

GENERATIONS AND CULTURAL HERITAGE IN ALISTAIR MACLEOD'S *TIMESCAPE*

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Abstract

In 1790, Alistair MacLeod's ancestors migrated from Scotland to Canada, where they settled in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia. Born in 1936, MacLeod died in 2014. Although he is not an autobiographical writer, his centuries-long family history is fundamental to his writing, families and generations being for him the natural configuration of human existence. In turn, generations inscribe themselves in the history of the countries they live in. In his short stories and one novel, MacLeod succeeds in problematizing both heritage and generational conflict. Emblematically, in the novel *No Great Mischief*, the narrator, while walking through a busy thoroughfare in Toronto, is made meditative by a sentence he reads on the front of a girl's t-shirt: "Living in the past is not living up to our potential".

Generazioni ed eredità culturale nel timescape di Alistair MacLeod

Nel 1790 gli antenati di Alistair MacLeod (1936-2014) emigrarono dalla Scozia in Canada, per stabilirsi permanentemente a Cape Breton in Nova Scozia. Non è uno scrittore autobiografico, ma la storia secolare della sua famiglia è fondamentale alla sua scrittura, perché famiglia e generazioni sono per lui la configurazione naturale dell'esistenza umana. A loro volta le generazioni si iscrivono nella storia dei paesi dove vivono. Nei suoi racconti e nel suo unico romanzo, MacLeod problematizza eredità culturale e conflitto generazionale. Nel romanzo, *No Great Mischief*, il narratore, mentre cammina in un'affollata strada di Toronto, è spinto a meditare da una frase emblematica che legge sulla t-shirt di una ragazza: "Vivere nel passato è non vivere appieno le nostre potenzialità".

From Skye to Cape Breton

Immigration from Scotland to Canada had its beginning as far as 1622 under the reign of James VI of Scotland (James I of England), with the founding and naming of the colony of Nova Scotia in the Gulf of St. Lawrence¹. Scottish im-

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¹ The Gulf, which is more an internal sea than a gulf, was named by the French explorer Jacques Cartier in 1534. Also the name Canada, meaning roughly 'abode', 'home', is believed to be due to Cartier.

migration increased when many Highlanders fled Scotland after the failure of the 1715 and 1745 Jacobite risings, the ensuing defeat at Culloden in 1746, and the death of Bonnie Prince Charlie, Charles Edward Stuart, the Young Pretender, in 1788. Today Scottish Canadians are distributed all over the country and are one of Canada's largest and more influential ethnic groups². Alistair MacLeod's ancestors migrated to Nova Scotia from the isle of Eigg, one of Scotland's Inner Hebrides, in 1790, settling in the island of Cape Breton. He was born in North Battleford, in Saskatchewan, in 1936³, where his parents had temporarily migrated. After other migrations from migration, first to Edmonton and later to Mercoal, Alberta, where the father worked in a coal mine, in 1946 the family went back to Cape Breton. This is the deep eidetic timescape⁴ Alistair MacLeod elects to deal with in his less than twenty short stories⁵ and in his novel *No Great Mischief* (2000). Although he may be easily misinterpreted as such, he is not an autobiographical writer; instead, he makes cultural history and his family history, his mine, using its ore to build the foundations of stories and characters belonging to our time.

The geographical and historical choreography of his fictional families and their patterns are fundamental to his vision of human progress through time because to him families, generations and their ties are the natural configuration of the very existence of the human race. In turn, generations inscribe themselves into the systemic structure of the country of which they are citizens. In every single one of his short stories and, with more emphasis on historical facts, in his one novel, MacLeod problematizes the often-conflicting issues of tradition and progress, heritage and contemporary realities, education and lack of it, parental and extended family relationships and bonds, including in-laws. Although contexts and agonists may seem to be reiterated, they are in fact varied presenting what could be almost called a range of case studies on and of family configurations. None of his characters seem to find optimal solutions to the conflicts they live through, because, ruthlessly and feelingly at the same time – quite an achievement on MacLeod's part –, the stories show that what is good for one person or community is bad for another. Nonetheless his characters cannot help making choices. MacLeod does not add judgements or even

² Scottish Canadians have registered tartans varying from province to province, or territory.

³ Alistair MacLeod died April, 20, 2014 in Windsor, Ontario, where he lived and taught English Literature and Creative Writing at the University of Windsor.

⁴ 'Timescape' was first used by the astrophysicist and novelist Gregory Benford, notably in his novel *Timescape* (1980). 'Timescape' has affinities with but is not Bachtin's 'chronotope'.

