Aging, Old Age, Memory, Aesthetics: Introduction to Special Issue

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The essays in this special issue of *Occasion* were selected from papers given at the international conference “Aging, Old Age, Memory, Aesthetics,” held in 2011 at the University of Toronto. This conference—which drew scholars from disciplines as disparate as literary studies, medicine, and sociology—aimed to stimulate scholarly discussions of the construction of identity beyond the familiar triptych of gender, race, and class, to include what Simone de Beauvoir saw as the unspoken (and thus untheorized) form of “difference”: age. We felt that a consideration of aging and old age and their relation to memory and aesthetics was particularly timely, especially given the prevailing modern and postmodern understandings of the self that have led to profound, metamorphosing, crises of memory: from late nineteenth-century hysteria, to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), to the twenty-first-century specter of dementia. These crises of memory are usefully understood in tandem with aesthetic modes. For example, Sander Gilman argues that hysteria and photography were inextricably connected, and he described hysteria as “the disease of images and imaging.” Alzheimer’s disease, initially “discovered” via silver-staining techniques and currently observed through biomedical imaging, is, I would argue, no less a disease of “images and imagining.”

The essays we have selected here engage the following questions: What are the prevailing representations of and theories about old age, memory, and aesthetics, ranging as they do from classical and religious models to contemporary research on neuroplasticity? How have these portrayals and theories changed in the light of contemporary research and technologies relating to anatomy and brain functioning? Since we are aging from the moment we are born, what can we learn from

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the varied use of the term “aging” at specific cultural moments? In responding to these and other questions, these essays specifically address four central concerns: the concept of late style, the relationship between memory and aging, the notion of embodied experience and its relationship to gender, and, finally, contemporary modes of conceiving of and caring for the elderly.

In their exploration of these concerns, the essays are unified by their shared engagement with the notion of embodied experience. As Mary Warnock observes, controversies surrounding the nature of memory and pathologies of memory inevitably bring “in the physiological.” But the body also firmly anchors the self within specific historical, geographical, and national contexts. American and Canadian geographic, political, and aesthetic traditions, for example, remain central to the essays’ analyses of the overarching concerns outlined above.

In addition to locating the self within specific temporal and spatial coordinates, embodied expressions of gender and sexual orientation likewise inflect our experiences and understandings of memory and modes of caring for the elderly. As Margaret Cruikshank and other have observed, women are traditionally the primary caregivers of the elderly. Women are also living longer than men, and perhaps as a result, they are more highly represented than men among those diagnosed with Alzheimer’s disease and mild cognitive impairment. For these and other reasons, as Stephen Katz observes in his essay presented here, gender and aging—key facets of embodiment—inform the biosocial structuring of bodily life.

Embodiment also informs aesthetics since the artist’s gender and age often have a tremendous impact on the shape of the artist’s career. Due to the powerful legacy of the Lockean self and the predominance of the contemporary model of the cerebral self, however, we often overlook the ways in which embodiment also shapes aesthetic theory and practice. Style and aesthetic invention are typically conceived of as cerebral, almost metaphysical. Many of the essays in this issue challenge this disembodied approach and explore alternative forms of bodily consciousness, phenomenological ways of living, and queer stylistics—alternative embodied forms that become increasingly significant when socially sanctioned forms of cognition, memory, and reproductive capacity are deemed compromised.

Analyses of the aging artist perhaps most sharply delineate the commonalities among the papers, including the centrality of notions of embodiment, the prevalence of narratives of decline, the importance of discrete political and aesthetic traditions, the significance of gender, and, finally, the impact of historically contingent theories of memory. In using the term “aesthetics” in our title, however, we wish to draw attention to the arts, aesthetic practices, theories of art, and modes of representation as they pertain to aging and memory. What do we mean exactly when we speak of an artist’s “late style”? Do aging and memory loss—benevolent or pathological—signal the individual’s and the artist’s inevitable decline, or do they, on the contrary, offer spaces for reinvention and transformation? This is the first of our four age-related themes in this special issue, followed by conceptions of memory, theories of embodiment, and the ethics of care.

