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Trauma and Aging: Dramatic Women Escaping the Presumption of Decline

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FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY

COLLEGE OF FINE ARTS

TRAUMA AND AGING:

DRAMATIC WOMEN

ESCAPING THE PRESUMPTION OF DECLINE

By

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A Dissertation submitted to the
School of Theatre
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

2019

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To Kristina, Michael, Greyson, Violet,
and all those who follow. This was as much for all of you as it was for me

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To begin, the person who deserves the most thanks for believing in this project and me is my dissertation chair Dr. Mary Karen Dahl who patiently mentored and led me through the process. Her feedback, advice, and guidance have been crucial to my success, and I will always be grateful for her kindness and for always listening.

The committee members have also influenced this work. I very much appreciate the motivation and inspiration provided by Dr. Patrick McKelvey, Dr. Aaron C. Thomas, and Dr. Kris Salata. And I especially want to thank Dr. Anne Barrett for her mentorship with this approach to age studies.

Other professors in the School of Theatre who have also helped shape my thinking and work over the years include Dr. Beth Osborne, Dr. Samer Al-Saber, Dr. Kathy Nigh, and Dr. Hans Vermy. All provided helpful feedback and guidance with this and other projects.

I want to extend a special thank you to Dr. Valerie Lipscomb who has mentored me over the past twelve years. If not for her encouragement and guidance, I would not have pursued this path.

I am also very grateful to my colleagues in the School of Theatre graduate program for their friendship and companionship. My PhD cohort, Aaron Ellis, Allison Gibbes, and Devair Jeffries always offered support and encouragement when I needed it. Fellow doctoral students Sean Bartley, Tony Gunn, and Jeff Paden were significantly supportive in my initial transition into the program and throughout the years for which I am ever thankful. I am also thankful for the friendship of Shawn Bolduc, Cassandra White, Marisa Andrews, and Merritt Denman. And most importantly, a circle of friends who never failed to “lean in” for me and for each other in the most critical moments: Christy Rodriquez de Conte, Kate Pierson, Laura Warringer, and more recently Hannah Fazio. The past few years would have been painfully impossible without all of you and I am eternally thankful.

Finally, thanks to my family, particularly my children Kristina Marie Banks and Michael Kochman, Jr. as well as my niece Marisa Butillo who have been incredibly supportive throughout my doctoral adventure.

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ABSTRACT

“Trauma and Aging: Dramatic Women Escaping the Presumption of Decline” is a study of representations of women over the age of 65 that focuses on 1) the so-called experience of “trauma and aging,” 2) how images in theatre and performance have supported negative stereotypes of aging, and 3) how counter-examples from theatre and performance might broaden the conversation, perception, and awareness about the experience of aging, particularly for women.

The project follows a chronology of representations beginning with Albee’s *Three Tall Women* and continues with textual and performance analysis of Paula Vogel’s *Oldest Profession* and Caryl Churchill’s *Escaped Alone*. The project concludes with a discussion of human rights issues regarding older persons and selected recent works by playwrights and theatre companies in the US and Britain that focus on bringing awareness to issues of aging and ageism. My assumptions are that theatre does the cultural work to enlarge human understanding about what it means to grow old and experience the passage of time.

I rely on a complex, inter-disciplinary approach using age studies, trauma studies, feminist trauma studies, feminist studies, and theatre studies. I bring the voices of many theorists into conversation with the play texts to discuss the experience of aging and instances where older women are represented in a way that subverts stereotypes and to highlight that we live in an “age culture” that requires a new affective experience (to thwart the cycle of ageism) in our culture.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

*Suddenly I looked up and down the streets and saw – old women.
Old men too, but mostly old women... I had not seen them. That was
because I was afraid of being like them.*
– Jane Somers in *The Diary of a Good Neighbor* by Doris Lessing¹

From her first moment on the stage in William Congreve's *The Way of the World*, Lady Wishfort critiques her reflection and expresses anxiety about her aged appearance: "An arrant ash-color – as I am a person!/. . . complexion, Darling! Paint! Paint! Paint!"² From the "erotically charged"³ Restoration stage, Wishfort offers an early modern example of theatre's tendency to elevate youth and reduce older people to the "prejudicial category of old age."⁴ As Wishfort experiences societal dismissiveness, she compares herself to an "old peeled wall" and seeks to affirm her desirability, her social position, and later her personhood.⁵ As a female *senex* figure, she drives the comic plot, evoking not only sympathy but also "painful laughter" and "cruel comedy."⁶ Wishfort's self-defeating humor and the laughter it evokes work to amuse while also alleviating the trauma and psychic pain of dismissal and erasure.⁷ Similarly, in

¹ Doris Lessing, *The Diaries of Jane Somers: The Diary of a Good Neighbor and if the Old Could* (New York: Knopf, 1983).

² William Congreve, "The Way of the World," in *Restoration and Eighteenth Century Comedy*, ed. by Scott McMillin (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1997), 277.

³ Michael Mangan, *Staging Aging: Theatre, Performance and the Narrative of Decline* (Bristol: Intellect, 2015), 100.

⁴ Kathleen Woodward, "Performing Age; Performing Gender," *NWSA Journal* 18, (Spring; 2006/1): 162.

⁵ Congreve, "The Way of the World," 280.

⁶ Mangan, *Staging Aging: Theatre, Performance and the Narrative of Decline*, 31.

⁷ According to philosopher John Morreall, laughter is the "physical activity" which "expresses, the feeling produced" by a "pleasant psychological shift" as a result of "some incongruity, releasing [of] pent-up nervous energy"; however, "laughter of embarrassment" occurs when "we feel self-conscious or uncomfortable, but we don't want to *appear* self-conscious or uncomfortable to the other people in the situation, for that would make things worse . . . so we

Beckett's *Happy Days*, Winnie is placed center stage half-buried in a mound of earth continually assessing her appearance in a mirror while desiring Willie's (or anyone's) gaze. The audience is forced to "see" her. Embedded to her neck at the beginning of the second act, Winnie asserts: "Someone is looking at me still. Caring for me still."⁸ But whom is she addressing? On the page, the lines read as a statement, an assertion. In performance, the lines function ironically, absurdly, as if questioning the audience: *Do you see?* This moment and Winnie's witty banter throughout operate to affirm the self (and the attentive viewer) as the bell tolls and Winnie's aging body is buried before our eyes.

More recently, the 65 year old "truth-telling" Violet Weston in Tracy Letts's *August: Osage County* bitterly reminds her middle-aged daughters and the audience: "Women are sexy when they're young, and not after . . . Women just get old and fat and wrinkly."⁹ As an allegorical figure voicing the "violent West" and representative of the "Greatest Generation" in the play, Violet articulates the judgment, shame, and dismissiveness associated with traditional beauty standards in U.S. culture as well as the ageist view of women's bodies as they age. These select images drawn from the Western theatre canon serve to illustrate not only the cultural moments from which they emerged, but also the continual and influential presence of the aging or aged female figure on the stage and how these figures convey cultural conceptions of aging and society's treatment of older people, particularly women.

Attitudes about senescence and the footholds of ageism begin long before the Restoration stage; in fact, ancient texts written by Plato, Aristotle, and Cicero as well as by poets and

perform the action of laughing." John Morreall, *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1987), 133, 137, 138.

⁸ Samuel Beckett, "Happy Days," in *Samuel Beckett: The Complete Dramatic Works* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), 160.

⁹ Tracy Letts, *August: Osage County* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2008), Kindle. Location 66.

dramatists such as Aeschylus, Menander, Sophocles, Aristophanes, and Plautus offer examples of social-cultural attitudes about aging. More often, older characters of both genders function as tropes or over-simplified stereotypes. For example, older men fall into categories, such as domineering, miserly blocking figures (*senex iratus*) or ridiculous lechers (*senex amans*) that are remnants of the Greek *senex* and Roman stock characters and the *Pantalone* from *commedia dell'arte*.¹⁰ Older women appear as benevolent, wise (and often sexless) mothers and grandmothers, witch-like shrews and crones, or as the lusty “older woman.” These older figures – especially the older women – beckon. From Aeschylus’ furies to Shakespeare’s “Weird sisters” to Lady Wishfort to Winnie to Violet: when playwrights place the aging woman on the stage, what does the audience/spectator see? What might the images of aging women (the stereotypes and the tropes) produce? Does theatre continue to remind audiences of the “multiple, cumulative, and irreplaceable”¹¹ losses associated with aging? Or does theatre offer works that challenge the conventional view? What roles do theatre and performance play in the cultural construction of age and ageist attitudes toward older women, particularly at a time when ageism and violence against older women is one of the most pervasive international human rights violations of our time?¹² As Lessing observes, “...old women. I had not seen them. That was because I was afraid of being like them.” If theatre makes us see older women, what is it showing us?

Statement of the Problem

In “Performing Age; Performing Gender,” humanities and age studies scholar Kathleen Woodward discusses how writers fashion younger female characters to fulfill the “male

¹⁰ For a full discussion of male stereotypes and age, see Mangan, *Staging Aging: Theatre, Performance and the Narrative of Decline*.

¹¹ Cathy Black and Valerie Lipscomb, “The Promise of Documentary Theatre to Counter Ageism in Age-friendly Communities,” *Journal Of Aging Studies* 42, (August 1, 2017): 32-37.

¹² “The Global Strategy and Action Plan on Ageing and Health,” World Health Organization, 2018. <http://www.who.int/ageing/global-strategy/en/>.

gaze,”¹³ whereas older characters encounter "the look of youthful disdain," meaning the non-verbal cultural cue that carries with it "the induced tendency to degrade and reduce an older person to the prejudicial category of old age."¹⁴ According to Woodward, "the look" conveys judgment, diminishment, dismissiveness, and disposal; in other words, this non-verbal social cue works to minimize and marginalize older people. Woodward argues that "the look" places youth in a superior position to age.¹⁵ Woodward and other age studies scholars, gerontologists, and sociologists contend that men as well as women and people of all ages view, judge, and dismiss the aged female body when it no longer meets the standard of the pleasurable "gaze." "The look" reflects the paradox of the aged female body. People see the aged female body and view it as different, unimportant, unworthy, lacking, deviant; they dismiss it, rendering older persons "invisible." In obvious contradiction, people also view the aged body with heightened scrutiny, as Woodward terms it: as hyper-visible.¹⁶ For example, Lady Wishfort's anxiety relates to both her social dismissal (invisibility) and the heightened scrutiny of her appearance (hyper-visibility); more absurdly, Winnie becomes "invisible" as her body is buried before the spectator's eyes while simultaneously requiring the spectator's increased examination of what of her remains visible. Their aged bodies are simultaneously dismissed as objects (of desire) while increasingly present as objects (of derision). So, in life, scholars argue that "the look" not only reduces or dismisses, it erases and dehumanizes, rendering the older person a cipher-like figure –

¹³ As theorized by Laura Mulvey in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," the "male gaze" envisions "the woman as icon, displayed for the gaze and enjoyment of men" and that "the image of women as (passive) raw material for the (active) gaze of man in when they are positioned to fulfill masculine desire. Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." In *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*. Eds. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (New York: Oxford UP, 1999): 833-44.

¹⁴ Woodward, "Performing Age; Performing Gender," 164.

¹⁵ Woodward, "Performing Age; Performing Gender," 164.

¹⁶ Woodward, "Performing Age; Performing Gender," 163.

a negative space that exists only in relationship to the other and recurring social acts of aggression. Thus, aged women exist in a contradictory space of being but not being. Yet, in theatre and performance, the aged female body cannot escape the gaze – or “the look” – of the audience, the spectator. The audience is forced “to see” and make meaning of the aged body on the stage. Lady Wishfort, Winnie, and Violet Weston all illustrate the social aggression, anxiety, vulnerability, and insidious trauma produced by societal dismissiveness and the hyper-visibility of the aged body.

In life, aside from the non-physical but culturally validated violence of “the look,” older women experience other acts of aggression and violence. Older people – particularly women in their sixth and seventh decade – suffer at the hands of the dominant group, specifically meaning people who are in the so-called prime of life.¹⁷ Older women are figures of inferiority, mocked, and scapegoated; they experience physical, emotional, and financial abuses.¹⁸ Women (as well as men) frequently internalize these negative messages throughout life beginning in childhood; they see these images at home, at school, and other social and ideological institutions.¹⁹ For example, a Yale study of self-perceptions of aging in 2002 indicated that participants internalized acts of violence, aggression, and abuses against older people long before they entered the subject group.²⁰ Ironically, children long to “grow up” and look forward to landmark birthdays that celebrate the shift from childhood to adulthood, yet the idea of “growing old” and images of

¹⁷ In her book *Aged by Culture*, Margaret Morganroth Gullette explains, “instead of occurring in the fourth decade of life, decline and losses are now thought to occur in the sixth and seventh decade.” Margaret Morganroth Gullette, *Aged by Culture*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 130.

¹⁸ Margaret Cruikshank, *Learning to Be Old: Gender, Culture, and Aging* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2013), 4-5.

¹⁹ Becca R. Levy, Martin Slade, Suzanne R. Kunkel, and Stanislav V. Kasl, “Longevity Increased by Positive Self-Perceptions of Aging,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 83, no. 2 (August 2002): 261-262. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.83.2.261>

²⁰ Levy, Slade, Kunkel, and Kasl, 261-262.

“aging” are less welcome. In Quira Alegría Hudes’ *26 Miles*, the 15-year-old Olivia describes the aged female body: “millimeter by millimeter, year after year, until you’re scars, wrinkles, negative space.”²¹ Decreased bone density, loss of collagen and muscle tone as well as diminished vision and hearing mark the body as an *aide-mémoire* of this fine line between growing up and growing old.

As partner to the body’s crime, the mirror and the media, particularly print, television, film and theatre, assail the public with images and reminders of the stigma of aging. Instead of presenting age/ing as an accumulation of experiences and the aged body as a treasured “map of [our] history,” a continual onslaught of negative images shames and batters the public, particularly women, reminding them of the ravages of time and the toll upon the body long before it even begins.²² Thus, well before the body is physically marked as “old,” people repeatedly observe and experience the negative images and cultural stigma associated with aging that generate anxiety if not a type of trauma about aging. These images or moments may impact someone suddenly or through a “series of losses.”²³ The trauma may be the result of intergenerational or cultural trauma that works indirectly or insidiously, damaging not only the individual but also society at large as internalized ageist attitudes and ageism. What does a society or culture lose by diminishing the aged, their knowledge, and productivity? Again, the question remains: what images of aging women do theatre and performance offer the audience

²¹ Quira Alegría Hudes, *26 Miles* (New York, N.Y.: Dramatists Play Service, 2010), 38.

²² Ashton Applewhite, “Working to Disarm Women’s Anti-Aging Demon,” *New York Times*, October 10, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/10/style/women-looks-ageism.html>.

²³ This idea is discussed in more detail in Chapter Two. In her essay “Trauma and Aging,” E. Ann Kaplan explains that “aging to an inevitable death” may be a “type of trauma”. . . especially the increasing series of losses – of bodily function and appearance, of mental agility, of ideologies and values one grew up with, of friends and family.” E. Ann Kaplan, “Trauma and Aging,” in *Figuring Age*, ed. by Kathleen Woodward (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999), 171-194.

and spectators *to see*? Do the images present age and aging as diminishment, loss, and trauma? Or do the images convey aging as an accumulation of experiences to be treasured?

A discussion about images of aging, particularly aging female figures, in theatre and performance invites an array of arguments and approaches. E. Ann Kaplan explains that, “Scholars tend to use the term ‘aging’ as an abstract developmental concept” and that aging is “common to all.”²⁴ As Kaplan points out, however, the human experience of aging differs based on “specific contexts,” such as “gender, race, sexuality, culture, nationality, religion, and geography” as well as ability or disability and the “historical moment in which one is aging.”²⁵ In short, “aging needs to be situated.”²⁶ To that end, my questioning of the phrase “trauma and aging” begins with Kaplan’s analysis of white middle-class women in U.S. culture and, considering my own positionality as an older white woman living in the U.S., my case studies are limited to plays that depict older white, generally healthy, women over the age of 65 in Anglo-American culture.

For this project, I focus on the aging woman trope in contemporary theatre and performance to define Kaplan’s idea of “trauma and aging” more precisely and how this idea: 1) manifests in theatre and performance, 2) operates culturally, and 3) contributes to ageist thinking.²⁷ Admittedly, theatre and performance have used images of the aged or aging since antiquity, and as Michael Mangan points out, the “plasticity and pliability of the stereotype of old age” may shift from a “negative stereotype. . . [to a] positive one, and vice versa.”²⁸ Nonetheless, the aged woman trope and related images can be damaging. Similar to how

²⁴ Kaplan, “Trauma and Aging,” 172.

²⁵ Kaplan, “Trauma and Aging,” 172.

²⁶ Kaplan, “Trauma and Aging,” 172.

²⁷ Kaplan, “Trauma and Aging,” 172.

²⁸ Mangan, *Staging Aging: Theatre, Performance and the Narrative of Decline*, 104.

negative images perpetuate racism and sexism, negative images of older women affect the social-cultural perception of aging women and reinforce ageist thinking and ageism.²⁹ I argue that the pervasiveness of negative imagery associated with the aging female trope as well as decline narratives of age contribute to individual and cultural trauma that necessitates active resistance and creative responses to the violence enacted upon the aging.

The goal of the project is to go beyond simply identifying plays and performances where stereotypes and tropes reinforce the “stubbornly persistent” decline narrative of age.³⁰ Rather, I want to complicate a discussion about aged and aging figures in theatre and performance 1) to examine how the aging female trope contributes to the “trauma of aging” and ageism and 2) to expand the conversation to offer counter-examples that contribute to a discussion of aging narratives that offer fuller, more expansive views of the vista of “old age.”³¹ These conversations are crucial to the humanities not only because theatre scholars have largely ignored the discussion of aging, but also particularly in this social-cultural moment when ageism, particularly against older women, remains a pervasive and dangerous human rights violation.

Literature Review

While the study of aging is interdisciplinary and multi-disciplinary and the social sciences dominate the field, the humanities suffer from what Kathleen Woodward terms “gerontophobia.”³² In the 1990s, Woodward's foundational work *Aging and Its Discontents: Freud and Other Fictions* (1991) analyzed the representations of age in Western fiction through

²⁹ Levy, Slade, Kunkel, and Kasl, “Longevity Increased by Positive Self-Perceptions of Aging,” 261.

³⁰ Ann Davis Basting, *The Stages of Age: Performing Age in American Culture* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1998), 2.

³¹ Elinor Fuchs, “Estrangement: Toward an ‘Age Theory’ Theatre Criticism,” *Performance Research*, 19.3, (2014): 72.

³² Kathleen Woodward, *Aging and Its Discontents: Freud and Other Fictions* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 193.

the lens of psychoanalysis and revealed the anxiety, fear, denial, and repression of aging.³³

Woodward claims that "[A]long with race, gender and age are the most salient markers of social difference."³⁴ For Woodward, the goal of age studies is to understand how discursive formations, social practices, and material conditions create difference; she explains: "Our culture has assigned different norms of behavior to different ages and has invented terms for different 'stages.' Like other markers of social difference, age is, in large part, socially constructed."³⁵

While Woodward's "pioneering work" and that of other age scholars in the 1990s seemed to move age studies in the humanities forward, Thomas R. Cole and Michelle Sierpina observed that literary scholarship with regard to age was limited to five categories:

1) analyses of literary attitudes toward aging; 2) humanistic approaches to literature and aging; 3) psychoanalytical explorations of literary texts and their authors; 4) applications of gerontological theories about autobiography, life review, and midlife crisis transitions; and 5) psychoanalytically informed studies of the creative process.³⁶

To these categories, we must add analysis of age in theatre and performance, yet the scholarship is sparse.

³³ In *Aging and Its Discontents: Freud and Other Fictions*, Woodward explains the repression of aging using a Freudian formulation. She describes the repression of aging as occurring when a person (the child) who is "presumably in the safe middle years and in a position of power" experiences a moment of "ambivalent identification with the aging parent" because they realize they have succeeded in replacing the parent." Citing Freud, she claims that "in the unconscious everyone is persuaded of his own youth." Woodward, 4, 37, 67.

³⁴ Woodward, *Aging and Its Discontents*, x.

³⁵ Woodward, *Aging and Its Discontents*, x.

³⁶ Thomas R. Cole and Micelle Sierpina, "Humanistic Gerontology and the Meaning(s) of Aging," in Wilmoth, Janet M., and Kenneth F. Ferraro. *Gerontology: Perspectives and Issues*. n.p.: New York: Springer Pub., 2007.

Compelled by the “dearth of scholarship on age and theatre,” theatre practitioner and gerontologist Anne Basting was one of the first theatre scholars to publish research about the performance of age. In *The Stages of Age: Performing Age in Contemporary American Culture* (1998), Basting analyzes eight different theatrical performances that “construct their own meaning about age.”³⁷ Drawing on both Richard Schechner’s and Judith Butler’s models, Basting explores the “performative qualities of aging,” but finds both theorists’ ideas inadequate in that they do not address “the role of the aging body in the constant reiteration of performance.”³⁸ Basting explains Schechner’s two main ideas of performance as: 1) “restored” or “twice behaved behavior” that includes everyday life and more formal theatrical pieces as part of a continuum (rather than separate entities), and 2) the transformative quality of performance, which also includes and acknowledges the difference between theatrical and everyday performance of the self.³⁹ Basting argues that neither works with regard to age because they do not address the complication of time which make “twice behaved behaviors” and the ability to “rebecome what they once were” impossibilities.⁴⁰ To account for the changes that occur with age, Basting turns to Butler’s idea of gender performance. Butler’s idea that identity is not fixed, but rather that “one congeals an identity through repeat performance or social practices over time” is helpful to conceptualizing Butler’s notions about the performance and performativity of aging.⁴¹ Basting argues that the older performer falls “out of the scope” of both Schechner’s and Butler’s models and requires a “new consideration of performance and performativity” to account for “the changes in social and biological functions brought on by the

³⁷ Basting, *The Stages of Age*, 2.

³⁸ Valerie Lipscomb, “Age in *M. Butterfly*: Unquestioned Performance,” *Modern Drama*, 58:2, (Summer 2016), 196.

³⁹ Basting, *The Stages of Age*, 6-8.

⁴⁰ Basting, *The Stages of Age*, 8.

⁴¹ Basting, *The Stages of Age*, 8.

passage of time” that create shifts in a person’s self-perception.⁴² Here, Basting points out that “aging is regarded as decline from the peak of youth” (reaching our “physical, emotional, and intellectual peak . . . sometime in young adulthood”), but that aging itself might “hold transformative qualities.”⁴³ Basting hoped that through her research society would “dislodge” itself from the narrative of decline and that the transformative power of theatre might “expand cultural perceptions of aging.”⁴⁴ Twenty years have transpired since the publication of her initial work, yet the negative stereotypes and decline narratives of age persist within our culture; moreover, a paucity of work exists in theatre and performance that highlights the fuller experiences of aging. Basting inspires my project not only in that theatre scholars have largely ignored the discussion of age,⁴⁵ but also because female scholars, meaning notably feminists scholars, have failed “to see” older women and their experiences of aging.⁴⁶ Basting’s ideas about the performance of age help inform my analysis of how older female figures “perform age” and redefine what it means to be old. Additionally, Basting argues that scholars should not simply seek to replace decline narratives with progress narratives, but rather we should look for narratives that offer an expanded view of what it means to grow old.

Soon after, a section of Kathleen Woodward’s 1999 anthology *Figuring Age: Women, Bodies, Generations* featured essays that considered how “image culture” shapes the view of

⁴² Basting, *The Stages of Age*, 8.

⁴³ Basting, *The Stages of Age*, 9.

⁴⁴ Basting, *The Stages of Age*, 7-8.

⁴⁵ In “Estrangement: Toward an ‘Age Theory’ Theatre Criticism,” Eleanor Fuchs observes that when attending academic age and disability studies conferences “theatre theory and criticism has been almost entirely unrepresented within the multidisciplinary range of these conferences.” Fuchs, “Estrangement,” 70.

⁴⁶ Barbara MacDonald, “Outside the Sisterhood: Ageism in Women’s Studies,” *Women’s Studies Quarterly*, 25, nos.1/2 (Spring Summer 1997): 47-48.

older women.⁴⁷ Essays of interest for my project primarily include Kaplan's "Trauma and Aging" wherein she argues that "aging was a trauma for everyone" (discussed more fully below) and Jodie Brooks' essay "Performing Aging/Performing Crisis."⁴⁸ Brooks addresses the "passing of old Hollywood" and the figure of the aging actress who is "doubly marked by time" as a discarded older woman ("outside of desire") and as a cinematic image both "frozen and transitory."⁴⁹ Brooks explains that the aging actress must grapple with the shift from no longer representing "the shock of the new" but rather experiencing "the shock of the discarded," and her options are to attempt to "freeze time" or accept her fate as "cultural refuse."⁵⁰ Yet, Brooks questions these options and identifies that women can refuse to "freeze time" and refuse disposability to negotiate a temporal experience where the older woman "is not confronting her disappearance *from* the present, but rather struggling for her appearance in it."⁵¹ Brooks' focus on the aging actress in film aids my analysis of moments when female characters refuse this status of "cultural refuse" and instead offer fuller expressions of what it means to grow old, including the "struggle to appear" in the present.

Since the late nineties, literary scholarship on aging has developed rather significantly, but, according to theatre scholar Michael Mangan, it has taken "a while for the scholarship on dramatic literature to catch up."⁵² In addition to Mangan, key scholars addressing theatre and age over the past ten years include Anthony Ellis, Maurice Charney, and Valerie Lipscomb. In *Old Age, Masculinity and Early Modern Drama*, English professor Anthony Ellis analyzes comic

⁴⁷ Woodward, *Aging and Its Discontents*, xix.

⁴⁸ Kaplan, "Trauma and Aging," 172.

⁴⁹ Jodi Brooks, "Performing Aging/Performing Crisis (for Norma Desmond, Baby Jane, Margo Channing, Sister George – and Myrtle)" in *Figuring Age*, edited by Kathleen Woodward (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999), 233.

⁵⁰ Brooks, "Performing Aging/Performing Crisis," 233.

⁵¹ Brooks, "Performing Aging/Performing Crisis," 243.

⁵² Mangan, *Staging Aging: Theatre, Performance*, 31.

male elders in Italian and English dramatic literature to demonstrate that “English dramatists relied on the Italian models” of age stereotypes.⁵³ He identifies key characteristic features of older male figures within their historical context. Ellis focuses on the male *senex* figure in Italian and Renaissance drama to show how English dramatists used the comic older man to remark on social, economic, and physical attitudes about aging.

In *Wrinkled Deep in Time*, Charney focuses on aging figures in Shakespeare’s work to draw connections between their mental and physical decline and their storytelling function. He argues that Shakespeare’s treatment of old age was not related to “ideological implications” of age or any connection to chronological time.⁵⁴ Rather, age[ing] was connected to adversity or reversal of fortune as seen with Hamlet or Macbeth. He also concludes that Shakespeare used age to convey sentimentality (in the case of Lear) or foolishness (as with Falstaff). Both Ellis and Charney (and Mangan, as discussed below) focus on male stereotypes of age and how those stereotypes operate in dramatic literature in a specific cultural period (Italian and English Renaissance).

The next significant work in theatre, performance, and age is Valerie Lipscomb and Leni Marshall’s anthology *Staging Age: The Performance of Age in Theatre, Dance, and Film* which sought to move age studies from the margins to the mainstream with a collection of essays engaging humanities scholars and theorists who consider the biological, sociocultural, political and psychological components of age, aging, and ageism. In the introduction, Lipscomb hearkens back to Basting to explain that age is both “performance and performative” and proposes a theoretical approach that considers the performance of age on the stage as well as the

⁵³ Anthony Ellis, *Old Age, Masculinity, and Early Modern Drama: Comic Elders on the Italian and Shakespearean Stage* (Farnham, Surrey, England: Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009), 116.

⁵⁴ Maurice Charney, *Wrinkled Deep in Time: Aging in Shakespeare* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 165.

“performance of age across the lifespan.”⁵⁵ Relying on Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble*, Lipscomb asserts that, like gender, age is, in part, socially constructed.⁵⁶ Lipscomb also points out that the physicality of aging (i.e., the constantly changing body) cannot be separated from issues of power and Western cultural anxiety about growing older.⁵⁷

The first monograph from a theatre scholar addressing the performance of age since Basting’s is Mangan’s *Staging Ageing: Theatre Performance and the Narrative of Decline*. Mangan’s main project is to identify negative stereotypes of aged male figures to examine “our understanding of aging by looking at it from the perspective of drama, theatre, and performance.”⁵⁸ Using selected texts and performances as an “optic through which to view changing images, representations, and understandings,” Mangan argues against ageism and reveals the persistence of the decline narrative of aging in dramatic literature.⁵⁹ Beginning in Ancient Greece with Menander’s *Dyslokos* and Sophocles’ *Oedipus at Colonus* and moving to the Romans with a discussion of Plautus’s *Menaechmi*, Mangan discusses familiar stereotypes that have continued as satirical figures throughout theatre history. Specifically, he analyzes the *senex iratus* (the angry old man) and the *senex amans* (the foolish, lecherous, devious old man) as well as the Pantalone from *commedia dell’arte* that influenced characters written by Shakespeare, Jonson, and Molière. Later in the work, he discusses how these figures persist in television as “dirty old men and elderly trickster figures.”⁶⁰ Mangan briefly discusses the female versions of the *senex* as seen in memorable characters such as Lady Wishfort, explaining that she

⁵⁵ Valerie Lipscomb and Leni Marshall, *Staging Age: The Performance of Age in Theatre, Dance, and Film* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 4.

⁵⁶ Lipscomb and Marshall, *Staging Age*, 2.

⁵⁷ Lipscomb and Marshall, *Staging Age*, 2.

⁵⁸ Mangan, *Staging Aging: Theatre, Performance*, 5.

⁵⁹ Mangan, *Staging Aging: Theatre, Performance*, 9.

⁶⁰ Mangan, *Staging Aging: Theatre, Performance*, 108-17.

“holds the traditional older parent function,” but her “self-delusion and sexual appetite are used against her.”⁶¹ Mangan analyzes Lady Wishfort on the Restoration stage to demonstrate that the “stereotypes of old age are enduring,” but also to remind us of the “plasticity and pliability of the stereotypes of old age.”⁶² These ideas support the foundation of my argument as well as help me think about how to analyze images of old age in contemporary culture.

In addition to Mangan’s work that identifies stereotypes and negative representations of older men, Lipscomb’s recent monograph *Performing Age in Modern Drama* considers “the body’s role in continuity of the self as it ages” and argues that “memory plays as a subgenre can challenge contemporary Western culture’s binary construction pitting young against old, as it calls attention to all ages sharing a performative basis.”⁶³ Lipscomb further contends that, although early memory plays (modern) manipulate time, they “represent a stable essential self, a longing for an ageless self”; conversely, later (post modern) memory plays depict a fragmented or “disrupted” self.⁶⁴ Both complicate the idea of 1) the chronological decline narrative and 2) the self continually evolving over time. Lipscomb argues the idea of a “timeless self” or “ageless self” works to diminish the value of the actual experience of aging. Her analysis of over a dozen canonical plays illuminates ageist cultural constructions of age as well as how performance (and casting practices) tend to reinforce ageist stereotypes.

This idea of aging and the fragmented or “disrupted self” appears in Elinor Fuchs’ 2014 article “Estrangement: Toward an ‘Age Theory’ Theatre Criticism.” Fuchs’ concept of “estrangement” marries ideas from age studies (life course perspective and life review) with the

⁶¹ Mangan, *Staging Aging: Theatre, Performance*, 98-104.

⁶² Mangan, *Staging Aging: Theatre, Performance*, 104.

⁶³ Valerie Lipscomb, *Performing Age in Modern Drama* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 6.

⁶⁴ Lipscomb, *Performing Age in Modern Drama*, 7.

