Photograph by Yunghi Kim, the *Boston Globe*. Design by Walter Harper.
self. This perspective is consistent with Woodward’s acceptance of inevitable mortality, rather than Gullette’s belief that associations with death are ageist.

Sarton’s ideas about creating the kind of old age she wanted presupposed a certain level of physical health; and it seems likely that Copper and Gullette’s argument – the dogmatic wish to dissociate old age and death – is also predicated on the assumption that frailty can be avoided. Sarton instead found herself frequently ailing, and as a result regarded her upward years with ambivalence. This lends the final three journals a contradictory note; her feelings about her own life and death fluctuate wildly. She is often frustrated with her level of disability: ‘It’s ridiculous to feel as frail as I do,’ she writes, and complains of ‘all this going downhill’ (*End* 126, 114). The idea that frailty may be ‘essential to the making of a self’ was of no comfort to the elder Sarton. By the final pages of *Endgame* the machine . . . is creaky and pretty much out of the running’ (233). Elsewhere in the journal, she reports feeling ‘a kind of shame for having so little strength, having to measure if I cross the room whether I have the strength to do it (313).

However, *Endgame* did not prove to be the end; and the amusing title of her next journal, *Encore*, perhaps indicates a more buoyant Sarton. The front cover shows a photograph of Sarton approaching eighty, with a painting of her younger self on the wall behind her (an image reproduced in fictional form in her novel, *Mrs. Stevens hears the Mermaids Singing*.) The juxtaposition reminds us that the old have always been young; Sarton’s beauty as a young woman provides a sharp contrast with her older face. On the other hand, her style of dress remains unchanged; the choice of jacket and scarf looks to be a deliberate reprise. The seventy-nine year old visage, furthermore, has a beauty of its own, and looks directly at the photographer with a candid gaze and small smile that is warmer than the youthful, oblique stare of the painting (See Fig. 3).

*Encore* begins:

It is the second day of my eightieth year. The journal of my seventy-ninth year will come out for my eightyth birthday, but I want to go on for a while longer discovering what is really happening to me by keeping a journal.
The great good news is that I continue to have less pain and therefore have all kinds of hopes and plans and even dream of getting back once more to England. (11)

While it may be naïve to imagine that the narrativising of a life results in a record of ‘what is really happening,’ Sarton’s cheerful tone here is unmistakeable. Three weeks later, however, she finds herself exhausted by the work involved in publishing the previous journal. During the writing of *Endgame*, she had struggled with ambivalence about her body; she was troubled by both her appearance and her physical instability. Sarton reports her own ‘mirror moment’ in this journal, describing her reaction to a videotape of herself at a reading. She is shocked to see that she looks old and diminished:

Parts of me are simply not operating. I feel about a fifth here as far as who May Sarton *was*. I think that was what upset me most about seeing the videotape. There too I wasn’t the May Sarton that I recognise, but an old turtle peering out, still enjoying life, but at a very reduced level. (*End* 181)

A videotape is a graphic version of the mirroring process. Alterations in appearance are not as important to Sarton, however, as what they signify: a loss of self. In old age, she also lost her resonant and commanding voice, but continued with poetry readings; the result, on one occasion, was that ‘all through the reading [she] kept feeling, This is not May Sarton. Where is May Sarton?’ (*End* 178). The repetition of her name reassures her she exists and subverts the meaning of her words, as it does for her character, Caro. In *Encore*, however, the ‘old turtle’ becomes an emblem of survival: the florist who delivers flowers for Sarton’s birthday has, on the way to her house, seen an ancient turtle, a well-known sight in the neighbourhood in Spring. The creature is thought to be a hundred years old, and for Sarton this is a ‘good augury.’

Her final journal, *At Eighty-Two*, displays a profound ambivalence about life – more troubling to witness than the fairly ordinary emotion of ambivalence towards death. This journal marks Sarton’s preparation for death, and in fact she did die before it reached publication. The eighty-two-year-old Sarton was depressed, and depression had played a part in her life since youth; but more than ever at the end of her life she felt she had reason to be unhappy. The
reasons for her misery vary from one page to the next: sometimes because she is ill, or because she has no family, or because her poetry, the aspect of her work most important to her, never had any critical recognition (179). The pains in her chest may be a recurrence of cancer, her doctors think: she considers the possibility without anxiety, for ‘when you are eighty-one and as ill as I feel . . . death is a friend.’ Sarton did not shy away from considerations of her own mortality as she reached the end of her life, and had strong feelings about the ‘rightness’ of particular ways of dying. In a letter about her mother, she wrote: ‘I do feel that people must have their own deaths, and a hospital death is no-one’s death’ (SL 333). Sarton was not to have ‘her own death,’ however; she died in hospital, an end she would not have chosen.