⁵ Sixteen of his short stories are collected in *Island - Collected Stories* (2001). Two are published separately in periodicals, while some are still unpublished and some unfinished.

opinions to representation, but often makes his characters debate those issues within themselves – in *No Great Mischief* between a brother and a sister who are twins.

The boat and the book

In MacLeod's writings, education and/or the lack of it are paramount factors in determining not so much the characters' choices but rather working as antagonists in the shaping of their lives. When some of the characters exit the enclosure of their clan – indeed it could be called a stage – they do it at a cost. The following pages will necessarily confine themselves to some, yet exemplary, of his short stories. In "The Boat" (1968), MacLeod's first published short story, the first person narrator, recalling his and his family's past, is a young academic, whose dead father was a fisherman, owner of his boat, in Cape Breton Island. Here the conflict over education versus fishing as a means of earning a living involves father, mother and son – with six sisters in the background. When he was not in the boat, the narrator's father spent most of his time reading in a room of his own, where he accumulated magazines and books, many of them novels⁶. The mother, beautiful in a severe fashion, strong and not illiterate, believes only in physical work, in homestead self-sufficiency and in maintaining the *status quo* of her family in the local community. She disapproves of her daughters' marriages because none married a fisherman but young men from outside and went with them to live in towns; and she bitterly, relentlessly resents her only son's desertion of his father's fishing 'profession' to go to university and make a 'profession' of reading books. He, the son, recollects that:

[She] had not read a book since high school. There she had read *Ivanhoe* and considered it a colossal waste of time. [...] At times, although she was not overly religious, she would bring in God to bolster her argument, saying, 'In the next world God will see to those who waste their lives reading useless books when they should be about their work'⁷ (MacLeod. *Collected Stories*: 8).

⁶ The father's room cannot but recall Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, giving the theme an additional perspective.

⁷ The narrator's mother attitude shows a curious analogy with that of Stephen Dedalus' mother in Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist As a Young Man*, when, at the beginning of Chapter 5, she tells her son: «you'll live to rue the day you set your foot in that place» – «that place» being the university (179).

Yet MacLeod makes it very clear that the young academic admires her mother, making him repeatedly add details to a portrait of her that borders on aestheticization, the semiconscious nature of which is part of the character of the young professor of English Literature, who describes her as «tall and dark and powerfully energetic» and for years «a local beauty», slightly disturbingly also telling the implied readers that she reminded him of Thomas Hardy's Eustacia Vye⁸, quickly adding «in a physical way» (5). She is beautiful in an almost Pre-raphaelite-like way⁹ even when he recalls that:

She fed and clothed a family of seven children, making all of the meals and most of the clothes. She grew miraculous gardens and magnificent flowers and raised broods of hens and ducks. She would walk miles on berry-picking expeditions and hoist her skirts to dig for clams when the tide was low (5).

His ties with his father are just as complex and mature slowly. One night, during a summer spent home trawling with him in «the boat», while they were talking about *David Copperfield* in his room, his father told him he had always wanted to go to university. Later, the narrator, by then an academic, thinking in retrospect about that personal confession, remembers how that summer he realized the existence of a new bond between him and his father, based on their common love for literature, and how he was simultaneously struck by the privilege of going to school he had been given and the life of forced endurance his father had to go through:

And then there came into my heart a very great love for my father and I thought it was very much braver to spend a life doing what you really do not want rather than selfishly following forever your own dreams and inclinations. [...]. And I knew then that I could never live him alone I felt that I had been very small in a little secret place within me and that even the completion of high school was for me a silly shallow selfish dream (21).

Nonetheless, when he remembers that momentous summer and the death of his father the following autumn, he lives in a town and teaches at university. The treatment of time in the story may at times seem difficult because of the interplay of flashbacks with reflective moments of the fictional present, but it is, in fact, very precise and consistent with MacLeod's representation of the

⁸ Eustacia Vye is a very complex and controversial character in Hardy's *The Return of the Native* (1878).