Brechtian concept of *Verfremdungseffekt* (estrangement) and invents the neologism: “estrangement.”⁶⁵ She theorizes “estrangement” (a combination of the words “strange” and “age”) as “a late life developmental moment where the familiar also becomes strange.”⁶⁶ In other words, as an individual ages (begins to “run out of life”), they become “estranged from their former selves” and a new, “unknown landscape” lies ahead where the “limitations of age might terrify, yet a new horizon of old age might open.”⁶⁷ Fuchs departs from the decline narrative of age and proposes a more expansive approach to age theory that considers aging an unexplored adventure that invites a sense of “terror” in that it is uncharted and uncertain.⁶⁸ More recently, Fuchs furthered her thinking on age theory to propose that we depart from thinking of “age” as a binary (young/old or younger/older) and instead consider age or aging as operating along a “spectrum” or as Lipscomb suggests, a “continuum.”⁶⁹ This shift in thinking of aging that moves away from the master narrative that starts “as a story of progress and becomes a peak-and- (early)- decline story” provides the necessary vocabulary to move away from the limitations of the age/youth binary and the decline narrative/progress narrative binary.⁷⁰

Like Mangan’s work, my project also seeks to analyze how playwrights and theatre artists use ageing figures. Specifically, I look at aged women in dramatic literature not simply as stereotypes of age or representative of the master narrative of decline, but as an under-theorized locus of cultural bias in the humanities, particularly in western theatre, performance, and popular culture. To do this, I place age studies in conversation with trauma studies to consider the

⁶⁵ Fuchs, “Estrangement,” 76.

⁶⁶ Fuchs, “Estrangement,” 76-77.

⁶⁷ Fuchs, “Estrangement,” 77.

⁶⁸ Elinor Fuchs, “The Problem with Difference,” ASTR Curated Panel “Aging and its Extra/Ordinary Differences, November 18, 2017, ASTR 2017 Atlanta, GA.

⁶⁹ Fuchs, “Estrangement,” 71.

⁷⁰ Gullette, *Aged by Culture*, 130.

contributions, assumptions, and limitations theatre and performance have made to the western view of aging and ageism. Why do we – even in Fuchs’ formulation – assume that the “uncharted” territory of aging will be terrifying? Thus, the first part of the project seeks to define “trauma and aging” more precisely (to distinguish it from senescence⁷¹ and thanatology⁷²). I identify and discuss objects and performances of age[ing] that support the theoretical move of positioning age and aging within the discourse of trauma studies. To do this, I integrate concepts of indirect or insidious trauma as discussed by Maria P. Root as well as Ann Cvetkovich’s idea of “everyday trauma” to argue that, for some, the social-cultural experience of aging and experiencing ageism creates a type of trauma, especially for women who already experience marginalization and oppression.⁷³ I also discuss how a feminist approach of interconnectedness and spirituality might help heal what Root identifies as “the most prominent wounds of trauma”: “the crushing of the human spirit.”⁷⁴

Primarily, I am interested in the concept of “trauma and aging” not only as an individual phenomenon tied to a singular traumatic event, but also as a cumulative effect experienced individually, culturally, indirectly, and insidiously. Secondly, I analyze the “aging woman” trope in theatre and performance. Although aged figures serve both dramaturgical (storytelling shortcuts) and ideological (what is considered normative) functions, I argue that images of older

⁷¹ The gradual deterioration of the body; to grow old.

⁷² The mechanisms of death; the process of dying.

⁷³ In *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Culture*, Ann Cvetkovich distinguishes her conception of trauma from Cathy Caruth who relies on Freud and focuses on trauma as result of a traumatic event. Cvetkovich is interested in how “shock and injury are made socially meaningful, even paradigmatic, within cultural experience” and maintains that social and cultural experiences “refract outward to produce all kinds of affective responses and not just clinical symptoms” (as associated with PTSD). Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feeling: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures*, (Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 2003), 19.

⁷⁴ Maria P. Root, “Reconstructing the Impact of Trauma on the Personality,” in *Personality and Psychotherapy: Feminist Reappraisals*, ed. L.S. Brown and M Ballou (New York: Guilford, 1992), 241.

characters,⁷⁵ specifically older females, reflect and contribute to social/cultural attitudes toward older women, including how people think about themselves as they age.⁷⁶ I consider how images of older women from theatre and performance contribute to 1) the conversation about older women in contemporary culture, 2) violence and trauma in the form of ageist attitudes, and 3) behaviors that affect individuals and contemporary society/culture at large. While I look to age studies scholars who position age and aging as a series of continual losses, I also consider those who view aging as an accumulation of experiences and seek objects that operate as counter-examples to the “decline narrative” of aging. I want to complicate the discussion about aged/ing figures in theatre and performance by 1) examining how the aging female trope contributes to the “trauma of aging” and ageism and 2) looking to counter-examples to expand the discussion of narratives to include fuller, more expansive views of the vista of “old age.”⁷⁷ To explore this possibility, it is first necessary to look more closely at “trauma and aging.”

Defining “Trauma and Aging”

When English and cultural studies scholar E. Ann Kaplan first wrote about “trauma and aging” in 1999, she explained that, for her, trauma refers to “ideologically and historically” produced trauma not trauma “produced by social institution or accident.”⁷⁸ In her formulation of trauma and aging, Kaplan first relies on clinical psychologist Laura S. Brown’s position that the DMS III-R⁷⁹ definition of trauma (“The person has experienced an event that is outside the range

⁷⁵ “Older female” refers to women over the age of 65, but may mean (as in the case of *The Golden Girls*) women who by social-cultural standards are labeled as “old” in their particular social-cultural moment.

⁷⁶ Levy, Slade, Kunkel, and Kasl, “Longevity Increased by Positive Self-Perceptions of Aging,” 261-270.

⁷⁷ Fuchs, “Estrangement: Toward an ‘Age Theory’ Theatre Criticism,” 77.

⁷⁸ Kaplan, “Trauma and Aging,” 172.

⁷⁹ The American Psychiatric Association’s definition of trauma has changed over time. According to the DMS III- R (which has been replaced by the DMS-IV in 1994 and the DMS-5 in 2013) the assumption was that humans had the ability to cope with “ordinary stressors”

of human experience”) was limiting in that the term “human” only refers to “male” and does not take into account experiences of trauma that are solely female.⁸⁰ Thus, Brown and Kaplan maintain that the definition of trauma fails to consider traumas unique to women and their experiences. For Kaplan, one of those experiences includes aging.

To further develop her argument to include age, Kaplan turned to psychotherapist and trauma expert Henry Krystal who addresses trauma and aging with regard to Holocaust survivors and observes that old age presented a type of “diminishing gratification” and a “special difficulty” for older Holocaust survivors.”⁸¹ He concluded that “the progressive loss of gratification, support and distraction limits the choices to the two alternatives: integration of one's life or living in despair.”⁸² Building on this idea, Kaplan argues that the “increasing series of losses – of bodily function and appearance, of mental agility, of ideologies and of values one grew up with, of friends and family – may be traumatic for everyone in western culture.”⁸³ In other words, the trauma related to aging is not necessarily limited to a singular traumatic event experienced by an individual, but the trauma might include other types of losses such as the “increasing gap between values and ideologies one carries with one from youth . . . the loss of

(painful events such as divorce, illness, rejection, etc.) but certain natural disasters, human disasters, and other events such as war, torture, and the Holocaust, were so intense (“outside of human experience”) as to result in trauma. For the DMS-5, the American Psychiatric Association responded to the debate about the “mutable definition of trauma” (the core criteria for diagnosing PTSD) and a new definition “trauma” as part of an expanded three-factor model for PTSD. Laura K. Jones and Jenny L. Cureto, “Trauma Redefined in the DSM-5: Rationale and Implications for Counseling Practice,” *The Professional Counselor*, 4, No. 3 (2014) 257-2=271. accessed April 26, 2018.

⁸⁰ In her essay “Trauma and Aging,” Kaplan uses the example of women who experience abuse at the hands of men in the “private, interpersonal realm” that causes trauma. Kaplan, 172.

⁸¹ Henrys Krystal, “Trauma and Aging: A Thirty Year Follow-Up,” in *Trauma Explorations in Memory*, ed. by Cathy Caruth, (Baltimore: John Hopkins UP), 1995. 77.

⁸² Krystal, “Trauma and Aging,” 77.

⁸³ Kaplan, “Trauma and Aging,” 173.

community, shared beliefs and world views.”⁸⁴ Another one of those losses, particularly for women, is the loss of “the gaze”; she explains that women in the west are socially positioned “to be gazed at,” so the external changes of aging (“as she begins to lose her youthfulness”) result in the loss of “the gaze” (from men).⁸⁵ This loss or this “invisibility of aging” may make aging especially traumatic if not cause a “crisis of identity” for women who have been enculturated to accept positions as objects rather than subjects; as Kaplan points out: “Who am I if I am no longer a desirable object to be gazed at?”⁸⁶

Admittedly, Kaplan’s argument focuses on white, middle-class women of European descent whose positionality in and of itself may in fact “create a type of trauma for them.”⁸⁷ However, over the years, studies and research by gerontologists, sociologists, humanities scholars and age studies scholars have established that for women of different races and classes aging is a difficult experience as it brings further social marginalization, oppression, and an array of violence and abuses. In *Learning to Be Old: Gender, Culture and Aging* feminist scholar Margaret Cruikshank goes so far as to claim that for women aging is akin to “internal colonization” where “one group dominates another within the same country.”⁸⁸ Speaking from a broad western perspective, Cruikshank maintains that older women share characteristics with colonized people:

⁸⁴ In “Trauma and Aging,” Kaplan is careful to draw distinctions between how men and women experience ageing and observes that for women in “western cultures” the “trauma of ageing” differs because of prevailing gender constructs and “the anxiety of (white) males about their own ageing and their own death.” Kaplan, 173.

⁸⁵ Kaplan, “Trauma and Aging,” 173.

⁸⁶ Kaplan, “Trauma and Aging,” 174.

⁸⁷ Kaplan, “Trauma and Aging,” 174.

⁸⁸ Cruikshank does not specify which “country” but based on context she is speaking of a western view of aging ...references are to U.S. and Canada. Margaret Cruikshank, *Learning to Be Old: Gender, Culture, and Aging*, (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield), 2013, 4-5.

[T]hey are thought to be less intelligent than the dominant group. They are judged by appearances. They are encouraged to imitate the dominant group. They are figures of fun. They are scapegoated. They may internalize messages of inferiority, and their movements may be controlled. In late old age they may be confined to very small spaces . . . Because old women are seen as bodies, physical appearance encompasses their whole being . . . When an old woman becomes “the Other,” fundamentally different from others, those in the dominant group create emotional distance from her by exaggerating difference and overlooking shared characteristics. The old woman is an alien creature, costly and crabby...⁸⁹

I acknowledge that the type of the violence as well as the severity of the violence is vastly different for both groups. Nonetheless, I believe that Cruikshank’s comparison falls in line with Simone de Beauvoir’s argument in *Coming of Age* where she “indicts society for its dehumanization of those it designates as Other.”⁹⁰ Cruikshank’s position that likens older women to colonized people helps my argument in that older women experience the violence of marginalization and “Othering” perpetrated by the dominant group. As a result, older women experience negative social, cultural, and emotional effects including direct, indirect, and insidious trauma.

Building on Kaplan’s argument that the multiple, cumulative “losses” of aging may be “traumatic for everyone in western culture,” clinical psychologist Brown calls for an expanded

⁸⁹ Cruikshank, *Learning to Be Old: Gender, Culture, and Aging*,”4-5.

⁹⁰ Deborah Bergoffen, “The Coming of Age: The Other Again,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Stanford University, 2018, accessed April 12, 2019, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/beauvoir/#ComAgeOthAga>.

and more complex definition of trauma.⁹¹ Brown's argument is that a feminist analysis of trauma "calls us to look beyond the public and male experiences of trauma to the private, secret experiences that women encounter in the interpersonal realm and at the hands of those we love and depend on."⁹² Brown's formulation of trauma questions the definitions of "human" and the "narrow construction of experiences and realities of the dominant groups in our culture."⁹³ For Brown, a feminist analysis of trauma includes understanding the "effects of oppression that are not necessarily overtly violent or threatening to bodily well-being at the given moment but that do violence to the soul and spirit."⁹⁴ Brown relies on clinical psychologist Maria P. Root who also seeks a "broader conceptualization of trauma" to include more than "direct blows."⁹⁵ Root argues for consideration of trauma that "speaks to the extensiveness of horrors and atrocities . . . that people struggle with over a lifetime."⁹⁶ Using a feminist analysis of trauma allows for "consideration of the social-political and phenomenological experience" to extend to "secondary trauma, indirect and insidious trauma."⁹⁷ For example, a person experiences indirect trauma when "traumatized by the experience of another person's trauma."⁹⁸ Root applies this idea to women in North America who understand its "rape culture" and "are aware that they may be raped at any time and by anyone."⁹⁹ As a result, Root claims many women (who have never been

⁹¹ As mentioned earlier, the losses include "bodily function and appearance, of mental agility, of ideologies and of values one grew up with, of friends and family." Kaplan, 173.

⁹² Laura S. Brown, "Not Outside the Range: One Feminist Perspective on Psychic Trauma," in *Trauma Explorations in Memory*, ed. by Cathy Caruth, (Baltimore: John Hopkins UP), 1995. 102-03.

⁹³ Brown, "Not Outside the Range," 107-08.

⁹⁴ Brown, "Not Outside the Range," 107-08.

⁹⁵ Root, "Reconstructing the Impact of Trauma on the Personality," 238.

⁹⁶ Root, "Reconstructing the Impact of Trauma on the Personality," 230.

⁹⁷ Root, "Reconstructing the Impact of Trauma on the Personality," 238.

⁹⁸ Root, "Reconstructing the Impact of Trauma on the Personality," 236.

⁹⁹ Root, "Reconstructing the Impact of Trauma on the Personality," 239-40.

raped) have symptoms of “rape trauma” are “hyper-vigilant to certain cues, avoid situations that we sense are high risk, go numb in response to overtures from men that might be friendly.”¹⁰⁰

As for insidious trauma, Root explains that this type of trauma is associated with the “social status of the individual being devalued because a characteristic intrinsic to their identity” differs from what is “valued by those in power, for example gender, color, sexual orientation, physical ability.”¹⁰¹ Root claims that insidious trauma effects are “cumulative and directed toward a community of people” and often begin in childhood.¹⁰² Root offers the example of a child who is told he or she is “not the right kind of person to play with – too poor, wrong color, etc.”¹⁰³ These “wounds” do not include physical violence but “leave a distinct threat to psychological safety, security, or survival.”¹⁰⁴

Root’s conceptualizations are important to my analysis as I expand on her ideas to argue that 1) older people fall into a devalued social status based solely on their identity as “old,” 2) ageism affects social status and falls within the category of insidious trauma, and 3) ageism or our “age culture” is akin to “rape culture” and operates as an indirect trauma.¹⁰⁵ I argue that older women experience (and may, in fact, participate in) direct, indirect, and insidious trauma as part of our “age culture.” Not surprisingly, women have anxieties, if not fear, of aging or appearing old. While some of those anxieties and fears can be attributed to the fear of death and dying, whether or not aging brings with it the symptoms associated with indirect and insidious trauma is unknown because older adults tend not to recognize, acknowledge, or share symptoms of trauma

¹⁰⁰ Brown, “Not Outside the Range,” 107.

¹⁰¹ Root, “Reconstructing the Impact of Trauma on the Personality,” 240-41.

¹⁰² Root, “Reconstructing the Impact of Trauma on the Personality,” 240.

¹⁰³ Root, “Reconstructing the Impact of Trauma on the Personality,” 241.

¹⁰⁴ Root, “Reconstructing the Impact of Trauma on the Personality,” 240.

¹⁰⁵ Root, “Reconstructing the Impact of Trauma on the Personality,” 240-41.

or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) with physicians.¹⁰⁶ Joan M. Cook, Elissa McCarthy, and Steven R. Thorp report that “trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder” remains “hidden in the lives of older adults, meaning that clinical information is not typically recognized, acknowledged or shared by the older patient.”¹⁰⁷ To be clear, this project does not propose or intend to diagnose characters in dramatic works with trauma or PTSD, I use trauma studies as lens to analyze text and performance and therefore rely on the vocabulary and generally accepted descriptions of traumatic behaviors.¹⁰⁸

Furthering the idea that trauma can exist “alongside moments of everyday emotional distress” and be the “name for experiences of socially situated political violence,” Ann Cvetkovich seeks a way to think about trauma that moves away from medical and pathological definitions.¹⁰⁹ Cvetkovich is critical of formulations of trauma that limit it to either clinical diagnosis (PTSD) or “poststructuralist theories” that define it as “unrepresentable.”¹¹⁰ Instead, she is “interested in how shock and injury are made socially meaningful, paradigmatic even, within cultural experience.”¹¹¹ Cvetkovich claims that trauma “sometimes leaves no record at all” and seeks to build an “archive of trauma” that includes:

[N]ew genres of expression, such as testimony, and new forms of monuments, rituals, and performances that call into being collective witnesses and publics. It

¹⁰⁶ Joan M. Cook, Elissa McCarthy, and Steven R. Thorp, “Older Adults with PTSD: Brief State of Research and Evidence-Based Psychotherapy Case Illustration,” *American Journal of Geriatric Psychology* 25 no. 5, May 2017, 522.

¹⁰⁷ Joan M. Cook, Elissa McCarthy, Steven R. Thorp, “Older Adults with PTSD,” 522.

¹⁰⁸ Symptoms of trauma include those of the mind or emotions and of the body. of trauma in individual behavior include, hyper-vigilance, numbness, and/or disassociation. For example, PTSD may include a cluster of symptoms, such as depression, flashbacks, hallucinations, helplessness, suicidal thoughts and self-destructive behavior. Bessel van der Kolk MD, *The Body Keeps the Score*, (New York: Penguin Publishing Group 2015), Kindle Edition, 14-23.

¹⁰⁹ Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feeling*, 3.

¹¹⁰ Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feeling*, 19.

¹¹¹ Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feeling*, 19.

thus demands an unusual archive, whose materials, in pointing to trauma's ephemerality, are themselves frequently ephemeral. Trauma's archives incorporate personal memories, which can be recorded in oral and video testimonies, memoirs, letters, and journals. The memory of trauma is embedded not just in narrative but in material artifacts . . .¹¹²

Cvetkovich believes building such an archive is necessary to find approaches to trauma that do not pathologize it, to “seize control of it [trauma] from the medical expert,” and to “place moments of extreme trauma alongside moments of the everyday emotional distress that are often the only sign” of trauma's effects.¹¹³ Cvetkovich's ideas of “everyday trauma” and archives of trauma are important to my project in that they invite us to examine and discuss cultural objects that offer an expanded view of the material lives of older women (beyond the stereotypes). Theatre and performance create a space where these stories can “call into being collective witnesses and publics.”¹¹⁴ As Cvetkovich points out, people are more likely to “go to the theatre than to therapy,” so it is important to consider what theatre might do and how it “can address collective traumas.”¹¹⁵

Here, I turn to Roger Bechtel's important analysis of the way embodied performance of trauma suggests how theatre can create empathy. This idea matters if theatre might provide paths to changing cultural norms regarding aging. In researching Troika Ranch's *loopdiver* performance, Bechtel observed that the embodied trauma was “shared” with the audience who experience “an emotional affect connected with the observed movement.”¹¹⁶ He hypothesized

¹¹² Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feeling*, 7.

¹¹³ Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feeling*, 3.

¹¹⁴ Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feeling*, 7.

¹¹⁵ Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feeling*, 282.

¹¹⁶ Roger Bechtel, “The Body of Trauma: Empathy, Mourning, and Media in Troika Ranch's

that the “bodies of trauma onstage impact the bodies in the audience” and concluded that the experience of trauma through live performance “might enlarge our empathic capacity.”¹¹⁷ Bechtel argues against the traditional Freudian conception of trauma, which focuses on the idea of primal scene (the initial incident, typically in childhood but later expanded to experiences in war), traumatic neurosis, and latency.¹¹⁸ He maintains that memory of a traumatic event is not repressed because the individual cannot cognitively assimilate it.¹¹⁹ Bechtel argues that when a person experiences a threat, he or she simultaneously experiences a neurophysiological response that attaches to the memory. This “embodied” trauma is reactivated time and time again in a “vicious cycle of trauma.”¹²⁰ In other words, the individual cannot recover the event (from repressed memory) because the memory of the traumatic event does not cognitively exist (thus, “healing” does not result from the “recovering” of it) – rather, the body does “remember.” The trauma is embodied as an experience that keeps an individual in a constant state of hyper-arousal preventing any reconciliation of mind and body.¹²¹ In performance, the embodied trauma is “shared” with the audience, who experience “an emotional affect connected with the observed movement.”¹²² With regard to the performance of age in Western cultures, both on the stage and in daily life, this looping effect that occurs between people (i.e., between performer and audience and between people in general) transmits meaning of “actions, intentions, feelings, and emotions of others” about how to “perform” age as well as the trauma associated with it.¹²³ Thus, building

loopdiver.” *Theatre Journal* 60.1 (2013): 77–93.

¹¹⁷ Bechtel, “The Body of Trauma,” 84.

¹¹⁸ In Freudian formulations of trauma the traumatic event is repressed but may return at any time.

¹¹⁹ Bechtel, “The Body of Trauma,” 77-93.

¹²⁰ Bechtel, “The Body of Trauma,” 82.

¹²¹ Bechtel, “The Body of Trauma,” 82.

¹²² Bechtel, “The Body of Trauma,” 84.

¹²³ Bechtel, “The Body of Trauma,” 85.

off of Bechtel's idea of "looping," the trauma associated with ageing is continually looping ("remembering and re-remembering") in an exchange that conditions individuals in Western culture to view ageing as a negative experience rather than a positive one.¹²⁴

It is possible drawing on this analysis of trauma to conceptualize the difficulty individuals have with reconciling the internal self (mind) with the physical (body) and aging. As Lipscomb points out, "Gerontological research finds that older people commonly report a disconnect between their physical bodies and internal selves, stating they feel significantly younger than they look."¹²⁵ The mind continually struggles to reconcile itself with the aging body; not necessarily because the body is in a constant state of hyper-arousal, but because the body has already aged further (moved forward) in time and in experience. As the mind reconciles itself with or integrates the aging experience, the body continues to age, forcing the mind once again to reconcile or integrate the aging experience in a cycle of trauma (analogous to the looping motion and sequence identified/discussed by Bechtel). Thus, with regard to the performance of age in Western cultures, both on the stage and in daily life, I would suggest that this "cycling" or "looping" effect transmits the meaning of "actions, intentions, feelings, and emotions of others" about how to "perform" age as well as the trauma associated with it. Thus, the trauma of aging is continually looping ("remembering and re-remembering") in an exchange that conditions people to view aging as a negative experience rather than a positive one.¹²⁶ However, Bechtel suggests that therapeutic value is found in the shared experience of trauma, which enlarges our "empathic capacity."¹²⁷ If so, I would argue that people might mitigate the trauma associated with aging with a "spirit of empathy." By this I mean that if a subject could

¹²⁴ Bechtel, "The Body of Trauma," 86.

¹²⁵ Lipscomb, "Age in *M. Butterfly*," 196.

¹²⁶ Bechtel, "The Body of Trauma," 82.

¹²⁷ Bechtel, "The Body of Trauma," 77-93.

reconcile the body and actually face aging rather than turn from it, or ridicule it, or diminish it, the potential exists to reposition the view of aging (as trauma) or perhaps “dislodge” it from the persistent decline narrative of aging (as Basting hoped). Like Basting and Bechtel, I believe theatre might offer at least one site where humans might enlarge their empathic capacity.

Relying on Kaplan’s insights regarding “trauma and aging,” Brown and Root’s ideas of indirect and insidious trauma, and Cvetkovich’s concepts of everyday trauma, and in light of Bechtel’s idea of how trauma is held in the body (and transmits it), I will look at case studies from contemporary Anglo-American theatre. Preceding this, I offer a discussion situating age and ageism in Anglo-American culture. I contend that older women face a threefold trauma of aging as a result of: 1) the “aging” body (as the “crumbling scaffold”),¹²⁸ 2) violence perpetrated by a society that not only marginalizes, but dehumanizes and often “disposes” of its aged members, and 3) violence perpetrated by people responsible for their care.¹²⁹ For my project, I primarily focus on the first two potential sites of trauma, which align with 1) the individual (mind and body) experience of aging and 2) the experience of older women in society at large. I draw on work from within the American and British theatrical canon to explore my observations about “trauma and aging” for women over 65 years of age. What images of aging do theatre and performance present to create on-going “sites of trauma”? How might theatre and performance work to subvert those images and/or offer counter-examples?

¹²⁸ Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: the Making and Unmaking of the World*. New York: (Oxford University Press, 1985.) 32-33.

¹²⁹ “Violence” includes neglect (by others and self-neglect), physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional and psychological abuse (including marginalization and infantilization), financial abuse and exploitation.

Justification

In a study conducted by the Institute of Public Health in 2000, research showed that older people with “more positive self-perceptions of aging” lived 7.5 years longer than people with “less-positive self-perceptions.”¹³⁰ Researchers Becca Levy, Martin Slade, et al., identified that as a “*stereotype threat*” age differs from race and gender in at least two ways: 1) they found that people enter the latter groups while developing identity, develop defenses, and generally hold positive views of their group, and 2) the “*stereotype threat*” comes from people outside the stigmatized group.¹³¹ Conversely, with age, younger people begin to accept and not question the validity of aging stereotypes “several decades before becoming old”; the study also revealed that there is a “greater likelihood that younger people will accept negative stereotypes about age” as well as acquire and internalize “age stereotypes” long before they enter the stigmatized group.¹³² Moreover, older people possess a decreased ability to develop defenses to the stereotype threat, and most significantly, older people hold a negative view of their group.¹³³ In turn, Levy argues that these internalized “aged-stereotypes” physiologically impact older people and their longevity. She maintains that the negative stereotypes of age function as a “societal sanction of the denigration of the aged” and compares it to a “virus” that reduces life expectancy.¹³⁴

As observed by Mike Featherstone and Mike Hepworth: “every image of a human being is an image of aging” and “every image of aging” is a study of our “ideas about “aging.”¹³⁵ In

¹³⁰ Levy, Slade, Kunkel, and Kasl, “Longevity Increased by Positive Self-Perceptions of Aging,” 268.

¹³¹ Levy, Slade, Kunkel, and Kasl, “Longevity Increased by Positive Self-Perceptions of Aging,” 262.

¹³² Levy, Slade, Kunkel, and Kasl, “Longevity Increased by Positive Self-Perceptions of Aging,” 261, 266.

¹³³ Levy, Slade, Kunkel, and Kasl, “Longevity Increased by Positive Self-Perceptions of Aging,” 262.

¹³⁴ Levy, Slade, Kunkel, and Kasl, “Longevity Increased by Positive Self-Perceptions of Aging,” 261, 266.

Anglo-American culture/in the United States and Britain (if not throughout the world) negative images of age and a decline ideology of age have persisted since the industrial revolution.¹³⁶ In turn, the negative images reflect and reinforce how society views aging and the aged. Media perpetuate many of these negative images in marketing an anti-aging agenda to the public in visual and print advertisements. According to C. Lee Harrington in “Time, Memory, and Aging on the Soaps,” research about the portrayal of older adults on television “dates back to the 1950s in North America, with the most prominent research stream focusing on the content of images.”¹³⁷ For example, Jake Harwood and Karen Anderson argue that television operates as a “crucial location” where relationships between social groups and stereotypes “play out,” influencing the socialization process and contributing to the decline narrative of aging/decline ideology of aging.¹³⁸ In their 1999 study of representation of older adults in U.S. television, Harwood and Anderson found that adults over 60 were one of “the most under-represented and most negatively portrayed groups” on U.S. television.¹³⁹ They found that older adults occupy minor roles and are relegated to playing comedic, foolish, or eccentric characters. They also

¹³⁵ Mike Featherstone and Mike Hepworth, “Images of Ageing: Cultural Representations of Later Life,” in *The Cultural Context of Aging*, ed. Jay Sokolovsky, (Westport: Praeger, 2009), 137.

¹³⁶ In *Ageism: Negative and Positive*, Erdman Palmore explains that:

The perception of aging has changed throughout history. In the colonial era, old age is said to have connoted honor and esteem. With the industrial revolution, older workers were increasingly viewed as redundant and expendable. When ageism was decried by Robert Butler in 1975...old age was said to connote poverty, isolation, and illness. Sociologists have speculated about whether older people are properly classified as a minority group, who, like Blacks or Hispanics, are subjects of prejudice and discrimination. Erdman Palmore, *Ageism: Negative and Positive*, (New York: Springer Publishing Co., 1999), vii.

¹³⁷ C. Lee Harrington, “Time, Memory, and Aging on the Soaps,” in *Serializing Age: Aging and Old Age in TV Series*, eds. Oró Piqueras, Maricel, and Anita Wohlmann (n.p.: Bielefield: Transcript, 2016), 26-27.

¹³⁸ Jake Harwood and Karen Anderson, "The Presence and Portrayal of Social Groups on Prime-Time Television," *Communication Reports* 15, no. 2 (Summer 2002): 81.

¹³⁹ Harwood and Anderson, “The Presence and Portrayal of Social Groups,” 83.

often live alone and lack a love life. In contrast, more recent scholarship by Anita Wohlman and Marical Oró-Piqueras in *Serializing Age: Aging and Old Age in TV Series* shows that “older people are still underrepresented in television compared to younger groups,” but that television programs, such as *The Golden Girls*, *Murder She Wrote* and more recently Netflix’s *Grace and Frankie*, feature “feisty older women who refuse to retire to passive, detached, and calm lifestyle[s]” and indicate an interest in lives of older characters.¹⁴⁰ They point out, as do media scholar John Fiske and others, that soap operas have long “provided an open-ended, ever evolving space for middle-aged and older female characters to explore economic power, desire, and sexuality.”¹⁴¹ The scholarship analyzing representations of older people on television, especially older women establishes the value in examining the representations circulating in popular culture. This work helps to identify positive and negative stereotypes, under-representation, misrepresentations, as well as how media might offer expanded views of aging. Likewise, theatre scholars should examine works of dramatic literature and performance for images and representations of older people for the same reasons, yet, as pointed out earlier, the field remains underdeveloped.

As demonstrated by Michael Mangan in *Staging Ageing*, negative images of aging do not begin with the contemporary recognition of aging and ageism; as any student of the classics or theatre knows, stereotypes of aging people and aging tropes date back to antiquity and continue to the present day. Mangan’s work primarily focuses on images and stereotypes of white men reaching back to antiquity and moving through the Restoration. His brief discussion of contemporary performances about age, includes plays with characters of various ages, gender,

¹⁴⁰ Oró Piqueras, Maricel, and Anita Wohlmann, *Serializing Age: Aging and Old Age in TV Series* (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2016), 12.

¹⁴¹ Oró Piqueras and Wohlmann, *Serializing Age*, 12; John Fiske, *Television Culture* (London: Routledge, 2010), 183-4.

and life stages to better understand how performance informs the human understanding of aging. With the exception of his mention of Lady Wishfort, however, he does not look at the image of aging women over time nor does he examine plays where older characters drive the dramatic action.

In contrast, I have selected works that foreground older women. I do this to highlight their visibility and focus on plays that place older women front and center on the stage to demonstrate their resilience and resistance in our current “age culture.” I argue that the pervasiveness of negative imagery associated with the aging female as well as decline narratives of age contribute to individual and cultural trauma (both indirect and insidious trauma) that necessitates active resistance and creative responses to the violence enacted upon the aging. I identify images that help to distinguish stereotypes and decline narratives from individualized stories of aging and fuller, more expansive narratives of aging that hold the potential to generate helpful conversations about aging and to revisit the internalization of ageist thinking and ageism. As I have mentioned earlier, this conversation is important to humanities not only because theatre scholars have largely ignored the discussion of aging, but because ageism, particularly ageism against women, remains a pervasive and dangerous human rights violation.

Methodology and Overview

Each chapter in this dissertation presents its own research question(s) and case study analysis that advances my argument with regard to: 1) the so-called experience of “trauma and aging,” 2) how images in theatre and performance have supported negative stereotypes of aging, and 3) how counter-examples from theatre and performance might broaden the conversation, perception, and awareness about the experience of aging, particularly for women.