Sarton had doubts as to whether At Eighty-Two was worthy of publication. And, indeed, it is not very well written. But she continued to write in order to ‘sort out and shape experience’ (HbS 27); and, in the case of these late journals, that experience was of ageing consciously. This exemplifies Gullette’s argument: that the erosion of identity is a factor in decline, but that the life-writing of older age may effect some resistance. Age ideology, the way ageing is constructed, is what deprives elders of identity. Unlike Caro Spencer, Sarton fended off identity-stripping through work, friendships and a familiar environment. Ram Dass comments on At Eighty-Two:

Sarton isn’t dressing up her feelings, but even in her worst despair, we see her keenly observing the whole process. There’s a thread of witness there, and while her practice of watching her own experience does not remove her physical suffering, it allows her an outlet for conditions that otherwise might have left her defeated. (76)

The autobiography of age makes a complex contribution to cultural gerontology: as counterconstruction, as information about the meanings of oldness, as witness account, and as a source of support for both author and reader. At Eighty-Two is an account, not of ‘successful’ or ‘positive’ ageing, but of a woman who did not stop writing when she felt ill or weak. It documents an old age dogged by infirmity, but depicts the final year of a writer who clung to the act of writing simply because it seemed so much a part of her identity that she could not bear to stop.
It also, and more unusually, documents the approach of death. While writing her last journal, Sarton records thinking ‘a lot about dying . . . the death wish is rather strong’ (146). Elsewhere, she muses: ‘when I think of dying in this beautiful place and seeing the sun rise every morning I think how lucky I am’ (139). There is, despite its imperfections, something pleasing about this last journal; it is more ‘piecemeal’ than ever, and shows a slight confusion of thought. But the text retains Sarton’s hallmarks: a delight in friendship and nature, a variety of subject matter, and an extraordinary sense of intimacy with the reader, to whom she confides her thoughts on frailty and mortality.

Sarton dealt with the increasingly difficult relation to her physical self by a kind of linguistic distancing: in the journals, her body parts are almost invariably referred to by means of the definite article, not a possessive: phrases like ‘the heart’ and ‘the lungs’ appear repeatedly in Endgame (130, 154). It is possible to argue that this is just a distancing of her pathology for the sake of the journal, which was always intended for publication. Or that such a removal of self from bodiliness is ordinary: Woodward argues that ‘in old age we are increasingly dispossessed of our “individual” bodies, even as we are burdened by them’ (1993 93). I would add that this disassociation of bodies takes place precisely because we feel burdened by them. Indeed, Sarton’s impersonal attitude to her own bodiliness appears in other guises. She deals with the recurrence of cancer by denial: she is puzzled by her continued weight loss, for example (End 207); and at one point in the journal she forgets to report a small stroke, and only thinks to mention it some weeks later. Her ambivalent attitude towards life, death and illness is demonstrated yet again in this denial of the body, even while the writing focuses on it.

Developing dissensus rather than consensus about this very personal transition will be key to any useful theorisation of the death process, rather than attempting a monolithic body of feminist theory on the subject. Age studies, in the words of Kathleen Woodward, ‘is concerned with understanding how differences are produced by discursive formations, social practices, and material conditions’ (1999 x). Sarton resisted being a discursively produced older subject; instead, she preferred to be produced by her own discourse. She claimed in an
interview: ‘For many years I felt I was under a gravestone. I wanted to push it up and shout “Here I am”’ (Conversations x); ironically, she only really came out from under her ‘gravestone’ in old age. This makes it the more problematic to locate Sarton on the continuum I have considered, between embracing thoughts of mortality in age and shunning them as negative and ageist.