⁹ The Pre-Raphaelite painter Frederic Leighton (1830-1896) offers interesting examples of tall, dark, beautiful women.

layered feelings of the narrator. In his present, the young academic has to face both old and new conflicting bonds and rifts: his father's confession makes him feel he would have approved his choice, yet he also senses a bitter remorse thinking of his life and death, and thinking of the «lobster beds off the Cape Breton», «grounds» the community and his mother consider «sacred» and waiting for him (24). Centuries of culture make his literary present fight with his family heritage: fathers had always been fishermen, mothers had reared children and took care of the whole household tasks, sons and daughters should follow in parents' footsteps. It is part of the character, decidedly a round character, his thinking of his mother always through a sequence of images, making her a severe, tragic and yet aestheticized epitome of his betrayal of their community culture:

It is not an easy thing to know that your mother lives alone on an inadequate insurance policy and that she is too proud to accept any other aid. [...]. And that she lies awake in the early morning's darkness when the rubber boots of the men scrunch upon the gravel as they pass beside her house [...] and she alone [...] has neither son nor son-in-law who walks toward the boat that will take him to the sea. And it is not an easy thing to know that your mother looks upon the sea with love and on you with bitterness because the one has been so constant and the other so untrue (24-25).

The fog

The choreography of family members changes in another short story, "The Lost Salt Gift of Blood" (1974): a ten-years old grandson is being brought up by maternal grandparents in a small fishing village in Newfoundland, not far from Cape Spear¹⁰; his mother and official father are absent from the scene because they died in a car accident; his natural father arrives in the village summoned through a sense of duty by the grandfather, while the boy does not know the stranger is his father, and the father has never seen the boy before and did not even know he had a son. Like in "The Boat", the narrator in "The Lost Salt Gift of Blood" is a young and clearly successful academic, but this time the point of view is that of a father not that of a son¹¹. The narration, fictionally lasting no more than twenty-four hours, is scrupulously maintained within his knowledge and perceptions.

¹⁰ Cape Spear is the easternmost point of Atlantic Canada, dramatically beautiful and awe-inspiring – a good example of the picturesque sublime.

¹¹ There is not the least sign of the young academic in "The Boat" being the same person of the academic in "The Lost Salt Gift of Blood".

His arrival at the village, literally at the end of the road from the nearest town, driving a «small rented Volkswagen», is a highly pictorial and emotional homage to the stunning beauty of the landscape and at the same time a proleptic intimation of a perduring cultural heritage: «Now in the early evening the sun is flashing everything in gold. [...] Even farther out, somewhere beyond Cape Spear lies Dublin and the Irish coast; far away but still the nearest land, and closer now than is Toronto or Detroit [...]» (118-119). It is protracted for more than two pages and does not end abruptly but lingers on almost to the end of the narrative, intermingled with the characters' motions and dialogues.

In the middle of that three-dimensional scenery, the narrator meets his son, John, serenely unaware that the stranger is his father, and, soon after, is invited by the boy's grandfather to stay for the night. Through the natural and anthropological landscapes, the characters features and clothes, and a number of knowledgeably selected tell-tale objects, the story is a representation of the traditional life of fishermen and their family in an epitomic village, which is made by MacLeod to appear as an outpost of Gaelic Ireland in a Canadian contemporary context. The family in "The Lost Salt Gift of Blood" is Irish and Catholic and, not unexpectedly, very similar to the Scottish family¹² in "The Boat". After supper, during which John does most of the talking, and after some family playing and singing a couple of old traditional songs, ingeniously chosen by MacLeod to be read as connected with the story, the narrator and the grandfather are alone, playing chess, drinking hot rum toddies and talking. It is at this point that the antefacts are grafted into the present situation, so that past and present are told in two parallel tracks, a not chronological one for the past, a chronological one for the present.

The grandfather starts his part of the story in *media re*:

When she married in Toronto [...] we figured that maybe John should be with her and with her husband. That maybe he would be having more of a chance there in the city. [...] Well, what was wrong was that we missed him wonderful awful. [...] Anyway, they could have no more peace with John than we could without him. [...] They sent word that he was coming on the plane [...]. Well, it was all wrong the night before [...]. The signs all bad [...] (134-135).

A list, a compendium of centuries-old superstitious beliefs follows – the omens and the human beings immersed together in a flood of fog, which is to

¹² During our private conversations (I was translating some of his short stories), MacLeod frequently underlined the similarities between Scotland and Ulster – and his interest in both.

the grandparents the most frightening of all bad omens. Yet, the aircraft transporting John lands safely through the fog, but the car accident where John's mother and her husband die takes place that night in the far away fog of Toronto: «That night they be killed» (135).

