

Queering Time, Ageing and Relationships with Split Britches

Jen Harvie

Abstract: This article begins by outlining some dominant narratives that produce ageism by socially constructing older age as a time of linear decline, social dependency, social isolation and intergenerational conflict. It then concentrates on recent work by elder lesbian feminist performance company Split Britches: *Ruff* (2012), *Unexploded Ordnances* (2018), *What Tammy Needs to Know about Getting Old and Having Sex* (2013) and *Last Gasp* (2020–1). It explores the alternative narratives of older age – or elder life – that Split Britches propose, as a time of futurity, desire, unexplored potential and intergenerational as well as intra-generational relationality. It also explores how Split Britches responds to chrononormative practices – which make socially produced understandings of time appear natural – by queering them. The article argues that Split Britches model socially progressive visions of elder life and relationships, both across generations and within their own, by queering dominant expectations and practices of relationships and time – including ageing.

Keywords: Split Britches; ageism; older age; futurity; desire; relationality; intergenerational; intragenerational; chrononormative; queer

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Introduction

In this article, I examine recent performances by US- and UK-based lesbian feminist theatre company Split Britches, led by Peggy Shaw and Lois Weaver, born in 1944 and 1949 respectively. In the first part of the article, I briefly examine the ways that many dominant representations of ageing socially construct late life and I consider the limitations and violence of those narratives. I then concentrate on potential alternatives. I argue that Split Britches model socially progressive visions of older age – or elder life – and of relationships both across generations and within their own generation by queering dominant expectations and practices of both relationships and time – including ageing. I show how Split Britches’ queer sensibilities and aesthetics constructively deconstruct ageist narratives and temporalities that are damaging yet culturally dominant.

Dominant and Damaging Narratives of Older Age

The four damaging narratives of older people that I address here are narratives of linear decline, social dependency, social isolation and intergenerational conflict. These narratives imagine older people becoming continuously and increasingly ill, simultaneously dependent while at the same time isolated, and in dispute with younger people, especially millennials, born between 1980 and 2000. [Lynne Segal’s 2013 book *Out of Time: The Pleasures and Perils of Ageing*](#) offers detailed description and analysis of these narratives’ tenacity and violence. All these narratives are damaging because they risk not merely describing older people’s conditions, sometimes inaccurately; more violently, these narratives risk influencing how people perceive – and what they expect of – older people, potentially, for some, condemning older people to a state of linear decline, dependence, and isolation, and to a role as public enemy.

First, narratives of linear decline – or, as Segal has put it, ‘seamless decline’¹ – self-evidently *presume* decline. For age studies scholar Margaret Morganroth Gullette, one of the key principles of age theory is that ‘*decline* is the narrative about ageing-past-youth systematically taught to us from on high’; it is ‘*decline* ideology’.² Even when older people do experience illness or frailty, narratives of linear decline allow no leeway for improved or fluctuating health, for recognising the different intersecting privileges and lack of privileges that influence decline, or for a broader recalibration of expectations and appreciations that allow people to value what elders have as resources

¹ Segal (2019).

² Gullette (2017: xiii, xvii; emphasis in original).

and futures rather than limitations and endings. Narratives of linear decline frame change negatively as continuously increasing deficit, when it might alternatively be understood and even experienced more positively – or simply normally, or equitably – as change and process; after all, all living is process. (As Split Britches' co-founder Peggy Shaw says, 'All my shows are about all the changes I've been through: I was a lesbian, then a butch lesbian, then a mother, then a grandmother, then a grandmother to a mixed-race grandson, then I had a lesbian old age, and then I had a stroke'.)³ By encouraging an understanding of ageing as change rather than a kind of compulsory decline, I do not mean to deny that many older people experience ill health, nor to suggest that human ageing is not, ultimately, terminal. But I do mean to argue that hegemonic narratives of linear decline – as distinct from narratives of fluctuating improvement and decline, or simply ongoing change – formulate consistent and persistent degeneration and cultural devaluation as broadly compulsory, projecting and predetermining futility and working to close down desires, ambitions, resources and futures.

Second, narratives of older people's social dependency confine them in a relational dynamic of inferiority, with the balance of power always tipped against them. Older people are framed as not capable of helping themselves or others, always recipients of unilateral support, incapable of reciprocation, unable to initiate care, and (too) expensive to care for.⁴ As Segal observes, 'The one thing that both young and old people, men and women alike, seem most to hate about the notion of old age is that it symbolizes forms of "dependency"'.⁵ Pervasive narratives of older people's social dependency deny or at least restrict the possibility that older people care for themselves and others, whether older or younger, despite evidence that older people care extensively; in 2015, Carers UK found that 'Almost 1.3 million people in England and Wales aged 65 or older are carers.'⁶ As Segal notes, 'What is rarely culturally acknowledged, least of all in any imprints of masculinity, is that differing modes of dependence are essential to the human condition.'⁷ We disavow dependence at our peril.

Third, at the same time as older people are framed as onerously socially dependent, they are also understood as socially isolated. The *Encyclopedia of Ageism* reports that in a 1998 American survey on ageing, nearly 50 per cent of respondents thought, 'The

³ Shaw (2016), quoted in Moore (2017: 193.3).

⁴ Gullette (2011: 13).

⁵ Segal (2013: 35).

⁶ Furthermore, Carers UK found that the preponderance of elders practising so-called 'informal' care was increasing: 'The number of carers over the age of 65 is increasing more rapidly than the general carer population. Whilst the total number of carers has risen by 11% since 2001, the number of older carers rose by 35%' (Carers UK, 2015: 3).

⁷ Segal (2013: 35).

majority of old people are socially isolated and lonely' and 'live alone',⁸ when, actually, 'About two-thirds live with their spouse or family'.⁹ Certainly, there is evidence that many older people feel lonely – in 2015, Age UK reported that 'Over 1 million older people say they always or often feel lonely'¹⁰ – and social isolation and loneliness do need addressing. But the dominance of a narrative of isolation risks naturalising and homogenising it, when there are important differences that affect different elderly people's experiences of loneliness, such as health, location and household size. Furthermore, a 2018 report by Age UK notes that:

The chances of being often lonely do not differ because of age – loneliness is similarly common at all ages. However, the circumstances which increase the risk of loneliness do differ by age. For example, leaving education is a commonly vulnerable time for younger people whereas the death of a loved one, and the onset of illness and disability are more often times of vulnerability for older people.¹¹

The dominance of a narrative aligning older age and loneliness potentially obscures other existing and possible narratives. Through being accepted as pervasively true, through being naturalised, the narrative not only *diagnoses* isolation, lack of communication and lack of understanding about older people and their experiences, but potentially *exacerbates* those conditions by excluding alternative narratives.