**Conclusion – a personal perspective**

Sarton seems to have thought about death from early adulthood, as I have. I was brought face to face with mortality in my twenties by a near-fatal attack of asthma. The very real possibility of death was, for a few hours, ‘at [my] elbow;’ I was resuscitated in hospital. Although I was mostly unconscious, I find that this experience has affected me; ever since, the reality of dying does not seem to be something I can ignore. Perhaps here is a way to resolve the conflict between Copper/Gullette – who refuse the association of age and death – and Macdonald/Woodward, who believe mortality should be closely examined. That is to say, if, like Marilyn Hacker, we have a consciousness of death from our earlier years – if children are not protected from funerals, for example, and if the subject is not euphemised and shunned – then thoughts on mortality will not be associated only with older age. Equally, we cannot then condemn those who do explore the particular relationship between old age and death as merely ageist.

Despite their differences, all the writers in this commentary share ambivalences and ambiguities about mortality. These take diverse forms, and place them along the continuum in locations that are often hard to pin down: but Sarton’s vacillations, Hacker’s strong links with Jewish experience of genocide, Macdonald’s marvelling at her body’s knowledge, Copper’s anger at the age-death connection, Stacey’s theorising and Grumbach’s denial all militate against an age ideology that attempts to flatten out experience. Lesbians and feminists who produce the literature of age are as passionate about death as they are about life, and inscribe female experience again and again as ‘indelibly different.’

Furthermore, the apparently polarised opinions have become closer through this analysis: Copper complained that ‘death is a forbidden subject with all but the old,’ and this is aptly answered by writers such as Hacker and Sarton,
who have been preoccupied with death since youth. Rather than two bifurcated positions, these writers’ attitudes to death can be seen as a continuum which holds that death is a part of life, and moreover of all life, not just the closing chapter. A mature literature of old age will come to terms with frailty, perhaps helped by records of vulnerability and the proximity of death in youth and midlife. Thus the appreciation of mortality and its meanings does not belong exclusively to one’s upward years, countering Copper’s complaint that elders have ‘death at their elbow.’ We all have death at our elbows. By suggesting that a consciousness of mortality pervades the life course, and not just the final years, I argue for the need to develop an acceptance of our own frailty and dependence – a knowledge of vulnerability from the inside. In this way, the ‘other within’ of old age becomes less othered. Older lesbian writing continues to wrestle with the challenge, however. Seduced by the valorisation of youth, strength and independence, even Sarton and Grumbach find weakness, loneliness and fear of death difficult to admit to, despite – or perhaps in part because of – their feminist politics. Hacker perhaps compensates for physical illness by the strength of her poetic language. The cultural work of such writing is to present mortality as diffused across the life course, bringing the dialogue with death into consciousness from our earliest years.
VIII: Afterword

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
Simone de Beauvoir, Old Age (1972) 284

Feminist theory intersects with
humanistic gerontology to deploy
literary texts as the base from
which to view aging not as a
series of problems but as a
developmentally interesting process.
Marilyn Pearsall, The Other Within Us (1997) 11

Some of the most significant prompts to age consciousness originated with older
lesbians. Their activism has provided one of the most powerful challenges to
age ideology, giving greater purchase on notions of resistance, transgression and
disruption to predictable life-course narratives. Second wave feminism in part
facilitated the growth of age consciousness; paradoxically, however, some of this
growth was articulated in protest against feminism’s own ageism. Older lesbian
feminists formed a vocal sector of the movement, well poised to produce anti-
ageist literature and to further the cause of age consciousness; the result has
been some of the paradigmatic narratives of ageing I have analysed. There are
three reasons for the particular importance of lesbian age writing:

Firstly, lesbian sexuality is non-reproductive. This does not mean that
lesbians cannot have children; a great many do. But for a lesbian subject
reproduction is not a direct consequence of her sexuality, undermining the
heteronormativity that shapes so much of female ontology. Jackie Stacey has
flagged up the ways in which

[...]he force of homophobia in this culture suggests that lesbianism has . . .
been ascribed the power to horrify. It goes against nature, we are told.
Refusing the connection between sexuality and reproduction, lesbianism is
seen as fundamentally unnatural. (73, italics added)