The narrator's part of the story spills over in his thoughts later, when he is alone in the room where he will spend the night, which is near the room where he fathered John and where the boy now sleeps. Literary images cram his mind intertwined with images of the local imported popular culture, the culture he investigated as a student, in particular the girlish belief that helped him to seduce his host's daughter. The quotation, though shortened, is long but worthwhile:

The room is full of sound. Like a foolish Lockwood I approach the window [...]. There is no Catherine who cries to be let in. [...] there is no boiled egg or shaker of salt or glass of water waiting on the chair within this closed room's darkness. Once, though, there was a belief held in the outports, that if a girl would see her own true lover she should boil an egg and scoop out half the shell and fill it with salt. Then she should take it to bed with her and eat it, leaving a glass of water by her bedside. In the night her future husband or a vision of him would appear and offer her the glass. [...] It is the type of belief that bright young graduate students were collecting eleven years ago for the theses and archives of North America and also, they hoped, for their own fame (137-138).

MacLeod endows his young scholar's thoughts with a touch of irony¹³, but chooses to stop short of making him a courageous and profound thinker. The key-word, and therefore the key image of the story is «fog», the fog without duplicating itself in the fog within: «I would like to see my way more clearly. I, who have never understood the mystery of fog» (138).

The boy and his grandparents are unaware that they live a life that is 'heritage' and 'folklore' to scholars and archives, they do not know the word 'picturesque'. The successful academic knows all that, and knows that the disappearance of cultural heritage is something to be fought against. Yet, how can this be done? Who does preserve the cultural heritage better, the scholar through his work or the illiterate grandparents who still live their 'heritage', or, may be, John will? John, of whom his grandfather says: «John here has the makings of a good fisherman» (128); and about whom his father asks himself: «And perhaps now I should go and say, come away from the lonely gulls and the silver trout [...]. Or may I offer you the money that is the fruit of my col-

¹³ MacLeod's allusion to the protagonists of Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847) is perhaps too evident to be pointed out.

lecting and most successful life?» (139). He does not tell John he is his father and leaves him with the grandparents, leaving to the reader the interpretation of the title: John, the «gift of blood», is a gift from a father to the lonely grandparents, or rather a gift refused? Or is the fathering of the boy ironically called a gift? Or the scholar wants to preserve the harmony and beauty of the village and its inhabitants, almost as a gift to a living, necessarily impermanent archive? Besides, there is another gift, briefly mentioned: the boy gives his unknown father «a smooth round stone [...] worn and polished» by sea and sand to «near perfection», and says «I like to collect them» (140). Does he, like his father, have «the makings» of a good collector of knowledge of the past? MacLeod's titles are always difficult and layered. Once more, the quotation of the entire passage would be too long. Suffice to point out again that MacLeod's characters make choices, but, as anticipated, do not find pacifying solutions. It would be easy to read the father and the grandparents in the story as instances of selfishness in different degrees of consciousness, but MacLeod makes things much more complex and ends the story with far more questions than answers.

Song and silence

The family pattern changes again, and utterly, in “The Tuning of Perfection” (1984). The central character, Archibald, is a seventy-eight years old ‘lumberer’, faultlessly respectful of the beauty of the woods, «a tall, slim man with dark hair and brown eyes and his own teeth» (271), whose ancestors had come to Nova Scotia from the Isle of Skye four generations before. At the beginning of the short story he has been a widower for forty-nine years; his wife died giving birth to a son, their fourth child, who died with her. After that, their three daughters had been brought up by his wife's sisters, within an enlarged family. Now, in the year 1980, he lives alone high up on a Cape Breton Island mountain in a log house he himself had built to near perfection and where he has a superb, pictorial view of the valley below, the sea, Prince Edward Island and the Magdalen Islands.

The generational conflict involves the entire family, particularly the younger members of it, but becomes especially alive when it extends itself out of the family clan to include a «gang» of young men belonging to other families. The story is narrated in the third person, by a very subtle narrator who mostly (not always) limits his knowledge to Archibald's life and thoughts, oscillating from inside and outside elements. The text of the short story is crammed with meaning, all the words and information are pondered to contribute to the whole, every word counts. Archibald, who clearly received a secondary school educa-

tion, still speaks Gaelic, knows by heart a large number of traditional songs and ballads and is an extremely good singer. He is well known to researchers in the field and is frequently asked for contributions:

Many of the letters [...] came from the folklorists who had 'discovered' him in the 1960s and for whom he had made various tapes and recordings. And he had come to be regarded as 'the last of the authentic old-time Gaelic singers'. He was faithfully recorded in the archives at Sydney and Halifax and Ottawa [...]. He did not mind the folklorists, enunciating the words [...] explaining that 'bh' was pronounced as 'v' (like the 'ph' in phone is pronounced 'f', he would say), expanding on the more archaic meaning and footnoting himself the words and phrases of local origin (280).