The project follows a chronology of representations beginning with Albee's *Three Tall Women* and continues with textual and performance analysis of Paula Vogel's *Oldest Profession* and Caryl Churchill's *Escaped Alone*. I have decided to limit my discussion/analysis to plays that primarily feature woman over the age of 65.¹⁴² As discussed earlier, the human experience of aging differs based on "specific contexts," such as "gender, race, sexuality, culture, nationality, religion, and geography" as well as ableness or disability and the "historical moment in which one is aging."¹⁴³ In short, "aging needs to be situated."¹⁴⁴ My objects are limited to plays by U.S. and U.K. writers that portray or feature older white female characters.¹⁴⁵ The project concludes with a discussion of human rights issues regarding older persons and selected recent works by playwrights and theatre companies in the US and Britain that focus on bringing awareness to issues of aging and ageism. My assumptions are that theatre does the cultural work to enlarge human understanding about what it means to grow old and experience the passage of time. My assumptions also include that the arts – and specifically theatre because of its reliance on the

¹⁴² I decided on chronological age of 65 primarily because it is often considered to be the beginning of "old age" or when people begin to "feel old." As explained by Anne Barrett and Joann M. Montepare, this "feeling of being 'old'" is "influenced by social meanings of age that often are embedded within social institutions—for example, views of 65 as the start of old age, deriving from Social Security criteria" in "'It's about Time': Applying Life Span and Life Course Perspectives to the Study of Subjective Age." *Annual Review of Gerontology & Geriatrics* 35, (2015): 56. <https://login.proxy.lib.fsu.edu/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/1619303349?accountid=4840>.

¹⁴³ Kaplan, "Trauma and Aging," 172. Scholars from other disciplines agree that the human experience of age/aging is influenced by many factors; see also: Basting, *Stages of Age*, 1-2; Gullette, *Agewise*, loc. 297; Cruikshank, *Learning to Be Old* 2; Lipscomb and Marshall, *Staging Age*, 2.

¹⁴⁴ Kaplan, "Trauma and Ageing," 172.

¹⁴⁵ As a reminder here, by "older" I am referring to women over 65 years of age; the exceptions being "B" and "C" in Albee's *Three Tall Women*. Nonetheless, all of the female characters (or figures) in Albee's play are concerned with age and ageing.

storytelling process and its interrogation of issues troubling the marginalized and the oppressed – holds the potential to raise awareness, educate communities, and advocate for human rights.¹⁴⁶

While almost all plays and performances lend themselves to an analysis of “age” or “aging” in some way, I will focus on: 1) plays written by playwrights who maintain a significant foothold in the British and/or American canon, and 2) plays that were written and performed in the past 30 years at the Royal Court, on Broadway, and in U.S. regional theatres. As I discussed earlier, historically age has “frequently functioned” as a metaphor or trope in literature. As theatre scholar Anna R. Harpin points out, “there is some evidence . . . that in the post-war period there has been a move in art and literature to explore the particularities of old age.”¹⁴⁷ Thus, my work focuses on modern and contemporary theatre to examine how these works might offer expanded views of the aging experience and dispel the myths and negative stereotypes of age. Through an analysis of select cultural objects I am providing tools with which to unpack and analyze other objects regarding ageism and potentially identify the way views of aging women are circulated in society to a similar effect. To do this work, I rely on a complex, inter-disciplinary approach from the following areas:

- From age studies, that age and aging should be viewed along a spectrum rather than over-simplified peak-and-decline narratives
- From trauma studies, that trauma involves individual, cultural, and insidious trauma, and
- From feminist trauma studies, that building an archive of cultural objects helps

¹⁴⁶ Mary Luckhurst, “Introduction: Theatre and Elder Abuse,” in *Things Unspeakable: Theatre and Human Rights After 1945*, ed. Mary Luckhurst and Emilie Morin, (New York, NY: Palgrave-McMillan, 2015). 3

¹⁴⁷ Anna R. Harpin, “The Lives of Our Mad Mothers: Aging and Contemporary Performance,” *Women & Performance: a Journal of Feminist Theory*, (March 2012): 67 -87.

people to understand “the way everyday trauma digs itself in at every level,” which offers expanded views of the material lives of women, particularly aging women, that might help us “forge new understandings” about the experience of aging¹⁴⁸

- From feminist studies, the idea that invisibility/visibility as a person ages is not solely about social and sexual marginalization, but that older women offer images of strength, resilience, and survival
- And from theatre studies, the proposition that theatre might offer at least one site where humans might enlarge their empathic capacity.

I bring these ideas and the voices of many theorists into conversation with the play texts to discuss the experience of aging and instances where older women are represented in a way that subverts stereotypes and to highlight that we live in an “age culture” that requires a new affective experience (to thwart the cycle of ageism) in our culture.

My primary methodology included close readings of the dramatic text with particular attention to the textual and experiential aspects for the aged female figure(s). Using the lens of age studies and trauma theory, I questioned how the dramatic text or performance defined and categorized older women and aging female characters. Textually, I analyzed the figures, posing the following questions: How does the playwright describe the aged character? How is the aging/aged female body described by the “aged figure” and other characters? Is ageism detectable in the dialogue? For example, what language, terms, and modifiers do people employ/engage to discuss, describe, or address the older or aging female? How is the aging/aged woman positioned on the stage?

¹⁴⁸ Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feeling*, 20.

Secondly, I analyze the objects in performance either in person or video-recordings of the original productions. In June 2017, I viewed *Three Tall Women* at the New York Public Library Theatre and Film on Tap archive; in June 2018, I attended the revival of *Three Tall Women* at the John Golden Theatre on Broadway. For Vogel's *The Oldest Profession* and Churchill's *Escaped Alone*, I consult theatre reviews written by established theatre critics and published in credible sources with a vast circulation, production photos, interviews and other artifacts.¹⁴⁹

For performance(s), I noted characteristics and features with particular attention to “age markers,” such as posture, gait, voice, hair color, makeup, costumes, accessories, and props. In what way did the images or representations celebrate or dismiss the aged woman and her body? How did the actor “perform” age? Was ageism expressed in the images and representations? And if so, how and to what effect? Experientially, how was the material, day-to-day life of older women portrayed or represented? Were the older women isolated, dismissed, or discarded? What are the characteristics or features of these experiences? What type of aging experience was presented? Was it one of decline or progress, or did the work and the performance offer expanded views of age(ing) beyond the usual binaries (youth/age or decline/progress or success)? Conversely, were other experiential paradigms of aging presented? How did the older women/aged female figures interact with each other? Did the older figures “transmit” negative or positive attitudes about aging? If so, in what ways? Through language? Behavior? Storytelling?

While this is not a historiographic project, I will situate each object in its respective cultural moment and discuss how it is responding to its moment and how people have situated it in its time by examining the work of scholars and critics. However, briefly having contextualized

¹⁴⁹ The librarians at the New York Public Library Theatre and Film on Tape worked to locate the video recording of Vogel's *The Oldest Profession* in 2017 and 2018. In 2017, they believed it out for “digitizing.” In June 2018, the librarians reported that they believe the video is lost.

the plays and performances, I will focus on what the performance does in culture using evidence as described above. Specifically, I will analyze the aged female figures with regard to the performance of “age” and instances of violence and trauma and how the figures resist the status of “cultural refuse” and perform or present age[ing] in a different way. What types of violence and trauma, including micro-traumas and aggression do aged women experience or express (verbally or physically) with regard to: 1) the aging body, and 2) ageist thinking and ageism? Do these different experiences result in trauma or insidious trauma, and if so, how is the traumatic experience conveyed or expressed? Here, I want to make distinctions between traditional forms of trauma and indirect, insidious, and everyday trauma. I want to explore this concept of “trauma and aging” to demonstrate how images of older women can also offer examples of resistance and resilience to social-cultural pressures related to aging. I believe this work is crucial to a conversation in the humanities so that we begin to understand how negative images and representations contribute to ageism and the internalization of ageist thinking in our culture.

Finally, this project is limited in scope in that it centers on images of white working and upper-class women over 65 years old. In life, the experience of ageing and ageism varies greatly based a number of factors. Those factors include a person’s gender and personality as well as a person’s culture, environment, and historical moment. And perhaps most importantly, the experience of ageing varies most by a person’s race and class. Thus, this project does not mean to represent the breath and depth of the aging experience for all older women. If anything, it offers one voice in an emerging conversation on age and aging in Anglo-American culture. I also offer a view of how images of age in theatre might work to expand the conversation about aging. Moving forward, it is important to think about the wide range of diverse experiences of older women in dramatic literature and musical theatre (where aged figures “work” in different ways).

It is also important to think about the “performance of age” in social media and everyday life. This project suggests that theatre offers, as it always does, a way to begin difficult conversations. One of those conversations is to create a deeper understanding of the experience of aging and to help dispel myths and stereotypes of age if we commit to watch and to listen.

Chapter Two - Women, Aging, and Trauma in Edward Albee’s *Three Tall Women*

Chapter two addresses the older female figure in theatre and performance by analyzing Edward Albee’s *Three Tall Women* (1994).¹⁵⁰ To bring the idea of trauma and aging closer to theatre, I begin the chapter with an overview of theoretical perspectives about aging from Simone de Beauvoir and Susan Sontag and then move to Barbara MacDonald and Cynthia Rich who sought to engage feminist voices in the conversation about women and aging. From there, I shift to a brief overview of trauma to address Kaplan’s idea of “trauma and aging” and feminist arguments from Laura S. Brown, Maria P. Root, and Ann Cvetkovich who all seek expanded conceptions of trauma to include everyday and insidious trauma. I consider dismissal, erasure, and dehumanization experienced by older women as well as direct traumas and insidious trauma. The goal of this first chapter is to clarify and expand the term “trauma and aging” and to discuss the aggregate effect of multiple traumas, using *Three Tall Women* as a case study. My interest is in how the play depicts the experience of the aging body, the experience of marginalization or diminishment for women in society as they age, and how the image of older women in contemporary dramatic literature and performance might be viewed other than as decline.¹⁵¹

¹⁵⁰ Performance references are to the original 1995 off-Broadway production at the Vineyard Theatre viewed at the New York City Library Theatre and Film Archive, June 2017 and the June 2018 revival on Broadway.

¹⁵¹ The focus of this project is not to discuss physical violence, neglect, and abuse perpetrated by caretakers and family members in care settings, etc. However, in some instances the overlap is

Chapter Three - Escaping Invisibility: Old Women Front and Center in Paula Vogel's *The Oldest Profession*

In chapter three, I turn to the first of two plays wherein the only characters on the stage are women over 65 years of age. In this chapter, I discuss Paula Vogel's *The Oldest Profession* (1981/2005) to examine older female figures experiencing "trauma and aging" in a specific social-cultural-political moment.¹⁵² The playwright places older women front and center on the stage. As a result, the aging female body is isolated, creating a "visibility" of what is otherwise and elsewhere marginalized, dismissed, or "invisible."¹⁵³

The goal of this chapter is to analyze "trauma and aging" and to discuss the aggregate effect of multiple traumas, using *The Oldest Profession* as a case study. My interest is in how the play's dramaturgy and its staging validate the idea of "trauma and aging" or if it reinforces aging female stereotypes. I question if this focused attention on the aged female figure erases age or amplifies its visibility. Again here, my interest is in how the play depicts the experience of the aging body, the experience of marginalization or diminishment for women in society as they age, and how the image of older women in contemporary dramatic literature and performance might be viewed in ways other than decline. I analyze the work as a counter-example to the traditional decline narrative and discuss how Vogel's play contributes to the emerging conversation about images of ageing, specifically images of older women and their material conditions.

unavoidable as the marginalization, dehumanization, and disposal of older adults is at the hands of caretakers and family members.

¹⁵² Vogel specifically sets *The Oldest Profession* in early "Reagan America" (1980 to 1983); Churchill does not specifically set the time period for *Escaped Alone*, but from the content of character's political discussions, the time period pre-dates the UK's vote on Brexit and is post-George W. Bush/pre-Trump.

¹⁵³ In her book titled *The Long Life*, Helen Small argues that "to become old is to lose social (and sexual) visibility," Helen Small, *The Long Life*, (Oxford University Press, 2007); In her essay "Lives of Our Mad Mothers: Aging and Contemporary Performance," Ann Harpin points out that "Older people and old age is not invisible in literature and philosophy; rather they form a troubling untroubled presence." Harpin, 67 -87.

Chapter Four - A Cup of Tea and Terrible Rage in Caryl Churchill's *Escaped Alone*

In chapter four, I turn to another play wherein the only characters on the stage are women over 65 years old. Here, I argue that Caryl Churchill's *Escaped Alone* (2015) offers a "new way of understanding the depiction of age" that is not simply another decline narrative illustrating the youth-age binary or age as a metaphor for decline, destruction, and death.¹⁵⁴ Rather, I argue that the play offers a narrative of what it is to be old, particularly old women and to have observed the passage of time. I consider the idea of the crone in a story that juxtaposes decomposition, decay, and human suffering with the beauty and kindness of human relationships nurtured over time. As in chapter three, I examine the play's dramaturgy and staging to analyze how the play creates a "visibility" of age and illuminates the experience of aging in a society/culture that routinely "ages out" older people from their profession, their neighborhood, and their culture.¹⁵⁵ I discuss how the play "escapes" the decline narrative as it places older women at the center of the dramatic action. I argue that *Escaped Alone* offers a counter-example to the decline narrative of age and instead illustrates how these older women resist the label of "cultural refuse" to honor the role of older women in our culture.

Chapter Five - Conclusion

Chapter five serves as the concluding chapter for the project and I engage human rights discourse to examine the experience of aging and human rights violations against older people, particularly for older women. Building on this discussion, I explore the role of the arts in human rights discourse, specifically responding to Linda Hogan's argument that the arts are capable of creating an "imaginative space" that helps "challenge and expand" the "moral imagination and can enable a level of understanding different from other theoretical forms of discourse and

¹⁵⁴ Fuchs, "Estrangement: Toward an 'Age Theory' Theatre Criticism," 69.

argument."¹⁵⁶ To support the ideas presented in this chapter, I discuss current theatre and performance projects and trends in Britain and the United States that engage not only new approaches to aging narratives but also encourage conversations about aging and ageism. I discuss Rob Gee's *Forget Me Not* and the work at Florida Studio Theatre (Sarasota) as two different types of theatrical approaches to ageist attitudes and ageism. Both plays demonstrate how theatre might work to address the violence and trauma experienced by older adults, bring awareness to the serious human rights violations perpetrated against older adults, and shatter pervasive negative images of age.

¹⁵⁶ Linda Hogan, *Keeping Faith with Human Rights*. (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2015), 176.

CHAPTER TWO

WOMEN, AGING, AND TRAUMA IN EDWARD ALBEE'S *THREE TALL WOMEN*

My life was hurrying, racing tragically toward its end. And yet at the same time it was dripping so slowly, so very slowly now, hour-by-hour, minute-by-minute. One always has to wait until the sugar melts, the memory dies, the wound scars over, the sun sets, the unhappiness lifts and fades away.

-- Simone de Beauvoir, *The Woman Destroyed*.¹⁵⁷

There is nothing stronger than a broken woman who has rebuilt herself.

-- Hannah Gadsby, *Nanette*¹⁵⁸

In her 2018 searing comedy special titled *Hannah Gadsby: Nanette*, Gadsby weaves her personal story of misogyny, homophobia, art history, comedy, and trauma with the politics of “coming out” in conservative Tasmania. Using the theatrical device that now – in her “prime” – she must “quit comedy,” Gadsby draws on her individual experience as a queer woman growing up in a country where homosexuality remained a crime until 1997.¹⁵⁹ Harnessing her anger, Gadsby shares her personal experience of marginalization, humiliation, shame, rape, and assault to speak to her specific story of “difference.”¹⁶⁰ Her story of individual trauma and her journey to acceptance relate directly to “queer trauma.”¹⁶¹ Nonetheless, *Nanette*, in fact, potentially speaks to all women no matter their sexuality, cultural moment, or age. By that I mean, all women experience trauma, including direct experiences of violence as well as indirect and insidious trauma through individual and socio-cultural experiences.¹⁶²

¹⁵⁷ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Woman Destroyed*, trans. Patrick O’Brien New York: Pantheon Books 1969.

¹⁵⁸ Hannah Gadsby, *Hannah Gadsby: Nanette*, 2018

¹⁵⁹ Gadsby, *Hannah Gadsby: Nanette*, 2018

¹⁶⁰ Gadsby, *Hannah Gadsby: Nanette*, 2018. Gadsby refers to herself as “different.”

¹⁶¹ Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feeling*, 5-6.

¹⁶² Root, “Reconstructing the Impact of Trauma on the Personality,” 238.

In *An Archive of Feeling* (2004), Ann Cvetkovich asserts that people carry trauma through a “range of cultural texts” that “haunt the present”¹⁶³ and appear in “everyday emotional life that don’t necessarily seem traumatic” or fit the model of PTSD.¹⁶⁴ Women carry trauma as a result of direct personal experiences of sexual violence or physical mistreatment, marginalization, and dismissal, whether a woman acknowledges these acts of violence against her or not. Women carry trauma as a result of indirect experiences and insidiously as a result of systemic sexism, endemic misogyny, and post-feminist rhetoric that pits woman against woman while often times supporting the very patriarchal ideals that have oppressed women for centuries. This “insidious trauma” operates within the realm of “the normal and everyday”¹⁶⁵ and often remains hidden or unseen.¹⁶⁶ Women express these traumas to the outside world collectively [in their “action back”] when participating in Women’s Marches, the #metoo or #timesup movements, and Handmaid protests. For both Gadsby and Cvetkovich, “acting out” together and sharing stories builds connectedness.

Like them and Root, I argue that women carry trauma in their stories. And while this sharing of stories might not be a “quick fix,” for those who embrace feminism and the role of “the spirit in the wholeness of the human being,” interconnectedness, including sharing stories, holds the cure.¹⁶⁷ This idea of sharing stories fall in line with some trauma theorists who see it as a way of “working through” or transcending trauma. For example, Cathy Caruth asserts that

¹⁶³ Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feeling*, 6.

¹⁶⁴ Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feeling*, 6.

¹⁶⁵ In her book *An Archive of Feeling*, Cvetkovich maintains that trauma is not only catastrophic events, such as slavery, genocide, etc., but also includes forms of trauma that fall into the “realm of the normal and everyday” and are not limited by “medicalized constructions of PTSD. Cvetkovich, 32-33, 38, 44.

¹⁶⁶ Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feeling*, 6.

¹⁶⁷ Root, “Reconstructing the Impact of Trauma on the Personality,” 238.

“trauma requires integration, both for the sake of the testimony and the sake of the cure.”¹⁶⁸

Dominick LaCapra further extends this idea claiming that “narrative enables one to recount and evoke experience” and that “bearing witness and giving testimony” may help “create openings in existence that did not exist before.”¹⁶⁹ Maria P. Root offers that “Ultimately a recognition of spirituality allows one to consider the effects of events that disconnect an individual from life through isolation that follows denigration, blame, and decreases social worth. Feminist portrayals of spirituality are conveyed in words, such as “dignity, respect, empowerment, humanity, and hope.”¹⁷⁰

Historically, theatre has been a site of human connectedness where voices and bodies share ephemeral moments structured around storytelling for educational or entertainment purposes, yet women’s voices and their stories remain limited and at times completely absent in theatre and performance. Although theatre is an art form that reaches back to antiquity and spans the globe, male voices have dominated the stage. As Gayle Austin explains in *Feminist Theories for Dramatic Criticism* (1990): “writing plays requires mastering to some degree a male-dominated, public production machinery, something that relatively few women have been able to do over the long history of the form... consequently there is not a large body of extant plays by women.”¹⁷¹ Over twenty-five years later, gender parity remains an issue in theatre. In 2016, *American Theatre* reported that, despite a slight increase, male playwrights continued to

¹⁶⁸ Cathy Caruth, “Introduction: Recapturing the Past,” in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins Press, 1995), 154.

¹⁶⁹ Dominick LaCapra, *History in Transit: Experience, Identity, Critical Theory* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004), 122.

¹⁷⁰ Root, “Reconstructing the Impact of Trauma on the Personality,” 238.

¹⁷¹ Gayle Austin, *Feminist Theories for Dramatic Criticism* (University of Michigan Press, 1990), 2.

outnumber females.¹⁷² In this male-dominated art form, writers construct younger female characters as objects, innocent, attractive, healthy, and sexually available. Conversely, writers marginalize older females as figures who support the hero's journey (as a mentor, guardian, or ally) or as stereotypes characterized as knowing, less attractive, diseased or disabled, and/or sexless grandmother figures. As actor Glenda Jackson recently observed in an April 2018 interview with *Newsweek* about the revival of Edward Albee's *Three Tall Women*:

Strong female characters are no longer routinely punished, and that's an improvement... [but] I find it very curious that given the advances in women's lives and capacity to actually speak up, that contemporary dramatists still don't find women interesting. Rarely is a woman the dramatic engine of anything.¹⁷³

As part of a patriarchal culture, theatre polices voices and bodies, marginalizing and often times silencing women, particularly older women who are rarely, if ever, heard. These older women whom literary scholar Amelia DeFalco describes as both "spectacle and specimen"¹⁷⁴ possess stories of joy, of trauma, of "brokenness" as well as of resistance and resilience. Thus, if as Gadsby observes, "there is nothing stronger than a broken woman who has rebuilt herself," then the strongest among the "broken" are older women who have accumulated decades of trauma, some directly, some indirectly, and many insidiously as a result of ageism.¹⁷⁵ We should listen.

¹⁷² According to *American Theatre Magazine*, for the 2015-2016 theatre season, 63% of shows were written by men, 26% written by women, and 12% co-written. For additional information see: Rob Weinhert Kent, *The Gender & Period Count: the More Things Change...*, *American Theatre Magazine*, September 26, 2017, <https://www.americantheatre.org/2017/09/26/the-gender-period-count-the-more-things-change/>

¹⁷³ Mary Kate Shilling, "Lioness in Winter," *Newsweek* "April 13, 2018, 42-45.

¹⁷⁴ Amelia DeFalco, *Uncanny Subjects: Ageing in Contemporary Narrative* (Ohio State University Press, 2010), 4.

¹⁷⁵ Gadsby, *Hannah Gadsby: Nanette*, 2018.

Women and Aging: Persistent Paradigms

More than twenty years before E. Ann Kaplan's 1999 essay about "trauma and aging," Simone de Beauvoir and Susan Sontag identified the experience of aging as "disturbing."¹⁷⁶ De Beauvoir's expansive and foundational work *The Coming of Age* (1970) was the first "important indictment of the treatment of the elderly in western culture" and identified the "otherness" of age.¹⁷⁷ In this trans-cultural perspective of aging, de Beauvoir constructed a view of aging in binary opposition to youth.¹⁷⁸ Shortly after de Beauvoir's work, Susan Sontag identified the "double marginality of sexism and ageism to which women are subject in our society" in her 1978 essay titled "The Double Standard of Aging."¹⁷⁹ Sontag observed that men and women equally experience the "social pathology" of age, but argues that aging "afflicts women much more than men."¹⁸⁰ Although her essay was published forty years ago, much remains the same. Sontag claimed that women are more "disadvantaged than men in old age in terms of social opportunities and resources," particularly since a woman's "sexual value drops steadily as she ages" and historically women have not had the same career opportunities as men.¹⁸¹ Sontag pointed out that for men "aging is a man's destiny, that must happen because he's human"; for women, "ageing is not her only destiny. Because she is that more *narrowly* defined kind of

¹⁷⁶ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Coming of Age*, (New York: Norton & Co., 1972), 360.

¹⁷⁷ De Beauvoir, 216, 441.

¹⁷⁸ In *Agewise: Fighting the New Ageism in America*, Margaret Morganroth Gullette characterizes this experience of aging as a "decline": "Decline" is the name I use for the entire system that worsens the experience of aging-past-youth. (Kindle Locations 75-76). Also see: Margaret Morganroth Gullette, *Declining to Decline: Cultural Combat and the Politics of Midlife*, (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1997.)

¹⁷⁹ Susan Sontag, "The Double Standard of Aging," *The Saturday Review*, September 23, 1972. 285.

¹⁸⁰ DeFalco, *Uncanny Subjects*, xi.

¹⁸¹ Sontag, "The Double Standard of Aging," 285.

human being, a woman, it is also her vulnerability.”¹⁸² Thus, while some scholars argue that age is in and of itself its “own difference” and that the concerns of “old age outweigh the concerns of gender,”¹⁸³ my position aligns with Sontag: for women, aging is not simply another “difference” where suddenly men and women are on equal footing.¹⁸⁴ For women, the “difference” of aging is yet further and specific forms of marginalization and oppression. Oftentimes the marginalization and social invisibility occurs at the hands of other, frequently younger, women as it did with second wave feminists.

For example, although de Beauvoir and Sontag brought issues of aging to the theoretical conversation, second wave feminists in general were surprisingly reluctant to embrace “age studies” and issues of “ageism.” Humanities scholars as well as feminist scholars marginalized older women and their issues of aging. Ageism activist Barbara MacDonald pointed out this failure during her 1985 keynote address to the National Women's Studies Association (NWSA). In her address entitled “Outside the Sisterhood,” MacDonald observed that even for feminists “adulthood ended with menopause” and criticized feminists for exploiting the knowledge and experience of older women to inform their own agendas while simultaneously defining older women as “needy, simple-minded and helpless” and overlooking the fact that “old women are raped, old women are battered, . . . old women perform unpaid work in the home and out of the home, . . . [and] that old women have to deal with racism, classicism, homophobia, and anti-Semitism.”¹⁸⁵ Twenty years after MacDonald’s address to the NWSA, her partner and fellow

¹⁸² Sontag, “The Double Standard of Aging,” 289.

¹⁸³ Sontag, “The Double Standard of Aging,” 289.

¹⁸⁴ This position is not intended to diminish or dismiss the male experience of aging. For men, ageing is also a societal and gendered experience that is also difficult and perhaps traumatizing. As men age, they experience marginalization, physical and mental weakness and diminishment, loss of wealth and status, etc.

¹⁸⁵ MacDonald, “Outside the Sisterhood” 47-48.

ageism activist, Cynthia Rich, again addressed the NWSA and, after observing conference proceedings, abandoned her planned reading and instead drew upon MacDonald's 1985 address to note that little had changed.¹⁸⁶ Thirteen years later when gerontologist and theatre artist Anne Davis Basting took on the issues of women and ageism to question the lack of scholarship, she simply and aptly observed: "No one wants to see older women or talk about getting old."¹⁸⁷ To that I would add: no one wants to listen to them either.

This "silencing" of older women and their life experiences is, in part, one type of violence and trauma experienced by the aging female and her body. In fact, as I mention in Chapter One, women endure a threefold experience of violence and trauma as they age: 1) the "violence" of the aging body, 2) the violence perpetrated by a society that not only marginalizes, but dehumanizes and often "disposes" of its aged members, and 3) for a certain percentage of older women, the violence perpetrated by individuals responsible for their care.¹⁸⁸ These experiences and the woman's capacity for resilience differ not only by personality but also by race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, marital status, health, and environment, including the social, cultural, historical moment. For example, the current increase in the aging population has created a slight shift in thinking of aging as decline, dependency, and disengagement, to instead thinking of aging as productive, active, and engaged. Older women, such as Nancy Pelosi, Hillary Clinton, and Elizabeth Warren, to name but a few, hold positions of power and influence, and older women now participate in our visual culture as social media influencers (on Instagram,

¹⁸⁶ Valerie Barnes Lipscomb and Cynthia Rich, "We Need a Theoretical Base": Cynthia Rich, Women's Studies, and Ageism: An Interview," *NWSA Journal* 18, no.1 (Spring 2006): 3-12.

¹⁸⁷ Basting, *The Stages of Age*.

¹⁸⁸ The focus of this project is not to discuss representations of physical violence, neglect, and abuse perpetrated by caretakers and family members in care settings, etc. However, in some instances the overlap is unavoidable as the marginalization, dehumanization, and disposal of older adults is at the hands of caretakers and family members.

Facebook, and elsewhere) offering images of age and aging that illustrate vitality, intelligence, and agency as well as economic and political power. However, advertisers continue to target women and their anxiety about aging when promoting health care products and services, pharmaceuticals, and anti-aging beauty products and procedures.¹⁸⁹ As feminist activist Germaine Greer commented in 2015, the “terror of growing old is as frightening as ever.”¹⁹⁰ Moreover, in her 2012 essay “Through (with) the Looking Glass: Revisiting Lacan and Woodward in Méconnaissance, the Mirror Stage of Old Age,” women and age studies scholar Leni Marshall explains how the “misrecognition of the self” in later life creates an “unpleasant and potentially traumatic, psychic step toward acceptance of death.”¹⁹¹ In other words socially, culturally, and psychologically the master narratives of age(ing) and the idea of “trauma and aging” persist.

Trauma, Women, and Aging: What Do We See?

Before I begin my discussion of *Three Tall Women*, I briefly want to review “trauma” as a term or concept and then offer how I see it applying to the aged female and my analysis of *Three Tall Women* and the plays in subsequent chapters. The word trauma originates with the Greek word meaning a physical “wound” or “to penetrate.” According to trauma theorist Ruth Leys, the study of “traumatic neurosis” in the mid-1800s related to the body in that it sought to

¹⁸⁹ In *Aged By Culture*, Margaret Morganroth Gullette labels this media campaign against old and ageing people as an “age war” between “aging Baby Boomers” who “cling to their youth” and X-ers who are awaiting their turn and continues to pit generation against generation and perpetuates age anxiety/ies.]

¹⁹⁰ Anita Singh, “Germaine Greer vs Jane Fonda: ‘Poor Old Jane has a Replacement Hip but not a Replacement Brain,’” *The Telegraph*, May 23, 2015. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/hay-festival/11626572/Germaine-Greer-vs-Jane-Fonda-Poor-old-Jane-has-a-replacement-hip-but-not-a-replacement-brain.html>

¹⁹¹ Leni Marshall’s argument is that this “second mirror stage” (in later life) holds the potential for positive transformation (“further psychological development”) as people age. See Leni Marshall, “Through (with) the Looking Glass: Revisiting Lacan and Woodward in ‘Meconnaissance,’ the Mirror Stage of Old Age.” *Feminist Formations* 24, no.2 (2012): 53.

identify and study “undetectable organic changes in the brain.”¹⁹² This study of the physiology of trauma continued for the next fifty years, particularly in the U.S.¹⁹³ Around the turn of the century, researchers such as J. M. Charcot and Sigmund Freud shifted the focus of trauma (from physiology) to a “more psychological meaning” that described trauma as the “wounding of the *mind* brought about by sudden, unexpected, emotional shock.”¹⁹⁴ As Leys explains, “the traumatized psyche was the apparatus for registering the blows.”¹⁹⁵ For Charcot and Freud, the “hysterical female epitomized the shattering effects of trauma,” which led Freud to conclude that trauma was the result of repressed sexual assault.¹⁹⁶ However, after World War I, Freud and others shifted their focus to study war neuroses or “shell shock” to expand conceptions of trauma to men.¹⁹⁷

Although research continued on “traumatic syndrome” following World War II and the Holocaust, the American Psychiatric Association did not recognize “traumatic syndrome” in their Diagnostic Manual until 1980 after physicians, social workers, and activists took up the cause on behalf of Vietnam War Veterans.¹⁹⁸ This Freudian-based formulation of trauma holds that a traumatic memory is repressed or trapped, causing traumatic neurosis. Feminist trauma scholar Judith Herman points out that it was during this same time period that women’s advocates worked to broaden the definition of trauma to include individuals who experience

¹⁹² Ruth Leys, *Trauma: A Genealogy*, (University of Chicago Press, 2000), 3.

¹⁹³ Leys, *Trauma: A Genealogy*, 3.

¹⁹⁴ Leys, *Trauma: A Genealogy*, 4.

¹⁹⁵ Leys, *Trauma: A Genealogy*, 4.

¹⁹⁶ Leys, *Trauma: A Genealogy*, 4.

¹⁹⁷ The American Psychiatric Association officially recognized traumatic syndrome as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in 1990. According to Ruth Leys in her book *Trauma: A Genealogy*, PTSD is “fundamentally a disorder of memory.” 2.

¹⁹⁸ Leys, *Trauma: A Genealogy*, 5.

child abuse and domestic violence.¹⁹⁹ However, Leys explains that more recently (2000), researchers such as Bessel A. van de Kolk have “shifted the focus of research from the mind to the *body* by explaining trauma in neurobiological terms.”²⁰⁰ This formulation of trauma holds that “trauma memory” differs from ordinary memory (“what some theorists call ‘declarative’ or ‘narrative’ memory), but rather trauma memory “involves bodily memories of skills, habits, reflex actions, and classically conditioned responses.”²⁰¹ These ideas align with trauma studies scholars such as Roger Bechtel who argues that the memory of the traumatic experience is not repressed (in the mind) but rather that “traumatic experience becomes trapped in the body.”²⁰² This distinction does not mean to suggest that “the psychological trauma— or more precisely the memory of the trauma—” does not exist.²⁰³ In fact, it continues to linger long after the traumatic event. Bessel Van der Kolk explains that psychic trauma (the memory of trauma) is “Like the splinter that causes infection, it is the body’s response to the foreign object that becomes the problem more than the object itself.”²⁰⁴

As discussed in Chapter One, when Kaplan first wrote about “trauma and aging” in 1999, she relied on psychotherapist Laura S. Brown’s definition of trauma that questioned the DMS-III definition at the time.²⁰⁵ In this definition, Brown, and Kaplan following her, take exception to

¹⁹⁹ Leys, *Trauma: A Genealogy*, 5; Cvetkovich, *Archive of Feeing*, 30.