This state of affairs, however, can be turned to advantage. The majority of
lesbians, as they age, having ‘refus[ed] the connection between sexuality and
reproduction,’ will not be defined by the role of grandmother. Old lesbians, then,
can configure age identities in other ways. Since the majority remain childless, a
certain continuity of experience – of friendships, activities, work and creativity –
is usual in lesbian ontology, as well as a reliance on friendships for support in
later life rather than the heterosexual family unit. I found it troubling recently,
when I attempted to engage in conversation with a heterosexual woman in
midlife, that she would only talk about her (adult) children. It was as though she
did not exist except through them. Research underscores this perception.
Psychiatrist Pauline Bart has shown that some women either cling to their role as
a mother long after it is redundant, or are devastated by its loss. As a result,
depression is all too common for women in midlife. Bart’s subjects – often
suicidal – consider the role of ‘helping [their] children’ the most important in their
lives, even though these children are now grown. Such women ‘can no longer
enact the role that had given . . . life meaning’ (27). Bart points out that the
‘traditional woman bases her self-esteem on a role, motherhood, that she must
finally relinquish . . . . There is no bar mitzvah for menopause’ (29).

By contrast, a lesbian-feminist life course may sidestep the painful
transition termed ‘empty-nest’; and, as a result, lesbian ontology is configured
independently of the archetypes that tend to contain and delimit female
development. Many of the protagonists – both fictional and real – whose stories
I have investigated either remain non-reproductive, or have had children in a
marriage which is later dissolved, disrupting linear life-course models. Both non-
reproductiveness and the refusal to remain as ‘wife’ are significant, enabling
these characters to produce new paradigms for conscious ageing. By stepping
outside imperatives of reproduction feminists can bring about changes in cultural
perceptions – and thus imperatives – of womanhood. As a result, the function
of procreation may in future hold a less important place in the female imaginary,
so that the absence or loss of that role would lose some of its ideological power
and therefore be less distressing. The transition out of ‘parenting’ into what has
often been represented as a vacuum has come to represent the sum of midlife
female experience in ways that are unhelpful and disempowering. Narratives of
lesbian midlife offer a different paradigm, configured, paradoxically, in terms of
both continuity and disruption – continuous in terms of the transition into older
age, and disruptive to age ideology’s archetypes. Already located beyond reproduction as a consequence of sexuality, lesbians exist outside the reproductive ‘mirror’, that is to say, they do not see themselves reflected by cultural imperatives of femininity. Looked at in this way, lesbian ontology at midlife provides a particular kind of disruptive continuity, an idea which is a paradox only if stereotypical ‘ages’ or ‘stages’ are seen as the only possible roles for women’s ageing.

Secondly, the power of lesbian writing – one among many ‘in-between worlds’ – harnesses the experience of marginality to offer paradigms for ageing in general. This interstitial perspective does not mean a fixed locatedness, but more accurately what Teresa de Lauretis has termed a ‘movement in and out of ideology, that crossing back and forth of the boundaries – and of the limits – of sexual difference’ (25). The production of discourses that are not ‘built on male narratives of gender . . . [or] bound by the heterosexual contract’ (25) can offer a different model of conscious ageing that benefits all midlife subjects looking for ways to age consciously, making such discourses an important weapon in the struggle against age ideology. Indeed, the lack of paradigms and role models for midlife lesbians is perhaps what prompts lesbian subjects to forge new and particular ways of being, the ‘different middle age’ Martha Kirkpatrick describes. Monique Wittig takes this argument a stage further, averring that ‘being a lesbian, standing at the outposts of the human . . . represents historically and paradoxically the most human point of view’ (1992 46). By situating ourselves in a third position, outside, (perhaps tangential to), gender binaries, lesbian feminists can offer a reconfiguration of life-course narratives, a model of ageing informed by the particularity of difference that nevertheless has value for the process of ‘learning to be old’ (Cruikshank 2003). Wittig’s argument, then, means that lesbian ontology is located in the ‘elsewhere’ – the interstices of the male-female gender axis – and that this may have a particular significance for writing by older lesbians who set out to challenge ideologies of age. The idea that old lesbians are ‘not women’ provides a useful antithesis to the stereotype of ‘all woman,’ which, like de Beauvoir’s worry that she was ‘no longer a body’ at midlife, suggests the all-important criterion for femininity – the capacity to be an
object of male sexual desire. By this yardstick, older lesbians are emphatically ‘not women.’ By implication, then, the older lesbian embodied subject is not so much androgynous but rather belongs to neither sex – not a sexed being within the usual parameters, but a sexuate being nonetheless. This ‘positional’ or ‘relativist’ definition of lesbian identity helps to explain why lesbian anti-ageism may open doors for other women who struggle with age ideologies. In this way, lesbian independence from reproductive narratives may well help heterosexual women who haven’t had children – or even those who have – to find more flexible models of ageing; and men, too, may benefit from more diverse models of older age and retirement.