The first set of essays—by Linda Hutcheon and Michael Hutcheon, Julia Dabbs, and Andrea Charise—have been gathered under the heading of “Meditations on the Concept of Late Style” in that they respectively engage with and challenge this prevailing critical construct. As the Hutcheons argue, generalizations about late style suffer from the same limitations as contemporary narratives of decline, the importance of discrete political and aesthetic traditions, the significance of gender, and, finally, the impact of historically contingent theories of memory. In using the term “aesthetics” in our title, however, we wish to draw attention to the arts, aesthetic practices, theories of art, and modes of representation as they pertain to aging and memory. What do we mean exactly when we speak of an artist’s “late style”? Do aging and memory loss—benevolent or pathological—signal the individual’s and the artist’s inevitable decline, or do they, on the contrary, offer spaces for reinvention and transformation? This is the first of our four age-related themes in this special issue, followed by conceptions of memory, theories of embodiment, and the ethics of care.

The first set of essays—by Linda Hutcheon and Michael Hutcheon, Julia Dabbs, and Andrea Charise—have been gathered under the heading of “Meditations on the Concept of Late Style” in that they respectively engage with and challenge this prevailing critical construct. As the Hutcheons argue, generalizations about late style suffer from the same limitations as contemporary narratives of aging because of their shared, reductive rhetoric of progress, peak, and decline. Even seemingly celebratory assumptions about “the extraordinary flowering of artistic genius in

2 Mary Warnock, Memory (London: Faber, 1987), 1.
3 Margaret Cruikshank, Learning to Be Old: Gender, Culture and Aging (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003).
old age” constitute the secret-sharer of ageist stereotypes about the supposedly inevitable creative decline associated with advancing years. Surveying a fascinating range of critical comments leveled at aging artists, the Hutcheons argue that the concept of late style obscures a host of important factors. Moreover, conceptions of late style ultimately do not reflect the work of the artist as much as reveal “the aesthetic values of the critic.” In closing, the Hutcheons also assert that late-style theory has typically been a male-gendered discourse. As a result, the question of female artists’ possibly very different later careers and creativity has been elided.

In accordance with this observation, Julia Dabbs insists that it is equally, if not more, fascinating to consider why female artists would portray themselves, or allow themselves to be portrayed, as old. Shedding light on the eclipsed story of women artists’ later careers, Dabbs analyzes the portraits and self-portraits of three early-modern women artists: Sofonisba Anguissola, Rosalba Carriera, and Anna Dorothea Lisiewska-Therbusch. All three were internationally renowned painters whose illustrious careers continued well into their advanced years, when they contended with the challenges of aging and, more tragically, vision loss. Explicitly drawing attention to the tyranny and centrality of vision, Lisiewska-Therbusch painted herself seated beside and, on three other occasions, wearing, a “superorbital arch spectacle” (a monocle). As Dabbs observes, juxtaposed to her delicate feminine attire, the monocle, although initially incongruous, underscores “her aura of probing perception—and, in combination with the direct gaze, might make the viewer feel as if he or she were being observed under a microscopic lens.” According to Dabbs, the portraits and lives of these three women constitute acts of self-fashioning that offer a strong contrast to the crones and widows portrayed in the art of previous centuries. Taken together, they effectively forged a new paradigm of the woman artist. Maintaining the respect of their colleagues, these three artists mentored younger painters and promoted the recognition of their talent and intelligence through their own work. In their self-portraits, they acknowledged their aging bodies but emphasized their wisdom and unflagging capacity for penetrating intellectual vision.

Whether scholarly discussions center on the careers of male or female artists, questions of the aging artist’s capacity are at the crux of critical analyses of late style. Andrea Charise observes that from the nineteenth century to the present, the demographics of societal aging and the aesthetics of late style rely on a shared set of conceptual tropes to represent the supposed problem of old age. More precisely, both discourses conceive of old age as “a crisis of capacity.” In contrast to classical considerations of age, which typically valorized “the weight of years,” modern approaches are marked by an apocalyptic and, at times, gothic sensibility that directs its anxieties at an increasingly aging population conceived of as a monstrously excessive, fluid mass—“a grey tsunami”—threatening to overwhelm the resources of the nation. As Charise astutely observes, the rhetoric of capacity seemingly forces a choice between containment and catastrophe. She traces this choice in a close reading of The Fixed Period (1881–82), the last novel penned by the nineteenth-century author Anthony Trollope. A radical departure from Trollope’s earlier comic works, The Fixed Period ventures into the realm of the fantastic to imagine a fictional British colony where euthanasia is made compulsory at the age of 67.5. On the one hand, Trollope’s novel underscores the unsettling intersection between contemporary Western demographics and aesthetics that frequently envision the elderly as a potentially catastrophic burden on the state. On the other hand, the text also includes the perspective of the elderly forced to bow to the law of the “fixed period”; their point of view emphasizes how the diabolical language of capacity is used to strip the aged of their privileges and basic rights as citizens. Although Trollope’s novel has been interpreted as pure satire, Charise rightly insists that if this were the case, it is highly un-
likely that the views of Neverbend, the champion of the euthanasia project, would resonate so profoundly with Trollope’s own reservations concerning the matter of capacity in older age. In Charise’s original interpretation, Trollope emerges as an author capable of imagining “the contradictory potentialities of productive later life” against an increasingly popular modern discourse that conceives of the aged as a burden.