²⁰⁰ Leys, *Trauma: A Genealogy*, 6.

²⁰¹ Leys, *Trauma: A Genealogy*, 6-7.

²⁰² In his article “The Body of Trauma: Empathy, Mourning, and Media in Troika Ranch’s *loopdiver*,” Bechtel maintains that maintains that a traumatic event is not repressed in the mind; trauma is, in fact, a person’s “inability to transform the lived experience into memory” at the time it occur

²⁰³ Bessel van der Kolk, MD, *The Body Keeps the Score*. Penguin Publishing Group. Kindle Edition, 247.

²⁰⁴ Van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, 247.

²⁰⁵ DMS III-R refers to the *American Psychiatric Associations Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* classification scheme. According to Laura K. Jones and Jenny L. Cureto, the “assumption was that humans had the ability to cope with “ordinary stressors” (painful events

the term “human,” claiming it refers to “male.” For them, the very definition fails to consider traumas that are unique to women and their experiences. Here, Brown relied on Root who maintained that medical and psychological conceptions of trauma are too limiting and called for an expanded conception of trauma. For Root and Brown, trauma should not be limited to catastrophic events, but should include experiences associated with the “normal and the everyday” such as racism, sexism, anti-Semitism, poverty, heterosexism as well as ageism.²⁰⁶ It is here, in 2003, that Ann Cvetkovich reasserts that our understanding of trauma relies too heavily on psychoanalytic discourse and it is, rather, “one of the affective experiences.”²⁰⁷ Without dismissing that trauma is produced by the catastrophic (as in Freudian formulations), Cvetkovich argues that trauma also falls within the realm of “the normal and the everyday.”²⁰⁸

My goal is to consider the idea of trauma, specifically insidious trauma (as defined by Root, Brown, and Cvetkovich), in relation to the experiences of aging and how theatre and performance represent or engage with the idea of “trauma and aging.”²⁰⁹ Kaplan argues that

such as divorce, illness, rejection, etc.) but certain natural disasters, human disasters, and other events such as war, torture, and the Holocaust, were so intense to result in trauma.” For the DMS-5, the American Psychiatric Association responded to the debate about the “mutable definition of trauma” (the core criteria for diagnosing PTSD) and a new definition “trauma” as part of an expanded three-factor model for PTSD. Laura K. Jones and Jenny L. Cureto, “Trauma Redefined in the DSM-5: Rationale and Implications for Counseling Practice,” accessed April 26, 2019 at <http://tpcjournal.nbcc.org/trauma-redefined-in-the-dsm-5-rationale-and-implications-for-counseling-practice/>.

²⁰⁶ Root, “Reconstructing the Impact of Trauma on the Personality,” 241.

²⁰⁷ Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feeling*, 17.

²⁰⁸ Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feeling*, 17.

²⁰⁹ In her book, *Ending Ageism, or How Not to Shoot Old People*, age studies scholar Margaret Morganorth Gullette invokes the term “trauma” to talk about ageing, shame, and suffering. Gullette calls for a “fleshier” definition of trauma, but does not discuss trauma theories or scholars (other than passing reference to Cathy Caruth). She relies on English professor Marianne Hirsh and offers the following to distinguish different types of trauma:

The “punctual” conception of trauma— war, rape— occludes another kind, “the insidious, cumulative, and daily experiences of poverty, persecution, enslavement, and

aging for white women differs (from that of white men) because of “prevailing gender constructs” and “specifically, the anxiety of (white) males about their own aging and their own death.”²¹⁰ She claims that for “women in the west” who are socially positioned “to be gazed at,” the external changes of aging (“as she begins to lose her youthfulness”) may make aging especially traumatic if not cause a “crisis of identity”: Who am I if I am no longer a desirable object to be gazed at?²¹¹ The idea of “to-be-looked at-ness” was first theorized by British feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey in the 1970s; she argues that (western) visual culture is constructed around the male viewer, and the figure of the woman [on the screen] is objectified to fulfill masculine desire (“the male gaze”) and in turn “the viewer” (the audience or spectator) likewise is positioned to view women from this perspective.²¹² As feminist art history scholar Michelle Meagher explains, this “to-be-looked-at-ness” is “the specifically feminine experience of being displayed and displaying oneself to a ubiquitous male gaze.”²¹³ In her 2014 essay analyzing images of older women in art, Meagher aptly points out: “it is white women, normatively attractive women, able-bodied women, and I want to emphasize here, young women who are looked at; the hyper-visibility associated with the to-be-looked-at-ness is not a universal female experience, and for those who do experience it, it is short lived.”²¹⁴ This short lived experience soon fades, and Kaplan concludes that this “focus on externals of the body displaces attention” to what older women can “contribute to society through their wisdom, deepened

abuse,” in Marianne Hirsch’s useful distinction. I expand the term further, bearing find ways to articulate their griefs and turn them into grievances. Loc. 479-482.

²¹⁰ Kaplan, “Trauma and Aging,” 172.

²¹¹ Kaplan, “Trauma and Aging,” 174.

²¹² Mulvey, 62-63.

²¹³ Michelle Meagher, “Against the Invisibility of Old Age: Cindy Sherman, Suzy Lake, and Martha Wilson.” *Feminist Studies*, no.1 (2014): 112.

²¹⁴ Meagher, “Against the Invisibility of Old Age,” 129.

intelligence and long and varied experiences.”²¹⁵ Similarly, following Woodward, Brooks claims that “old women” are “cultural exiles” or “cultural refuse,”²¹⁶ and Meagher argues that “in order to look at old women in new ways they need to be wrenched from cultural invisibility.”²¹⁷ These social and cultural experiences of diminishment and disposal – of violence – create a type of everyday or insidious trauma related to and as a result of aging.

In the dozen or so years since Woodward’s essay, a proliferation of older women have appeared in television, film, media, and visual culture in part due to the increased baby boomer population in western societies. Nonetheless, Ros Jennings and Hannah Grist observe that these visual media representations position older women as either “in decline or successfully aging.”²¹⁸ In other words, the representations remain at polar extremes that are limiting on the female spectrum of possible aging experiences. But what of representations of older women and aging experiences fashioned for the stage? In theatre and performance, the aged female body cannot avoid the gaze or “the look” of the audience, the spectator. By entering the “seeing place,” the spectator commits to observe and to make meaning of the aged figures, the aged body, on the stage.²¹⁹ What might it mean then when the principal character or only bodies on the stage are old?

Albee’s Three Tall Women

Originally titled *And So It Goes*, Edward Albee’s *Three Tall Women* initially appears to present a trio of not only tall but also “strong” women as the “dramatic engine” for a work that

²¹⁵ Kaplan, “Trauma and Aging,” 190.

²¹⁶ See Jodi Brooks, “Performing Aging/Performing Crisis (for Norma Desmond, Baby Jane, Margo Channing, Sister George – and Myrtle)” in *Figuring Age*, edited by Kathleen Woodward (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999), 233.

²¹⁷ Michelle Meagher, “Against the Invisibility of Old Age,” 129.

²¹⁸ Cathy McGlynn, Margaret O’Neill, Michaela Schrage-Früh, ed., *Aging Women in Literature: Reflections, Refractions, Reimaginings*, (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

²¹⁹ The Greeks termed the first auditorium “theatron” or “seeing place.”

engages issues of race, class, sex, gender, and most significantly women and age(ing). The three characters (“A,” “B,” and “C”) each portray a woman aged 92 (who claims to be 91), 52, and 26, respectively.²²⁰ A simple way to view the play is that it illustrates the feminine archetype of the maiden-mother-crone.²²¹ These archetypes support the patriarchal position that women are fulfilled by domesticity as the “angel in the house,” and once having fulfilled the role of wife and mother, they serve no productive place in society. Similar to the image of aged women in early cultures, “A”’s body is a symbol of death and reminder of man’s mortality.

Structurally, the play consists of two acts with no scene division. Act One opens in “A”’s bedroom where she “is in the armchair” in the presence of her caregiver “B” and another woman “C” sitting “on the bed-foot bench.”²²² Albee indicates that the place is “a wealthy bedroom” decorated with a “French feeling” with pastel blue, silk fabrics and a pastel floor.”²²³ In performance, both the premiere at the Vineyard and the revival at the John Golden Theatre,²²⁴ the set reflect an upper middle class lifestyle with an elegantly appointed bedroom. The text does not indicate any specific time period or location. The action of Act One centers on “C”’s visit to discuss the status of “A”’s finances as she has been forgetful about signing checks and neglectful

²²⁰ Albee, *Three Tall Women*, 5.

²²¹ Barbara Walker discusses the origins of maiden-mother-crone archetype in *The Crone: Woman of Age, Wisdom and Power*: “This many-named Goddess was the first Holy Trinity. Her three major aspects have been designated Virgin, Mother, and Crone; or, alternatively, Creator, Preserver, and Destroyer. The same trinitarian pattern can be traced in all the Goddess figures of India, Arabia, Egypt, the Middle East, Aegean and Mediterranean cultures, and among Celtic and Teutonic peoples of northern Europe. Walker, Barbara G. *The Crone Women of Age, Wisdom, and Power*. New York: HarperOne, 1988, Kindle. Loc. 311.

²²² Albee, *Three Tall Women*, 5. Albee uses “A”’s declaration of age as running joke throughout the play. By claiming the age of 91, “A”’s birth year associates her with the 20th century rather than 1899, which would associate her with an “older” time period and the previous century.

²²³ Albee, *Three Tall Women*, 4.

²²⁴ As mentioned in Chapter One, in June 2017, I viewed a video recording of the original production of *Three Tall Women* at the New York Public Library Theatre and Film on Tap archive; in June 2018, I attended the second to last performance of the revival of *Three Tall Women* at the John Golden Theatre on Broadway.

about paying bills. As the three women (whose relationship is not immediately clear) discuss new arrangements for “A”’s finances, the women also converse about health and family. The dialogue and the dramatic action comment on the aging body as in a state of decline from the loss of bladder control to loneliness to broken bones to the “loss of dignity” associated with old age.²²⁵ At ninety-two (or ninety-one), “A” embodies the traditional narrative of decline while her middle-aged care companion, “B,” and “C” (a young female attorney hired to assist “A”’s finances) view “A” as a burden. At the end of Act One, “A” appears to suffer a stroke.

At the opening of Act Two, the text indicates that “*A is propped up in the bed. (Actually, a dummy with an exact life mask of the actress playing A. . .)*.”²²⁶ In this Act, Albee deploys a unique shift in mode, character representation, and mood as the play shifts from realism to an expressionistic form where each character on the stage (“A,” “B,” and “C”) now represents the “same self” at three different life stages. The conversation among the women also shifts from lively banter with moments of physical and emotional tension to introspective conversation, reflective monologues, and direct addresses to the audience that conclude the play. As Act Two progresses, the older selves (“A” and “B”) share memories and stories with the younger self (“C”) as to what life will bring in terms of men, marriage, motherhood – and growing old. The play culminates in a visit from “A”’s estranged son and the three same selves finding a type of resolution or reconciliation of the selves (discussed more fully below). In this way, the play traces a conventional peak-and-decline narrative.

²²⁵ Albee, *Three Tall Women*, 9.

²²⁶ Albee, *Three Tall Women*, 32. In the original production, a mannequin representing “A” lays prone on “A”’s bed while the same three actors portraying “A,” “B,” and “C” remain in the room. In the 2018 Broadway production, the bed was positioned in a way that from my seat in the orchestra, no body or figure was visible in the bed. This was in part due to position of the bed and the bed’s position in relation to the full mirror backdrop (and presumably my seat in the center orchestra).

This simple two-act play that brings together three female characters at three different life stages allows me to marry theories of trauma and aging to theatre. Using *Three Tall Women* as a case study, I am able to illustrate how the play functions as an example of the master narrative of decline and how the play subverts it and can be viewed as a counter-example that offers an expanded view of the lives of older women. The fundamental concepts I bring into conversation with the play text are 1) representations older women on the stage, specifically a female character over the age of 65 who drives the dramatic action, 2) the spectrum of aging through three stages of women presented in the play, first as three different individuals (in Act One) and later as three different phases of the self over time (in Act Two), 3) Mulvey's concept of "the gaze" and Woodward's idea of "the look" and how it functions as a type of violence with resulting trauma, 4) intergenerational female interactions both as individuals and as three "same selves" (for instances of direct, everyday, and insidious trauma), and 5) the visibility/invisibility of the aged white women and the aged body to argue that while aging may result in the fragility or "brokenness" of the body, it also brings with it emotional and mental strength, endurance, resilience and a sense of survival.

Three Tall Women premiered in Vienna in 1991 and later enjoyed a Broadway run at The Vineyard in 1994, earning Albee the 1994 Pulitzer Prize for drama. In 2018, Joe Mantello directed a successful Broadway revival of the show, which garnered six Tony nominations, including Best Revival, Best Direction, and Best Performance nominations for Glenda Jackson (as "A") and Laurie Metcalf (as "B"). Critics and scholars often describe the play as a semi-autobiographical work whereby Albee "works through" his difficult relationship with his adoptive mother. However, Jackson maintains that the playwright was "quite categoric" that the play was a "not a revenge play [against his mother]," (though the actor claims she believes it

was).²²⁷ Nevertheless, as literary and age studies scholar Valerie Lipscomb points out: “focusing too much on the autobiographical elements can divert attention from the play’s statements about identity, particularly age identity.”²²⁸

With regard to that age identity, *New York Times* theatre critic Jesse Green sums up the play’s paradox, observing that it is either “a comedy about decrepitude or a tragedy about survival.”²²⁹ The play also catalogues the violence and trauma experienced by a woman as she ages physically and cognitively as well as the cumulative social and cultural losses associated with age(ing). However, by placing the oldest woman or “the oldest age” at the center, the play subverts the idea of the male “gaze” (whereby the younger female body is constructed for male consumption)²³⁰ and “the look” (whereby the aged body is viewed with dismissiveness). Here, Albee places the oldest woman – the character with most aged body – at the center for audience consumption, thereby forcing the aging individual and her body into visibility (as opposed to marginalization or erasure). The audience must either engage with an older individual as the protagonist of the central narrative and the plight of an older woman or “check out” of audience participation altogether: “A”’s life story, including her multiple and cumulative losses is fully on display. Yet, “A” becomes an endearing figure, and as Jesse Green pointed out, evokes not only sympathy and empathy but also laughter. Jackson shares that Albee once commented that “he never met anyone who liked his mother in real life, but he never met anyone who *didn’t* like her in the play. What have I done?”²³¹ Thus, despite “A”’s acerbic tongue, racism, sexism, and

²²⁷ Shilling, “Lioness in Winter,” 42-45. Jackson does not explicitly state or allude to why she thinks the play is his “revenge” play.

²²⁸ Lipscomb, *Performing Age in Modern Drama*, 130.

²²⁹ Jesse Green, “Review: Glenda Jackson Gets Her Lear Moment in ‘Three Tall Women,’” *The New York Times*, March 29, 2018.

²³⁰ Elaine Aston, *An Introduction to Feminism and Theatre* Routledge 1995. Kindle Edition.

²³¹ Shilling, “Lioness in Winter,” 42-45.

classism, the oldest character in the play commands the stage and demands the audience's attention, forcing them to see not only her physical and cognitive decline but to experience it, acknowledge it, and recognize as a condition of living a long life. "A"'s story, including experiences of direct and insidious trauma, not only evokes empathy, but serves as a type of message reinforcing negative stereotypes of age: that to age is to experience decline. At the same time, Albee's play offers an image of an older woman with a sense of humor and a story of strength, resilience, and survival.

In part, Albee accomplishes this affection for "A" by humanizing her, particularly in Act One through her relationship with "B." In the text, Albee includes notes with the dialogue, such as "placating," "comforting," "knowing," or "amused" to indicate not only tone but specifically to characterize the relationship between "A" and "B." Together the older women also take pleasure in teasing "C" about growing old. Early in the action of Act One, "A"'s physical decline is marked by memory loss, tearfulness, a broken arm (from falling), and loss of bladder control. "C" comments that "It must be awful/To begin to lose it."²³² "B" reminds her: "Oh, stop it! It's downhill from sixteen on! For all of us! ... Grow up! Do you know it? Do *you* know you're dying?"²³³ "A" and "B" use their words to taunt "C," while also simultaneously expressing their experiences of "growing old" in U.S. culture. Interestingly, in both the 1994 and 2018 Broadway productions, "B"'s attire is masculine or androgynous as well as drab in color, particularly compared to the feminine business attire worn by "C."²³⁴ The attire suggests that part of the

²³² Albee, *Three Tall Women*, 9.

²³³ Albee, *Three Tall Women*, 9.

²³⁴ In original production at The Vineyard in 1992, 64-year old Myra Carter was cast as "A" and "B" was played by 65 year old Marian Seldes ["C" was Jordan Baker (age unknown).] In the 2018 revival, 81-year old Glenda Jackson played "A" and 62-year old Laurie Metcalf was cast as "C." In the original production, Seldes wore plain dark skirt and plain short sleeve sweater in Act One. The 2018 revival, Metcalf wore dark patterned slacks, a brown cardigan, and sneakers.

“downhill slide” as a woman ages includes the loss of femininity and loss of (hetero)sexual allure and sexuality associated with the post-menopausal body and that she’s bought into that narrative.

A few moments later, “B” helps “A” to her chair and the following exchange takes place that comments further on “A”’s physical decline and the sense of burden, yet the sense of a care and connection between “A” and “B”:

C: What a production.

B: You haven’t seen anything.

C: I bet!

A: *(To B)* You can’t just leave me in there like that. What if I fell? What if I died?

B: *(Considers it; calm.)* Well ... if you fell I’d either hear you or you’d raise a racket, and if you died what would it matter?

A: *(Pause; then she laughs; true enjoyment.)* You can say that again.
(Amused at seeing C not amused.) What’s the matter with you?

C: There’s *nothing* the matter with me.

B: *(Sour smile).* Well ...you just *wait*.²³⁵

The two older women “A” and “B” “gang up” on “C” and the dialogue reads as rather harsh and abrasive, yet the stage directions indicate that “A” enjoys the banter “greatly.”²³⁶ In performance, the tone and playfulness suggest that the two older women share knowledge with the younger

In both productions, the women change attire to more a feminine yet modest dress, indicating social class status but not sexualized in any way.

²³⁵ Albee, *Three Tall Women*, 11.

²³⁶ Albee, *Three Tall Women*, 11.

one of what lays ahead, such as bodily decline, relationships with men, sex, and caring for dying family members. This exchange might read as a type of verbal assault (or verbal bullying) whereby the older women participate in a type of insidious trauma instilling ageism and “age culture” attitudes. Yet in both the playwright’s notes and in performance, the humor injected into the dialogue together with knowing glances between actors create a sense that this exchange is a type of initiation into a private women’s club about coping with the ravages of time.²³⁷ This intergenerational gathering of women in “A”’s bedroom is a type of community that harkens back to early cultures and the idea of female spaces, such as the “child-bed,” laundry, market, and kitchen where women gathered together to share their wisdom.²³⁸

Again, in reference to what older women convey to younger women about what to expect from life, “A” reminisces that it was her mother who taught her to “be careful, she said; they all want something; she taught me what to expect...”²³⁹ “A” recounts that her family was “poor” and “We didn’t have a lot, and being a girl wasn’t easy. We knew we’d have to make our own way.”²⁴⁰ Periodically throughout the play, “B” and “C” describe “A” as being “made of money” and “A” repeatedly comments on her rise in class after marriage. Thus, part of making her “own way” consisted of a series of “transactions,” including marrying well to attain wealth and social status: “I wasn’t rich until I got married . . . We had horses! . . . we were in the championships; . .

²³⁷ Albee, *Three Tall Women*, 11.

²³⁸ Feminist novelist Marina Warner discusses how in early cultures, patriarchal religions (such as Christianity) “negated the woman’s role,” by “erasing the Goddess,” marginalizing motherhood, and usurping the crone’s social position; “old women became enemy of God and man . . . Printed broadcast sheets warning against allowing women to gather together and allowing older women to share their wisdom with younger women in places only women gathered: “at the childbed,” in the laundry, at the market, and in the kitchen. Marina Warner, *From the Beast to the Blonde*, (New York: Farrar Straus & Giroux, 1990), 40-41.

²³⁹ Albee, *Three Tall Women*, 12.

²⁴⁰ Albee, *Three Tall Women*, 12, 14.

.They all knew me; we were famous; we had a famous stable.”²⁴¹ For “A,” the expectation was that women use their sexual allure as power in exchange for financial security. Indeed, the idea of love and the institution of marriage are reduced to an economic transaction of sex in exchange for a piece of jewelry in a “climatic” scene near the close of Act One. On the page, the scene reads cold in its description of a husband’s desire for oral sex in exchange for gifting his wife a new diamond bracelet. However, in both the original and 2018 productions, this provocative moment captures the audience’s attention while also evoking empathy for “A.” It illustrates that at 92 years old, she remains adept at using her sexuality as power while holding the audience captive as she recounts this erotic memory. In both the initial production and the 2018 revival, “A” delivers this monologue seated with a regal posture in her dressing table chair as if she is holding court with her ladies in waiting. Sitting in the orchestra for the 2018 revival, I noted the power in Jackson’s delivery and the delightful glisten in her eyes knowing the power she held in this moment of storytelling. Yet, the disappointment in “A”’s admission that she could not or would not perform the sex act her husband desired is equally palpable on the page and in performance as “A” begins to weep.

As this monologue ends, it conveys the cumulative losses: loss of her husband, loss of love and companionship, loss of sexuality, loss of fulfillment of desire, and the loss of touch. “B” demonstrates care as she assists “A” into a bed and offers words of support and comfort. Here, “A” acts more childlike and per Albee’s notes should use a “(*Tiny voice*)”; she also verbalizes a reflection saying, “The things we’re able to do and the things we’re *not*.”²⁴² This childlike and needy moment triggers the memory of additional losses, particularly the loss of the relationship with her son.

²⁴¹ Albee, *Three Tall Women*, 13.

²⁴² Albee, *Three Tall Women*, 31.

As Act One approaches its conclusion, “B” continues to console “A” as she reminisces about moments from her past, including her physical care of loved ones as they approached death. She recalls:

(Rambling again) There’s so much holding on; fighting for every thing. . . *I* had to do *everything*. Tell him how handsome he was, clean up his blood. Everything came on *me*. Sis being that way, . . . falling . . . falling down the way she did. Mother coming to stay, to live with us; he said she could; where else could she go? Did we like each other even? At the end? Not at the end, not when she hated me. I’m helpless, she . . . she screamed; I hate you! She stank; her room stank; she stank; I hate you, she screamed at me. I think they all hated me because I was strong, because I *had* to be.²⁴³

In Jackson’s performance, this final monologue of Act One ends with “A” physically collapsing into her caretaker’s arms illustrating the physical and emotional breakdown after years of accumulated losses. This last emotionally charged memory borders on rage rather than rambling, however, as “A” describes her aging mother’s final days of life. Whether or not “A” resented the “burden” of caring for mother is left to the audience to decide, yet the memory of caring for her dying husband, her sick sister, and her aged mother has left an undeniable traumatic mark and reminder of the vulnerability, the decline, and the decay of those she loved. As “A” articulates this memory and creates an image of watching and caring for the person who gave her life slowly depart, those who witness it, specifically the younger women (“B” and “C”), should recall “A”’s earlier words about her mother who “taught her what to expect.”²⁴⁴ The lesson in this

²⁴³ Albee, *Three Tall Women*, 31.

²⁴⁴ Albee, *Three Tall Women*, 31

moment is not about men or marriage but of aging as they witness the scene before them: a traumatic cycle of life and death that falls primarily to women.

Here, I am reminded of Cvetkovich's idea that "traumatic events refract outward to produce all kinds of affective responses not just clinical symptoms" and of trauma as a "collective experience that generates collective responses."²⁴⁵ In this moment of "A"'s physical collapse at the close of Act One, the younger women witness "A"'s experience of aging – the decline of both the mind and the body – and the multiple and cumulative traumatic losses. In life, the audience also witnesses this same scene of an older woman's mental and physical decline, her frailty, and her vulnerability, and I am also reminded of Bechtel's analysis of Troika Ranch's *loopdiver* performance discussed in Chapter One. He theorized that the "bodies of trauma onstage impact the bodies in the audience," meaning that the embodied trauma was "shared" with the audience who experienced "an emotional affect connected with the observed movement."²⁴⁶ Extending this idea to *Three Tall Women*, one could argue that the younger female characters are traumatized by witnessing "A"'s cognitive and bodily decline over the course of Act One, but so might be the audience in their experience of witnessing "A"'s losses and decline. For example, the audience for the performance I attended in 2018 reacted with appropriate laughter at certain moments of the play, but I also sensed they reacted more deeply to the emotionally heavier moments. The people seated to my left and right were strangers, yet both sought to comment at how moved they were at particular moments in the show as well as after the performance. I also observed tearfulness and noted comments that indicated a connectedness or empathy for "A." In these moments, I cannot help but think that Bechtel's hypothesis that experiencing of embodied enactments of trauma through live performance "might enlarge our

²⁴⁵ Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feeling*, 19.

²⁴⁶ Bechtel, "The Body of Trauma," 84.

empathic capacity.”²⁴⁷ Personally, I was struck by my different responses to watching the Vineyard Theatre’s original production on video and the live performance at the Golden Theatre a year later. I found that watching the video performance of the final “collapse” of “A” in Act One evoked sympathy. However, I found witnessing that same moment live in performance seated in the theatre was a more visceral moment. For one, my proximity to the stage was close enough not just to witness the collapse of the body but also to hear the collapse of the body on the stage. This live witnessing of the breakdown of the body is emotionally disturbing but also establishes the powerful effects of theatre. The action brings the audience to the climatic moment not to only witness but hear and feel “A”’s mental, emotional, and physical collapse. We have also witnessed her flaws, her humor, and her strength; thus, instead of just seeing an aged body in decline, we see her complexity as an individual who is worthy of pity but also strong, defiant, sassy, bitter, and beautiful.

As mentioned earlier, at the rise of Act Two, the action continues in “A”’s bedroom, yet it is not immediately clear what has transpired since the close of Act One. The text notes state: “*A is propped up in bed. (Actually, a dummy with an exact life mask of the actress play A; same costume as A’s in Act One.)*”²⁴⁸ “B” and “C” are present and the notes indicate that they are dressed differently than in Act One. The change in attire functions to indicate a shift in time since the close of Act One, yet no specific reference is made to whether hours, days, or years

²⁴⁷ Bechtel, “The Body of Trauma,” 84.

²⁴⁸ Albee, *Three Tall Women*, 32. In the original production, “the dummy” was clearly propped in the bed and visible to the audience. In the 2018 revival, director Joe Mantello explains that he used a live actor rather than a “dummy”; however, her body was not visible to all audience members. For example, from my fifth row center seat in the orchestra, the bed appeared empty. Mantello acknowledged this in an interview with Greg Evans in “Broadway’s Joe Mantello Talks ‘Three Tall Women’, ‘Boys In The Band’, Even ‘Angels In America’ As Only He Can – Tony Watch,” *deadline.com*, May 23, 2018. <https://deadline.com/2018/05/tony-awards-broadway-joe-mantello-three-tall-women-boys-in-the-band-angels-in-america-1202395746/>.

have passed (see dialogue below). In both the original production and the revival, “B” was dressed in a more feminine style than in Act One: her buttoned up navy blue business suit was exchanged for a flowing dress that was softer in color and texture. Similar to the opening of Act One, the relationship between the women is not immediately apparent; however, “B” and “C” converse about “A”’s condition as if they are familiar with one another:

B. (*General*) No change.

C. (*Wistful*) No?

B. That’s the way it goes.

C. Yes?

B. (*Grim.*) Something to look forward to. (*No response from C. Continued.*) No?

C. (*Hard*) I don’t want to talk about it; I don’t want to think about it. Let me alone.

B. (*Sharp*) It is worth thinking about – even at *your* age.

C. Let me *alone!*²⁴⁹

Here the older “B” pushes “C” to confront the inevitability of aging and death, yet “C” protests, wishing not even to think about it let alone discuss it. “B” nudges further: “It’s got to be *some* way . . . stroke, cancer, . . .”²⁵⁰ pushing the younger “C” to consider future mental and physical decline. As “C” looks to “A,” she remarks, “I’ll do a will; I’ll do some paper won’t let me go on if I get like that.”²⁵¹ This scene and exchange between “B” and “C” illustrates direct and insidious trauma for both of them as they witness “A”’s aged, infirm, and presumably dying body. In witnessing “A”’s condition, they must face the deterioration and end of life. For some people,

²⁴⁹ Albee, *Three Tall Women*, 32.

²⁵⁰ Albee, *Three Tall Women*, 32.

²⁵¹ Albee, *Three Tall Women*, 33.

witnessing death is a type of trauma. As a form of insidious trauma, they witness the experience of the everyday life for women as they age.

At this point, the actress playing “A” “enters the scene and the notes indicate “(*A is dressed in a lovely lavender dress...*)” and “(*She is fully rational during this Act. B and C are not surprised to see her.*)”²⁵² The dialogue clarifies that the three characters on the stage are, in fact, the same person at three different life stages (“C” is the 26 year old “A,” “B” the 52 year old “A,” and “A” is “A” at 92). The three women converse and recall memories of the younger self. Woodward’s idea of hyper-visibility and invisibility comes into focus when “C” is forced to face her future self as the aged, disabled, nearer-to-death body in the bed. As she points to “A”’s body lying in the bed, she declares: “I will not become . . . *that!*”²⁵³ In performance, “C” then points to the 52-year old “B” and exclaims: “Nor will I become *this!*”²⁵⁴ The stage directions indicate how the other actors should react to “C”’s declaration, noting that “B hoots” and “A shakes her head” (knowing her fate)” in response.²⁵⁵ “C” “comes down front” to address the audience as she points to the bed: “I *won’t*. I *know* I *won’t* – *that’s* what I mean. That . . . (*Points to A*) . . . *thing* there? I’ll never be like that. *Nobody* could.”²⁵⁶ “C”’s choice of the terms “this” or “that” reduces the “young old” and “old” from person to pronoun. “C”’s violent declaration and her use of the pronoun diminishes and dismisses the person to a “thing” and rails against aging and the aging body. “C” reduces the aged person to an object of derision and revulsion. In this singular moment, the younger self commits an act of violence against the future self and is traumatized by the aged self.

²⁵² Albee, *Three Tall Women*, 33.

²⁵³ Albee, *Three Tall Women*, 34.

²⁵⁴ Albee, *Three Tall Women*, 34.

²⁵⁵ Albee, *Three Tall Women*, 34.

²⁵⁶ Albee, *Three Tall Women*, 34. In the original production, “C” clearly points to the mannequin propped in the bed. In the 2018 revival, “C” gestured to the bed.

This unique interaction of three same selves at different life stages as they observe the aged self in a state of stasis (at or near the end of life) dramatizes the “disruption” of the continuity of the self and the inability of the mind and body to reconcile trauma. As Bechtel argues, trauma is an embodied experience that keeps an individual in a constant state of hyper-arousal; this hyper-arousal thwarts the “cognitive assimilation of the [traumatic] experience, producing an infernal loop of mind and body -- the former attempting to claim the experience, the latter responding ever more defensively to these attempts.”²⁵⁷ The body, as “the dominant signifier of age,” experiences “disruption” as part of the biological process of aging.²⁵⁸ The mind continues to attempt to “claim the experience” of aging (traumatic and otherwise), not necessarily because it is in a constant state of hyper-arousal, but because the body has already aged further in time or progressed in the aging process. Krystal explains this phenomenon when sharing a comment from one of his patients: “The past is always catching up to the present in my mind.”²⁵⁹ In Act Two, “A”, “B,” and “C” embody this “disruption” by having three different bodies on the stage at the same time in conversation with each other physically, yet mentally unable to reconcile themselves past or future. Thus, part of the trauma of aging (perhaps if we had to identify a “wound”) is that people remain in a transitory state or in a continual “looping” of the aging mind attempting to reconcile itself with the body’s aging experience.