The fourth and final dominant and damaging narrative of elder lives that I respond to is a narrative of intergenerational conflict.¹² This narrative portrays what Gullette calls a 'contrived war' between millennials and baby boomers, born from the mid-1940s to mid-1960s,¹³ representing the boomers as unfairly advantaged competitors who take a disproportionate share of scarce resources of housing, jobs, pensions and social welfare, amongst other things. This narrative frames older people as social enemies, 'avaricious and burdensome, [and] apparently effortless and insatiable accumulators of secure pensions, owned homes, and social care'¹⁴ who 'therefore' deny those things to younger people. Writing from the US, Gullette observes that 'Intergenerational rivalry, a factor in ageism in many countries, encourages the young to blame midlife workers for greedily holding onto their jobs.'¹⁵ Older people, she continues, are 'held responsible for an increasing portion of the national crises

⁸ Palmore (1998), in Palmore (2013: 429.2).

⁹ Palmore (2013: 430.6).

¹⁰ Davidson and Rossall (2015: 2); they cite Age Concern and Help the Aged (2009).

¹¹ Age UK (2018: 3).

¹² I have previously written about this in a special issue of *Contemporary Theatre Review* on feminisms: Harvie (2018).

¹³ Gullette (2004: 41–60).

¹⁴ Harvie (2018: 332).

¹⁵ Gullette (2017: xx).

(fiscal deficits, high youth unemployment), serving as a scapegoat, a bogeyman, a mass of hysterical projections'¹⁶ that conveniently mask other structural and ideological reasons for those economic crises. Former UK Conservative cabinet minister David Willetts neatly encapsulated this kind of perniciously ageist attitude in the title of his 2010 book, *The Pinch: How the Baby Boomers Took Their Children's Future – and Why They Should Give It Back*. As Segal has observed, Willetts '[i]gnor[ed] altogether the role of reckless fiscal gambling following the deregulation of the banking sector, as well as the gigantic accumulation of personal bonuses in that sector, ... instead blam[ing] the current crisis on "the self-interest and electoral dominance of the huge generation of baby-boomers"'.¹⁷ Furthermore, as Segal goes on to note, 'Not all Boomers are affluent. Over 20 per cent of those who live in poverty are elderly pensioners, rising to around 30 per cent if they are single women, around a third of them in their 60s'.¹⁸ Ideas of older age – many of which are violently ageist – are socially constructed, not essential aspects of older people; as Gullette insists, people are 'aged by culture'.¹⁹ We must recognise the narratives we tell, take responsibility for their violence, and act to change them.

What We Need More of

In contrast to those dominant and damaging narratives that equate older age with futility, dependence, isolation and conflict, we need the possibility of counternarratives of hope. Instead of futility, we need a sense of older age and possibility; of time as not simply 'running out'; of time, change, life and desire as still happening, still unfolding; a sense that there remain things to do with and in time, that there is still a future and life has resources, not just deficits. Instead of a sense of elder dependency, disempowerment and inferiority, we need to recognise and credit older people's independence, resilience, agency and even, superiority, including their deep historical knowledge and their understandings of themselves, understandings that risk being ignored or disbelieved when older age is routinely pathologised.²⁰ As well as recognising elder independence, we need to recognise social *interdependence* – not only how older people might rely on younger people, but also how older people might benefit younger people as well as each other and themselves. Instead of narratives of elder isolation, we need also to be able to recognise and therefore nurture elder connectedness

¹⁶ Gullette (2017: 5).

¹⁷ Segal (2015: 4–5).

¹⁸ Segal (2015: 5).

¹⁹ Gullette (2004).

²⁰ Segal (2013).

and social engagement. Instead of narratives of intergenerational conflict, we need the possibility of intergenerational solidarity and collaboration, the sense of mutual responsibility, and recognition of everyone's worth. We need to recognise that we are inevitably – but also valuably – interconnected, especially across generations, but also within them.

That might be what I – and many others, including age studies scholars such as Gullette, Segal and Kathleen Woodward²¹ – would like, but how do we foster these alternative attitudes towards older people and their place and value in society? And how do we work towards ensuring that more constructive attitudes benefit more older people across a range of intersectional factors, including gender, race, class and sexuality? Partly, we need to see these alternatives modelled – acted out for us, made credible, made real. We need to see narratives and enactments of intergenerational collaboration, intragenerational elderly solidarity, elder knowledge and elder independence.

Crucially, we not only need alternative narratives, or narrative content; we also need alternative narrative forms to convey different ways of understanding age and time. These forms can help to challenge normative understandings of time and, hence, naturalised ageist understandings of older age. Normative understandings of time – or chrononormatives – have been thoughtfully critiqued by queer theorists such as Jack Halberstam and Elizabeth Freeman. Freeman writes that chrononormative practices 'convert historically specific regimes of asymmetrical power into seemingly ordinary bodily tempos and routines, which in turn organize the value and meaning of time'.²² For example, life course narratives are often oppressively gendered and ageist, expecting life to peak with points of marriage, childbirth and child rearing. As theatre scholar Anna Harpin has noted, when women have outlived those 'normative stages of female life' – not to mention, I would add, when we have never lived them – 'their chronological excess makes them jut awkwardly across the arc of normative life cycles. Their aged presence exceeds the final full stop of a complete heteronormative life narrative.'²³

Chrononormativity can be challenged by queering time – troubling its dominant conventions, for example by exploring non-normative ways of understanding it that move beyond binaries of young and old by modelling identities that are *trans*generational. These are identities that may be older but, as Segal puts it in *Out of Time*, they also accept that 'the older we are the more we encounter the world through complex layerings of identity' because 'There are many ways in which we can, and we do,

²¹ See, for example, Woodward (1999).

²² Freeman (2010: 3). See also Halberstam (2005) and Pryor (2017).