This brings me to my third point, which is that texts produced by lesbians tend to re-embed the issue of sexuality into discourses of ageing. As Copper and Macdonald maintain, older women struggle with the issue of invisibility in general; they tend not to be seen at all, let alone seen as sexual beings. The statement of sexuality on the part of older lesbians may go some way to countering this cultural blind spot; for to be sexual is to claim one aspect of personhood, to exist as a subject, albeit one at the ‘outposts of the human.’ To insist on our presence radically undermines that aspect of age ideology which proffers the myth of older age as a progression from asexual decline to death as a mainstay of its discourse. It may seem ironic that lesbian ontology offers itself as a paradigm for ageing, when lesbians have struggled for so long to attain visibility – witness Terry Castle’s essay on ‘The Apparitional Lesbian’ in the book of that name (1993). Castle muses: ‘Why is it so difficult to see the lesbian – even when she is there, quite plainly, in front of us? In part because she has been “ghosted” – or made to seem invisible – by culture itself’ (4).

She gives clear reasons for this:

It would be putting it mildly to say that the lesbian represents a threat to patriarchal protocol. Western civilization has for centuries been haunted by a fear of “women without men” – of women indifferent or resistant to male desire. Precisely because she challenges the moral, sexual, and psychic authority of men so thoroughly, the “Amazon” has always provoked anxiety and hatred. (Castle 4-5)
This threat, Castle implies, is the reason that culture tends to configure lesbians as not-seen; and old lesbians, like oldness in general, are even more ‘ghosted’ or rendered invisible. Furthermore, among the legions of old ‘women without men,’ lesbians are without men through choice. At the same time, older lesbians (and the early age critics both stated and enacted this principle) are perhaps more willing – because of a lifetime of challenging the normative – to extend this activism towards the identification of, and resistance to, other prejudices.

Lesbian feminist age critics brought a distinctive, often formative contribution to the anti-ageism movement, seeking to overturn decline ideology and de-essentialise the process of ageing. It may even be that the vexed relation of lesbian-feminism to the women’s movement as a whole echoed the uneasy partnership between feminism and anti-ageism, thus rendering lesbianism and age criticism a more organic relationship. In any event, there can be no doubt that lesbian feminist writers have furthered the cause of age consciousness through the texts they produce, and their re-sexualisation of old age has been an important part of that process.

Margaret Cruikshank moots a further reason that lesbians may be adept at ageing consciously. She cites Betty Friedan’s text, which avers that ‘Jungian analysts believe a root cause of psychological problems in the elderly is an insistence on seeing themselves as young’ (Cruikshank 77). Perhaps lesbians, accustomed to accepting that they are othered in terms of sexuality, have a greater capacity to acknowledge themselves as also othered by age. The reduced emphasis on appearance in lesbian ontology may contribute to this acceptance of the self as old. Cruikshank echoes: ‘[h]aving been free to de-emphasise or entirely disregard conventional notions of female attractiveness, many [lesbians] seem to accept their aging bodies with equanimity’ (122).

Overall, then, lesbians conform less to imperatives of femininity, rendering them freer to sidestep the stereotypes of age and develop alternative discourses on ageing in ways that are ultimately beneficial to all.

It would, therefore, be over-simplifying the case to pitch heterosexual and lesbian life courses against each other, polarising depressed postnest mothers versus an activist and thriving lesbian midlife. I propose, instead, a continuum –
with the ‘marriage plot’ and ‘empty-nest’ at one extreme and the possibility of more conscious and creative upward years at the other. Whatever the path chosen, midlife, as the cusp of older age, may not be an easy process. The potential for personal difficulty should not be underestimated, and there is no reason to think that the different midlife experienced by lesbians and/or childless women is an easier option per se – indeed, it may be the more challenging because it involves working against the grain of ideological norms, and more frightening because of the paradigmatic vacuum of life with no ‘grandmother’ role. There may even be specific age-related difficulties that lesbians may encounter; indeed, some sociologists have suggested that lesbian women encounter more trials in growing old than their heterosexual counterparts. Shulamit Reinharz offers this thought: ‘the stigma associated with lesbianism persists into old age . . . If these women have not reared children, they may feel particularly vulnerable to being left alone in old age’ (85). This perhaps underscores the uneasy relation of some lesbian subjects to reproduction, and the more general repercussions of remaining non-reproductive. However, Reinharz implies that all heterosexual, post-parental older women have their adult offspring nearby for support, which may very well not be the case.