Immediately following, “C” – now representing the youthful “A” – recalls that as a young woman, she worked as a department store “mannequin” (i.e., live model) and pleasantly, perhaps slightly narcissistically, she recalls: “we know there are people looking at us, studying

²⁵⁷ Bechtel, “The Body of Trauma,” 77.

²⁵⁸ Woodward, *Discontents*, 10.

²⁵⁹ Krystal, “Trauma and Aging,” 82.

us, and we smile, and we . . . well, I suppose we flirt a little with the men who are doing it – the husbands, or whatever.”²⁶⁰ Here, all three women clearly enjoy the pleasurable memory of “being looked-at-ness” as if to dismiss or avoid confronting the image of the aged body in their presence. “C” remembers aloud: “We wear our beautiful evening gowns, and parade about, and we know there are people looking at us, studying us, as we smile and I suppose we flirt a little . . .”²⁶¹ Here, “C” not only dismisses “A” with her words, but in performance with “the look.” As “C” denies the future self she immediately shifts to the image of the younger self enjoying “the gaze” as a department store model. The two moments in juxtaposition with each other highlight the cultural complicity as it offers positive reinforcement of the desirable gaze and the negative association of the dismissive “look.”²⁶² The 52-year-old “B” makes the accusation of cultural complicity clear:

Twenty-six to fifty two? Double it? Double your pleasure, double your fun? Try *this*. Try *this* on for size. They lie to you. You’re growing up and they go out of their way to hedge you, to qualify, to . . . evade; to avoid – to *lie*. Never tell it how it is – how it’s going to be – . . . God, if they did the streets’d be littered with adolescent corpses! Maybe it’s better they don’t.

Parents, teachers, all the others. You *lie* to us.²⁶³

Here, “B” addresses the audience and the line suggests their complicity in the social construction

²⁶⁰ Albee, *Three Tall Women*, 35.

²⁶¹ Albee, *Three Tall Women*, 35.

²⁶² See Chapter One (above) for a discussion of the desirable gaze in contrast to the dismissiveness of “the look.” In short, Woodward’s idea of “the look” holds that writers fashion younger female characters to fulfill the “male gaze,” while older characters encounter “the look of youthful disdain” -- that is, the non-verbal cultural cue that carries with it the “tendency to degrade” and “reduce an older person to the prejudicial category of old age.”

²⁶³ Albee, *Three Tall Women*, 45.

of age. “B” then shifts to address “A” and “C” and recounts the multiple and cumulative losses introduced in Act One: the disappointments in her marriage, the deteriorating relationship with her mother-in-law, the worry for her sister, and the most poignant, the lost relationship with her son.

For the 2018 Broadway revival, Miriam Buether’s set design was more complex than the original production in that it was divided in multiple levels: the downstage room, a layer of Plexiglass, and the room in reverse (behind the Plexiglass) and then the mirror that covered the entire back of the set (the full width and height).²⁶⁴ The duplication and multiple reflections transformed “A”’s elegant bedroom from Act One into what some labeled a “magic trick” and others described as “something not of this earth” for Act Two.²⁶⁵ As a design element, I found that the mirror contributed to the story telling in two ways. First, it functioned as a metaphor of self-reflection or life review (as the second act somewhat functions as “A”’s “memory play”²⁶⁶). Second, it reinforced the idea of the cultural construction of age by reflecting the audience’s image back on itself. For example, near the end of Act Two, as the three “same selves” recognize their respective life stage and the joys as well as challenges associated with each “age,” the entire mirror was slightly raised and the top tilted forward (so that at the top the mirror was angled forward). This positioning of the mirror caused the audience to see their own reflections in the mirror as well as multiple “versions” of each character. The mirror also reinforced the idea of Bechtel’s “looping” when he talks about how embodied trauma is shared with the audience who

²⁶⁴ Evans, Greg. “Broadway’s Joe Mantello Talks ‘Three Tall Women’, ‘Boys In The Band’, and Angels In America’ As Only He Can – Tony Watch,” *deadline.com*, May 23, 2018.

²⁶⁵ Evans, “Broadway’s Joe Mantello Talks ‘Three Tall Women’, ‘Boys In The Band’, and Angels In America’ As Only He Can – Tony Watch.”

²⁶⁶ For a full discussion of *Three Tall Women* as a memory play, see Valerie Lipscomb, “The Continuum of Age: Performing Identity over the Life Course,” *Performing Age in Modern Drama*, (Palgrave-Macmillan, 2016), 129-139.

experience “an emotional affect connected with the observed movement” to create empathy.²⁶⁷ With the theatrical gaze cast back upon the audience, this ephemeral experience between the action on the stage and the affect on the audience is what Albee did not count – that theatre’s capacity to evoke empathy was more powerful than his disdain for “A.”

Three Tall Women evokes an era and social class where feminine success was to marry well. At all stages of life, “A” upheld the patriarchal expectations as a maiden, a mother, and was ultimately silenced as a crone, living alone with a caretaker visited by a financial planner. “A”’s story of decline supports the patriarchal paradigm that expects older people, particularly older women to become invisible and silent.²⁶⁸ The play dramatizes “A”’s cognitive and physical decline as well as illustrating the marginalization and oppression women fear and often experience as they age. As a decline narrative, *Three Tall Woman* supports the patriarchal paradigm that situates aging as only in opposition to youth and emphasizes the social-cultural fixation of “the gaze” where youth is prioritized over age. Nonetheless, the play also serves as a counter-example in that the aging female bodies (“A” and “B”) are not erased or de-humanized by the “gaze” or the “look” or the younger self on the stage. In fact, the oldest character in the play drives the dramatic action. From the first line of the play where “A” announces, “I’m ninety-one” to the play’s closing monologue where she addresses the audience to declare that “Coming to the end of it,” is the “happiest time,” “A” forces the audience to see and hear the aged woman.²⁶⁹ As the play concludes, “A” delivers the final lines and “A” who joins all the selves together: “(...looks to C and B, puts her hands out and takes theirs).”²⁷⁰ In this final

²⁶⁷ Bechtel, “The Body of Trauma,” 84.

²⁶⁸ Kathleen Woodward, “Against Wisdom: the Social Politics of Anger and Ageing,” *Cultural Critique*, 51, Spring 2002, 187.

²⁶⁹ Albee, *Three Tall Women*, 5, 54.

²⁷⁰ Albee, *Three Tall Women*, 55.

image, “A” literally and figuratively moves the image of the aging female body from the margins to the center. The aged female body is in full view with a focused attention on the older woman’s story, her life, and her aged body. Thus, as an “age narrative” – and not solely one of decline – *Three Tall Women* makes visible the aged body and the complex person who will not be dismissed, but will be seen and heard. In this final moment, the play conveys the importance of reconciliation, connectedness between women of all ages, and human dignity.

CHAPTER THREE

ESCAPING INVISIBILITY: OLDER WOMEN FRONT AND CENTER IN PAULA VOGEL'S *THE OLDEST PROFESSION*

A feminist approach to anything means paying attention to women. It means paying attention when women appear as characters and noticing when they do not. It means making some "invisible" mechanisms visible and pointing out, when necessary, that while the emperor has no clothes, the empress has no body . . .
-- Gayle Austin, *Feminist Theories for Dramatic Criticism*²⁷¹

Your body is your house. . . . It's you in that body; you're the only one there. Make it a good place to be. Your body is the only real gift you get.
--Beatrix Ost, writer and artist, from "Three Women on What They've Learned in Their 70+ Years of Life"²⁷²

"Can you remember one major female character from any play you saw this year?" asks Gayle Austin in her 1986 essay titled "Women/Text/Theatre."²⁷³ Austin's essay, in part, reports on the first (and only) Professional Older Women's Theatre Festival in the spring of 1985. Conceived by theatre artist Elsa Rael, the festival comprised original works written by women featuring "older women" as the principal characters.²⁷⁴ In her analysis of the event, Austin noted that "the representation of women's experience on the stage needs more than a trickle to fill it,

²⁷¹ Gayle Austin, "Women/Text/Theatre," *Performing Arts Journal*, 9 Nos 2&3, 185-190.

²⁷² Annah Stretton, "3 Women and What They Learned in 70+ Years of Life," June 6, 2017. <https://www.annahstretton.co.nz/blogs/fashion/3-women-on-what-they-ve-learned-in-their-70-years-of-life>

²⁷³ Austin, "Women/Text/Theatre," 185-190.

²⁷⁴ Motivated by the lack of roles for older women and her observation that "something happens to women in the theatre as they slip past 40 and slide toward 65," Rael used funds from a CAPS grant and the support of Joe Papp and The Public to conceive a playwriting contest to create roles for older women. The result was a "three week celebration of women over 50 in the world of theatre," involving theatre artists, such as Estelle Parsons, Gretchen Cryer, Carol Hall, and Mary Alice. Of the event, Austin pointed out that: "The undeniable strength of the event was in the performances of the actresses, the desire of the audience to see plays about older women, and the excitement created by the *idea* of the festival." Despite the successful festival and one play that went on to full production, the theatre community offered little support to continue the effort. Austin, "Women/Text/Theatre," 185-190.

plays need to go more into the real issues of our lives.”²⁷⁵ Austin’s essay also serves as a call to action for female playwrights when she writes: “there were more women playwrights on Broadway at the turn of the century” than in the 1980s, and while those women were “writing the same type of forgettable hack plays as their male counterparts . . . they were earning a lot of money for their trouble. Today’s women on Broadway are making neither money nor much of an impact.”²⁷⁶ Another century has turned and gender parity in theatre remains an issue.

Nonetheless, for the women of the 1980s as well as today, the mission – the hope – remains that if opportunities open for women to write for women, the images of women, particularly older women might expand beyond the stereotypes. The next two chapters discuss plays written by women that only feature female characters who are over sixty years of age and move beyond the negative stereotypes of aging. What might it mean when the dramatic action is driven by the aged female figure? Or when the principal character(s) or only bodies on the stage are old?

As discussed in Chapter Two, in Albee’s *Three Tall Women* the oldest of three female characters – the 92 year old “A” – drives the action forward. While the play at its worst illustrates a traditional decline narrative of age or at its best serves as an example of Robert N. Butler’s concept of “life review,” I argued that it can also be read as another type of age narrative in that it depicts “trauma and aging” while also offering a counter-example of resistance and resilience (i.e., a potentially positive, even radical result).²⁷⁷ However, this reading or reception is partly undercut or complicated by youth versus age images. The play visually reinforces the young/old binary in that the three characters are set in opposition to each other: the 26 year old “C” is juxtaposed with the 52 year old “B” as well as the 92 year old “A,” and the 52 year old

²⁷⁵ Austin, “Women/Text/Theatre,” 190.

²⁷⁶ Austin, “Women/Text/Theatre,” 185.

²⁷⁷ Lipscomb, *Performing Age in Modern Drama*, 129.

“B” is also set in contrast to the 92 year old “A.” As a result, the young/old and young-old/older-old binary remains at the forefront and the spectator cannot avoid visual comparisons between the opposing images of “youth” and those aged past it. “A” cannot escape comparisons to both younger women and “B” cannot escape comparison to the much younger “C.” The play does, however, offer an older female figure driving the dramatic action and places older female figures at the center (rather than the margins).

In this chapter and the next, I focus on plays where all of the characters are older women within a few years of each other in chronological age thereby removing any contrast or comparison to younger women or youthful bodies. As a result, the aging female figure is isolated and brought into focus, creating a “visibility” of what is otherwise and elsewhere marginalized, dismissed, or by some deemed “invisible.” Are the aged figures subjected to the dismissive “look” or are they empowered by subjectivity? What does the image of the aged female body convey when placed front and center on the stage? How might Vogel’s work contribute to expanded images of older women, their material conditions, and the life stories of women and aging?

Vogel’s *The Oldest Profession*

Written ten years prior to Albee’s *Three Tall Women*, *The Oldest Profession* (1981/2004) is one of Paula Vogel’s earliest plays. It follows the final years in the lives of five older prostitutes living and working in New York City’s Upper West Side during the Reagan era. The women, who range in age from 72 to 83, struggle with a deteriorating business because many of their clients are dying and younger prostitutes are cutting in on their market.²⁷⁸ Cultural shifts in their neighborhood create increased rent and an influx of “yuppies,” forcing out many of their

²⁷⁸ Paula Vogel, “The Oldest Profession,” *The Baltimore and Other Plays*, 127.

old clients. The women also experience changes in their bodies, such as failing mental capacities and reduced stamina. As with Albee's "A" in *Three Tall Women*, all of these "declines," from the financial to the mental to the physical fall within the conventions of decline narratives.

The Oldest Profession begins on "A sunny day in October one week before the election of Ronald Reagan" and spans a three-year period of time to comment on the politics of Reagan's America and Mayor Edward Koch's New York City.²⁷⁹ The action of the play oscillates between the women sitting on a "long bench" located at 72nd and Broadway (Vogel labels these scenes or sections as "episodes") and dance interludes, which mark four of the women's deaths. Having relocated from the fictional Storyville, the women have enjoyed a rather lucrative business in New York City over the course of fifty years.²⁸⁰ American studies and Vogel scholar Joanna Mansbridge describes the play as "equal parts Beckett, vaudeville, and *Golden Girls*" and points to its significance as a work that "positions women as active citizens and central shapers of American culture."²⁸¹ The play is also one of Vogel's "political exploration[s]," commenting on the depreciating currency of women's bodies and the politics of the period while simultaneously humanizing prostitutes beyond being workers in a service industry.²⁸²

In this chapter I use *The Oldest Profession* as a case study to examine older female figures experiencing "trauma and aging" in a specific social-cultural-political moment.²⁸³ The

²⁷⁹ Vogel, *The Oldest Profession*, 6-7.

²⁸⁰ Historic Storyville, Louisiana was the "red light" district of New Orleans and the "hot bed" of jazz music in the late 19th and early 20th century. "Storyville, Louisiana," *Atlas Obscura*, accessed April 29, 2019. <https://www.atlasobscura.com/places/storyville>

²⁸¹ Joanna Mansbridge, *Paula Vogel. Michigan Modern Dramatists Series* (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 2014), 92.

²⁸² David Rooney, "The Oldest Profession," *Variety*. Sept 26 2004.

²⁸³ Vogel specifically sets *The Oldest Profession* in early "Reagan America" (1980 to 1983); Churchill does not specifically set the time period for *Escaped Alone*, but from the content of character's discussions, the time period pre-dates the UK's vote on Brexit and post-dates George W. Bush and pre-Donald Trump.

play challenges the “invisibility” of the aging female figure to make it visible. This visibility disrupts Woodward’s idea of “the look,” which holds that writers fashion younger female characters to fulfill the “male gaze,”²⁸⁴ while older characters encounter “the look of youthful disdain” – that is, the non-verbal cultural cue that carries with it the “tendency to degrade” and “reduce an older person to the prejudicial category of old age.”²⁸⁵ This visibility also exposes the material conditions women face as they age, particularly those that were occurring in the “new socially and fiscally conservative administration” of the Reagan era and continue today.²⁸⁶ I consider the violence and trauma associated with the individual experience of the aging body, the violence²⁸⁷ and trauma experienced as a result of a society that not only marginalizes, but dehumanizes and often “disposes” of its aged members as “cultural refuse.”²⁸⁸ I also look to this work as one that pushes back against the traditional decline narrative of age to create an “age narrative” with a fuller, more expansive view of the vista of “old age.” In this chapter, the fundamental concepts that I bring into conversation with the play text are representations of older women on the stage, specifically female characters over the age of 65 who drive the dramatic action; the subversion of (or escape from) the decline narrative of age to offer a story that illustrates older women whose image (literally and figuratively) as “cultural refuse” pushes back against the narrative of decline to offer a view of older women as “cultural treasures” or cultural

²⁸⁴ Mulvey’s concept of the “gaze” and that “to-be-looked-at-ness” is “short-lived” because it is limited to younger women (as argued by Michelle Meagher and discussed in Chapter 2).

²⁸⁵ Woodward, “Performing Age; Performing Gender,” 164.

²⁸⁶ Linden, “Seducing the Audience: Politics in the Plays of Paula Vogel,” 235.

²⁸⁷ “Violence” includes neglect (by others and self-neglect), physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional and psychological abuse (including marginalization and infantilization), financial abuse and exploitation. See United Nations. Division of Social Policy and Development. Department of Economic and Social Affairs. *Neglect, Abuse, and Violence Against Older Women*. New York, NY: United Nations. 2013.

²⁸⁸ For a discussion of older women as “cultural refuse,” see Chapter One and Jodi Brooks, “Performing Aging/Performing Crisis (for Norma Desmond, Baby Jane, Margo Channing, Sister George – and Myrtle)” 233.

repositories²⁸⁹; the escape from Mulvey's concept of "the gaze" and Woodward's idea of "the look" and how the play uses dance to re-center the aged body as desiring; and the visibility/invisibility of the aged white women and the aged body to argue that while aging may result in the fragility of the body, it also brings with it emotional and mental strength, endurance, resilience and a sense of survival.

Although Vogel wrote *The Oldest Profession* in response to the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980, the play's first full production in the United States did not occur until September 2004.²⁹⁰ Prior to its U.S. premiere at New York's Signature Theatre, Manhattan's Hudson Guild staged a reading in 1981 and The Theatre Network in Edmonton, Canada, fully produced the play in 1988. Mansbridge argues that this gap or delay in its U.S. production was due in part to mainstream theatre trends of the 1980s that focused on realism and preferred to maintain theatre conventions. According to Mansbridge, those conventions created productions that were primarily "deeply conservative . . . white, heteronormative, and masculine."²⁹¹ Identity politics of the 1990s brought about a shift in theatre productions, and plays that fell "outside the universal" drew interest from theater makers.²⁹² To that end, New York City's Signature Theatre produced a season of Vogel's plays in 2004-05, beginning with *The Oldest Profession*. The production did not meet with the same level of critical acclaim as Vogel's *How I*

²⁸⁹ Brooks, "Performing Aging/Performing Crisis," 233.

²⁹⁰ Linden. "Seducing the Audience: Politics in the Plays of Paula Vogel," 234.

²⁹¹ Mansbridge, *Paula Vogel*, 12.

²⁹² In *Paula Vogel*, Mansbridge explains what was occurring in theatre history: Identity politics of the 1990s together with "an intellectual climate of post-structuralist theories of gender, sexuality, and embodiment" generated interest in plays such as Vogel's *How I Learned to Drive*, Kushner's *Angels in America*, and George C. Wolfe's *The Colored Museum* to name but a few. Mansbridge, 12.

Learned to Drive.²⁹³ For example, *Theatre Mania*'s David Finkle claimed it did not amount to more than a play that says, "Old hookers never die; they just go to a cathouse in the sky."²⁹⁴ On the other hand, *Variety*'s David Rooney found the show had more depth, pointing out that the work acknowledged the "increase in poverty and homelessness during a political period that produced as many down-and-outs as it did billionaires."²⁹⁵ From my view, the play is more than a commentary on Reagan's America and a more complex narrative than hookers en route to the hereafter.

In *The Oldest Profession*, Vogel avoids stereotypes of age and creates five individualized characters that emphasize each woman's role within the community, her subjectivity, and her ability to transcend age by using the physicality of the aged body – making each woman fully visible – rather than marginalizing or dismissing her. Vogel accomplishes this visibility by focusing attention on the older female figure on the stage. The Signature Theatre's Broadway production starred Priscilla Lopez, Marylouise Burke, Katherine Helmond, Carlin Glynn, and Joyce Van Patten who were all between the ages of 56 and 75 while performing in the production.²⁹⁶ Vogel also focused attention on the aged female figure by allowing her to perform in multiple ways: the women perform as businesswomen; their bodies perform sexually as they continue to service clients; their bodies perform up to their deaths, refuting/dispelling the myth that to grow old only means a life of weakness, frailty, depression, and dependency.

²⁹³ *How I Learned to Drive* was written in 1997 and successfully produced at the end of decade making "Vogel an important voice in American theatre." *The Oldest Profession* was written in 1991 but not produced on Broadway until The Signature Theatre's 2004-2005 season featuring Vogel's work. Mansbridge, 13.

²⁹⁴ David Finkle, "The Oldest Profession," *Theatre Mania*, Sept. 27, 2004.

²⁹⁵ David Rooney, "The Oldest Profession," *Variety*. Sept 26 2004.

²⁹⁶ At the time of the Signature Theatre production Priscilla Lopez (Edna) was 56, Marylouise Burke (Vera) was 63, Katherine Helmond (Mae) was 75, Carlin Glynn (Lillian) was 65, and Joyce Van Patten (Ursula) was 70.

The madam of the group, Mae, is a “self-made woman” who easily manages men – and women – but also “looks after her girls,” creating this business community.²⁹⁷ Positioned as her business replacement, Ursula conveys determination and a belief in “rules, merit promotion and supply-side economics.”²⁹⁸ Lillian, “the rose of the stable” views their work as a “public service” and operates as a type of mediator between Mae and Ursula who hold contrasting views for the future of their business.²⁹⁹ The “good time girl” Edna and the youngest Vera, who some might describe as timid or vulnerable, round out “the stable” of five and view their contribution to the community as “labor.”³⁰⁰ The women are brassy and bawdy, warm and witty, and caring and cared for. They are all, in Vogel’s words, “vibrant and sexy.”³⁰¹ Vogel sets this up from the opening scene; for example, for ten years Vera has shared her weekly story about eating fish on Fridays while Ursula teases her:

VERA: And so last night I thought a bit of fish would be nice for supper. . .
I just sautéed it on each side until it flaked with a fork and then just
squeezed lemon and parsley over it – and I tell you, it melted in my
mouth. Just melted.

URSULA: Last night was Friday.

VERA: Why, yes, it was.

URSULA: The Pope says you don’t have to eat fish on Friday. For the past
ten years you don’t have to eat fish on Friday, Vera. . . .Try not to

²⁹⁷ Vogel, *The Oldest Profession*, 6.

²⁹⁸ Vogel, *The Oldest Profession*, 6.

²⁹⁹ Vogel, *The Oldest Profession*, 6.

³⁰⁰ Vogel, *The Oldest Profession*, 6.

³⁰¹ Vogel, *The Oldest Profession*, 6.

tell us in detail what you ate for dinner the night before. With or
with out your teeth in.³⁰²

The women then shift to chide Ursula about her habit of collecting restaurant napkins rather than buying her own, and when Mae arrives, looking tired from the night before, the women discuss Edna's "hundred-dollar night" as part of an old client's birthday surprise party – and how Edna's night ended in police custody.³⁰³ Later, when Edna joins them, Ursula again teases: "I know it's not your first time in handcuffs."³⁰⁴ Thus, Vogel does not define these older female figures by domestic space, traditional gender roles (as mothers or grandmothers), or stereotypes of age or aging bodies in physical or mental decline. In fact, their bodies still "work" as well as remain desired and desiring until their death.

The women, who are similar in age to the newly elected 69-year-old Ronald Reagan, understand their market value and how to make adjustments to their business to accommodate decline.³⁰⁵ With over 50 years of experience in their profession, the women know how take care of themselves and each other; they work harder, longer, and serve more clients to keep their business profitable. For example, near the end of Act One, Ursula complains to Mae that "we're not going to stay in the Life, Mae, unless you stop living in the past" and that "what's needed

³⁰² Vogel, *The Oldest Profession*, 7. Ursula's remark referencing the "Pope said" is not literal. She is teasing Vera about a Roman Catholic religious observance to abstain from eating meat on Fridays as type of penance. In 1966, Pope Paul IV and the U.S. Catholic Conference of Bishop relaxed (but did not remove) the Church's rule requiring Catholics to abstain from eating meat on Fridays.

³⁰³ Vogel, *The Oldest Profession*, 8.

³⁰⁴ Vogel, *The Oldest Profession*, 10.

³⁰⁵ In her analysis of the play from a Marxist (labor/economy) perspective, Mansbridge asserts that women also "represent different modes of production in American society as well as different ideologies supporting them" as well as an "alienated labor force." Mansbridge posits that Lillian is a "believer in Keynesian economics," Mae is a more "socialist-minded model," and Ursula "espouses a capitalist belief in top-down organization." Ursula pushes Mae about the New-Age neo-liberal economy, which "further alienates the worker from their labor, each other, and their place of belonging." Mansbridge, 96-7

around here are new management ideas at the helm; someone who can make this business cost-effective.”³⁰⁶ Before the end of Act One, Ursula voices the idea that advertising in the *Village Voice* will help business by attracting a younger clientele, but Mae has assessed the situation and presents a different plan:

MAE: Well, ladies if you give me your undivided attention. Here’s how matters stand: We are depleting our saving account to the tune of fifty dollars a month. And as you know, we’ve incurred legal expenses that have to come out of the kitty.

Measures need to be taken. Edna, can you approach Judge Benjamin and ask him to reconsider three times a week? He can afford it.

EDNA: I don’t know if I can take him three times a week – but I’m willing to die trying.

MAE: Good girl, Lillian.

LILLIAN: Yes.

MAE: You’ll start today with Mr. Sidney. As he’s still new, we’ll up his fee; fifteen bucks to dip his wick, twenty-five for *soixante-neuf*.

LILLIAN: *D’accord.*

MAE: Next, I want every girl in the stable to identify one new prospect a week. Be careful. I will screen them and follow up . . . Reward your gentlemen when they give referrals. Scout the grief

³⁰⁶ Vogel, *The Oldest Profession*, 16.

counseling group at the Ethical Culture. Another thing: there will be no increase in your weekly allowance. It's adequate.³⁰⁷

Although the women have different opinions about how to increase business, keep their home, health care, and invest for the future and gently protest Mae's plan to increase business, they follow her in solidarity, manage to assuage their petty squabbles with humor while continuing to care for each other and maintain their sense of community.

Benched: Another View

British writer Tom Hodgkinson observes that benches are “free public resting places where you can take time out from the bustle and brouhaha of the city, and simply sit and watch and reflect.”³⁰⁸ Author Mal Peet compares them to books in that both “are forms of public privacy, intimate spaces widely shared.”³⁰⁹ For the women in *The Oldest Profession*, the bench serves as the location for the main action of the play and as a touchstone. The specific location of the bench marks a “sweet spot” in New York City's Upper West Side and defines the women's position as displaced and marginalized³¹⁰ in this upper middle-class neighborhood desired by singles and families for its well-appointed apartments and sense of peacefulness amid the bustle of the city.³¹¹ Vogel occasionally describes particular attire for each character (specifically the dance interludes) and sporadically mentions food items that reinforce the idea of pleasure and satiation of physical desires; however, the return to the bench at the beginning of each episode is

³⁰⁷ Vogel, *The Oldest Profession*, 21.

³⁰⁸ British writer Tom Hodgkinson is founder and co-editor of *The Idler*, a magazine devoted to the ethos of “idling.” [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Idler_\(1993\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Idler_(1993))

³⁰⁹ Mal Peet, https://www.brainyquote.com/authors/mal_peet.

³¹⁰ These women are independent contractors whose self-management epitomizes neo-liberal market capitalism at the bottom of the income scale.

³¹¹ Han Benzel, “Living in the West 70s: The Sweet Spot of the Upper West Side,” *The New York Times*, November 29, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/29/realestate/living-in-west-70s-upper-west-side.html>

significant in how it marks place and time. For example, the play opens with “*A long bench on 72nd and Broadway. New York City. Lillian, Ursula, and Mae sit in the sun. They are finishing a sumptuous lunch. Mae reads the paper. Lillian finishes coffee out of a paper bag from Jimmy the Greek.*”³¹² Subsequently, Vogel signals the sparse set design at the opening of each episode with a return to the bench: “*The bench. A week later*”³¹³ or “*The bench. Months later.*”³¹⁴

This dramaturgical choice to open each episode with the women sitting together on the bench suggests the women’s position socially and culturally on the margins. As Pam Corbin and Debra Levine point out, “aging is still defined on a deficit model” and for older women this means, “moving to the margins of visibility in the labor market, the visual market, the socio-political market.”³¹⁵ However, unlike the association with the masculine place where someone withdraws (or is withdrawn as in athletics/sports when a player is “benched”), the return to the bench for each episode creates as an intimate space for the women as a community. The lack of a lavish set or set change (the bench and its surroundings remain unchanged) directs attention solely on the women, their conversations, and their bodies. The choice focuses the audience’s attention without the distraction of new surroundings or new characters, specifically without younger, more youthful bodies.³¹⁶ The spectator must acknowledge the presence and physicality of the older female figure. The set and the specific location or place becomes irrelevant. What does matter is the centrality and visibility of the older women and their role as cultural

³¹² Vogel, *The Oldest Profession*, 7.

³¹³ Vogel, *The Oldest Profession*, 25.

³¹⁴ Vogel, *The Oldest Profession*, 32.

³¹⁵ Pam Corbin and Debra Levin, “Introduction,” *Women and Performance*, 22, no. I Special Issue: Aging (2012:2).

³¹⁶ In her article “Against the Invisibility of Old Age: Cindy Sherman, Suzy Lake, and Martha Wilson,” Michelle Meagher argues that that younger bodies work to alleviate a spectator’s anxieties of aging. Michelle Meagher, “Against the Invisibility of Old Age: Cindy Sherman, Suzy Lake, and Martha Wilson,” *Feminist Studies*, no.1 (2014): 101.

repositories. The image of the older women on the bench marks the passage of time, and their bodies convey the deteriorating economic and social circumstances personally, locally, and nationally.

The park bench and the women's observations also reinforce their roles as cultural repositories – observers and reporters – not only of their personal histories, but also of the shifts occurring in the neighborhood over time.³¹⁷ Through their storytelling the women reminisce about their lives, earlier years living and working in Storyville, and observations of the present state of the neighborhood. For example, in Act Three (which takes place a few months after the opening action) Ursula takes pride in her familial “stock” when talking of her grandmother emigrating from Hamburg and her work ethic, which also serves as a commentary on “female labor”: “Let me tell you the stock I came from. My grandmother, fresh off the boat from Hamburg, worked all day as a seamstress, rose early and scrubbed the stoop . . . she cleaned the house, she cleaned the shutters, and then she climbed into the Rosewood bed she carried from Hamburg and turned her face to the wall.”³¹⁸ Ursula leaves the scene, but the younger Edna and Vera, still sitting on the bench, note the devolution of the neighborhood as they observe and comment on the changes in the park:

VERA: There's an awful lot of young people on the benches. Where are all these kids coming from?

EDNA: It's not just the seniors with their pockets full of crumbs for the pigeons anymore . . . These kids look hungry.³¹⁹

³¹⁷ In chapter 9 of *Aged by Culture*, Gullette argues that our bodies and our faces are “historical repositories.”

³¹⁸ Vogel, *The Oldest Profession*, 38.

³¹⁹ Vogel, *The Oldest Profession*, 38.

This exchange reports on the changing economic circumstances occurring in the Upper West Side at the time period: the image of the young people crowding the benches and the “crumbs” needed to feed the poor are symbolic of what was occurring on a larger scale across the United States. In this period that recorded the most “consistent burst of economic activity ever seen in the U.S.,” the play, in part, functions as a counter-narrative challenging the perception of the “Great Expansion or Reagan’s Great Expansion from 1982 to 1989.”³²⁰ *The New York Times* economist Paul Krugman explains that Reagan’s economic policies created an initial “boom” in the economy as it recovered from a recession, “the rich got much richer, [but] there was little sustained economic improvement for most Americans . . . and the poverty rate had actually risen.”³²¹

The shared anecdotes of daily life and the women’s shared history dating back to their time in Storyville and over their early years in New York also establish a connection with the audience so they come to care about these women and their plight. As the play unfolds, the script endows each woman with specific characteristics and life experiences. They discuss family history, their coming of age and entry into the profession, and how they first met Mae. They all speak with personal agency for their decision to work in the “profession” and none of them expresses shame. For example, Mae talks about the honor in the profession: “There was honor in the trade. My father went up to Storyville often when I was a girl. Mother used to nod to Miss Sophie right in the street before Mass in the Quarter. And when my papa lost work . . . Miss

³²⁰ For a concise overview of Reagan era economics see: Martin Anderson, “The Regan Boom – The Greatest Ever,” *The New York Times*, January 17, 1990.