²³ Harpin (2012: 73).

bridge different ages, psychically, all the time'.²⁴ This kind of transgenerational temporal queering is, I argue, persistent in Split Britches' recent work: *Ruff* (2012), made while Shaw was recovering from a stroke; *Unexploded Ordnances or, How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love* (abbreviated by the company to *UXO*, 2018), a radical adaptation of Stanley Kubrick's 1964 Cold War black comedy *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*; *What Tammy Needs to Know about Getting Old and Having Sex* (2013), Weaver's socially engaged performance as her alter ego Tammy WhyNot exploring older age and intimacy; and *Last Gasp* (*Last Gasp WFH* [2020] and *Last Gasp: A Recalibration* [2021]), shows that explore, amongst other things, endings and death not with a sense of resigned futility, but with curiosity and resourcefulness.²⁵

Split Britches' work demonstrates that it is both possible and valuable to have narratives of older age that are counter to hegemonic ageist narratives, and to have understandings and practices of time that challenge oppressively linear, heteronormative chronormativity. Understandings of time that are more queered – less linear, less normative, and less oppressively normalising in ways that are, for many, deeply punishing – stand to benefit the vast majority who do not hold hegemonic power.

Split Britches and Their Work

Split Britches is a lesbian feminist theatre company founded in 1980 in New York by Lois Weaver, Peggy Shaw and Deb Margolin. Since about 1990, the company's work has been made by Weaver and Shaw, life and work partners whom Weaver has described as 'an off-again-on-again couple'.²⁶ They have produced their performances worldwide, especially in the US and UK.

Their theatre challenges normative assumptions, especially about gender and sexuality. Their first, and eponymous, show *Split Britches* from 1980 was about Weaver's great aunts who were farmers in Virginia and wore split britches so they could conveniently urinate while working in their fields. The rich allusions of 'Split Britches' make it an apt name for the company, conjuring female emancipation and independence, permissiveness and so-called impropriety, practical invention and improvisation, non-normative practices, non-binary clothing and identities, working-class pride,

²⁴ Segal (2013: 4, 19), quoted in Harvie (2018: 334).

²⁵ Moore (2017) explores in insightful detail how Peggy Shaw's solo performances *Menopausal Gentleman* (1997), *Must – The Inside Story* (2009), and *Ruff* (2013) 'disrupt the [conventional] scripts of ageing femininity by offering multi-layered representations of ageing' (2017: 189.9).

²⁶ Weaver, quoted in Vincentelli (2020).

feminist legacies and suggestions of sex. In her introduction to a 1996 collection of Split Britches' plays, Sue-Ellen Case explained that the company has a

unique 'postmodern' style that served to embed feminist and lesbian issues of the times, economic debates, national agendas, personal relationships, and sex-radical role playing in spectacular and humorous deconstructions of canonical texts, vaudeville shtick, cabaret forms, lip-synching satire, lyrical love scenes and dark, frightening explorations of class and gender violence.²⁷

The company's queered and feminist adaptations of canonical works include *Beauty and the Beast* (1982), *Little Women: The Tragedy* (1988) and, with Bloodlips' Bette Bourne and Paul Shaw, *Belle Reprieve: A Collaboration* (1991), a reworking of Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire* (see [Figure 1](#)). More recent work has focused on the tragedy of Hurricane Katrina in *Miss America* (2008), and grief prompted by New York's gentrification in *Lost Lounge* (2009). Both Weaver and Shaw have also made solo work, Weaver especially in persona as Tammy WhyNot whom I discuss below, and Shaw in autobiographical shows that have made her an iconic butch lesbian performer, such as *You're Just Like My Father* (1993) and *A Menopausal Gentleman* (1996). Formally and aesthetically, Split Britches' work characteristically is episodic and non-linear, draws on Weaver and Shaw's personal experiences and relationship, combines pop culture references and poetic lyricism, interacts with audiences and engages consistently with feelings of queer desire.

What is especially productive about their practice in the context of this article is that it challenges assumptions about gender and, increasingly, age, through narrative, storytelling, action, engagement and queering time; in other words, through both its contents and its forms. Rather than telling stories that binarise age as young/old and gender as male/female, and rather than succumbing to ageist gendered stereotypes, Split Britches portray women in older age as narratively complex and they enact counter-hegemonic ways of being older women. Weaver, for example, performs highly physical movement around the sets of *UXO* and *Last Gasp*, challenging assumptions about frailty and older age – especially in older women. Shaw puts in plain sight – that is, without shame – the technological assistance she uses to feed her lines after her 2011 stroke, using onstage television monitors in *UXO* and *Ruff* (see [Figure 2](#)), and large, over-ear headphones in *Last Gasp*. Writing specifically about Shaw's solo performances, but in ways that apply also to Split Britches' work, Bridie Moore observes that shows like *Ruff* 'explicitly acknowledg[e] physical and cognitive fragility' at the same time as 'Shaw's performance expertise, in spite of her cognitive difficulties, confounds expectations of post-stroke dependency'.²⁸ Shaw's work – again, like Split Britches' – is, for

²⁷ Case (1996: 1).

²⁸ Moore (2022: 31).



Figure 1. Peggy Shaw as Mitch (left) and Lois Weaver as Stella (right) in Split Britches' and Bloodlips' *Belle Reprise: A Collaboration* (1991). Photo: Amy Meadow.

Moore, 'inflected throughout with questions of identity, taking delight in unsettling constructions through playful inversions and subversions; her "old woman" identity is modulated by a multiplicity of other designations'.²⁹ For Shaw, these designations include being a 'second-generation Irish, working-class, grand-butch-mother'.³⁰ Alongside these 'content' elements of their work, Split Britches often actively engage their audiences in discussion in their shows, meaning that the alternative narratives of ageing that *they* tell and show are also narratives that *their audiences* discuss and enact within the frame of performance. Finally, Split Britches actively dis-organise time in

²⁹ Moore (2017: 193.3).

³⁰ Shaw (2011: 41).

their shows, queering it, denying its alignment with normative life course narratives and radically destabilising those narratives.³¹ They help audiences both see and experience things differently, non-normatively.

To detail these practices and the ways they respond to the problematic narratives of older age I outlined above, I will now discuss four Split Britches productions from the 2010s on: *Ruff*, *Unexploded Ordnances*, *What Tammy Needs to Know about Getting Old and Having Sex* and *Last Gasp*.

