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 Ridgecrest, 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).

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[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' 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

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[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 wellbeing. 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. Rebelling 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 examined[3] 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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