<https://www.nytimes.com/1990/01/17/opinion/the-regan-boom-greatest-ever.html>

³²¹ Paul Krugman, “Debunking the Reagan Myth” *The New York Times*, January 21, 2008.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2008/01/21/opinion/21krugman.html>

Sophie had groceries delivered to the back step before the neighbors woke up.”³²² And Vera shares about culinary delights: “Three o’clock already, is it? My stomach is growling already. Soon it will be time for dinner . . . My mother used to make babies in the blanket: raspberries wrapped in pastry and then sprinkled with confectionary sugar, like stardust, like snow . . . raspberries are the plain best.”³²³ Their stories not only demonstrate their care for each other over fifty years, but also illustrate the endearing human qualities of each woman – their memories, their dreams, strengths, weaknesses, desires – and empathy for others. Vogel creates individualized portraits for each of them with a distinctive style and attitude as well as emotional complexity that avoids over-simplified stereotypes, commodities, or objects – sex workers or old women – but rather fully individualize women and cultural treasures within the community who deserve attention, respect, and love in the same way that they give it.

Their storytelling also works to develop the connection between past and present. Age studies scholar Robert N. Butler refers to this type of process as a “life review” whereby the aged individual reconciles their past to “present a peaceful older self at the moment of death.”³²⁴ It also aligns with Krystal who in his essay on “Trauma and Aging” observed that “one either accepts one’s self and one’s past or continues to reject it angrily . . . the choice is integration or despair.”³²⁵ The women in *The Oldest Profession* may be facing desperate times, but they are not in despair.

Since their youth, the women have been capable of providing and caring for themselves and each other without the necessity of marriage. They have, in fact, eschewed marriage and

³²² Vogel, *The Oldest Profession*, 15. “Trade” refers to “the profession,” (i.e., “the life”). This line also established that the script values the women’s labor and the life they have chosen.

³²³ Vogel, *The Oldest Profession*, 23.

³²⁴ Robert Butler. “Successful Aging and the Role of Life Review,” *American Geriatric Society*, 22, no. 12 (1974): 529-535.

³²⁵ Krystal, “Trauma and Aging,” 83.

domesticity in favor of personal agency (power and control) over their lives, their finances, and their bodies as well as the men who take pleasure in them. However, over the time period of the performance, the women in *The Oldest Profession* experience multiple and cumulative losses. They have not undergone violence and trauma at the hands of someone caring for them or strangers, but in the breakdown of the bodies that they continue to celebrate throughout the play. They also experience violence and trauma by way of the social, cultural, and political power structures that have complicated their lives.

The women lose their comfortable rent-controlled apartment and move to more modest living arrangements. A decline in their business forces Edna and Vera to work as low level caregivers at the “Home.” As the neighborhood gentrifies, they lose their local community. They are increasingly lost within fiscal policies of Reganomics that favored Wall Street and middle-to-upper class Americans but left those in the lower class behind. In the first episode Ursula observes that while “The garbage is festering in the streets. So what does Koch do? Crack down on the working girls in Times Square,” and Mae reminds her that they are always “targets in an election year.”³²⁶ Over the course of the play – a short three-year time span – the women are displaced from their rent controlled building to living on the street and from eating at Sardi’s to eating sandwiches out of a garbage bin. As Edna points out just before her death, she and Vera are “too broke to get out of New York City” and “too poor to live there.”³²⁷ The women also lose each other. Thus, all of them, particularly Edna and Vera, experience social-cultural decline as well as repeated personal and financial losses. As Kaplan discusses, this “series of losses” may be a potential trauma for everyone.³²⁸ From Root and Brown’s perspective, these indirect and

³²⁶ Vogel, *The Oldest Profession*, 2.

³²⁷ Vogel, *The Oldest Profession*, 44.

³²⁸ Kaplan, “Trauma and Aging,” 173.

“low-level insidious” traumas are not violent or threatening to bodily well-being (“direct blows”) but rather damaging to “soul and spirit.”³²⁹ However, in *The Oldest Profession*, the women choose to focus on the accumulation of experiences rather than the losses; together they focus instead on community and interconnectedness, acceptance; individually they choose integration over despair.

And Then They Dance

In *The Oldest Profession*, the precisely drawn characters create a visibility of aging women who are desired and desiring well into their older years.³³⁰ As I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, Vogel alternates the realistic episodes of the women sitting on the bench with dance interludes that mark each character’s passing from the physical world to death. In the realistic scenes discussed above, the bench serves as the location for the main action of the play and focuses on the material conditions the women are facing. The bench marks the place in the material world where the women are displaced and marginalized based on their profession, their gender, and their age. Conversely, the dance interludes transport the women (and the audience) to the Storyville Parlor in New Orleans’ “Red Light District,” which shifts the focus from their current plight in New York City to a time fifty years earlier when their bodies – by traditional beauty standards – were in their prime. The Storyville Parlor also marks a time and place where the women enjoyed a position of power and control compared to the more recent business and economic struggles in New York City. It also marks a time and place where the

³²⁹ Brown refers to the work of therapist colleague Maria Root’s concept of “insidious trauma, meaning: “traumatogenic effects of oppression that are not necessarily overtly violent or threatening to the bodily well-being at the given moment but that do violence to the soul and spirit.” Brown, “Not Outside The Range,” 107.

³³⁰ In her book *Paula Vogel* (Michigan Modern Dramatist. The University of Michigan Press, 2014), Joanna Mansbridge argues that the women in *The Oldest Profession* stand in as “metonym for different modes of American production” and represent the “whore diaspora” of Koch’s New York City brought about by gentrification and rising costs of living.

women first came together under Mae's guidance and suggests a sense of "going home" as they pass from life to death.

This exclusive and sharp focus on the aging female and the aged body is rare and remarkable in that representations of older women in art and theatre are far and few between and when female old age is represented or "made visible" it is on a negative register.³³¹ Film and age studies scholar Susan Liddy claims that in film women over 65 years of age are primarily cast as "visual reminders" of "biological reproduction" or minor characters, such as wives, mothers, or "lonely spinsters"; she also asserts that while more recently "a number of films are being produced that challenge this discourse," the "vast majority of mainstream films continue to exclude or marginalize older female characters."³³² Art historian Griselda Pollock points out that when older women are represented "they exist to terrify" as "witches, hags [and] old bags."³³³ Or as theatre scholar Anna Harpin argues, people perceive old women with a "kind of mute, political neutrality."³³⁴ In other words, the aged female body is used to perpetuate the idea and experience that aging is violent and/or traumatic in how it marginalizes, diminishes older people as lesser and sometimes, monstrous figures. If not as deviants, older people are represented as impotent, abject, or less than fully human creatures without power or agency. These types of representations contribute to social-cultural views of aging and ageism.

However, in *The Oldest Profession*, the women accept and integrate their life experiences – even the traumatic ones – by revisiting the past through their storytelling and "touch" the past in their final danced moments. These "end of life performances" fully integrate the present with

³³¹ Griselda Pollock, "The Grace of Time: Narrativity, Sexuality and a Visual Encounter in the Virtual Feminist Museum." *Art History* 26 (2): 2003, 174–213.

³³² Susan Liddy, "Older Women and Sexuality on Screen: Euphemism and Evasion." In *Ageing Women in Literature and Visual Culture: Reflections, Refractions*, 168.

³³³ Pollock, "The Grace of Time," 174–213.

³³⁴ Harpin, "Mad Mothers," 73.

the past. The characters (and action) transcend the physical limitations of the body to experience a final moment of pleasure and connectedness. The characters do not calculate the losses (i.e., bodily function, appearances, mental agility, ideologies and values one grew up with, friends, and family) or appear to process these accumulated losses as trauma, but rather celebrate the accumulation of life experiences, which they accept and integrate up through their death.³³⁵ Looking on, in the spirit of Cvetkovich, these dance interludes function as a type of archive, a “cultural text,” created collectively by virtue of a shared authorship of many women within the same “profession” over a long period of time.³³⁶ Here, the women who are not only marginalized by class (as sex workers) and by age (over 65) use the dance interludes as a response to their history, a form of connectedness to their community, and as a form of empowerment.

Vogel clearly states that the dance interludes are seductive and celebrate each women’s body as she “cross[es] over” from the physical world to death.³³⁷ The interludes also establish each woman’s individuality, vitality, and embodied subjectivity.³³⁸ This structure of alternating between the quotidian business of life and the process of dying creates a “displacement of time” (another signature feature in Vogel’s work) similar to the altered temporal experience when death interrupts life and survivors adjust to the loss/void.³³⁹ The interludes also create a shift from representation of character as the women sit “in community” on the park bench to the

³³⁵ Kaplan, “Trauma and Aging,” 173.

³³⁶ Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feeling*, 6-10.

³³⁷ Vogel, *The Oldest Profession*, 31. Vera, the youngest of the five and left alone on the bench at the end of the play, does not pass from the physical world to death by way of an expressionistic interlude or “dance state.” In this final realistic scene, Vera sits alone on the bench with “garbage bags stuffed with her possessions”; she has lost her community. And the four other women “wait for her on the other side” and “continue to serenade” her. Vera’s decline and accumulated losses are visually apparent: the character who at the opening savored her fish dinner is now eating a fish sandwich discarded by a passerby.

³³⁸ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*.

³³⁹ Mansbridge, *Paula Vogel*, 5.

presentation of each woman's individual performing body. For each, the elements of dance – body, effort, time, and space – create what age studies and dance scholar Suzanne Martin refers to as a “personal movement language.”³⁴⁰ This “personal movement language” allows each woman to communicate with the audience uniquely and expressively – both the actual audience in the theatre as well as the women that form her community. Most importantly, this final “dance state” allows the dancer to transcend her body – that is, to be the dance or to experience a type of escape.³⁴¹

The “personal movement language” for each woman is further emphasized in that Vogel individualizes each woman's performance. For example, in the first interlude, Lillian, whom Vogel describes as a “*woman of style and audacity*,” begins by not seeming to realize she has died.³⁴² Lillian, together with the audience, comes to understand the significance of the dance interlude as a passage to death: “*She sits . . . a bit stunned and dazed*,” and seems “*a bit scared*,” but as the music prompts her with her favorite song, “*she brightens*” and eventually realizes “*the audience is waiting for her*.”³⁴³ For Lillian, Vogel suggests a song that is “*something in the vein of a torch song, or something like Mae West's 'I'm No Angel*.”³⁴⁴ The image of Mae West conjures the specific vision of the petite and curvy West who drew on the style of the “strumpet of the Gay Nineties” as well as vaudeville and burlesque in her film, stage, and television career

³⁴⁰ Suzanne Martin, *Dancing Age(ing): Rethinking Age(ing) in and Through Improvisation Practice and Performance* (2017), 36-37.

³⁴¹ Kikoyu Toyama, “Old, Weak, and Invalid: Dance in Inaction” in *The Aging Body in Dance: A Cross-Cultural Perspective*, Ed. by Nanako Nakajima and Gabrielle Brandstetter, (Routledge: London, 2017), 125-127.

³⁴² Vogel, *The Oldest Profession*, 31.

³⁴³ Vogel, *The Oldest Profession*, 31.

³⁴⁴ Vogel, *The Oldest Profession*, 24.

spanning over fifty years.³⁴⁵ This music suggestion supports Vogel's character description of Lillian as "*the rose of the stable.*"³⁴⁶ Commonly associated with true love and passion, roses possess exquisite beauty, yet their thorns have the capacity to prick and maybe draw blood. As Lillian's song progresses, "*each verse gets increasingly strong as Lillian's fear abates and she takes pleasure in the song.*"³⁴⁷ Here, in her strapless cocktail dress and boa, Lillian is as Vogel describes "*without fear, without a body, without care.*"³⁴⁸ Vogel's note suggests the dance interludes are a release from the aging and aged body and its limitations. The dances in these interludes have no special technique or precise movement; Lillian moves without thinking, which makes the dance uniquely hers and freeing. At this point, before the "*light beckons*" her, Lillian has entered a dance state that has transported her back to the "*Storyville Parlor.*"³⁴⁹ This dance state harks back to the past to integrate the historical body with the present body to take pleasure in the performance in the moment – this time, not for those who are taking pleasure in the watching, but for her own personal celebration of being and the body. This idea to celebrate death aligns with the feminine idea that views life as cyclic (not linear). Barbara Walker explains that in ancient cultures, the old women (the crones) "*established the cyclic system of perpetual becoming, whereby every temporary living form in the universe blends eventually into every other form, nothing is unrelated, and there can be no hierarchy of better or worse. . . It was a philosophical system profoundly opposed to the ones devised by men.*"³⁵⁰

³⁴⁵ "Mae West, Stage and Movie Star Who Burlesqued Sex, Dies at 87," *New York Times Magazine*, November 23, 1980. Accessed April 29, 2019. <https://web.archive.org/web/20080407064502/http://www.nytimes.com/specials/magazine4/articles/west1.html>.

³⁴⁶ Vogel, *The Oldest Profession*, 24.

³⁴⁷ Vogel, *The Oldest Profession*, 24.

³⁴⁸ Vogel, *The Oldest Profession*, 24.

³⁴⁹ Vogel, *The Oldest Profession*, 24.

³⁵⁰ Walker, *The Crone: Women of Age, Wisdom, and Power*, Loc. 299.

In the second interlude, Vogel writes that it is Mae's "*turn to shine*."³⁵¹ The choice of the term "shine" reinforces that the dance interludes are a celebration of the women and the body (as opposed to expressing grief, remorse, or sorrow). For Mae, the oldest of the five women, Vogel suggests she dance in the "*style of burlesque; that is, titillating, suggestive, but not vulgar. Something that Sally Rand might perform with fans or an Ann Miller with tap. Sex with an old-fashioned sense of humor*."³⁵² Differing from Lillian's sentimentality, Mae's performance style tilts toward bawdiness and does not rely on a particular type of body. Instead, burlesque in the early 20th century relied on female sexual expressiveness, revealing costumes, erotic gestures, and sexy humor. Burlesque also allowed women to control their own representation and sexuality as well as empowered women to provide for themselves uniquely and expressively. This style of dance supports Mae's position as the oldest of the five women as well as her position as their "madam" (i.e., their business manager). It also speaks to her view about the profession, as she believed "there was honor in the trade."³⁵³ Mae understands the body and sexuality as a business ("she finds the management of men ridiculously easy, and has mastered the management of women as well") but also understands it as connectedness.³⁵⁴ For Mae, connectedness is about the body, sensuality, playfulness, and touch. When she returns to taking on clients after Lillian's death and soon before hers, Mae comments: "No, I think I just want to feel . . .skin to skin. . . .Yes, sir, skin to skin."³⁵⁵ Mae's comments remind us that for most people the human desire for "touch" remains throughout life – including in "old age." Here, "touch" is not limited to "skin to skin"; it is about "touching" each other's lives and creating meaningful,

³⁵¹ Vogel, *The Oldest Profession*, 31.

³⁵² Vogel, *The Oldest Profession*, 31.

³⁵³ Vogel, *The Oldest Profession*, 15.

³⁵⁴ Vogel, *The Oldest Profession*, 6.

³⁵⁵ Vogel, *The Oldest Profession*, 29.

shared moments. In the final moment of her dance state, Vogel indicates that Mae shows “*great dignity and timing*,” and that she continues to tease by “*let[ting] down her hair, peel[ing] off her gloves and “slowly slide[s] off her peach chiffon dress down to her slip.*”³⁵⁶ These gestures illustrate that at 83 Mae’s dance embodies power and sensuality to its fullest.

Vogel describes the third and fourth interludes as increasingly more “*blue than anything the other two have performed*” and for each the stage notes indicate, “*We’re clearly in the Parlor on Basin Street.*”³⁵⁷ The third interlude belongs to Ursula, whom Vogel earlier describes as “*Determined. Believes in rules, merit promotion, and supply side economics.*”³⁵⁸ Ursula takes a dominatrix approach for her dance, wearing a “*fancy bustier, girdle, and garters.*”³⁵⁹ Vogel suggests that Ursula dance to “*‘Must Get Mine in Front’ . . . ‘I’ve Got What it Takes (but it breaks my heart to give it away)’; and the infamous ‘Shave ’Em Dry.’*”³⁶⁰ All of the songs were made popular by female blues vocalists of the 1920s and 1930s, such as Irene Scruggs, “The Blues Empress” Bessie Smith, and Lucille Bogan. The sultry songs with sexually suggestive lyrics were popular in after hour adult clubs; Bogan’s “Shave ’Em Dry” was particularly “infamous” for its explicit sexual lyrics and what Lorna Wheeler describes as an “unapologetic boast of sexual prowess.”³⁶¹ The location in the Storyville parlor and the song selection harks back to the women’s earlier lives, but also the time period when historic Storyville was the “Red Light District” of New Orleans and influential in shaping “the blues’ racy reputation.”³⁶² The

³⁵⁶ Vogel, *The Oldest Profession*, 31.

³⁵⁷ Vogel, *The Oldest Profession*, 39.

³⁵⁸ Vogel, *The Oldest Profession*, 6.

³⁵⁹ Vogel, *The Oldest Profession*, 39.

³⁶⁰ Vogel, *The Oldest Profession*, 39.

³⁶¹ Lorna Wheeler, “Shave ’Em Dry: Lucille Bogan’s Queer Blues, [link]

³⁶² Lewis Porter about the blues’ racy reputation during the 1920s and 30s, and explore the role New Orleans’ turn of the century Red Light District played in shaping the music. <http://thenewjazzarchive.com/wp/2012/07/23/sex-jazz-the-bawdy-blues/>

scene also evokes a sense of nostalgia for a lost era in U.S. history when even “the oldest profession” was more about human connectedness than a business transaction.

If Mae’s burlesque dance is about sexual playfulness, Ursula’s is about power and control. In fact, Vogel states her “*favorite song for this number is ‘If I Can’t Sell It, I’m Gonna Keep Sitting on It, I’m Not Going to Give it Away’*”³⁶³ This song popularized by blues singer Ruth Brown in the 1930s conveys the story of a man who “wanted to buy her chair, but the price was too high.” The song selections and Ursula’s style of dance align with her personality and her focus on the business side of the profession. Up until her death at age 79, Ursula analyzed business opportunities, managed investments, and stepped in to run the women’s business after Mae died. In fact, just before her own death, Ursula’s conversation with Edna and Vera relates to a disagreement about her management of them; she explains, “I’m not running a popularity contest, I’m running a business.”³⁶⁴ Ursula understands the body and sex as a transaction: Ursula knows her value and the value of her “labor.”

Vogel bequeaths Edna the “*dance number of the night.*”³⁶⁵ She struts in her “*best Come F Me Pumps*” and “*flashes her full mojo at the men.*”³⁶⁶ Aside from “*legs that go all the way up,*” Edna’s power lies in the movement of her body, “*once those pumps are on her feet. Edna can’t keep still.*”³⁶⁷ At 74 years old, she still offers “*a glimpse*” of the “*young alley girl*” who is “*very good at her trade.*”³⁶⁸ For Edna, Vogel suggests “*uptempo*” songs, such as “*Wild Women Don’t Get the Blues,*” “*A Little Sugar in my Bowl,*” and another Brogan number, “*They Ain’t Walking*

³⁶³ Vogel, *The Oldest Profession*, 39.

³⁶⁴ Vogel, *The Oldest Profession*, 37.

³⁶⁵ Vogel, *The Oldest Profession*, 46.

³⁶⁶ Vogel, *The Oldest Profession*, 46.

³⁶⁷ Vogel, *The Oldest Profession*, 46.

³⁶⁸ Vogel, *The Oldest Profession*, 46.

*No More.*³⁶⁹ These vaudeville style blues songs contain sexually suggestive and sometimes blatant lyrics that were considered risqué in the 1920s when they were first popular. Unlike Mae’s playfulness and Ursula’s prowess, Edna’s style invokes her femininity and asserts her feminism. For example, the song “Wild Women Don’t Get the Blues” has a “strong feminist message that disputes the authority of a man.”³⁷⁰ As the music for Edna’s dance suggests, she does not need a man, but she will take one. For Edna, Vogel suggests that she improvise “patter” with the audience and break the fourth wall to engage with “the men in the audience.”³⁷¹ This assertive gesture signals Edna’s proclivity to challenge accepted behavioral norms (both in performance and in life). In fact, Vogel suggests at the end of the interlude that Edna “leaves the auditorium in triumph” – ideally with a man from the audience.³⁷² In this moment, Edna asserts her sexual and personal power.

Vogel’s use of dance is significant not only in that the body must *be* to perform the dance, and dance allows one to fully experience *Being* or a “perpetual becoming” (or flow) that reaches beyond the limits of a body’s physicality. On one hand, “codified forms of dance such as ballet” exclude the aging/aged body, as Martin explains: “Western dance has often focused on youthful physicality and, as such, takes part in an un-questioned marginalization of older bodies.”³⁷³ Contemporary, experimental, or improvisational dance on the other hand is “more

³⁶⁹ Vogel, *The Oldest Profession*, 46.

³⁷⁰ In his article “Ida Cox: ‘Wild Women Don’t Get the Blues,’” Rick Moore explains that the lyrics of this song were controversial at the height of its popularity and is now considered an early “feminist anthem.” *American Songwriter*, February 3, 2019
<https://americansongwriter.com/2019/02/ida-cox-wild-women-dont-have-the-blues/>

³⁷¹ Vogel, *The Oldest Profession*, 46.

³⁷² Vogel, *The Oldest Profession*, 46.

³⁷³ Suzanne Martin, *Dancing Age(ing) : Rethinking Age(Ing) in and Through Improvisation Practice and Performance*. transcript Verlag, 2017, 1.

Also, Japanese theatre/dance (particularly Kabuki) does not follow the “peak and decline” mentality of western dance; it employs concepts of technique, virtuosity, and

attuned to individual bodies and the bodily signs of aging”; thus, the “status markers of which bodies can dance and which can’t” are removed.³⁷⁴ Martin also argues that dance “can speak to a larger social-cultural context” about the “body being” and “the body aging.”³⁷⁵

While sitting on the bench, the women remain clothed in bulky winter coats fully covering their aged bodies and their conversations relate to the women’s lives and their material conditions. However, in the dance interludes, the emphasis shifts to the performing body and the revelation of the “aged body” is further highlighted in that each woman performs a type of striptease or “a peeling performance” to sexually suggestive songs.³⁷⁶ In each interlude, Vogel notes the women perform their dances or move their bodies in ways that reveal not only their personalities but also their skin, challenging social-cultural behavioral norms. To have women – particularly older women – on a stage in a theatre *and* revealing their bodies alludes to the role of women in theatre throughout history. In *Undressed for Success*, Brenda Foley reminds us that in theatre the female body has been a “discursive site of social appropriateness in behavior since women first stepped on the stage, both in terms of expectable decorum and the more problematic issue of female infiltration of public space.”³⁷⁷ Mary Russo observes of Western culture that this female infiltration of public is to make “spectacle of oneself” and a “specifically feminine

professionalism not bound to youth but rather old age. . . the older dancer symbolizes lifelong dance practices. . . Aging is the ultimate status (Nanako Nakajima)

³⁷⁴ Suzanne Martin, *Dancing Age(ing): Rethinking Age(ing) in and Through Improvisation Practice and Performance* (2017), [holding this quote here for now: Martin also explains that contemporary dance “has the potential to dismantle stereotypical body and age-related values and images that are not only part of dance but of our everyday culture.”]

³⁷⁵ Martin, *Dancing Age(ing)*, 1.

³⁷⁶ Foley, Brenda Foley, *Undressed for Success: Beauty Contestants and Exotic Dancers as Merchants of Morality. Palgrave Studies in Theatre and Performance History* (Palgrave Macmillan 2005), 14.

³⁷⁷ Foley, *Undressed for Success*, 14.

danger.”³⁷⁸ Thus, this idea of older women dancing – especially dancing sexually – is a particular danger and that danger is spectacle. To make this spectacle is, as Foley argues, a rhetorical sister to ‘letting herself go’ that “confound[s] established disciplinary, regulatory, and cultural notions of “proper” female display.”³⁷⁹ Russo uses the term “grotesque” when analyzing these types of perceptions of female bodies, particularly aging female bodies.³⁸⁰ However, her formulation of the “grotesque” inverts the usual pejorative connotations to deploy the term as one of liberation and empowerment. That Vogel’s older women are front and center on the stage and dancing revises or challenges the norm. To have them dancing sexually and in various stages of undress redoubles the defiance and wakes us to see anew. In their individual final dance states each woman is fully liberated; dance releases the women from the harsh realities of life (through death), but also frees each woman from social-cultural marginalization, or using Woodward’s formulation, it releases the older women from the dismissiveness of “the look.”

Vogel’s dance interludes defy norms and rise to the plane of Russo’s grotesque, which empowers each woman to express her femininity, her desire, her sexuality, and feminist spirituality through her body. Each character’s final dance also functions as a spiritual release for her individually (as she dances for herself) and collectively as she takes pleasure in dancing for not only the audience but also her community. Each dance interlude celebrates each woman fully being and their perpetual becoming but also, according to Vogel, as an escape from the body and an escape from care.³⁸¹ The women’s final dances are a type of reconciliation and transcendence that releases them from the accumulated individual and cultural losses and related trauma(s).

³⁷⁸ Mary Russo, *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess and Modernity*. New York: Routledge, 1994, 55-75.

³⁷⁹ Foley, *Undressed for Success*, 14.

³⁸⁰ Russo also includes pregnant and irregular bodies. Russo, 14, 54, 55.

³⁸¹ Vogel, *The Oldest Profession*, 24.

Root points out:

Reconstructing one's life following pain and deep wounds of trauma necessitates an integration of mind, body, and spirit of the healing process. This stands in contrast to contemporary theories of trauma that reside in mind-body duality and totally ignore the intangible spirit, which may play a prominent role in finding meaning in one's life, instilling hope in the future for oneself or people or humanity, and connecting one with a larger sense of life.³⁸²

These dance interludes place a feminist value on being, spirituality, connections among people and "validation of intangible senses and intuition" and an understanding life beyond the self.³⁸³

Conclusion

For Michel Foucault "The body is the zero point of the world, the place where paths and spaces cross. The body itself is nowhere. It is the tiny utopian core at the centre of the world."³⁸⁴ Similarly dance scholar Jess Curtis states that, "Our embodiment, our in the worldliness, is the very stuff from which we make meaning on a daily basis."³⁸⁵ This radical step to have female figures over the age of 65 sensually and sexually dance confronts normative ideas about the body, age, aging, sensuality, and sexuality. Even in poverty, the women maintain their connectedness to these ideas, to each other, and to their community by returning to the bench and returning to each other in their physical and spiritual presence. Through dance "with all of the senses of the flesh and fully open, trust[ing] and savor[ing] the sense of oneness with the world"

³⁸² Root, "Reconstructing the Impact of Trauma on the Personality," 238.

³⁸³ Root, "Reconstructing the Impact of Trauma on the Personality," 238.

³⁸⁴ Michel Foucault, "The Utopian Body," in *Sensorium: Embodied Experience, Technology, and Contemporary Art*, edited by Caroline A. Jones, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2006, 232-33.

³⁸⁵ Jess Curtis, "Dancing the Non-fictional body," *The Aging Body in Dance: A Cross-Cultural Perspective*, edited by Nanako Nakajima and Gabrielle Brandstetter. Routledge: London 2017 73-77.

the women uphold a connectedness to each other, to their past, and to their individuality and subjectivity.³⁸⁶

Although the older women in *The Oldest Profession* decline into poverty and eventually death, they continue to celebrate life in “late old age” as well as the aged body. The women remain visible in the labor market as they conduct business on the park bench, and they remain visible socially and politically. With the exception of Vera (who is left alone on the bench at the end of play and represents the fall of the lower class into abject poverty as the result of Reagan Era fiscal politics) the women remain independent as well as sexually desiring and desirable, defying the myth of social and sexual marginalization that many argue comes with age. Mae, Lillian, Ursula, and Edna remain fully visible humans who celebrate their lives, their bodies, and their sexuality. This radically different view of the aged female figure antagonizes the historically received physical presence of the aged body as well as the received psychological and philosophical ideas of aging. Vera remains the sole figure – dressed in rags alone on the park bench eating discarded fish from a garbage bin – who presents the familiar image of older women who suffer the traumatic effects of poverty as they age. In *The Oldest Profession*, the repetitive visual representation of the older women as they sit together on the bench day by day reflecting on their lives, sharing their stories, and their end of life performance literally and figuratively moves the image of the aging female body from the margins to the center, placing the older women in full view to create a visibility of age(ing). *The Oldest Profession* reinforces feminist approaches to aging and trauma that support reconciliation, community, connectedness, and human dignity while also illustrating active resistance within a narrative that traces the

³⁸⁶ Kikoyu Toyama, “Old, Weak, and Invalid: Dance in Inaction.” In *The Aging Body in Dance: A Cross-Cultural Perspective*, edited by Nanako Nakajima and Gabrielle Brandstetter,. Routledge: London, 2017, 122-136.

effects of supply side Reganomics that began large-scale transfers of wealth to the few and impoverished many, particularly older Americans.

CHAPTER FOUR

A CUP OF TEA AND TERRIBLE RAGE IN CARYL CHURCHILL'S *ESCAPED ALONE*

*When you get older, plainer, saner
Will you remember all the danger we came from
Burning like embers, falling, tender
Longing for the days of no surrender years ago
--- LP, *Lost on You*, 2016³⁸⁷*

It was a sunny Friday evening in November 2018 when a gunman entered the yoga studio where I practice. As yogis positioned themselves in child pose, syncing their breath preparing for the next 75 minutes of practice, a young man posed as a student opened fire/began shooting, piercing flesh and their united breath with bullets. Two women died; others were injured physically. More of us in the community were injured emotionally, experiencing the vicarious trauma of gun violence in our “safe place.” Three of my close colleagues were en route to the studio around the corner from my home. I decided to skip class to read, shower, and meet them for dinner later afterwards. I remember hearing the sirens, more sirens than I ever could imagine. I remember my cell phone ringing and a frantic voice on the other end asking what was happening – police vehicles blocked the street to the studio and they could not get to class. We did not know in the moment, but the bullets missed them only because they were late – delayed by writing an abstract for a conference. As the moments passed, they decided to go on to dinner. I would join them once the police vehicles opened the streets in my neighborhood. While I waited, I stood on my balcony and noticed the flashes of red and blue filling the sky. I thought: how could the sunset be so stunningly beautiful on *this* day? I eventually joined my friends at the restaurant. Their somber faces and tear-filled eyes showed the depth of the injury. A few of us

³⁸⁷ LP, Nate Campany, and Del Rio. “Lost on You,” *Lost On You*, Warner Bros., December 2016.

brought personal trauma histories to the table, some triggered by the event and now a new one to process. As I walked toward them, I thought about violence against women, the devastation of our space, our recent march against gun violence – and death. I was never so happy to see them. As we sat together, we told our stories, we raged, we laughed, and we wept. The jazz quartet next to our table played on and on. We talked about the sunset and how it seemed to be the most vibrant blue and red streaks we ever saw. And it was nice. And we ate our meal. And we hugged. And said thanks for being here. And we went home.

I share this story because it was not until a few weeks after this event that I found layers of meaning in Churchill's *Escaped Alone*. On that evening with my friends as we sat around the table and shared our stories, I noticed our dialogue. Our conversation was sparse and fragmented and overlapping, but we all knew each other well enough, long enough to fill in gaps. Occasionally, one of us spoke longer than the other in a type of monologue and we all gave her space. I also noticed that I was the oldest at the table – double the age of some or a few decades older than others. As we processed what had happened and what we were learning about those injured as well as the gunman, I also noticed I was in a unique position. In well over 50 years of life, I had experienced a significant number of violent and tragic events, personal and public, local and global. So it's in the spirit of Cvetkovich that I share this story as part of the archive of everyday trauma and of resilience. I know that sharing stories may not hold any magical transformative power to heal us from trauma or save us from destruction, but I also know that stories have the capacity to nurture, comfort, and unite people to feel not as alone, especially in moments of deep pain.

Escaped Alone

Written in the year leading up to the UK's 2016 vote to leave the European Union, Caryl Churchill's *Escaped Alone* gathers four older women on a "number of summer afternoons" to share stories and sit in community with each other.³⁸⁸ Although Churchill does not specify a time period (as Vogel does in *The Oldest Profession* is), based on the dialogue, the main action of the play occurs in a post-George W. Bush, pre-Trump-pre-Brexit era where people carry "whole worlds in your pocket."³⁸⁹ This short play locates longtime friends Sally, Vi, and Lean in Sally's backyard welcoming newcomer Mrs. Jarrett to afternoon tea in this working-class British neighborhood.³⁹⁰ Based on the women's conversation about their employment later in the play, the women are working class or skilled working class. The women sit together on "un-matching chairs,"³⁹¹ drinking tea, conversing, and laughing about everyday life in a backyard garden."³⁹² The play progresses in eight scenes with each offering a glimpse into the women's on-going conversation and their lives. Churchill's notes indicate that these conversations take place over a "number of afternoons but the action is continuous."³⁹³ Each scene concludes with Mrs. Jarrett describing multiple instances of planetary horror to the audience.