Ruff

Shaw and Weaver made *Ruff* beginning in 2012 in response to Shaw's stroke the previous year, at the age of 67, with both co-writing, Weaver directing and Shaw as solo performer. The text was published in 2018 in *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art*. In *Ruff*, Shaw reflects on her experience of her stroke in what I see as a kind of lucid dreaming, with poeticism, song and chat with the audience. 'I was minding my own business', she repeatedly remembers, 'And an icicle of death hit the ocean floor of my brain'.³² She also reflects on the deaths of her sister Norma, veteran New York theatre producer Ellen Stewart and other famous artists including Marsha P. Johnson, an African-American drag queen and transgender activist who drowned in New York's Hudson River in 1992 in her mid-40s in circumstances suggesting transphobic murder.³³ Shaw also casts back to her past, recalling, for example, a camping trip with her family where, arriving in the dark of night, she accidentally parked on a traffic island, not the campsite; and the first time she roasted a turkey for friends, when she took a tab of acid and freaked out because there was a dead bird in her oven.³⁴ Shaw performs songs, including one about recognising the signs of stroke: it is a public service announcement, but it is also riotous and a little punk. *Ruff* is a show that is about stroke survival, life, death, singing, remembering, storytelling, queerness and more. Like Shaw herself, it is poignant, witty and queer.³⁵

It is ostensibly a solo show, but alongside Shaw, many others make appearances: Weaver is on hand in the audience and calls out cues to Shaw if she forgets lines; Shaw is joined by a video of her band projected onto the back of the set (see [Figure 2](#)).

³¹ For more on Split Britches, see, for example: [Shaw and Weaver \(n.d.a\)](#); [Shaw \(2011\)](#); [Case \(1996\)](#); [Harvie and Weaver \(2015\)](#); and [Dolan \(2011\)](#).

³² [Shaw and Weaver \(2018: e.g., 108\)](#).

³³ [Shaw and Weaver \(2018: 26\)](#). On Johnson, see, e.g., [Born \(n.d.\)](#) and [France \(2017\)](#).

³⁴ [Shaw and Weaver \(2018: 117, 112\)](#).

³⁵ I draw here on some ideas discussed in [Harvie \(2018\)](#). For a more detailed and extensive analysis of this show, see that article.



Figure 2. Peggy Shaw in *Ruff* (2012) with a video projection of her band upstage and a monitor feeding her lines downstage. Photo: Matt Delbridge.

Shaw's show is peopled by the myriad of others whom she invokes: artists, musicians, her sister and – importantly – many younger versions of herself – roasting a turkey as a young adult; camping at 17; and, at 13, captured in her family's one and only home movie in a green dress for her sister's wedding. As these back-and-forth references to herself across her lifetime show, *Ruff* stages non-normative life narratives, as well as portraying a life that is non-chronological/chrononormative. Similarly, Shaw presents her 'family' as both biological – including her sister – and queer, non-biological and chosen, including other queer New Yorkers. The show stages Shaw 'recovering' from a stroke but in non-normative ways for an older person. She makes a punkish public service announcement that formally rejects ageist expectations about aesthetics and propriety and, as Moore suggests, portrays Shaw not only as vulnerable herself – as someone recovering from a stroke – but also as actively caring for her audience by teaching and entertaining them.³⁶ *Ruff* also shows Shaw as expertly in control of new technologies like green screening which, as Moore observes, frames 'Peggy's newfound disabilities as possibilities for innovation'.³⁷

³⁶ Moore (2022: 35).

³⁷ Moore (2022: 35).



Figure 3. Peggy Shaw in *Ruff* (2012) with a projected video of herself at 13 in a dress. Photo: Ves Pitts.

Importantly, *Ruff* does not stage intergenerational conflict in terms of the currently dominant adversarial narrative about boomers and millennials. Rather, it stages trans-generational collaboration between Shaw and: her then-early-teen grandson; her 30- and 40-something-year-old band members; musicians and actors from the 1950s to the 2010s with whom she identifies; and her audience, whom she calls on to assist her.³⁸ Most importantly, the show stages transgenerational collaboration and understanding between 60-something butch lesbian grandmother Shaw and her 13-year-old self (see [Figure 3](#)). She says:

But when my sixty-seven-year-old self saw my thirteen-year-old self wearing a green dress,
I could see a picture of my thoughts before I even thought them back then in the fifties,
In a world that was not ready for me.
...
I was inside my young brain,
And I felt a cold metallic tear,
Like when I lost my lips by resting them on a freezing sled.³⁹

Older butch lesbian Shaw sees her young self in a dress and her ‘thoughts before I even thought them’ in a kind of queer childhood ‘ghosting’ identified by queer theorist Kathryn Bond Stockton in a different context.⁴⁰ There is a shock of recognition and a powerful sense of solidarity across this lifetime generational divide: older Shaw sympathises with her younger self wearing (possibly made to wear) a dress in a ‘world that

³⁸ See [Shaw and Weaver \(2018: 108–9\)](#); [Solga \(2015: 75\)](#); [Moore \(2022: 34\)](#).

³⁹ [Shaw and Weaver \(2018: 115–16\)](#).

⁴⁰ [Stockton \(2009\)](#), quoted in [Jaffe \(2018\)](#).

was not ready' for her gender disturbance. For Moore, Shaw's act of connecting her adolescent and elder selves 'implies that her uninterrupted confusion has caused her stroke and that her current cognitive "blanks" have as much to do with a long-term bewilderment over cultural notions of femininity as the physiological state of either her adolescent or her sixty-seven-year-old stroke-surviving brain.'⁴¹ Crucially, Shaw demonstrates and embraces transgenerational solidarity.

Ruff also stages intragenerational solidarity and kinship, especially between Shaw and her on-hand collaborator/partner/director Weaver, ever ready to cue Shaw in a supportive but not subservient way. There is also intragenerational solidarity and kinship between Shaw and her present self, as Shaw narrates the ways she is using the show to, as she puts it, 'try to recover some of my documents' after her stroke.⁴² Against dominant narratives of elder isolation, Shaw is deeply connected to herself and others.