When he and his family receive an invitation to sing traditional Gaelic songs in Halifax, at a Festival connected with «the year of 'Scots Around the World'» (184), while his relatives, especially those in their twenties or thirties, seem more excited by the prospect of spending a week in Halifax than interested in singing, he reacts with a mixture of warm feelings and philological passion, although the word philology is obviously unknown to him. The organisers interview other groups of singers, but Archibald's family is the one they prefer, mainly because of Archibald's leading skill and exceptionally good voice and enunciation. Yet, when they are singing and Archibald is asked to cut the song before it ends, he becomes very upset: «It's not finished [...]. It's a narrative». The producer says that there is no problem, since nobody knows the language and they are «just trying to gauge audience impact» (298). But, the austere and passionate philologist in Archibald strives toward perfection and cannot compromise. To his family's chagrin, since he cannot accept the songs to be cut in the middle, he declines the invitation to sing in Halifax. Another group will sing in their place, the 'gang' of those reckless young men always ready to pick up a good 'fight', far less good and respectful of heritage and authenticity, but a group who can accept to cut a song because they do not know the meaning of the words they sing. Archibald, in the end, envies and admires them for their «closeness [...] fierceness [...] tremendous energy» (309), thinking that perhaps «men like them» (309) fought in the «storm past» (309) of Scotland. Archibald prefers silence.

Timescape and irreversibility

Several others of MacLeod's short stories would be interesting too, especially considering that they cover a gamut of family structures. No less interesting would be the novel, *No Great Mischief*, where the case studies coalesce into the history of the generations of one family, from Culloden to contemporary To-

ronto, via Cape Breton. Almost at the beginning of the novel, the narrator, Alexander MacDonald walking through a busy thoroughfare in Toronto, is made meditative, and partly upset, by a sentence he reads on the front of a girl's t-shirt: «Living in the past is not living up to our potential» (56).

MacLeod's concept of time is linear and its movement unidirectional; it could aptly be described by Arthur Eddington's 'Arrow of time'¹⁴: the past can be remembered, preserved, studied, imitated, acted and enacted, obeyed in its commands, endured in its consequences, expiated, and much more, but it cannot be 'the present' a second time – its unidirectional movement is irreversible. In his timescape, paradoxically, the two academics and the folklorists of the three short stories here privileged¹⁵ do more to preserve the past than the mother in "The Boat", John and his grandparents in "The Lost Salt Gift of Blood" – though the natural father's choice makes the situation multi-layered – and Archibald in "The Tuning of Perfection".

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¹⁴ Arthur Eddington (1882-1944) was an English astrophysicist and literary writer. He developed the concept of the 'Arrow of time' or 'Asymmetry of time' in 1927.

¹⁵ At least "Island" (1988) and "Clearances" (1999) must be mentioned, because the choice of the protagonists of both stories, albeit for very different reasons, is, like Archibald's, silence.

TRANSGRESSING BORDERS: INTERSECTIONALITY AND GENRE IN THOM FITZGERALD'S *CLOUDBURST* (2010)

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Abstract

This paper discusses aspects of identity and intersectionality in Thom Fitzgerald's road movie *Cloudburst* and focusses on the role genre conventions play for the construction of the protagonists' identities. Canadian nursing home escape stories and their interpretations can be seen as textual interventions in the deconstruction of the limited spatiality of old age and counteract stereotyping on several levels of intersectionality.

Violare i confini: intersezionalità e genere in Cloudburst (2010) di Thom Fitzgerald

Questo saggio discute alcuni aspetti legati all'identità e alla intersezionalità nel road movie *Cloudburst*, focalizzandosi su come le convenzioni di genere influenzino la costruzione dell'identità delle protagoniste. Le storie sulla fuga dalle case di riposo e le loro interpretazioni possono essere viste come interventi testuali nella decostruzione della spazialità limitata riservata agli anziani e nella lotta contro la stereotipizzazione a diversi livelli di intersezionalità.