African-American writer Jewelle Gomez has examined the difficulties inherent in the lack of role models for lesbian midlife, and testifies to the potential for pain and confusion of not conforming to age conventions. For her, progress through the life course is ‘tentative, as if we hop-scotched through our lives landing solidly in certain ages and less so in others’ (240). Childless herself, and thus set to embody neither ‘empty-nest’ nor ‘grandmother’ archetypes, Gomez attempts to resolve the dilemma of how to live her upward years; as part of this process, she records musing on her mother’s photo. Her response to is to acknowledge that generations of female ancestors stop short at her: ‘I have no child to judge my photograph’ (240). The snapshot is a metonymy, for what she is really judging is her mother’s life, including her decision to leave the custody of an infant Jewelle to the child’s grandmother. There is ambivalence in her admiration at the way her mother’s life was not ‘bound up in the lives of [her] children’ (240), a position that Gomez must have identified with.
She is also troubled by the thought of her own transition into old age, in part because of its difference, for she acknowledges ‘a certain investment in the traditional even when it is despairing and oppressive’ (240). Although the myths of middle age provide Gomez with ‘comforting stereotypes,’ her mother and grandmother stand ‘[o]n the other side of the myth . . . they seemed to take advancing age as only one other element to be included in their daily calculations, like rain or a high wind’ (240). For the forty-year-old Gomez, midlife seems a ‘frightening’ prospect. She considers the possibilities: ‘If I, as lesbian/feminist poet, reject the traditional perception of who I am, what do I replace it with? I’ve no idea’ (241). While her mind ‘says there’s really no limit,’ Gomez’s body ‘mocks [her] with its readiness to become old’ (241). At the same time, she finds comfort in her physical slowing down: ‘my body has relieved me of the obligation to pursue daily physical feats. Will I ever learn to ski? Do I care?’ (241). Ultimately Gomez decides her age anxiety is ‘simply the fear that all feminists must face: how to balance the power of control over [one’s] own life with a need for support and encouragement’ (241). That difficulty may become exaggerated in age, when the dichotomy between society and solitude comes into relief. Though the women of her family are a ‘great sustainer’ for Gomez, she sees that her life ‘cannot be fully patterned on theirs, if simply because it’s 30 or 40 or 50 years later, socially, politically, economically, if simply because I am a lesbian and they were not lesbians’ (242). All the same, she resolves to ‘see what a black lesbian looks like when she lives longer than the statistics say she should’ (242). It takes courage, Gomez suggests, to refuse the life course scripted for us; and, as Gomez points out, this clearly extends to all women who have do so.

Gomez’s meditation is predicated on notions of identity. And yet one of the difficulties in developing a coherent theory of lesbian ageing is the very instability of ‘identity’ as a paradigm for understanding subjectivity. Hockey and James propose that identity be thought of as ‘a negotiated, unstable assemblage of ideas and perceptions’ (2003 4). There is a conflict between the notion of the ‘lesbian subject’ and the knowledge that identity is ultimately unfixed and multiple. Furthermore, lesbians are a heterogeneous group, refusing any
totalising definition in terms of sexuality. How do we reconcile what Judith Butler calls the 'failure' of identity with the idea that identity politics can illuminate a particular experience, in this case ageing? Butler both elucidates and answers this question. She writes:

I’m permanently troubled by identity categories, consider them to be invariable stumbling blocks, and understand them, even promote them, as sites of necessary trouble. In fact, if the category were to offer no trouble, it would cease to be interesting. (1993 308)

In the same essay, she suggests she ‘would like to have it permanently unclear what th[e] sign [of ‘lesbian’] signifies’ (308). Identity categories, she declares, are ‘sites of necessary trouble’ – that is to say, both problematic and important – and that is what lends interest to the discussion of identity.