Ruff also queers time. As I've already noted, *Split Britches*' productions generally eschew temporal linearity and this is true here. For one thing, Shaw is a kind of time traveller, at once here, post-stroke, but at the same time, here at 13, 17 and so on. She narrates having the stroke as though it had already happened as she was having it; 'I was practising', she says.⁴³ Time is queered for the audience too. Explaining that a cough is a symptom she has been left with post-stroke, Shaw gives an audience member a cough drop to hold and says,

If you see me start to cough, you could either wait for me to get a cough drop,
Or you could say, 'That's OK, take all the time you need to cough.'
I guess we could call that audience participation.⁴⁴

But this is also audience *anticipation*, with the audience cued by a story of Shaw's past behaviour to anticipate possible future behaviour.

So, as much as *Ruff* is a narrative of post-stroke older age, it is perhaps more importantly a reminder of the transgenerational, intragenerational and intergenerational relationships that Shaw has (instead of undiluted dependency or isolation). Furthermore, it is a temporal queering that explicitly, implicitly and thoroughly challenges normative 'life-course' narratives of linear decline.

⁴¹ Moore (2017: 212.2).

⁴² Shaw and Weaver (2018: 109).

⁴³ Shaw and Weaver (2018: 110).

⁴⁴ Shaw and Weaver (2018: 109).

Unexploded Ordnances

Unexploded Ordnances or, *How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love (UXO)* is a performance Split Britches made in 2018 with other artists including several women in their 20s and early 30s.⁴⁵ Its main set is formed of a large ring of long tables, making a space that Split Britches calls the *Situation Room*.⁴⁶ In this space, *UXO* weaves together two main strands. The first is pre-scripted and draws on Stanley Kubrick's 1964 satirical Cold War film *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*. Shaw plays the General and Weaver, the President (see [Figure 4](#)); both are given to lethargy and ineptitude (see [Figure 5](#)), despite the imminence of global disaster. Against this backdrop of impending catastrophe unfurling in a political vacuum, *UXO*'s second and only partly pre-scripted strand gradually invites the eldest 10 or so members of the audience to sit at the onstage tables as a Council of Elders and, led by Weaver, to explore potential solutions to current social crises (see [Figure 6](#)). The Elders are invited individually to share what worries them, from the personal to the global; to select a single topic from those shared; to discuss it as a group; then, using their ambitions and fantasies (their 'unexploded ordnances'), to suggest some solutions.⁴⁷

The worries expressed by the elders may appear intractable. Quoting some recorded by Weaver and 20-something collaborator Hannah Maxwell, the worries include: 'the entrenched social divisions, the warming earth, the mass violence, disease and misery in so many parts of the world'.⁴⁸ But *UXO*'s scenography and Weaver's guidance support the Council of Elders to address these worries. As Weaver and Maxwell have written, 'People begin to speak with authority and urgency, empowered by the theatricality and the fantasy. The *Situation Room* becomes the floor of the United Nations, the basement of the White House, a town-hall talkback on our shared future.'⁴⁹

The elders are asked to share personal desires – 'the place they always meant to travel, the instrument they wish they'd learnt, the lover they should have stayed in contact with'⁵⁰ – and then creatively apply these desires as solutions to the problems using the phrase, 'We could'. Weaver says, 'When I say, "How might we use the desire to help us approach a situation?", it's a question that I hope people can go home with'.⁵¹ The

⁴⁵ This section draws on material in [Harvie \(2021\)](#).

⁴⁶ The *Situation Room* has been staged independent of *UXO* at, for example, London's Wellcome Collection as part of the 2019 Sick of the Fringe Festival focusing on Care and Destruction ([The Sick of the Fringe, 2019](#)). This is one of Weaver's Public Address Systems ([Shaw and Weaver, n.d.b](#)).

⁴⁷ [Weaver with Maxwell \(n.d.\)](#).

⁴⁸ [Weaver with Maxwell \(n.d.\)](#).

⁴⁹ [Weaver with Maxwell \(n.d.\)](#).

⁵⁰ [Weaver with Maxwell \(n.d.\)](#).

⁵¹ [Weaver and Harvie \(2019a\)](#).



Figure 4. Lois Weaver orchestrating the action as the President in *Unexploded Ordnances* (2018).
Photo: Theo Cote.



Figure 5. Lois Weaver as the President – collapsed atop a table – in *Unexploded Ordnances* (2018).
Photo: Rosie Powell.



Figure 6. Peggy Shaw (left) as the General, Lois Weaver (standing, right) as the President, and audience members conscripted as the Council of Elders in *Unexploded Ordnances* (2018). Photo: Theo Cote.

concluding emphasis on desire and creativity stresses their importance as tools for recalibrating expectations about what can be done, both through desire, and by elders. Weaver and Maxwell write,

In reminding us of our human creativity, and what the mass accumulation of our personal goals may be able to achieve, we experience a mental repositioning of ourselves in relation to these huge problems. ... There is... a glimmer of something through the new space that has opened, space in which we might find the room to act, to make change, in our own finite lives and perhaps the wider world.⁵²

UXO explores older age, anxieties and as-yet-unexplored potential, validating elders' unexplored potential through hearing their desires and proposing that those desires might collectively achieve great things.⁵³

Again, this show demonstrates intragenerational collaboration, as the elders work together with Weaver's guidance to problem-solve with each other. Again, the show

⁵² Weaver with Maxwell (n.d.).

⁵³ In another context (Harvie, 2021), I have addressed in greater detail how the show enacts care, especially for elder audiences, recognising their needs to express anxieties about the future and not just their reminiscences about the past, and to express their desires or unexplored potential in a culture that tends normatively to focus on the potential of youth.

is not about linear elderly decline, but about future solutions, asking how elders, in particular, can fix the future, with their expertise but importantly also their desires, which are so often excluded from narratives of older age. The show queers temporality. It mashes the Cold War with now and the future, but more importantly it refuses the countdown of the timebomb. Near the show's start, audiences are asked to set their phone timers for 60 minutes, but the show deliberately carries on when all the timers go off (the ordnances explode). Furthermore, the show reimagines the negative concept of the timebomb (the 'unexploded ordnance') as something that portends not catastrophe but potential, as older people are invited to reflect on something they have always wanted to do and do it, to realise their desires. *Unexploded Ordnances'* emphasises on elders' agency, creativity, desires, capacity to solve problems and future-facing potential decisively challenge ageist narratives of older age and dependency.