Introduction: *The Journey of Life*

The topic of escape is of course a foundational motif in American literature that can be traced as far back as the first immigrants' escape from Europe (see Bluefarb). Care home narratives that culminate in escape include both old men and women who set out on their life-altering journeys as heroes and heroines. Thomas R. Cole analyzes the topos of the journey in his 1992 groundbreaking book *The Journey of Life: A Cultural History of Aging in America*, tracing it back to biblical traditions. The journey as escape narrative already played a role in late nineteenth century care home narratives such as Mary Wilkins Freeman's "A Mistaken Charity" (1887), in which two elderly sisters run away from an 'Old Ladies' Home', since they feel like «two forlorn prisoners» in their genteel surroundings» (Wilkins Freeman 244). In 1964, Margaret Laurence's

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Stone Angel most famously addressed the topic of escape again, but especially during the last two decades, a massive increase in the number of stories that feature elderly protagonists fleeing long-term institutional care has been observed. One of the most popular texts has been Swedish author Jonas Jonasson's *Hundred-Year Old Man Who Climbed Out of A Window and Disappeared*. The novel (2009) has been translated into 36 languages and the film by Felix Herngren (2013) has been shown in over 40 countries. With its more than \$50 million in revenue, it is said to be the most successful Swedish movie ever. The plotline is not very innovative and resembles several other escape stories, yet the story of an elderly man's rebellion seems to have touched a nerve.

Characters such as 'the 100 year old Man' are seen as voiceless victims while still in their roles as frail, old nursing home residents, but transform into picaresque heroes as soon as they attempt escape. As Pam Gravagne explains, «we secretly cheer for the elderly, for the success of those made less than human by an overarching narrative of decline» (47, also quoted in Chivers. "Blind People": 140). Well-known literary examples of such escape stories are Sara Gruen's *Water for Elephants*¹ in which the 93-year-old protagonist, Jacob Jankowski, walks out the nursing home door one day and runs away with a circus, or Todd Johnson's *The Sweet By and By* (2009), in which Margaret and her friend Bernice escape from Ridgcrest, even if only to have dinner in a diner. In Andrea Barrett's *The Forms of Water*, eighty-year old Brendan Auberon convinces his nephew to hijack the nursing home van to make a final visit to the only family estate remaining.

Nursing home escape stories as road narratives

Individual texts that center on the nursing home as a place from which to escape follow the conventions and patterns of the escape narrative, the road novel or quest story. Films and stories, therefore, can also be interpreted in terms of such genres. However, the aspect of age and the starting point of the nursing home add an additional dimension to the interpretation of such «geriatric road narratives», as the genre has pejoratively been called (imdb, "Cloudburst"). Even if some of the protagonists' escapes are only temporary and end in confinement or even death, their journeys and explorations affect their narratives of self and thus change them. The characters who escape confinement are struggling to acquire a new kind of subjectivity (Uten g and Cresswell 2).

¹ The novel *Water for Elephants* was made into a movie in 2011, starring Reese Witherspoon, Robert Pattinson, and Christoph Waltz.

Their spiritual and physical journeys change them forever and challenge the notion of old age as being static and immobile.

«Lack of movement is characteristic of decrepit age», Kathleen Woodward argues. «If movement bespeaks life, immobility – lack of movement – is akin to death, and inertia verges dangerously on the inert» (Woodward 53). It can be argued that escape narratives, therefore, counteract the myth of immobility in old age, and celebrate the protagonists' resistance to the inertia forced upon them by institutional life.

Elderly characters who refuse to obey institutional rules and claim the road for themselves feature more prominently in novels and films today than ever before, thus, as Sally Chivers notes in "On the Road", «conveying [a] shift from self-consciousness to self-empowerment» (213). She writes, «[c]ontemporary depictions of elderly characters on the road again do more than expand literary and film road genres; they reconfigure expectations of old age in a way that stands to make elderly mobility important enough to matter socially» (214).

When elderly characters run away from the confinement of institutional care and hit the road, the genre's conventions are challenged: whereas young protagonists flee from conventions and break out of the familiar, the old protagonists attempt to reclaim the familiar, recover their place in society, and fight against the marginalized social role that has been assigned to them (see Hartung and Maierhofer 15). How does gender play out in this context?

In nursing home escape novels such as Oscar Casares's *Amigoland*, Sara Gruen's *Water For Elephants* or Jonas Jonasson's *The Hundred-Year-Old Man Who Climbed Out Of The Window And Disappeared* that feature male protagonists, their journeys are successful. While such stories are examples of road narratives that portray escape as necessary and, most importantly, successful in terms of fulfilling the quest for the spiritual and cultural redefinition of the male protagonists' identities, Thom Fitzgerald's movie *Cloudburst* (2011) is a dramatic story that is, in the words of Sally Chivers, «catalyzed by the threat of long-term residential care» ("Blind": 136) that ends on a sadder note.