The second section of this special issue of *Occasion* presents essays by Stephen Katz and Cynthia Port on the relationship between aging and memory. Katz offers a genealogical analysis of cultural conceptions of memory, ranging from Platonic conceptions of memory as a wax tablet, to the Lockean understanding of memory as a reflexive and conscious narrative, to nineteenth-century models of brain localization, to our contemporary neuroculture. For Plato, memory was privileged because it housed our innate recollection of ideal forms. Locke, however, valued memory for very different reasons. Citing Ian Hacking, Katz explains that for Locke, “the person is constituted not by a biography but by a remembered biography.” Thanks to the work of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century researchers such as Pierre-Paul Broca, Carl Wernicke, and Alois Alzheimer, memory disturbances became a problem “not only of recall but of disease, the representation of which contained important lessons about the brain, the self, responsibility, and normality.” According to Katz, these researchers added significantly to the list of so-called memory disorders, laying the foundation for contemporary ageist cultural and political discourses. Surveying the present cultural moment, Katz argues further that we are grappling with a new cognitive crisis—one arising from our contemporary biosocial context and fostered by pharmaceutical interventions—that blurs the boundaries between the natural and the cultural, and the real and the artificial. Nowadays, we are enjoined to sign up for brain gym, to do crossword puzzles to keep our memory sharp, and to eat brain food. Resisting the seductive lure of a “perfect” memory, Katz reminds readers that despite decades of theoretical and experimental work, we still do not know very much about the construction, retention, and retrieval of memory. In effect, the mystery of capacity also continues to haunt us since we are “unsure whether memory capacity is finite or bounded.” Recalling the Hutcheons’ insistence on the danger of reducing aging artists’ work to a singular notion of late style, Katz highlights the complexity of memory and similarly warns of the dangers of reducing memory—and, by extension, humanity’s manifold capacities—to a single organ.

Complementing Katz’s analysis of contemporary neuroculture and its obsession with memory, Cynthia Port explores narratives of reverse temporalities, including Martin Amis’s *Time’s Arrow* and David Fincher’s film *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*. Port examines how these reverse chronological narratives oppose normative investments in the future, which, as we have seen, treat old age as an insupportable burden that must be sacrificed for generational continuity. Drawing on Lee Edelman’s analysis of the idealization of the child in hetero- and repro-normative discourse—which frames queerness as a kind of death drive and a denial of the future—Port argues that filmic and literary narratives that reverse time constitute counterdiscourses that interrogate the ideologies supporting many of the policies and practices of our current ageist society.

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In the third section of this special issue, on embodied experience, the essays by Angelo Muredda, Aynsley Moorhouse, and Pia Kontos respond to Katz’s injunction to resist modern society’s privileging of the brain and cognition over the embodied experience. Recalling Cha-rise’s analysis of the troubling intersection between modernity’s ageist demographics and rhetoric, Angelo Muredda considers how the modernist impulse to contain, dispose of, or spiritually transcend the weighty corporeality of aging flesh is undermined by The Double Hook’s repeated assertions of the primacy of the body. Sheila Watson’s novel, which opens with the murder of an elderly mother by her young son and closes with the celebration of the birth of the murderer’s child, fails to install the modernist, mythic redemption of the fallen world (echoing The Fixed Period’s celebration of “disposing” of the elderly). Instead, the characters in The Double Hook remain haunted by the ghost of the old lady and the corporeal aspects of their own bodies that stubbornly resist transcendence. Rather than serve as a testament to the fascist dream of perfect bodies and beautiful minds, Watson’s novel drives home the impossibility of evading the embodied experiences associated with aging and death.