What Tammy Needs to Know about Getting Old and Having Sex

Weaver originally created alter ego Tammy WhyNot in 1977 and began to play her as an independent researcher-performer from 2004 (see [Figure 7](#)).⁵⁴ Tammy is reported to have been a successful country singer who experienced a calling to become a lesbian performance artist. From her country background, she brings big blonde wigs, spangly cowboy shirts, a southern drawl and charm; from performance art, she brings a queer sensibility and an applied theatre practice of public engagement and social research. The combination allows her to approach potentially intimate questions with a disarming cultural naivety. As I wrote in the book I co-edited with Weaver about her practice, Tammy WhyNot 'coaxes input and wisdom from her collaborators through a combination of gentle teasing, humour, and tenderness.'⁵⁵ As Weaver has put it to WhyNot in an interview with herself as WhyNot, 'you are my greatest source of courage. ... You're that part of me that allows me to be ridiculous and to take on serious subjects in a humorous way.'⁵⁶

Weaver started work on the show *What Tammy Needs to Know about Getting Old and Having Sex* in 2008, when, in her own words, 'as I was ageing I was starting to feel a lack of sexual energy and sexual desire and wasn't quite understanding whether that was hormonal, because I had gone through menopause, or my situation, circum-

⁵⁴ For more detail on Tammy's history and Weaver's work with and as her, see the section 'Why Tammy? Why Not?' in [Harvie and Weaver \(2015: 218–55\)](#). I discuss *What Tammy Needs to Know about Getting Old and Having Sex* in relation to care in [Harvie \(2021\)](#); this section draws on some of that material.

⁵⁵ [Harvie and Weaver \(2015: 237\)](#).

⁵⁶ [Harvie and Weaver \(2015: 221, 223\)](#).



Figure 7. Lois Weaver as Tammy WhyNot (2012). Photo: Christa Holka.

stance, or my busy-ness, or is it just what happens when we age. I had no idea.⁵⁷ She used her persona of Tammy WhyNot to explore questions of intimacy and desire with older people whom she went to meet at tea dances and other spaces of elder gathering. The show evolved into ‘a sort of variety talk show with Tammy as the host’, and the setting a front room.⁵⁸ It continued to evolve into ‘a kind of concert or rehearsal of a concert – “Tammy’s comeback tour”’.⁵⁹ Tammy sang songs she wrote incorporating her participants’ stories. Participants sang and danced in the show, came on stage to do interviews with Tammy, and sat in the audience to help generate answers to fill-in-the-blank statements about desire that Tammy posed to the audience: “When I think about sex I ...”, or “When I feel desire I ...”.⁶⁰

Clearly, this show also challenges normative assumptions about older people, and especially older people and desire, putting desire and intimacy at its centre. Importantly again, it is not about decline but about ongoing desire; unlike much socially engaged theatre for older people, it does not focus on reminiscence and the past. Again, it is future-oriented, asking participants and audiences what they desire. And it is proactively about elder intragenerational kinship, combatting ageist narratives of elder

⁵⁷ Weaver and Harvie (2019b).

⁵⁸ Weaver and Harvie (2019b).

⁵⁹ Weaver and Harvie (2019b).

⁶⁰ Weaver and Harvie (2019b).



Figure 8. Lois Weaver as Tammy WhyNot (left) and WhyNets (right) in *What Tammy Needs to Know about Getting Old and Having Sex*. Photo: Dahlia Katz.

isolation. In an interview with me, Weaver described how the participants who performed in the show became the WhyNets (see [Figure 8](#)), a set of collaborating co-performers for whom the collective was important. Weaver observed that, ‘In performance, the care [the WhyNets] demonstrate for one another – in moving on and off stage, reminding each other of choreography and words, applauding their individual set pieces and anecdotes – empower them in the eyes of the audience, as a collaborating ensemble rather than lone participants.’⁶¹

This show is perhaps less about queering time than the other two I have discussed thus far, but it is very much about intragenerational solidarity, mutual care and perhaps even queer care, as the participants care for each other, whatever their genders and sexualities. Elder life is marked in this show by collaboration rather than isolation, and by mutual care rather than dependency; furthermore, the show’s important intragenerational care challenges the ageist assumptions not only that older people are dependent, but also that they are asymmetrically (even unfairly) dependent on younger people.

⁶¹ Weaver with Maxwell (2018: 92).

Last Gasp

Originally composed so that it might be presented as two separate solo pieces,⁶² *Last Gasp* is a non-linear performance of interleaved movement sequences (mostly performed by Weaver) and monologues by both Shaw and Weaver but with passages of dialogue near the end. Its range is capacious. Topics engaged with span from the myth of Echo and Narcissus to not knowing, dealing with emergencies, surviving loss, luck (or masculine privilege), climate crisis, righteousness, charisma, using Black male singers as ‘butch role models’,⁶³ singer and writer Johnny Ray, race inequalities and the criminal justice system, cancel culture and the importance of words, relativity, dying on stage and the last word. Its mood, too, ranges from the reflective and sometimes sombre to the wryly funny (a sense of which might be conjured by the promotional image of [Figure 9](#)). Reviewers have called it ‘weird, unruly, and organic’ with a structure ‘resembl[ing] a storytelling jukebox set on shuffle’,⁶⁴ and ‘fleet, surprisingly entertaining ... alternately playful, surreal, pointed and poignant’.⁶⁵ After its originally planned stage version fell victim to COVID-19 lockdowns, *Last Gasp* has had two lives as I write in autumn 2022: as *Last Gasp WFH* (working from home), a pre-recorded film for Zoom created by Split Britches in lockdown in London and screened online by New York’s La MaMa theatre in November 2020; and as *Last Gasp: A Recalibration*, a live stage performance incorporating elements of pre-recorded film, presented at London’s Barbican Pit in October 2021 and (in a slightly revised version) at La MaMa in October 2022. (I am writing here mostly – but not exclusively – with reference to the film version, but the two have vast amounts in common.) Given the show’s complexity of content, forms and history, the reading I offer is necessarily highly selective. I take up the show’s engagement with the ‘last gasp’ to explore a handful of the many ways it contributes to constructive thinking about older age. I show how *Last Gasp* depicts older age as ordinary, demonstrates the value of ‘working with what you’ve got’, and invites reflection on how to live with loss in a kind of ultimate queering of chrononormatives (or [hetero- and age-] normative understandings of the so-called ‘life course’).