Cloudburst

In *Cloudburst*² (USA/CAN 2011, dir. Thom Fitzgerald, prod. Thom Fitzgerald

² The movie *Cloudburst* premiered on September 16, 2011 at the Atlantic Film Festival in Halifax, Nova Scotia where it won the "People's Choice Audience Award for Best Film of the Festival" and the "Atlantic Canada Award for Best Screenplay". With more than 40 awards from Canada, the United States, and Europe it has become one of the most popular

and Doug Pettigrew, 93 min.) which has been called «Thelma & Louise on a pension», Dot and Stella travel north from Maine in the US to Canada. *Cloudburst* is a comedy-drama road movie that stars Oscar-winning actresses Olympia Dukakis (“Moonstruck”) and Brenda Fricker (“My Left Foot”) as Stella and Dot, a butch-femme couple in their eighties who drive from the US to Canada to get married. The film critically reflects on the hotly debated personal and political issue of same-sex marriage and its social and financial implications for aging homosexual couples while telling a partly comic, partly tragic tale of lesbian love, friendship, and death. It addresses the problems many LGBT elders face in heteronormative society especially when confronted with issues of long-term care.

Stella, a feisty, strong, swearing butch wearing lumberjack shirts and boots, and Dot, a plump femme with angelic, curly gray hair, have been happily living together in Dot’s house on the coastline of Maine for 31 years when Dot, legally blind and in need of care after a fall, is assigned to a nursing home by her prudish granddaughter Molly (Kristin Booth). Molly, oblivious of the women’s loving relationship, is more interested in Dot’s house than in her granny’s well-being. After violently taking Dot away from Stella with the help of her boyfriend Tommy, a local policeman (Michael McPhee), Molly asks Stella to look for a new place to stay. Rebellious against Molly’s plans, Stella drives to Bangor in their red pickup truck, dresses up as nursing home resident, and kidnaps Dot from the bleak institution.

During a stop-over in a roadside diner Stella proposes to Dot, and the couple decides to drive to Canada where same-sex marriage is legal. On their way across the border, they pick up a hitchhiker, young and sexy strip dancer Prentice (Ryan Doucette) who is on his way home to visit his dying mother (Marlane O’Brien). While his mother is happy to see him, his father (Randy Bolliver) does not approve of his visit, and it becomes clear that he no longer has a home. Understanding his dilemma, Stella and Dot invite him to join them as their best

and highly awarded LGBT movies. It was shot over seven weeks in various locations in Nova Scotia. Jay Brannan was nominated for the 2012 Genie Award for his song *My Love, My Love* in the category “Best Achievement in Music – Original Song” which is part of the movie’s soundtrack that also features music by k.d. lang, Rick Kurek, and Ryan Doucette. *Cloudburst* debuted as Thom Fitzgerald’s first full-length stage play on April 8, 2010 at the Plutonium Playhouse in Halifax, Nova Scotia, where Ryan Doucette also starred as Prentice. It won the 2011 Merritt Award, Nova Scotia’s theatre award, for Best New Play. Thom Fitzgerald’s feature films include *The Hanging Garden* (1997), *Beefcake* (1998), *Wolf Girl* (2001), *The Wild Dogs* (2002), *The Event* (2003), and *3 Needles* (2005). Fitzgerald is an award-winning producer, director and writer who has also worked on short films, documentaries, and for television.

man. Their decision proves life-saving: When Dot during a walk almost drowns in the rising tide and Stella is too weak to pull her out, Prentice runs to their help. Revealing Dot's weakness and Stella's powerlessness, the incident makes it clear that an independent life together might not be possible for the two women anymore. Thus, Stella and Dot need to come up with an alternative care arrangement, striking a deal with Prentice: He will join them to live in Dot's house and help them with their chores such as heavy lifting and driving.

After a scenic drive through the Nova Scotian landscape, the three travelers arrive in the little village of Lunenburg to have the couple's marriage arranged. Just before they are officially wed, however, their ceremony is interrupted by Molly and her boyfriend who come rushing into the church. Dot manages to convince the justice of Molly's treachery, and Molly is taken to the police station where Dot explains her family history, her previous unhappy straight marriage, and her relationship with Stella, which Molly finally agrees to accept in order to have her handcuffs taken off. When the little group finally drives to the courthouse to repeat the ceremony, Dot suddenly takes violently ill. Gathering all her strength, she begs Prentice to marry her and Stella on the spot. He performs a pseudo-ceremony in the car, pronouncing them lawfully married 'women and wives' just before Dot dies in Stella's arms. The movie ends with a scenic shot of Prentice and Stella standing on the shore in front of Dot's house, looking out to the sea, the clouds, and the sunset, and remembering Dot. Her death replicates the conventions of traditional escape movies such as *Thelma & Louise* with which *Cloudburst* has frequently been compared, and highlights the search for individual freedom and identity as well as the social conflicts that precede any escape. However, *Cloudburst* can also be viewed as a critique of current practices of long-term residential care which is portrayed in the movie as a place to be avoided at all costs. It advocates aging in place especially for LGBT elders who are often discriminated against in care-giving institutions.