Dramaturgically, the juxtaposition of the safe and peaceful backyard with the horrific and disturbing images described by Mrs. Jarrett function differently than the alternating episodes and dance interludes in *The Oldest Profession*. In *The Oldest Profession*, Vogel alternates the realistic scenes of the women sitting together with dance interludes to draw a distinction between the increasingly harsh material present and the nostalgic past while also celebrating each

³⁸⁸ Churchill, *Escaped Alone*, (London: Nick Hern Books, Ltd, 2016), 6.

³⁸⁹ Churchill, *Escaped Alone*, 6.

³⁹⁰ In production, the show is under an hour.

³⁹¹ Churchill, *Escaped Alone*, 4.

³⁹² Churchill, *Escaped Alone*, 4.

³⁹³ Churchill, *Escaped Alone*, 4.

woman's individualized subjectivity as well as the aged body. In *Escaped Alone*, Churchill alternates the quiet solitude of pleasantries over afternoon tea and celebrating the value of sustained friendship with apocalyptic images of the "world crumbling beyond the garden gate."³⁹⁴ While Ariel Sibert argues that the "shock value" of this technique (of shifting scenes) might "wear off" as the play progresses, I maintain that form is content.³⁹⁵ As the play shifts from mundane conversation about family, work, and world events to Mrs. Jarrett's horrific images of planetary destruction, the alternating topics and imagery exposes the audience to the experience of loss and trauma on many levels: personally, locally, and globally.³⁹⁶ As Bonnie Marranca points out in her review of the play: "The local is inextricably tied to the global, and the political is not merely personal."³⁹⁷ Thus, *Escaped Alone* is as much about older women visiting in a garden as it is about all women and the direct, indirect, and insidious trauma experienced personally, locally, and globally.

As the only characters visible on the stage, the four older women might be viewed as a metaphor for aging as an apocalyptic event or aged bodies as symbolic of "end times." However, using *Escaped Alone* as a case study, I am able to illustrate how the play functions as a "new way of understanding the depiction of age" that disrupts the youth/age binary and the master narrative of decline.³⁹⁸ Rather, the play does something different. After all, this is Churchill – a playwright

³⁹⁴ Bonnie Marranca, "The Imagination of Catastrophe: Caryl Churchill's Natural History Lessons," *PAJ*, 116, (2017): 1-6.

³⁹⁵ Ariel Sibert, "The Back Garden at the End of the World," *Theatre*, Vol. 48, No. 2, (2018): 155-159. Sibert argues that the "dramaturgy—tea, doom, tea, doom"... "soon loose its capacity to shock."

³⁹⁶ Scott Proudfit, "Wittgenstein, Cell Phones, and the Terrible Rage: The Post-Postmodern Condition in Caryl Churchill's *Escaped Alone*" 39th Annual MATC 2019 Reeling it In: Adapting for Today's Digital World. Proudfit argues, the play functions both on the "local and the large."

³⁹⁷ Marranca, "The Imagination of Catastrophe: Caryl Churchill's Natural History Lessons," 116.

³⁹⁸ Fuchs, 69.

known for dramaturgical innovation – who places a group of older women at center stage and has them share their individual and collective stories. In this chapter, the fundamental concepts I bring into conversation with the play text are the representation(s) of older women on the stage, specifically female characters over the age of 65 who drive the dramatic action; the subversion of (or “escape” from) the decline narrative of age to offer a story that illustrates older women who resist the label of “cultural refuse” to present an expanded view of older women as “cultural treasures”; an “age narrative” that addresses what it is to be old, to have observed the passage of time, and to accept life as an accumulation of experiences (as opposed to decline); the significance of Churchill’s epigraph referencing the book of Job and Melville’s *Moby Dick* to analyze how placing older women at the center of the storytelling, particularly the character Mrs. Jarrett harkens back to pre-patriarchal cultures and a world view where the role of “the crone” included sharing knowledge with other women as well as of the impermanence of human existence and our own destruction.

Escaped Alone was first staged at London’s Royal Court from January to March 2016 and later enjoyed an 11-day run at New York’s BAM (Brooklyn Academy of Music) in February 2017. In her review of the production at the Royal Court, Susannah Clapp of *The Guardian* described the play as “a feminine view of the apocalypse,” and Paul Taylor of *The Independent* noted its “extreme visions of personal and planetary catastrophe.”³⁹⁹ As Sibert points out in her review of the BAM production, the play is not simply a “character study of women of a certain age in particular time and place.”⁴⁰⁰ Nonetheless, the women and their aged bodies are worthy of

³⁹⁹ Susannah Clapp, “*Escaped Alone* review – Small Talk and Everyday Terror,” *The Guardian*, Jan. 31, 2016.; Paul Taylor, “*Escaped Alone*, Royal Court Theatre review: The Performance is a Rich Birthday Present,” *Independent*, Jan. 29, 2016.

⁴⁰⁰ Sibert, “The Back Garden at the End of the World,” 155-159.

study, and as I discussed in Chapter One, it is rare and remarkable to find female characters, particularly female characters over 65 years of age, functioning as the dramatic engine of a play.

As in *The Oldest Profession*, the women in *Escaped Alone* possess individualized personalities that avoid the usual female stereotypes, such as benevolent, wise (and often sexless) mothers and grandmothers, witch-like shrews, or lusty “older women.” Over the course of the play, Churchill’s older women are charming, but reveal hints of personal trauma from ailurophobia to agoraphobia to domestic abuse to murder. Only specifying that “They are all at least seventy,” Churchill does not offer specific character descriptions in the same fashion as Vogel.⁴⁰¹ However, in the original production (both at the Royal Court and BAM), the women were portrayed by well-established British actresses – all close to or over 70 years of age: Deborah Finley, Kika Markham, June Watson, and Linda Bassett. In both performances, the women are dowdily dressed and live working-class lives in a small, ordinary English town.⁴⁰² By traditional Western beauty standards, the women are plain and their bodies show the “weightiness” of age. Yet audiences come and are compelled to see and to listen.

I Went to a Garden Party to Reminisce With My Old Friends⁴⁰³

In *Escaped Alone*, Churchill has deliberately positioned the women in a non-threatening backyard garden. For people living in post World War II United States, the backyard is a private place associated with rest and relaxation. In Britain, the backyard garden is similarly a private and casual space, particularly when compared to the front garden that would be more formal and public. People use the backyard for leisure activities, such as gardening and playing games as

⁴⁰¹ Churchill, *Escaped Alone*, 4.

⁴⁰² Although Churchill does not offer any notes about costuming in the way Vogel does in *The Oldest Profession*, the text makes it clear that these are working class women and costumed according to their social status.

⁴⁰³ Ricky Nelson, “Garden Party,” 1972.

well as spending time with family and close friends. Backyards also suggest a place of “retirement” from both domestic life and the work place. People generally think of backyards as safe spaces. In *Escaped Alone*, the garden fence also suggests safety as well as privacy and seclusion. Alternatively, the fence could indicate that the women are “closed off” or removed from the world at large. Churchill does not specify the type or height of the fence; however, the dialogue indicates its presence and Lena comments that Sally is “lucky” to have a “high wall.”⁴⁰⁴ In the Royal Court production, the fence appears to be a six-foot high wood privacy fence. While the women enjoy the relative safety and seclusion of this enclosed backyard setting, as discussed below, women are not necessarily “closed off” from the wider world. Rather this private space functions as feminine space where the women gather in a community. This space connects to early cultures where women gathered together to share their wisdom.⁴⁰⁵

Although these garden meetings create a circumscribed “female space,” I want to argue that this enclosed backyard is not solely a safe and secure space enforced by the patriarchy, but rather a safe and secure place where women meet with other women to “escape” from destructive forces in the world at large. This feminine space connects the women with earlier cultures where women gathered together to share their wisdom.⁴⁰⁶ In *The Crone: Woman of Age, Wisdom, and Power*, Barbara Walker argues that the feminine “naturalistic world vision was pushed aside by rising patriarchal religions, which were basically anti-nature.”⁴⁰⁷ Churchill’s

⁴⁰⁴ Churchill, *Escaped Alone*, 5.

⁴⁰⁵ Warner, *From the Beast to the Blonde*, 40-41.

⁴⁰⁶ In literature, an enclosed garden space may resonate with the mythic pre-lapsarian garden. Here, the content of the women’s discussion does not support that this garden is one of innocence that pre-dates the fall of man. In fact, based on Churchill’s body of work, this garden is a “woman’s” space to convey a woman’s story (as opposed to a biblical story written and narrated by men).

⁴⁰⁷ Walker, *The Crone: Women of Age, Wisdom, and Power*, Loc. 299.

placement of women in the backyard connects them with ancient cultures and myths that links them, particularly older women, with the “external world.” Walker explains:

The Great Mother was the earth, as well as the sea, the moon, the Milky Way, the elements, mountains, rivers, aniconic, or nonrepresentational, stones, vegetation, women, time, fate, intelligence, birth, love, and death. Her scriptures credited her with the initial creation of the universe and everything in it, as well as the ongoing creation and temporary preservation of each individual creature. She was also the destroying Crone, who brought an end to each life and eventually would destroy the universe itself at doomsday.⁴⁰⁸

Churchill places the women in the backyard garden as way to connect them to the pre-patriarchal environment that associates women with the earth and forces of nature. Churchill reinforces this bond between women and the forces of nature through the voice of Mrs. Jarrett who has the first and last lines of the play as well as being the only woman who addresses the audience with images that describe the destruction of the natural world.

The action of the play begins with Mrs. Jarrett addressing the audience, which establishes the setting of the main action, her role as narrator, and that the women regularly gather in this space:

MRS J I'm walking down the street and there's a door
 In the fence open and inside are three women I've
 seen before.

VI Don't look now but there's someone watching us.

SALLY Is it that woman?

⁴⁰⁸ Walker, *The Crone: Women of Age, Wisdom, and Power*, Loc. 307.

MRS. J So I go in.⁴⁰⁹

Critics have described the women as “good natured,” friendly, and easy-going.⁴¹⁰ As mentioned briefly above, they seemingly know each other well as indicated by their knowledge of each other’s secrets, faults, and phobias. The moments of shared history establish their sense of neighborliness if not intimate friendship. They also trust each other; for example:

VI all have each other's keys because there's no way round and
 anyway I couldn't climb

MRS J unless you lose them

VI no I hang them all on a nail

SALLY in a teapot

VI teapot?

SALLY Elsie puts them in and takes them out⁴¹¹

As the eight backyard scenes unfold, each woman’s particular type of suffering emerges during the course of the warm, casual conversation between confidants. Although Churchill does not specify Mr. Jarrett’s movement in the text, in both the London and U. S. productions directed by James MacDonald, when Mrs. Jarrett addressed the audience with her descriptions of global disaster, she steps out from the garden conversation. When she stepped out, the garden setting was blacked out and she was in total darkness with a glowing neon orange (or copper colored) light framing the stage (see Figure 4). The text gives no indication that the women are aware of Mrs. Jarrett stepping out or what she describes. Thus, the women in the garden are seemingly

⁴⁰⁹ Churchill, *Escaped Alone*, 6.

⁴¹⁰ Sophie Gilbert, “Escaped Alone Finds Comfort at the End of the World,” *The Atlantic*, February 21, 2017. <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2017/02/escaped-alone-caryl-churchill-bam/517191/>

⁴¹¹ Churchill, *Escaped Alone*, 6.

unaware of anything Mrs. Jarrett shares with the audience. However, their lack of commentary on Mrs. Jarrett's descriptions of global disaster does not point to the women's lack of awareness about world events or impending global disaster; their dialogue proves otherwise:

VI don't the comedians do that, they make themselves
SALLY but of course we know they're clever
LENA So in other countries do they have that?
VI jokes about being stupid?
LENA making out it's some neighbor who's
SALLY you always get people hating their neighbors
VI yes the closer they are
SALLY Serbs and Croats, French and English
LENA there's history though
SALLY but anyone everyone outside thinks is the same
VI Catholics and Protestants, Sunni and Shia
MRS J Arsenal and Tottenham⁴¹²

This exchange demonstrates their awareness of global events, politics, history, and soccer rivalries. They may be retired working class women enjoying tea in the backyard, but they are not retired from observing and understanding the world at large.

The exchange also illustrates the intimacy and longevity of the women's friendship as they interrupt each other, finish each other's sentences, and make bad jokes about "stupid people," various ethnic groups, George Bush and "morons."⁴¹³ They talk about dental visits, their

⁴¹² Churchill, *Escaped Alone*, 19. Arsenal and Tottenham refers to a fierce rivalry between the two North London football teams.

⁴¹³ Churchill, *Escaped Alone*, 18-19.

favorite television “stories,” and love affairs while also accounting for and comparing notes about changes in their neighborhood. The sparse, fragmented, and “overlapping dialogue” is, as explained by R. Darren Gobert in *The Theatre of Caryl Churchill*, Churchill’s “signature style” that “weaves a tapestry” of voices.⁴¹⁴ In this case, she creates a chorus of voices who have shared many years in the same neighborhood while upholding traditional female roles within the home and family structure.

Markedly, the women do not discuss their roles as mothers, grandmothers, or wives. Rather they talk about jobs they held outside the home and the cost of that labor. To be clear, these women are not the older versions of Churchill’s *Top Girls* who sacrificed their bodies, their children, and their family or sisterly relationships for professional and social success. These working-class women talk about the toll of their labor on their bodies. For example, Sally misses work in the medical office even with its “endless colds coughs coughs sore throats coughs”; Vi talks about her [aching] “back doing hair on my feet all day,” and Mrs. J briefly mentions her “two new hips” as related to work as a “lollipop lady.”⁴¹⁵ These women (and their newcomer) are neighbors brought together by proximity and class, experiencing day-to-day joys, deep sorrows, and long held secrets. During their conversations about lost jobs, family, and body functions, the women allude to shared confidences and deeper, more painful and traumatic life experiences or their effects.

⁴¹⁴ R. Darren Gobert. *The Theatre of Caryl Churchill, Critical Companions*. (London: Methuen Drama, 2014): 126.

⁴¹⁵ The only piece of personal information that Mrs. Jarrett shares is that she was a “lollipop lady” (a crossing guard); this type of work would have a person on concrete or pavement all day, which takes its toll on a person’s lower extremities. Churchill, *Escaped Alone*, 30-33.

Afternoon Tea

Each of the women except for Mrs. Jarrett shares an individualized moment that reveals her personal story of suffering ranging from Sally's seemingly trivial fear of cats to Lena's agoraphobia to Vi's experience with domestic violence, manslaughter, and imprisonment. Theatre critic Maddy Costa argues that the women are "depressed" from "the effects of attempting to live within patriarchal capitalism."⁴¹⁶ I argue that the physical manifestations the women describe are not related to depression but rather to the accumulation of suffering or insidious trauma over a lifetime as the women have aged.

At the end of Scene Five, the women begin to reveal more personal information, beginning with Sally. As the women discuss different types of birds, drones, and bombs, suggesting the destruction of the natural world as a result of human technology, Sally associates the birds to cats. This connection leads to Sally's monologue about her fear of cats (i.e., ailurophobia):

[I] know it's just cats cats themselves are the horror
because they're cats and I have to keep them out I
have to make sure I never think about a cat because
if I do I have to make sure there's no cats and they
could be anywhere they could get in a window I
have to go around the house and make sure all the
windows are locked and I don't know if I checked
properly I can't remember I was too frightened to
notice I have to go around the windows again I have to

⁴¹⁶ Maddy Costa, "Our Arsenal of Anger, Our Terrible Rage: Wilson, Churchill, Lorde." *Contemporary Theatre Review*, Vol 26 Issue 4 November 2016, 529-547.

go around the windows again and back to the kitchen.⁴¹⁷

The monologue continues with Sally describing her path searching through her house where cats can be anywhere and surprise her at any turn. She describes her fear of encountering cats in a “biscuit tin,” or “in the fridge,” or they “could be in the oven the top oven under the lid of the casserole,” and on and on.⁴¹⁸ For Sally, the unpredictability of cats that might startle her anywhere in her house speaks to her hyper-vigilant behavior. Sally also longs for a “rescuer” when she says, “I need someone to say there’s no cats . . . I need to say do you think there’s any way a cat could have gotten in, and they have to say of course not . . . I have to believe them.”⁴¹⁹

Textually, Sally does not reveal when her fear of cats started nor does she speculate how or why the fear manifested. She does not reveal that she suffered any type of direct trauma or what Root would label a “direct blow” that would explain her behavior which are often found in people suffering from PTSD.⁴²⁰ While Sally’s fear of cats seems innocuous, perhaps even amusing, it does point to her inability to cope with the unpredictability of life, its disruptions, and/or an experience (or experiences) of accumulated trauma in public or private. Thus, it may not be that Sally fears the world, but as a woman, she fears what lurks in the world and threatens her physical and emotional safety. Feminist scholar Sara Ahmed observes, “As girls you learn to

⁴¹⁷ Churchill, *Escaped Alone*, 25.

⁴¹⁸ Churchill, *Escaped Alone*, 26.

⁴¹⁹ Churchill, *Escaped Alone*, 26.

⁴²⁰ According to Root, trauma affects a person’s central nervous system, the injury is permanent, and can manifest at an unspecified time following the trauma. Symptoms include, sensitivity to threatening cues in the environment that occur at three different (non-sequential) intervals: readiness, alertness, and survival. A traumatized person “reorders their internal world to deal with everyday living.” She explains that there is always a “readiness to detect threatening people or events.” Alertness is a “state of heightened vigilance” in response to perceived threats. The survival state occurs when a person is no longer able to “voluntarily assess contextual validity; in this state, a person is “transformed and survival directs all activity.” Behaviors include egocentrism, quickness to anger (fight), social and emotional withdrawal (flight), preservation (rumination), and shutting down (disassociation). Root 246-249.

be cautious and careful in public spaces with that caution and care directed toward those who do not belong, whose presence or proximity is illegitimate. The stranger loiters. The stranger becomes a container of fear.”⁴²¹ For Sally, cats embody the fears (the “stranger that loiters”) out in the world from marginalization, objectification, and dehumanization to more serious physical danger of unwanted touch to sexual assault. Ahmed points out: “You begin to recognize how violence is directed: that being recognized as a girl means being subjected to this pressure, this relentless assault on the senses; a body that comes to fear the touch of a world.”⁴²²

In Scene Seven, Lena, the quietest woman of the group, reveals her agoraphobia that was hinted at in earlier scenes:

some days it would be all right for weeks but then
I'd find it coming down again. You're so far away
from people at the next desk. Email was better than
speaking. It's down now.

Why can't I just?

I just can't.

I sat on the bed this morning and didn't stand up
til lunchtime. The air was too thick. It's hard to
move. It's hard to see why you'd move.⁴²³

Agoraphobia is a panic disorder caused by anxiety that causes the person to feel trapped, helpless, and embarrassed.⁴²⁴ Lena expresses her regret and longing to get out and that she

⁴²¹ Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, Durham: Duke University Press. Kindle. Loc. 519-521.

⁴²² Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, Loc. 568-570.

⁴²³ Churchill, *Escaped Alone*, 32.

⁴²⁴ “Agoraphobia.” Mayo Clinic, accessed April 29, 2019, <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/agoraphobia/symptoms-causes/syc-20355987>.

sometimes does, but “it’s just difficult.”⁴²⁵ For Lena, the world beyond her house and the safety of the backyard garden and the “touch of the world” is paralyzing.⁴²⁶

The most physically violent and emotionally disturbing account comes from Vi. In Scene Two, Vi rouses curiosity when she mentions being “away.” As the newcomer to the garden, Mrs. Jarrett, the narrator and guide through this story, is equally unaware as the audience:

VI I did miss a few things when I was away

MRS. J away was you?

VI six years⁴²⁷

Later, half way through the play in Scene Four, the women joke about political humor leading to comments about “hating neighbors” on a global scale.⁴²⁸ Lena and Vi’s banter about Cain and Abel quickly turn to commentary about “killing.”⁴²⁹ At this point, Vi indicates she trusts or is comfortable enough with Mrs. J enough to share her history:

VI no it’s all right, she can know

MRS J what can I know?

VI tell her, go on

LENA she accidently

SALLY a long time ago

LENA accidently killed her husband

VI not accidently

⁴²⁵ Churchill, *Escaped Alone*, 11.

⁴²⁶ Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, Loc. 568-570.

⁴²⁷ Churchill, *Escaped Alone*, 10.

⁴²⁸ Churchill, *Escaped Alone*, 19.

⁴²⁹ Churchill, *Escaped Alone*, 19.

LENA in self defence⁴³⁰

The women collectively share Vi's story, but when Mrs. Jarrett asks, "how did you do that?" Vi responds, "kitchen knife happened to be in my hand."⁴³¹ Lena comes to Vi's defense commenting it was "just bad luck really," but Vi's next line completes the image: "so when I hit back."⁴³² Vi's comment indicates her husband hit first, but this moment of violence in Vi's life marks her as both a victim of violence and perpetrator. Mrs. Jarrett alerts us to this painful paradox when she replies, "so that was all right was it, self defence."⁴³³ Mrs. Jarrett's remark can be read as an affirmation, a type of reassuring remark of support; it can also be read as inquiry or indictment of Vi's action.

In the final moments of the play, the discussion returns to Vi and the lasting effect of that violent moment in her life:

VI I can't have a kitchen. I can't love a kitchen any more, if you've killed someone in the kitchen you're not going to love that kitchen. I lost that flat, even the kitchen where I am now reminds me of that kitchen; completely different colour, the cooker's on the other wall, and the window, but maybe it's the smell of food cooking, it's meat does, cooking meat, the blood if it's rare, we don't often have meat, when you've cut somebody and seen the

⁴³⁰ Churchill, *Escaped Alone*, 19.

⁴³¹ Churchill, *Escaped Alone*, 20.

⁴³² Churchill, *Escaped Alone*, 21.

⁴³³ Churchill, *Escaped Alone*, 21.

blood you don't feel the same.⁴³⁴

As Vi continues to share this olfactory flashback with her friends in the garden, her description of her suffering, her pain, and her violence speaks to how women experience violence within their own home and seemingly safe spaces. Vi does not offer any detailed accounts or hints of the type, duration, or frequency of the violence in her home. All we know is of this once instance when she “hit back.” In fact, details of the violence perpetrated against her are irrelevant (except perhaps to defense attorneys). Marriage vows do not endow one spouse with the right to harm the other. Nor do marriage vows obligate a person to endure violence perpetrated against them. Here, the myth of love, and family, and marriage breaks down. It is a reminder that women are more likely to experience violence not from a random attack perpetrated by a stranger (or a cat) startling them or out and about in the world at large, but rather women are more likely to experience violence at the hands of someone in their own home – someone who might profess to love them and care for them.⁴³⁵ Vi's story speaks not only to her personal experience as a victim of domestic violence and as a perpetrator of violence, but it is also emblematic of the violence many women experience within their families, within their homes, and within the world at large.

With the exception of Vi's incident of domestic abuse, the characters in *Escaped Alone* do not reveal specific events or detailed incidents of violence (“direct blows”).⁴³⁶ We do know and statistics support that women regularly experience multiple forms of violence and trauma – direct, indirect, and insidious. Women need not know specifically what happened to Sally, Lena,

⁴³⁴ Churchill, *Escaped Alone*, 40.

⁴³⁵ United Nations. Second World Assembly on Ageing: Madrid. *Political Declaration and Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing*. New York: United Nations. 2002; United Nations. Division of Social Policy and Development. Department of Economic and Social Affairs. *Neglect, Abuse, and Violence Against Older Women*. New York, NY: United Nations. 2013.

⁴³⁶ Root, “Reconstructing the Impact of Trauma on the Personality,” 238.

or Vi because women know. Ahmed points out “We [women] all have different biographies of violence, entangled as they are with so many aspects of ourselves: things that happen because of how we are seen; and how we are not seen. You find a way of giving an account of what happens, of living with what happens.”⁴³⁷ Here, the “account of what happens” with these women manifests in their bodies as physical symptoms from fear of cats (aurliphobia) to fear of entering the world (agoraphobia) to battered women who turn to violence. As Bechtel and Van der Kolk remind us, trauma is not repressed (in the mind) but rather the body remembers.

Sally, Vi, and Lena’s stories fit early, more drastic understandings of trauma but Churchill also signals more mundane, often indeterminate causes of trauma. The play encompasses a range of symptoms and behaviors that reflect the impossible task medical professionals have also faced as they sought to discover one cause or one “cure” for the disturbances they observed in different subjects. As discussed in Chapter Two, the shifting and expanding accounts of trauma including everyday and insidious trauma further expand its definition but also the difficulty identifying symptom and accurately making a diagnosis as well as treatment. In *Escaped Alone*, the women discuss an array of experiences – from the unnamed events to the confession of murder that now manifest in Sally’s fear of cats, Vi’s inability to rise from bed or go outside, and Lena’s fear of kitchen appliances and the revulsion triggered by smelling raw meat – that do not simply define trauma as originating in a single violence or wound that once revealed in its fullness will set the survivor on a path to recovery. Instead, the garden conversations gradually generate the imagined vision of a multiplicity of, an assemblage of, mundane and not-so-mundane everyday events that silently, cumulatively, create the effect that Root and Brown theorize as insidious trauma. These stories and the associated experiences

⁴³⁷ Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, Loc. 489.

enlarge the “archive of feeling” as proposed by Cvetkovich, so that we might have a deeper, more expansive understanding of trauma.

If feminism is, as Ahmed observes, “about bringing people into the room,”⁴³⁸ Churchill’s body of work has demonstrated this feminist idea by bringing women together around dinner tables, in bathrooms, and gathered in backyards to talk about their lives.⁴³⁹ In this instance, the women gather to visit for afternoon tea illustrating women offering understanding and support for each other in old age and the shared knowledge of pain, violence, and trauma that accumulates over time. Without needing to recount their individual instances or experiences of pain or violence they understand what it is to experience life and move through the world in a female body. Over many years, Sally, Lena, and Vi have held each other’s confidences and are ultimately supportive of each other, and they find ways to create moments of levity and harmony. This harmony is highlighted in Scene Six where Churchill’s stage directions note: “*All sing. Sally, Vi, and Lena in harmony. Mrs. Jarrett joins in the melody. They are singing for themselves in the garden, not performing for the audience.*”⁴⁴⁰ This “musical interlude” differs from the “performance” of the dance interludes in Vogel’s play (as discussed in Chapter Three). The women in *The Oldest Profession* perform in the dance interludes as an expression of empowerment and of the self for the pleasure of their friends and for their audience. Their performance is a way of integrating the past with the present as well as celebrating the body and transcendence from life to death. In *Escaped Alone* this brief scene of the women singing

⁴³⁸ Gobert, 126.

⁴³⁹ Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, Loc.115

⁴⁴⁰ Churchill, *Escaped Alone*, 28. In an interview with Chris Wiedgand, actor Linda Bassett explains that Churchill does not specify a song to sing in the text. Bassett shared that the actors in the Royal Court production “went through loads” before deciding on “Da Doo Ron Ron” by The Crystals (as suggested to them by Churchill). Chris Wiegand, “Sunshine and Terrible Rage,” *The Guardian*, February 10, 2016. <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2016/feb/10/linda-bassett-caryl-churchill-escaped-alone-royal-court>

together functions dramaturgically to offer a moment of lightness between two of Mrs. Jarrett's direct addresses describing apocalyptic horror. The scene illustrates that between moments of horrific events and personal pain, we find moments of human connectedness and joy. We find moments to "escape" together.

I Only Am Escaped Alone to Tell Thee

Churchill structures the play in eight episodes comprising easy conversation among friends and difficult disclosure of fears, phobias, and violent experiences both as victims and perpetrator. Mrs. Jarrett's direct addresses to the audience that conclude each episode disrupt the conversation between the women and disrupt the time within the play as well as the time outside of the play. These disruptions are a type of direct and indirect trauma for the reader or spectator that place the audience both in (performance) time and out of it (the quotidian). On one hand the spectator or reader is drawn into the women's relationship as it unfolds before us, and on the other hand, they need to struggle to follow along and make sense of the juxtaposition of the safe backyard and the cascade of violent images. Form is content as the audience experiences a type of insidious trauma as they experience moments of peacefulness disrupted by moments of apocalyptic horror. While the dialogue itself does not appear to develop any particular plot or storyline, it may be that Churchill's epigraph to the published script provides useful guidance to meanings that underlie this action and produce the play's specific resonances—some of which may be more available to individual audience members based on their own life experiences of violence and trauma.

In the published text of Churchill's play, the title of the play is found within its epigraph, which states: "I only am escaped alone to tell thee."⁴⁴¹ Beneath this quoted line is printed: "*Book*

⁴⁴¹ Churchill, *Escaped Alone*, np.

of *Job*, *Moby Dick*.”⁴⁴² These two referenced texts both contain the quoted line “I only am escaped alone to tell thee” within the narrative. In the prologue to the book of *Job*, the sentence is repeated four times by each messenger who comes to Job warning of personal catastrophe. In Melville’s *Moby Dick*, the story’s narrator and survivor Ishmael speaks the same line after surviving catastrophe. While none of the characters in Churchill’s narrative utter the line, the epigraph supports critics who have described Mrs. Jarrett as a prophet similar to those who come in the prologue of the book of *Job* to warn him of the disastrous losses to come or less directly connected to the referenced texts, as a “Cassandra-type figure,” predicting public and private catastrophe/destruction of a society.⁴⁴³ These different references support the position of Bonnie Marranca who identifies Mrs. Jarrett as “the mind of the play, a figure both in and beyond the central dramatic action,” announcing “the new world order in a prolix catalogue of images and unknown syntax that run through her consciousness.”⁴⁴⁴ I agree with Marranca to the extent that “Mrs. Jarrett” is the voice of the play and could be read as a prophet, predicting impending doom. However, I believe Mrs. Jarrett’s function is more significant than simply being a messenger as in the book of *Job* or witness (like Ishmael) as in Melville’s *Moby Dick*. I argue that Churchill’s unassuming story of four older women enjoying afternoon tea is one of personal and environmental trauma with the voice of Mrs. Jarrett displacing the male narrator with one of feminine rage.

The epigraphs, though brief, unlock how the play expands the view of the aged female, especially as figured through Mrs. Jarrett as she moves between sites, transiting the liminal space between the everyday and the extraordinary. Not unlike the messengers in the book of *Job* or

⁴⁴² Churchill, *Escaped Alone*, np.

⁴⁴³ Susannah Clapp, “*Escaped Alone* review,” *The Guardian*, Jan. 31, 2016.; Paul Taylor, “*Escaped Alone*, Royal Court Theatre review: Jan. 29, 2016.

⁴⁴⁴ Marranca, 116.

Melville's Ishmael, she both reports on catastrophic events and witnesses stories of human suffering as part of the conversation with the other women in the garden. These accounts of devastation and human suffering relate to the experience of trauma individually, locally, and globally that humans suffer throughout life. These undercurrents in Churchill's composition connect the play to a mythos of patriarchal culture by reference to the book of Job and *Moby Dick*, which are at once both masculine and patriarchal. Using the feminine or matriarchal voice of Mrs. Jarrett as the messenger/reporter or prophet/seer, Churchill displaces the male archetype with a female protagonist and mythos embodied by the figure of the "destroying crone." This figure, as Walker describes, held the power to bring "an end to each life and eventually would destroy the universe itself at doomsday, only to prepare a new creation in her next cycle."⁴⁴⁵

In the book of Job, the phrase "I only am escaped alone to tell thee" appears four times in the prologue as four different messengers come to Job with their warnings of impending personal catastrophic loss.⁴⁴⁶ Written primarily in poetic form, the book of Job is an example of Hebrew

⁴⁴⁵ Walker, *The Crone: Women of Age, Wisdom, and Power*, Loc. 310.