The Ordinariness of Older Age

It might sound counter-intuitive for me to argue that Weaver and Shaw depict older age as ordinary if what I meant by ‘ordinary’ were ‘unimportant’; but what I mean

⁶² Weaver in [La MaMa Podcast](#) (n.d. [2020]: 8:44).

⁶³ [Shaw and Weaver](#) (2020a: 14).

⁶⁴ [Liedke](#) (2021: 226, 225).

⁶⁵ [Vincentelli](#) (2020).



Figure 9. Lois Weaver (behind) and Peggy Shaw (in front) in a promotional image for *Last Gasp* (2021) created in 2019. Photo: Christa Holka.

more accurately is an understanding of older age as neither exceptional nor unusual in a world where, as the United Nations points out, ‘we are getting older’,⁶⁶ and, more importantly, older age is not the problem dominant ageist narratives would have people believe. Where ageist cultures treat older people as exceptional in terms of the extreme social difficulties attributed to them, and therefore often both age-shame elders and encourage elders to feel age-shame, Split Britches treat being older as ordinary, unexceptional and certainly nothing to be ashamed of. ‘I am old without realizing it’, says Peggy.⁶⁷ This approach to representing – or simply inhabiting – older age as ordinary is one of the main ways Split Britches queer older age in *Last Gasp*. It is informed by their career-long approach to representing lesbianism, also something they have never been ashamed of and simply take as understood. In discussing with me the place of care in Weaver’s and Split Britches’ work, Weaver talked about how care – including for audiences and one’s fellow performers – is so deeply embedded as part of the work’s structure that it becomes unexceptional. ‘It’s not about exceptionalising the need for care’, Weaver said. ‘Just like we didn’t exceptionalise what it meant to be lesbians, we just were lesbians making work, or older people making work.’⁶⁸ This ordinariness of lesbianism is the fabric of their lives as well as their work; in *Last Gasp*, Peggy notes that her ‘kid at 5 years old would shake everyone’s hand and say “nice to meet you, are you gay?”’.⁶⁹ Split Britches’ oldness, likewise, is ordinary in the sense of standard. At the same time, their oldness repudiates the limitations, stasis and age-shame that are so often attached to older age. This combination means their taken-for-granted version of older age is dynamic, mobile and proud.

Split Britches’ ordinary-old is not held back by old-age typecasting: near the end of the show they perform the famous argument scene from Noah Baumbach’s 2019 film *Marriage Story*,⁷⁰ a scene originated by 30-something actors Scarlett Johansson and Adam Driver. Split Britches’ ordinary-old is not a time of stasis, even romantic stasis; throughout *Last Gasp*, their ‘off-again-on-again’ relationship is still evolving, dealing with jealousies and uneven privileges. Their ordinary-old is highly mobile and physically capable: reviewer Regan Harle writes that ‘Lois has restless energy, constantly performing dance moves open to interpretation. Her movements seem natural and fluid’.⁷¹ Their ordinary-old is highly competent; they handle the technology to

⁶⁶ ‘Older persons (ages 65 and above) today comprise the world’s fastest growing age group. Globally, for the first time in 2018, older persons outnumbered children under the age of five, and by 2050, older persons will outnumber adolescents and youth (ages 15 to 24)’ (United Nations, n.d).

⁶⁷ Shaw and Weaver (2020a: 10). I call Lois Weaver and Peggy Shaw by their first names when I refer to them in the performance, and by their surnames when I refer to them as the show’s makers.

⁶⁸ Weaver and Harvie (2019a), quoted in Harvie (2021: 325).

⁶⁹ Shaw and Weaver (2020a: 12).

⁷⁰ Shaw and Weaver (2020a: 29–31).

⁷¹ Harle (2021).

make what Shaw calls a Zoomie (an online Zoom movie).⁷² It is also resilient. They repeatedly changed the show, adapting what was originally created for stage into a different form for the online Zoomie, then adapting that material twice for presentation on stage in London and New York. They also made the initial changes to online performance-making with the coming of the COVID-19 pandemic, meaning they were simultaneously transitioning Weaver's in-person university teaching online, moving into an empty house, and 'populat[ing] the house with things' such as furniture and sheets.⁷³ In a podcast interview with La MaMa theatre, and discussing how they adapted to the threat of COVID-19, Shaw says, 'I think queers immediately know how to do emergencies 'cause of all our life of emergencies',⁷⁴ including HIV/AIDS.

Furthermore, Split Britches' ordinary-old acknowledges their changing abilities, including impairments, but does not treat these as negatively-defining disabilities. Split Britches here subscribes to the social model of disability, which 'holds that people with impairments are "disabled"' not by their impairments or difference but 'by the barriers operating in society that exclude and discriminate against them'.⁷⁵ Shaw acknowledges that she wears headphones in the show (visible in [Figure 10](#)) so that Weaver can feed her lines, but points out that the headphones are large, over-ear models because 'I couldn't fit little headphones into my ears because I already have hearing aids'.⁷⁶ In Split Britches' ordinary-old, there is no shame in either memory loss or hearing loss. Finally, not only Weaver and Shaw are older in *Last Gasp*; so is the house they filmed in, loaned to them while it awaited gutting and renovation on the other side of lockdown. On one hand, this house too is ordinary, an apparently blank canvas for their inventions. On the other hand, this old house is also, as Weaver says, an 'amazingly beautiful, empty house that's a little bit like a fairy tale'.⁷⁷ It is capacious, adaptable, characterful and supportive of them; reviewer Tulis McCall calls it their 'supporting cast'.⁷⁸ Like other old – and, for many, obsolete – things that *Last Gasp* references – including 45rpm records, the record player stylus, the jukebox, even the word 'woman' – the show revels in the pleasures of the old. The old house joins Weaver and Shaw in presenting what is ordinary and obvious to them – that older people (and things) are capable, dynamic and richly interesting.

⁷² Shaw, quoted in [Vincentelli \(2020\)](#).

⁷³ [La MaMa Podcast \(n.d. \[2020\]](#), 4:50–5:10 and 6:25–6:27).

⁷⁴ [La MaMa Podcast \(n.d. \[2020\]](#), 5:52–5:59).