Stella and Dot pick up a hitch hiker without whom their journey would not be possible. The young, sexy character of Prentice underlines the obvious opposition of youth and age and, according to the movie's director Thom Fitzgerald, fulfils the function of making the «geriatric lesbian road movie» more accessible to a wider audience: «Prentice is the entryway for a lot of viewers into the story. Not everyone can relate to an angry geriatric bull dyke or a vision-impaired grandmother» (Nash n.p.).

Including the figure of Prentice actually means adhering to a conventional narrative: as is typical of the road narrative, he is a «helper character» (Soyka 35). Whereas the male characters in *Thelma & Louise* function as antagonists, Prentice in *Cloudburst* functions as the binary 'other', juxtaposed to the elderly,

vulnerable women, who could not travel without him. Prentice is added as ‘eye candy’ for viewers, once he even saves their lives and distracts the police, who are looking for the old women. He learns only in the car that the women are running from the law but finds this «awesome!» (00:30:12) and is excited to hear that the police already have an all-points bulletin out for them. However, the couple is just about to get married, but before the official ceremony can be conducted, Dot becomes severely ill and dies in Stella’s arms in their car.

The runaway women meet many obstacles, must disguise themselves, use false names, and hide from the police, their families, and the nursing home administrators who are frantically looking for them. Stella and Dot are women travelers who are denied a place where they can be ‘at home’. While it can be argued that this development is in line with traditional road novels, and that the characters never set out with the goal to find a new place, but rather to avoid the care home, their being and remaining ‘out of place’ is also connected to their age, gender, and sexuality. The nursing home is contrasted with the free and open space of the road and configured as its binary opposite. While the nursing home, despite its bleak perspective, is represented as a safe place, the open road becomes a life-threatening space that forces the women to accept the limits of their own very existence in the end. The road is a gendered space, which has been constructed differently for women on the run than for men (Ganser 156). Alexandra Ganser notes in this context,

Drawing on recent remappings in cultural geography, the ‘open road’ appears as a dangerous frontier – in which women’s physical and emotional well-being is always at perilous stake – rather than as an adventurous playground. In women’s road stories, the American [and Canadian, my addition] highway does not maintain its mythical, iconic status, signifying freedom and the heroic quest for identity, which has been ascribed to it at least since the legendary accounts of the flight from domesticity by Jack Kerouac and his fellow (anti-)heroes of the Beat generation (153).

Dot and Stella are ‘out of place’, as Tim Cresswell puts it: «[S]pace and place are used to structure a normative landscape – the way in which ideas about what is right, just, and appropriate are transmitted through space and place» (8). Clearly, Stella and Dot have transgressed the limits of the space and place assigned to them.

The care home as a setting serves to highlight this search for identity, also in old age. Authors consciously employ the space of the care home (instead of, for instance, a hotel or a cruise-ship), precisely ‘because of’ the connotations and cultural assumptions linked to it. While many texts (seemingly) reaffirm these assumptions, others challenge them openly. All of them produce an alternative spatiality of old age and offer the possibility to overcome its negative

interpretations. Here, space becomes a powerful statement of resistance. I agree with Stanka Radović's reading of postcolonial space when she argues that «the reliance on the metaphor of space, rather than the reflection on space as such, produces an act of substitution» (182). In other words, the metaphor of space highlights its contested nature and its unavailability to the elderly characters. It is exactly this «denial of space – drawn into sharper focus by the proliferation of spatial images » (182) that I have examined³ by focusing on the spatial concerns of care home escape narratives with regard to gender. The problem of the 'double marginalization' of old women crystallizes in such narratives that are modeled after the road movie.

To conclude, I would like to argue that as the spatiality of age relations is socially and culturally constructed, the way we narrate and interpret old age is always determined by our own position as readers. We have to interpret texts with the narrative power they have, but also make conscious the ambivalences we as readers have regarding age and aging.

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³ The spatiality of aging and its representation in North American anglophone film and fiction set in care-giving institutions is the focus of my forthcoming book, *Putting Age in its Place*.

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