⁴⁴⁶ Job, "Prologue," *Book of Job*, eBible.org. <https://eBible.org/kjv/Job.htm>

1:13 And there was a day when his sons and his daughters *were* eating and drinking wine in their eldest brother's house: 1:14 And there came a messenger unto Job, and said, The oxen were plowing, and the asses feeding beside them: 1:15 And the Sabeans fell *upon them*, and took them away; yea, they have slain the servants with the edge of the sword; and I only am escaped alone to tell thee. 1:16 While he *was* yet speaking, there came also another, and said, The fire of God is fallen from heaven, and hath burned up the sheep, and the servants, and consumed them; and I only am escaped alone to tell thee. 1:17 While he *was* yet speaking, there came also another, and said, The Chaldeans made out three bands, and fell upon the camels, and have carried them away, yea, and slain the servants with the edge of the sword; and I only am escaped alone to tell thee. 1:18 While he *was* yet speaking, there came also another, and said, Thy sons and thy daughters *were* eating and drinking wine in their eldest brother's house: 1:19 And, behold, there came a great wind from the wilderness, and smote the four corners of the house, and it fell upon the young men, and they are dead; and I only am escaped alone to tell thee. 1:20 Then Job arose, and rent his mantle, and shaved his head, and fell down upon the ground, and worshipped, 1:21 And said, Naked came I out of my mother's womb, and naked shall I return thither: the LORD gave, and the LORD hath taken away;

wisdom literature that most scholars agree is written as a parable or allegory;⁴⁴⁷ others, however, argue that it could be an historical text. Its original author remains unknown. This ancient text is one of the oldest and most influential biblical stories people of the Jewish and Christian faiths have relied on with regard to enduring human suffering and maintaining the purity of faith. Traditionally, the Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) are considered patriarchal and non-egalitarian.⁴⁴⁸ Historically, in these religions men hold the power to make theological and legal interpretations and women are placed in subjugated positions.

Likewise, Herman Melville's *Moby Dick, or The Whale* presents a "masculine" voice. This late 19th century American novel, despite earlier negative critical reception, has become one of the most read and studied poetic epics in American literature. In short, the narrative follows the quest of captain Ahab aboard his whaling ship (the *Pequod*) to kill the evil white whale (Moby Dick) in an act of revenge. The story is told through the narrator Ishmael who is the only survivor of Ahab's quest. The text is exceedingly complex with images and objects that hold multiple meanings. While scholars do not agree on one meaning of this dense text, Melville scholar Leland S. Person points out that they do "generally agree that *Moby Dick* is a man's book and that Melville's representation of sea-faring manhood inscribes a patriarchal, anti-female ideology that reinforces nineteenth-century gender separatism."⁴⁴⁹ It is also worth noting here that throughout the story the reader is reminded that the *Pequod* and its crew are destined for catastrophe.

blessed be the name of the LORD. 1:22 In all this Job sinned not, nor charged God foolishly.

⁴⁴⁷ Janis Stout, "Melville's Use of the Book of Job." *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 25, no. 1 (1970), 69.

⁴⁴⁸ John L. Esposito and Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, *Daughters of Abraham: Feminist Thought in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*. University Press of Florida, 2001.

⁴⁴⁹ Leland S. Person, "Gender and Sexuality," *A Companion to Herman Melville*, Ed. Wyn Kelley. Malden, MA: Blackwell (2006): 231-246.

In *Melville's Bibles* Ilana Pardes distinguishes Melville's Ishmael from the messengers in the book of Job. Pardes explains that in Job the messengers are "harbingers of evil tiding" of the "catastrophe to come."⁴⁵⁰ The messengers arrive in the prologue in rapid succession as the "opening note" of the collapse of Job's world and his struggle with God.⁴⁵¹ Conversely, in Melville's *Moby Dick*, Ishmael is the only survivor of the *Pequod* and assumes the role of narrator of the story and its witness. Ishmael's declaration comes at the end of a story that is not and cannot be brief. Pardes explains that "the final fall of the *Pequod* opens up in retrospect a whole chain of earlier disasters that need to be recorded."⁴⁵² She argues that Melville "underscores the change in Job" and echoes his cry to "bear witness to the unjust wounds of many in other innocent sufferers whose voices remain unheard" through Ishmael's witness of Ahab's suffering.⁴⁵³ The distinction is that in one text the prophets warn Job of the suffering to come and the narrative then recounts Job's struggle to understand God, faith, and justice. In the other, Ishmael reports on the human suffering that has already occurred and the narrative conveys his struggle to understand the many meanings of life.

As I argued earlier in this chapter, the naturalistic setting of Churchill's work alludes to the naturalistic religion of the "Great Mother," the life-giver and life destroyer, who was pushed aside by patriarchal religions of the "Great Father."⁴⁵⁴ According to Walker, "The religion of the Great Mother was theologically very different from that of the Heavenly Father" in that it was more closely connected with the earth and naturalistic elements.⁴⁵⁵ Walker explains that the

⁴⁵⁰ Ilana Pardes, *Melville's Bibles*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008

⁴⁵¹ Pardes, *Melville's Bibles*, 32.

⁴⁵² Pardes, *Melville's Bibles*, 33.

⁴⁵³ Pardes, *Melville's Bibles*, 33.

⁴⁵⁴ Walker, *The Crone: Women of Age, Wisdom, and Power*, 249.

⁴⁵⁵ Walker, *The Crone: Women of Age, Wisdom, and Power*, 306.

Great Mother “introduced life” as well as the ability to destroy it to create a new life cycle.⁴⁵⁶ Here, Mrs. Jarrett presents a female voice that pre-dates patriarchal storytelling in works such as the book of Job and Melville’s *Moby Dick*. Similar to the messengers in Job and *Moby Dick*’s Ishmael, Mrs. Jarrett enters the narrative from outside the garden to describe catastrophic events and has been observing or “watching.”⁴⁵⁷ Mrs. Jarrett’s position as an outsider or newcomer is similar to the messengers in Job who come from afar to warn Job and similar to Ishmael who newly arrives in town to join the crew of the *Pequod*. She is also the only character referred to using a formal name perhaps suggesting an elevated status or respect. Walker explains “She [The Great Mother] was also the destroying Crone, who brought an end to each life and eventually would destroy the universe itself at doomsday.”⁴⁵⁸

Moreover, as mentioned earlier, Mrs. Jarrett “escapes” from the main action of the play when she directly addresses the audience with descriptions of planetary destruction at the end of each scene. This dramaturgical move to have Mrs. Jarrett address the audience was reinforced in the original production (both at the Royal Court and at BAM) by having her step out of the backyard garden setting to address the audience and then step back in to backyard setting. Her direct addresses to the audience and the blocking choices distinguish Mrs. Jarrett from the other women not only as narrator or voice of the play, but also as someone who watches and reports. This idea of her as someone who watches over others is also hinted at when she comments about her work as a “lollipop lady.”⁴⁵⁹

⁴⁵⁶ Walker, *The Crone: Women of Age, Wisdom, and Power*, Loc. 310.

⁴⁵⁷ As Vi points out at the beginning of the play, “there’s someone watching us.” Churchill, *Escaped Alone*, 5.

⁴⁵⁸ Quoted above on page 112.

⁴⁵⁹ Churchill, *Escaped Alone*, 31.

Mrs. Jarrett's descriptions begin with the destruction of the land and the cost of human life, "Four hundred thousand tons of rock paid for by senior executives split off the hillside to smash through roofs, each fragment onto the designated child's head" and "survivors underground developed skills of feeding of the dead."⁴⁶⁰ In Scene Two, she describes the destructive force of water: "baths overflowed," "Rivers flowed backward," and "walls of water came from the sea."⁴⁶¹ She later talks of human illness, hunger, and more illness. In Scene Seven (the penultimate scene of the play), she describes how "fire broke out" and "fires were lit to stop the fires."⁴⁶² This last description of an all consuming fire where "Houses exploded" and "Some shot flaming swans, some shot their children," indicates some type of finality.⁴⁶³ Mrs. Jarrett states, "Finally, the wind drove the fire to the ocean, where wind made survivors faint."⁴⁶⁴ Here, as in earlier descriptions of destruction, Mrs. Jarrett mentions survivors. However, in this last description she indicates both finality as well as a type of rebirth from the destruction. It is not clear if she is reporting destruction or prophesying catastrophe and perhaps it is purposely ambiguous so as to draw connection to both the book of Job and *Moby Dick*.

Mrs. Jarrett's descriptions of global apocalyptic horror do not seem at all related to a question of faith in a just God or retributory justice (as in the book of Job and *Moby Dick*). In fact, the text does not offer any evidence to believe it is anything other than secular without any religious or spiritual meaning. If anything the work is political, based on its commentary on socio-political matters. If I had to categorize the text at all, I would argue that it is socialist and feminist in that it seems to call upon the idea of the "Great Mother" described by Walker

⁴⁶⁰ Churchill, *Escaped Alone*, 8.

⁴⁶¹ Churchill, *Escaped Alone*, 12

⁴⁶² Churchill, *Escaped Alone*, 37.

⁴⁶³ Churchill, *Escaped Alone*, 37.

⁴⁶⁴ Churchill, *Escaped Alone*, 37

(above). This position is supported by the recurring socialist feminist themes in Churchill's body of work. Feminist scholar Elaine Aston explains:

Churchill remains fiercely opposed, as her theatre attests, to the nightmarish intensification, rather than diminution, of capitalist greed, violence, terror and damage that Churchillian landscapes now point to as occurring on a global scale. Hers is a radical theatre voice, steadfast in its creative and political address of the dangerous consequences of a failure to believe in and to realize more egalitarian and less damaged futures.⁴⁶⁵

These ideas are reinforced through Mrs. Jarrett at the end of play. As the narrator or voice of the story, she has the opening and closing lines to the play. She is also the only woman who does not share a personal story of suffering or trauma. Instead, in the play's final moments, Mrs. Jarrett repeats the words "terrible rage" 25 times. *Contemporary Theatre Review's* Maddy Costa describes that in performance Bassett's delivery of the repeated term was ordinary, but "gathered force like a hurricane wind."⁴⁶⁶ Other theatre scholars who attended the London and New York productions also report that the lines "terrible rage" are not delivered with any force.⁴⁶⁷ And that is the point: Mrs. Jarrett does not need to physically rage. As the "Great Mother" marginalized by the patriarchy, she now reports on the global destruction at their hands. She has sat with her sisters listening to their descriptions of loss, pain, suffering, and the bodily manifestation of their

⁴⁶⁵ Elaine Aston and British Council, *Caryl Churchill*. Devon: Liverpool University Press, 2010, xv-xvi.

⁴⁶⁶ In her article, "Our Arsenal of Anger, Our Terrible Rage: Wilson, Churchill, Lorde." Maddy Costa reports that by "repetition 19 I was nauseous, in tears and ready to shout along in solidarity."

⁴⁶⁷ I want note here that the three people I talked with who saw the show at the Royal Court in London or at BAM each reported that the repetition of "terrible rage," was not delivered with rage (and in line with Costa's account). Interestingly, two of the individuals were men who did not report any affect from that moment. Conversely, the women who attended the performance reported similar to Costa that it is one of the most moving moments in the play.

trauma. She dramatizes the rage that simmers beneath the surface, particularly for women. As Costa points out, “historically, it’s [rage] often been dismissed as hysteria because we [women] are given little space” for the rage amid all that we do.⁴⁶⁸ Rage is an unacceptable form of expression for women and even more so for older women. Humanities and age studies scholar Kathleen Woodward addresses this in her article “Against Wisdom: the Social Politics of Anger and Ageing,” when she talks about “damaging effects of cultural prohibition of anger in older people in the United States.”⁴⁶⁹ Woodward argues that we need to “rewrite the cultural script” to include a “social emotion”⁴⁷⁰ for older people to “describe the anger associated with ageism.”⁴⁷¹

In this peaceful backyard, where the older women are “put out to garden,” Churchill’s radical voice has given us the landscape of the personal damage – the damage sustained by the body – and the rage. Mrs. Jarrett and the older women gathered in Sally’s backyard are not successful “top girls” who Churchill’s Marlene might have at her dinner table. They are not the women who sacrificed to make it to the top in their profession. If anything they are the women caught in the gap; those like Churchill’s Joyce – ordinary women who carry the weightiness and the damage of life without the means or power or voice to rage.

Conclusion

Churchill’s *Escaped Alone* subverts patriarchal paradigms in at least three ways: 1) the older female figures subvert (or “escape”) the decline narrative of age to offer an “age narrative”

⁴⁶⁸ Maddy Costa, “Our Arsenal of Anger, Our Terrible Rage: Wilson, Churchill, Lorde.” *Contemporary Theatre Review* 26, no. 4 (November 2016): 529-547.

⁴⁶⁹ Kathleen Woodward, “Against Wisdom,” 187.

⁴⁷⁰ Woodward relies on Vaclav Havel who she explains “speaks of what he has called ‘something like a social emotion,’ a judgment akin to a feeling of aversion to unfair social inequities, a feeling he experienced early in his life as ‘an antagonism toward undeserved privileges, toward unjust social barriers, toward any kind of so-called higher standing predetermined by birth or by anything else, toward any humiliation of human dignity.’” Woodward, “Against Wisdom,” 209.

⁴⁷¹ Woodward, “Against Wisdom,” 209.

where women are at the center of the action and resist the label of “cultural refuse” to present a view of older women as “cultural treasures,” 2) the older female characters offer conceptions of trauma that are not limited to medical or pathological formulations,⁴⁷² and 3) the older female figures present an “age narrative” where the “Great Mother” or feminine view of suffering, pain, and destruction includes women, their bodies, and their spirit as well as the earth and all of its inhabitants. Using her signature style, Churchill takes a feminist perspective that once again places women – this time aged women – at the center of the action and in community. The older women of *Escaped Alone* offer stories about their lives that contribute to an archive that reinforces an approach to aging and trauma that supports reconciliation, community, and connectedness. This choice to have four women over 70 share their personal stories of fear, pain, and destruction as well as share the imagery that comments on global destruction that falls in line with pre-patriarchal cultures where women – particularly older women – were valued, seen, and heard. This expanded view of the aged female figure escapes the master narrative of decline by juxtaposing images of decomposition, decay, and human suffering with friendship, dignity, respect, the human spirit, and the importance of harmony and interconnectedness.

⁴⁷² Leys, *Trauma: A Genealogy*, 6-7.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

*Once I was so afraid of old age, of death,
That I refused to let myself see old people in the streets—they did not exist for me
Now I sit for hours. . . and watch and marvel. . .*
-- Jane Somers in *The Diary of a Good Neighbor* by Doris Lessing⁴⁷³

In the introduction to this project, I called upon images of older women from Congreve's Lady Wishfort to Beckett's Winnie to Letts's Violet Weston as a reminder that theatre has always offered images of age and ageing for both women and men. As I briefly mentioned in Chapter One, Anna R. Harpin reminded us in her 2012 "The Lives of Our Mad Mothers" essay that "Older people and old age is not invisible in literature and philosophy; rather they form a troubling untroubled presence."⁴⁷⁴ This "troubling presence" is in large part due to the anxiety related to death and dying, but the physical presence of the aged body is an unwelcome reminder of ageing and being old and the loss of "social (and sexual) visibility."⁴⁷⁵ It is as Lessing points out, our "fear of being like them."⁴⁷⁶ Simone de Beauvoir observed this fear and this "Othering" in *Coming of Age* where she recognized that it has long been the "social norm to treat the elderly as 'outcasts'" and called for an end to the "conspiracy of silence" surrounding the majority view that once older people outlived their "usefulness" they ceased to exist.⁴⁷⁷ For de Beauvoir, the social "Othering" of the aged related directly to productivity, she writes: "As for humanitarian feelings, they do not enter into the account at all. The human working of stock is only of interest for as long as it is profitable. When it is no longer profitable it is tossed aside."⁴⁷⁸

⁴⁷³ Lessing, *The Diary of a Good Neighbor*, 237.

⁴⁷⁴ Harpin, "Mad Mothers," 68.

⁴⁷⁵ Small, *The Long Life*.

⁴⁷⁶ Lessing, *The Diary of a Good Neighbor*.

⁴⁷⁷ De Beauvoir, *The Coming of Age*, 2.

⁴⁷⁸ De Beauvoir, *The Coming of Age*, 6.

In theatre, where viewing the body is unavoidable, playwrights have used the aged body and older persons to represent feebleness, disability, death, and generally speaking a trope reaching back to antiquity that views ageing and the aged body solely as decline. Beckett absurdly illustrated this systematic “disposal” or discarding of older persons in *Endgame* by positioning Nell and Nagg in ashbins at stage left. This idea of older persons as disposable or as “cultural refuse”⁴⁷⁹ reinforces ageist thinking in Anglo-American culture and contributes to everyday or insidious trauma that some older people experience as they age. My goal for this project was to examine the idea of ageing and ageism⁴⁸⁰ in Anglo-American culture and offer expanded conceptions of trauma that might include what older people, specifically older women, experience as they age. From there, I turned to theatre to seek images of older women in contemporary works to examine plays where the decline narrative might still be in place, but also to look for instances where playwrights subvert it to offer expanded views of older women. I began with Albee’s *Three Tall Women* not only because it offers such a clear peak-and-decline narrative, but also because it offered me a popular and canonical work to analyze as a counter-examples or “non-declinist” narrative as urged by Fuchs.⁴⁸¹

To that end, I first pointed out how *Three Tall Women* upholds this patriarchal paradigm where age and the aged body are presented not only as in decline but also as literally, physically collapsed. Conversely, I also argue that *Three Tall Women* can be viewed as an example of older women demonstrating strength and resilience throughout life. This twofold view of a canonical

⁴⁷⁹ Brooks, “Performing Ageing/Performing Crisis,” 233.

⁴⁸⁰ In *Ending Ageism, or How Not to Shoot Old People*, Gullette clarifies the distinction between aging and ageism, “the two slippery concepts are often confused. The difference between them needs to become rudimentary. Let us devise a new consensual definition of “aging” that fixes it more squarely in culture. Whatever else it may be, aging is the process that serves as the trigger for ageism.” Margaret Morganroth Gullette, *Ending Ageism, or How Not to Shoot Old People* (Kindle Locations 169-171). Rutgers University Press. Kindle, loc. 160-171.

⁴⁸¹ Fuchs, “Estrangement,” 72.

work is foundational to the discussion of everyday and insidious trauma as well as illustrating how the work resists or subverts the peak-and-decline narrative. It is also significant in that the resonance or “looping” between actor and audience both intellectually and in embodied relationships holds the potential to generate empathy. Discussing this play first helps to explore the idea of trauma as it relates to aging in Vogel’s *The Oldest Profession* and Churchill’s *Escaped Alone* where playwrights place older women front and center on the stage to drive the dramatic action. These plays are significant in how they represent expanded views of older women and their experience of everyday or insidious trauma as well as how even in decline or aged bodies the characters show/demonstrate instances of resistance and resilience. Moreover, all of the plays with older women at the center of the dramatic action are crucial to dispelling ageism in our culture, which the World Health Organization has identified as a “prevalent and insidious problem” threatening public health.⁴⁸²

This societal view of older persons as a burden rather than robust, valuable, and contributing members of society persists. Social workers have long pointed out that, “older people are stigmatized and socially excluded on the basis of age” and that in the West older persons are devalued and rejected in society.⁴⁸³ This oppression creates human targets ripe for acts of violence, and in turn, leads to elder abuse and other violations of individual human rights where the stakes/the consequences are low to non-existent. These views, acts of violence, and violation(s) of rights apply not only to older persons individually but occur with such frequency and pervasiveness that older people have become a “vulnerable” class requiring extra protection

⁴⁸² Paula Span, “Ageism: A ‘Prevalent and Insidious’ Health Threat,” *The New York Times*, April 26, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/26/health/ageism-elderly-health.html>

⁴⁸³ Christine Walsh, Jennifer Olsen, Jenny Ploeg, Lynn Lohfeld, and Harriet MacMillan, “Elder Abuse and Oppression: Voices of Marginalized Elders,” in *Journal of Elder Abuse & Neglect*, (2010) 23: 1, 17.42, 19-20.

under the law. Thus, this disempowerment has a direct link to ageism as the socially constructed mechanism that “robs elders of power and makes older adults vulnerable to abuse.”⁴⁸⁴ In 2016, Ban-Ki Moon, the UN secretary-general addressed the oppression, if not abuse, as “a global social issue, which affects the health and human rights of millions of older persons around the world” and asserted that “ending it was crucial to the international community.”⁴⁸⁵

These human rights violations based on age are particularly egregious for women. In 2002, the international community gathered at the Second World Assembly of Ageing in Madrid and recognized that the matter of aging was a worldwide problem not only in developing countries but also in developed countries.⁴⁸⁶ The Madrid International Plan of Action on Aging (MIPAA) recognized that older women faced a “greater risk of physical and psychological abuse due to discriminatory societal attitudes and the non-realization of human rights for women”; a 2012 review of the MIPAA report revealed that awareness of the problem had grown, but that the neglect, abuse, and violence against older adults, specifically women, had increased.⁴⁸⁷ That same year, the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA) and Division for Social Policy and Development (DSPD) provided an overview of the current state of affairs: their goal was to identify forms of abuse and violence perpetrated against older women, dispel myths, understand health implications and risk factors, and identify gaps in research as well as report on recent qualitative studies. Their conclusion called for more data on evidence-based

⁴⁸⁴ Walsh, Olsen, Ploeg, Lohfeld, and MacMillan, “Elder Abuse and Oppression,” 19-20.

⁴⁸⁵ See United Nations webpage: www.un.org/elderabuse.

<https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/blog/2016/06/on-world-day-ban-calls-for-ending-elder-abuse-as-a-pathway-towards-global-goals/>

⁴⁸⁶ In 1995, the global population of people over 60 was 542 million; the UN predicts that figure will be 1.2 billion by 2025. See UN webpage: www.un.org/elderabuse.

⁴⁸⁷ United Nations. Division of Social Policy and Development. Department of Economic and Social Affairs. *Neglect, Abuse, and Violence Against Older Women*. New York, NY: United Nations. 2013, 1.

practices for prevention and intervention and a review of all laws related to neglect, abuse and violence against older women.⁴⁸⁸ In April 2018, following the American Society for Aging’s (ASA) 2018 Conference, *Forbes* reported that older women are living longer, earning less, and more likely to live in poverty compared to their male counterparts.⁴⁸⁹

In *Keeping Faith with Human Rights*, ecumenicist professor Linda Hogan discusses how the arts can help contribute to human rights discourse, citing that “human rights norms have yet to be fully embedded in cultures and practices of societies worldwide” and that the arts can help “bring this to task.”⁴⁹⁰ She proposes that the arts can “capture” thresholds of human dignity, particularly where “philosophical arguments” fail. She also maintains that “the arts will not allow us to sanitize or sacralize the use of violence, even for worthy ends, and will require us to confront more honestly its destructive nature.”⁴⁹¹ She specifically cites the work of Seamus Heaney who insists poetry holds the “possibility of redress” and agrees that Robert Frost’s “Directive” is an example of “the way poetry brings human existence to a fuller life”; it holds the “potential to transform the familiar into something rich and exotic that enables us to absorb and re-experience loss.”⁴⁹² Hogan also highlights painters, such as Goya, Picasso, Botero and other poets, such as Pablo Neruda and Maya Angelou as artists whose work holds the potential to move humans from the quotidian to the transcendent. Relying on Lynn Hunt’s 2008 work in *Inventing Human Rights: a History*, Hogan maintains that literature – the storytelling process – “articulates new kinds of individual experiences, which in turn make possible new kinds of

⁴⁸⁸ United Nations. Division of Social Policy and Development. Department of Economic and Social Affairs. *Neglect, Abuse, and Violence Against Older Women*.

⁴⁸⁹ Kerry Hannon, “The Financial Challenges Facing Older Women,” *Forbes*, April 12, 2018 <https://www.forbes.com/sites/nextavenue/2018/04/12/the-financial-challenges-facing-older-women/#76f695911560>

⁴⁹⁰ Hogan, *Keeping Faith with Human Rights*, 182.

⁴⁹¹ Hogan, *Keeping Faith with Human Rights*, 183.

⁴⁹² Hogan, *Keeping Faith with Human Rights*, 178-180.

social and political concepts.”⁴⁹³ The process also strengthens the “symbiotic relationship between the concept of individual autonomy and the idea of human rights.”⁴⁹⁴

In other words, for both Hogan and Hunt literature develops the human capacity of empathy. As I discuss in Chapter Two (and elsewhere above) theatre scholar Roger Bechtel argues that the embodied performance of trauma suggests how theatre can create empathy. In researching Troika Ranch’s *loopdiver* performance, Bechtel observed that the embodied trauma was “shared” with the audience who experience “an emotional affect connected with the observed movement.”⁴⁹⁵ He hypothesized that the “bodies of trauma onstage impact the bodies in the audience” and concluded that the experience of trauma through live performance “might enlarge our empathic capacity.”⁴⁹⁶

Social workers have long pointed out that, “older people are stigmatized and socially excluded on the basis of age” and that in the West older persons are devalued and rejected in society.⁴⁹⁷ Thus, this disempowerment has a direct link to ageism – the socially constructed mechanism that “robs elders of power and makes older adults vulnerable to abuse.”⁴⁹⁸ Ageism is “entrenched in our social institutions” and contributes to systemic issues, such as a lack of government assistance for health programs (compared to those for children), affordable and safe housing.⁴⁹⁹ As a result, the needs of the elderly fall to families, which in turn contributes to the sense of “burden” that perpetuates the cycle of family violence.⁵⁰⁰ Thus, empowering the marginalized and oppressed voices of older persons will take increasing awareness and social

⁴⁹³ Hogan, *Keeping Faith with Human Rights*, 181.

⁴⁹⁴ Hogan, *Keeping Faith with Human Rights*, 181.

⁴⁹⁵ Bechtel, “The Body of Trauma,” 77–93.

⁴⁹⁶ Bechtel, “The Body of Trauma,” 84.

⁴⁹⁷ Walsh, Olsen, Ploeg, Lohfeld, and MacMillan, “Elder Abuse and Oppression,” 19-20.

⁴⁹⁸ Walsh, Olsen, Ploeg, Lohfeld, and MacMillan, “Elder Abuse and Oppression,” 19-20.

⁴⁹⁹ Walsh, Olsen, Ploeg, Lohfeld, and MacMillan, “Elder Abuse and Oppression,” 19-20.

⁵⁰⁰ Walsh, Olsen, Ploeg, Lohfeld, and MacMillan, “Elder Abuse and Oppression,” 19-20..

initiatives to change this ageist culture from anxiety, fear, and disdain to value aging and ensure the rights of older persons (and their bodies) are protected.

Theater, Human Rights, and Social Change

From the ancient Greeks to commercial mega-musicals, theatre has commented on the human condition. Ancient Greek playwrights understood the power of theatre, particularly Aristophanes who used his work as social commentary in plays, such as *Lysistrata*, and later by Early Modern writers, such as Shakespeare whose dramatic work indirectly commented on matters of politics and religion (in coded plays to escape the watchful eye of the Master of the Revels). Since World War II, playwrights, such as Augusto Boal and his Theatre of the Oppressed, Luiz Valdez, Ping Chong, Erik Ehn, and Anna Deveare-Smith have used their work as a vehicle to address human right issues and advocate for social change. Mary Luckhurst and Emilie Morin point out that theatre artists have “increasingly promoted specific human rights issues in their work, and sought to establish ties” with human rights advocacy.⁵⁰¹ Luckhurst and Morin also note that documentary or verbatim theatre particularly allows for “minority voices to be heard and the exact words of the speakers, the living and dead victims, to be transmitted to the audience.”⁵⁰² Other forms of theatre from dramatic works to musicals, often interrogate issues plaguing the marginalized and the oppressed. Thus storytelling is “deployed across the world” to raise awareness, educate communities, and advocate for human rights.⁵⁰³ These examples are only but few of the many ways theatre engages in human rights discourse.

⁵⁰¹ Mary Luckhurst and Emilie Morin. “Introduction: Theatre and the Rise of Human Rights” in *Things Unspeakable: Theatre and Human Rights After 1945*, ed. Mary Luckhurst and Emilie Morin, (New York, NY: Palgrave-McMillan, 2015), 2.

⁵⁰² Luckhurst and Morin, “Introduction,” 2.

⁵⁰³ Luckhurst and Morin, “Introduction,” 3.

In her article, “Theatre and Elder Abuse,” Luckhurst explains that “human rights for the elderly are among the least regarded, and elder abuse is a taboo subject in both developed and developing countries.”⁵⁰⁴ For Luckhurst, theatre plays an important role in approaching taboo subjects and theatre productions “present opportunities to debate elder abuse,” including workshops and events that have “important consciousness-raising impact on the general public, on service users, and service providers.”⁵⁰⁵ Luckhurst claims that elders involved in these projects report “a sense of wellbeing, a more powerful sense of self, and greater social and personal confidence pertaining to their rights to personal expression and dignity.”⁵⁰⁶ Luckhurst also reports on theatre companies in the United Kingdom (e.g. TongueTied Theatre Company, Sole Purpose, and Risky Things) that give voice to older persons and expose elder abuse. For example, TongueTied Theatre takes its theatre directly to care homes to confront the “unholy trinity”: “a common triumvirate of conditions experienced by their residents – confusion, immobility, and incontinence.”⁵⁰⁷ Sole Purpose utilizes the verbatim or documentary style theatre, which utilizes “storytelling techniques” and engages with “frontline issues in direct collaboration with communities.”⁵⁰⁸ Here, recent work interrogates psychological, financial, and emotional abuse and the “complex dynamics that exist between victim and perpetrators.”⁵⁰⁹ And finally, Risky Things, takes its theatre projects directly to vulnerable communities and stages

⁵⁰⁴ Luckhurst and Morin also report that “the UN estimates that 4 to 6 percent of elderly people have experienced some form of mistreatment at home” as well as deaths in care homes and hospitals.

⁵⁰⁵ Luckhurst, 234.

⁵⁰⁶ Luckhurst, 234.

⁵⁰⁷ Luckhurst, 234.

⁵⁰⁸ Luckhurst, 235.

⁵⁰⁹ Luckhurst, 235.

“live interactive performances to raise awareness about elder abuse” by inviting members of the audience to role-play and solve problems.⁵¹⁰

These types of community and applied theatre not only fully engage the body and human experience but create a “safe space” to approach the taboo subject of aging as well as interrogate human rights abuses against older persons. As Luckhurst points out, they are “critical in the global push to curb elder abuse and promote the rights of older persons.”⁵¹¹ For example, in his one-man show *Forget Me Not*, Rob Gee addresses ageism, abuse, violence, and trauma in the care home setting. Gee, a former care home nurse, performs his one man show on the fringe theatre circuit and offers his performance and play as a training tool for health care workers to open up conversations about age, ageing, and care/caring for older persons. More recently, Florida Studio Theatre in Sarasota called on older community members for interviews about the experience of ageing to create two original documentary theatre productions: *Old Enough to Know Better* (2015) and *Older Than Dirt* (Spring 2017). These community engagement projects and productions demonstrated how theatre might work to improve the quality of life for older adults, bring awareness to the serious human rights violations perpetrated against older adults, and shatter pervasive negative images of aging.

As I have mentioned in this concluding chapter and elsewhere above, theatre about (and with) older persons is important to forming an expanded view of lives of older people, particularly women. Theatre brings people into the room to be present, to be careful observers, and patient listeners. When people make the commitment to enter the theatre, they agree to see the bodies on the stage and listen to their stories. When an audience commits to hearing stories from and about older people, particularly older women, they value the wisdom of experience.

⁵¹⁰ Luckhurst, 236.

⁵¹¹ Luckhurst, 237.

They hear about the pleasure of living and the pain of dying and together feel less traumatized by the world around them through the sharing of stories and shared experience. This experience encourages people to feel less fearful of the “touch of a world.”⁵¹²

The three plays I discuss for this project are not the only examples of contemporary plays with older women at the center, but I believe they are the best examples at this time where older female characters offer stories that focus on the lives of the older women, their experiences in the past, their experiences in their present as well as in their bodies and in the world they inhabit.

The women do not deny their age or offer false narratives about embracing it. They accept aging as part of life and time moving forward. For Albee, the aged female expresses the anxiety if not trauma associated with the peak and decline narrative, yet “A” and “B” both convey moments of resistance and resilience and express acceptance (rather than denial) of their age and ageing at each life stage. Vogel resurrects the aged female body to not only place it front and center on the stage but also puts it to work for the audience both professionally and narratively with both collective and individualized stories about the past and the present. In each woman’s radiant transformative moment, the body is a repository for a mythical place where the women’s stories both past and present are realized in dance, placing them “out of time” literally and figuratively where they “escape” the social, cultural and physical boundaries of the (aged) body. From Churchill, the older women convey stories about the experience of pain and trauma personally, locally, and globally. Again, the women’s bodies are repositories of our shared cultural moment designed to convey resistance and resilience. In all three plays, older women drive the dramatic action and offer narratives of age other than the usual peak-and-decline narrative to offer more

⁵¹² Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, Loc. 500.

expansive views of ageing other than a life of decline as well as a deeper understanding and beauty of what it means to grow old.

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