⁷⁵ [Inclusion London \(n.d.\)](#).

⁷⁶ [Vincentelli \(2020\)](#).

⁷⁷ [La MaMa Podcast \(n.d. \[2020\]](#), 3:45–3:48).

⁷⁸ [McCall \(2020\)](#).



Figure 10. Lois Weaver (outside, left) and Peggy Shaw (inside, right) in *Last Gasp* WFH (2021). Photo: Split Britches.

Working with What You've Got

‘[W]e work with what we’ve got. We’ve always just worked with what we’ve got’⁷⁹. ‘Work with what you’ve got’ is a Split Britches mantra. It encourages them (and those they engage with, including students and audiences) not only to accept given circumstances – including things like hearing and memory loss, COVID-19 lockdown and an empty old house – but to embrace those circumstances as inspiring resources. Like the social model of disability, this approach rejects negative understandings attributed to any given circumstances and explores instead what they have to offer. This mantra is enabling not only for performance making, but also for ageing. Split Britches model the mantra in action in *Last Gasp*, making the show with what they had when they went into lockdown: the clothes and few props they had with them, two laptops, ‘the only pair of headphones we had’,⁸⁰ domestic lighting, Zoom technology, themselves, the house, the remote collaborators they were already working with and furniture they had in storage from earlier shows such as *UXO*.⁸¹ The result is aesthetically focused,

⁷⁹ Weaver, quoted in [La MaMa Blogs \(2020\)](#).

⁸⁰ Shaw, quoted in [Vincentelli \(2020\)](#).

⁸¹ [La MaMa Podcast \(n.d. \[2020\]: 6:37–6:42\)](#).

with a limited costume palette of black and yellow apparent in [Figure 9](#) (echoing the bees Lois references in a dance as well as the hand-painted Black Lives Matter poster we see in the front window of their house);⁸² and brilliant work with framing, depth of field and scale (with, for example, Lois sort of ghosting Peggy in one scene by appearing behind a window while Peggy performs to camera inside; see [Figure 10](#)).⁸³ Similarly, they incorporated Shaw's memory loss by devising strategies to feed her lines. Strategies included Weaver vocally prompting Shaw, and posting lines in large lettering on big sheets of paper on the wall behind the filming laptop when recording scenes in which they both spoke. Some of the benefits of these approaches were a to-camera focus that was intense and exciting in the *Marriage Story* argument scene (as Shaw and Weaver looked beyond the camera at lines posted on the wall behind) and a sort of aural ghosting in the vocally prompted lines, giving a reiterative and poetically lyrical emphasis as well as a powerful formal sense of Weaver's intragenerational presence gently, whisperingly supporting Shaw. Overall, *Split Britches*' modelling of the practice of 'working with what you've got' in *Last Gasp* demonstrated the viability, sometimes the pleasure, and often the richness of working with what circumstances present, even if, for some, that might initially appear as a limitation, a deficit or a loss.

Living with Loss

Last Gasp explores how to survive loss. It understands loss as a frequent experience for older people, be it the loss of embodied memory, hearing, or balance; beloved peers ('your sister', says Lois); or vocation ('I have only one more show left in me', Peggy announces).⁸⁴ *Last Gasp* explores what to do, or how to live, with the inevitability of loss. Portrayed in the show as a narcissist, Peggy speculates that others might benefit from what she casts off:

So this could be my last show
A kind of estate sale

Where you might pick up something useful
Or just nostalgic
Or old school⁸⁵

Opening her scene titled 'How to Survive a Loss', Lois instructs, 'First you recalibrate', and tells the story of the Zebra Finch whose singing to her unborn chicks

⁸² Shaw and Weaver (2020b: 1:02:37).

⁸³ Shaw and Weaver (2020b: 30:05).

⁸⁴ Shaw and Weaver (2020a: 3, 6).

⁸⁵ Shaw and Weaver (2020a: 16).

allows them to adapt to rising temperatures before they hatch.⁸⁶ Shaw and Weaver acknowledge the inevitability of death – ‘At least I know that I’m going to die’, says Peggy⁸⁷ – and they rehearse for it in a scene titled ‘How to Pretend to Die Onstage’.⁸⁸ While they do not pretend to have all the answers, they also suggest that it is all right to not know, to live in the loss. Perhaps what the show most powerfully models, despite playing with Shaw’s narcissistic desire to be right, is the importance of living with not knowing. ‘What if we didn’t know’ is the refrain of Lois’s opening monologue,⁸⁹ in a proposal that frames the whole show. As reviewer Brendan Macdonald observes, *Last Gasp* invites its audience to ‘Sit in unknowing’,⁹⁰ accept it, trust it even. The show’s last line, Lois’s to Peggy, is, ‘You know I never know where you are going with your stories but when you get there I always say, oh yeah.’⁹¹ This might be the ultimate queering of a chrononormative. We are all going to die, older people mostly sooner than younger people. A chrononormative understanding of the approach of death might see it as a time to be feared or given in to; *Last Gasp* explores this time with curiosity, as a process to be explored.

Conclusion

The damaging normative narratives of older age that I opened with were narratives of linear decline, social dependency, social isolation and intergenerational conflict. I have proposed that we need alternative narratives and enactments: of older age and futurity; and of older age and, not so much independence, but relationality that connects elders themselves, as well as elders and younger people in ways that are neither isolating nor adversarial. In other words, I have argued that we need intragenerational models and functional intergenerational models. I have also argued that we need to queer normative conceptions of time that are culturally restrictive, ageist and often sexist.

Split Britches model precisely these things – attention to elders’ futurity and desires; appreciation of elders’ intragenerational collaboration; evidence of importantly meaningful intergenerational relationships, including with one’s former selves; and a queering of time that rejects chrononormatives and offers richly different engagements with time and understandings of ageing. The queer work of Split Britches demonstrates

⁸⁶ Shaw and Weaver (2020a: 16–17).

⁸⁷ Shaw and Weaver (2020a: 32).

⁸⁸ Shaw and Weaver (2020a: 32).

⁸⁹ Shaw and Weaver (2020a: 1).

⁹⁰ Macdonald (2021).

⁹¹ Shaw and Weaver (2020a: 33).

much more progressive understandings and modellings of time, age and relationships than those that are currently dominant. Split Britches show how important it is to queer our sensibilities about time, age and relationships.

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