Thus one of the reasons that lesbian writing offers a paradigm for politicised ageing is that many – though not all – lesbians experience identity as relative, contingent and processual. Arguably, indeed, lesbianism can itself be seen as diachronic; and most of my sample texts model Gullette’s theory of diachronic identity in their work, by producing fictional characters whose sexual identities themselves change over the life course. This lack of fixity is, from this point of view, precisely what may facilitate flexibility about ageing; for lesbians do not easily access received roles of wife/partner, grandmother, ‘divoreree’ or even ‘singleton.’ Old lesbians, then, in response to a paucity of paradigms, have created their own patterns for growing old.

The ‘negotiated, unstable assemblage of ideas and perceptions’ that go to make up identity is capable of – and likely to – change over a life course, in a succession of palimpsests codified by the concept of diachronic identity. The ‘lesbian perspective’ may not be stable or absolute, but it does incorporate particular knowledges and practices. It is not easy to bear this mutability in mind while constructing an argument, in part because ‘feminist resistance requires a strong female subject’ (Roof 164). The plurality of lesbian experience, however, in reality results in ‘multiple possibilities: lesbian sexuality as innate, lesbian as a social or political category, lesbian sexuality as a choice selected
from a possible range’ (161). Judith Roof sums up the problems inherent in theories of lesbian writing thus:

Multiplicity and difference catalyze a desire for differentiation and fixity, for the categories definition provides. And this is why the lesbian is particularly subject to definition, precisely because she is not readily assimilable in the binary system of sexual difference, yet she must be accounted for. As a point of stress, the definition of lesbian becomes necessary to feminist criticism . . . . (167).

I have refrained, therefore, from defining the term ‘lesbian,’ preferring to allow the word full freedom of signification. Difficult though the term may be, my argument – that lesbian writing offers a particularly useful challenge to age ideology – cannot exist without it.

Older lesbian writing, in this provisional sense, has much to say to women in general, and, as we have seen, is inextricably linked with second-wave feminism, which has supported the challenge to age ideology in multiple ways. One UK-based example is the ‘Hen Co-op,’ a group of older women who gathered to take part in a series of workshops on ageing in the late ’80s and early ’90s. They continued to meet after the workshops ended, writing about their experiences in the book *Growing Old Disgracefully* (1993). These women set out to challenge age ideology through a specifically feminist consciousness. ‘Would there have been a place called the Hen House with an event called “Growing Old Disgracefully” without the Women’s Movement? The answer must be NO!’ asserts facilitator Mary Cooper (Hen Co-op 90).

Kathleen Woodward and Margaret Gulette, both definitive references in the field of age studies, share a clear allegiance to feminist theory. They concur in considering old age a feminist issue; for ‘the aging experience is not gender neutral but, rather, is fully imbricated with sexual difference’ (Pearsall 4). Woodward, Gulette and other critics who have followed them – Margaret Cruikshank for example – see the purpose of anti-ageist activism as, in Gulette’s words, ‘[u]nmaking an essentialized, body-based ideology.’ ‘Age is becoming an overriding constructor of difference,’ she warns elsewhere (2004 102, 35), and it is this very construction against which all midlife subjects need to be on our guard.
Despite the importance of the women’s movement in the writing and activism of ageing, there is something of a contradiction in the relation between gender theory and age research. Paradoxically, although individual feminists have led the way in age studies, the women’s movement has not developed a coherent stance on the issue of oldness, nor has it mounted a united front to challenge age ideology. This was recently confirmed by Leni Marshall in an NWSA journal focusing on age and ageing (Spring 2006). Exasperated that age studies are perpetually hailed as a ‘new’ discipline, Marshall writes:

Since the 1973 publication of Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Coming of Age*, reviewers have greeted feminist books on aging with words that emphasize the importance of the topic – and that reflect the larger social amnesia. A few examples: *The Coming of Age* was hailed as a text that “confronts a subject of universal public anguish and universal public silence” . The back cover of . . . *Look Me in the Eye* . . . shows that May Sarton welcomed it as “extremely rare,” while Robin Morgan called it “courageous.” The label of “pioneering” was bestowed upon Kathleen Woodward’s 1991 *Aging and its Discontents* . . . . Margaret Gullette’s 1997 analysis of middle-ageism, *Declining to Decline* . . . was described as “original,” a book that “establishes a new domain for research” . . . A reviewer saluted one of the most recent feminist texts on aging, Margaret Cruikshank’s 2003 text *Learning to be Old: Gender, Culture and Aging*, as “important” and “pioneering” . . . . Thirty years and we’re still “pioneering.” This must be rough country indeed! How many publications does it take to move groundbreaking to an official -ism? (viii)