In her work as a sound artist, Aynsley Moorhouse also grapples with the experience of failing minds and bodies. Initially, in response to her father’s late-onset dementia, Moorhouse set out to create the equivalent of a “memory theater.” Due to the severity of his illness, however, Moorhouse was unable to access or share his memories and was forced to adapt both her theory and her artistic technique in the light of the material she received—namely, the current experiences that her father shared in their lively conversations. Eschewing earlier desires to contain, master, or glorify her father’s experience, Moorhouse drew instead on Merleau-Ponty’s The World of Perception to theorize her powerful aesthetic interpretation of the value and richness of her father’s immediate perception. In keeping with the female artists whom Dabbs analyzes, Moorhouse also contends with the dominance of the visual. In her aesthetic praxis, however, she transcodes her father’s experience into sound rather than into an object of vision. The result at once moves and arrests: The Sounds of Forgetting attempts an aural counterdiscourse that effectively and affectively conveys a unique, embodied experience of the world.

Like Moorhouse, Pia Kontos also turns her attention to the challenge of communicating with and caring for people suffering from Alzheimer’s disease. In her negotiation with and expansion of Lockean-inspired notions of selfhood to include embodied self-expression, Kontos also relies on Merleau-Ponty’s theory of basic intentionality to provide a corporeal foundation of selfhood—a selfhood predicated on the body’s capacity “to engage with the world”—that remains intact despite cognitive deficits.

Implicit in the essays cited above, particularly those treating embodiment, are questions about how society conceives of and cares for the elderly. The remaining two essays in this special issue—by Amelia DeFalco and Kathleen Woodward—make up the final section, on caring for the elderly, because they directly address these questions in provocative ways. Concerns about improper and unethical care are the focus of DeFalco’s analysis of Michael Ignatieff’s Scar Tissue. As DeFalco explains, for Ignatieff’s narrator, care for his demented mother becomes “an all-encompassing activity, a dedication of one person to another that verges on the devotional.” Although the narrator feels compelled to relinquish everything, including his own identity, DeFalco asserts that “care becomes suspect as the narrator’s attention to his mother becomes an exclusive focus, an inquiring gaze into his mother’s illness that transforms into solipsism after her death.” According to DeFalco, the narrator’s orientation toward caregiving is problematic from the start because he approaches it “not as a means toward well-being but as an occasion for in-
quiry and exploration, regarding his mother’s alterity as a ‘philosophical problem’” characterized by blindness and revelation. Ignatieff’s and DeFalco’s emphasis on the trope of vision brings to mind the enigmatic message behind Lisiewska-Therbusch’s portraits of herself posing with the “superorbital arch spectacle.” As this painting ironically suggests and the essays cited above repeatedly demonstrate, aging bodies (particularly women’s), memory loss, and dementia are not singular problems that can be contained within traditional empirical paradigms or clichéd tropes of blindness and insight.

Whereas DeFalco focuses on failed caregiving, we bring this special issue to a close with Kathleen Woodward’s analysis of diverse treatments of long-term care facilities and the dreaded “fourth age.” Surveying a selection of texts ranging in genres from memoir to television soap opera to personal documentary, Woodward explores the prevailing ageist obsession with the failings of the aging body that underwrite the portrayals of nursing homes and assisted-living facilities as circles of hell into which members of the “third age” must never fall. In contrast to these gothic depictions, Woodward turns to the recent work of Annie Dillard and documentary filmmaker Cecelia Condit. In keeping with Woodward’s implicit celebration of the pastoral, Dillard’s novel *The Maytrees* and Condit’s documentary *Annie Lloyd* portray caregiving as a retreat from the market economy and a return to nature, where networks of filiation and affiliation fashion an ethical and compassionate safety net for the elderly.

As editors, we have not found it a difficult task to organize the essays in this special issue in ways that highlight their commonalities. Yet our desire lies equally in demonstrating their differences. It is far too early in the history of the newly emergent area of “age studies” to promote a singular model or impose unity on the work of scholars from such diverse disciplines. Instead, by virtue of the conference and by publishing selected papers from the proceedings, we hope to energize scholarly conversations about aging, old age, memory, and aesthetics. If there can be said to be a goal, perhaps Gullette puts it best when she writes:

> The overarching question is, how might more people of all ages develop a collective identification with the whole life world—especially the ages of life ahead? Only through such imaginative solidarity can we maintain our precious sense of self-continuity and possibility within the dangerous age ideology we confront in the twenty-first century. . . . Is it too blissful to imagine, as our goal, being able to feel at home in the life course at every age?

It is with this goal in mind that we invite you to engage with the ideas expressed in the fascinating and diverse essays in this issue.

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