Marshall complains that nothing has moved on: ‘feminist aging studies scholars often end up “reinventing the wheel”’ (viii). And, indeed, there are some perennial problems with age studies that do make it ‘rough country.’ One is that, as I have suggested, older age is a category of othering that is shaped by denial, rendering it unpopular for personal scrutiny even though – or perhaps because – it will affect most human subjects in a way that race and gender issues do not. In the main, as Sarton pointed out, ‘age is not interesting until one gets there’ (*AWAN* 23). Another problem is multiplicity of opinion: feminist – and indeed non-feminist – gerontologists have not begun to agree on whether ‘successful,’ ‘productive,’ ‘vital,’ ‘healthy,’ ‘busy,’ ‘outrageous,’ or merely ‘comfortable’ aging is the ideal to aim for, let alone on how we should achieve it.
Margaret Cruikshank argues that the women’s movement itself could still benefit from returning to these early lessons from lesbian feminists. In her opinion, the ‘sorry record of the women’s movement and women’s studies on aging must be acknowledged before we can recognize our internalized ageism and from that analysis come to understand the strengths of old women’ (176). Furthermore, she attempts to explain feminism’s failures in the area of ageism, answering difficult questions as to why age studies have been slow to become established in the academy:

The women’s movement and women’s studies have been very slow to name aging a women’s issue and some would argue that the acknowledgement has not yet come. Why not? Many of us were young at the beginning of the second wave of feminism. Reproductive issues, workplace inequality, and violence against women have claimed our attention during the past thirty years. In addition . . . for some white, middle-class women adopting feminism seemed to require rejecting mothers, for they represented volunteering, housework, and living for husbands and children. To confront aging would have been not only to acknowledge our mothers but to stress likeness to them rather than the radical difference we exulted in. We suffered from “mother flu.” (175).

This echoes the thoughts of Baba Copper, who identified one source of ageism in younger feminists as a projection of the ‘bad mother’ (20-25). If feminists persist in rejecting our mothers along with their values, how can we deal with ageism and acknowledge the old woman in ourselves? This mother-anxiety also emerges in lesbian fiction, where, as Judith Roof has discerned, the protagonist often has no biological mother or is in some way differently parented. Such avoidance does not resolve the problem that older age is associated with parents, and that lesbians sometimes have inimical relations with their own mothers.

Older lesbians are not necessarily exempt from the powerful forces of decline theory, nor, of course, from the real and material challenges of ageing. But, as Margaret Cruikshank asserts: ‘At this unique, historical moment of a burgeoning population of old women, meaning lies in particulars. Having no models, we improvise’ (200). This kind of interstitial consciousness – the description of ‘particulars,’ of the specificity of difference as it emerges through an othered sexuality complicated by older age – can inform more general
paradigms of age identity. I suggest that lesbians, because less ‘subject’ – not lesser subjects, but less subject to ideological law – are well placed to produce counterconstructions to ageing discourse and thus to challenge the damaging forces of age ideology. The inevitable incompleteness of subjectivation not only prevents the subject from being a unified self, but also saves it from complete subjection to ideology. Always in process, and adept at what Sarton called ‘self-actualisation,’ old lesbian psyches are able to harness the vestigial, unsubjectivated scrap of self that enables ‘late life courage in non-conformity’ (Waxman 1997 90). Precisely because of their transitional character, older lesbian identities can shape new ways of exploring the problems of age ideology. For we are never only the age we are, but also embody previous ages, previous sexualities, and previous personae; and, held with them in the unconscious, we may also keep foreknowledge of future ages, future selves. Practised at self-configuration, used to refusing or sidestepping ideological imperatives, lesbian feminists have produced a wealth of writing that facilitates perceptions of ageing as an enabling continuity of development rather than a picture of loss and decline. In answer to Cruikshank’s question – ‘What are the “in-between worlds” within aging?’ – I propose the lesbian literature of age as just one among many ‘in-between worlds’ still to be discovered.
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