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Sexuality, desire and the ageing female body: An essay

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One Night in Hong Kong
a novella

and

Sexuality, Desire and the Ageing Female Body
an essay

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A thesis submitted for Master of Arts by Research, Faculty of Education and
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Abstract

This thesis consists of a novella, 'One Night in Hong Kong', and an essay, 'Sexuality, Desire and the Ageing Female Body.' The novella tells the story of an erotic affair between the female narrator and a man in a hotel room in the neon city of Hong Kong. Told in four parts, the story shifts in time, reflecting on earlier events in the narrator's life and a trip she made to the Sicilian city of Catania in 1954.

Older female protagonists and their sexuality are rarely depicted in contemporary Australian fiction. Where representations do exist, they act as 'interventionist' texts, rupturing dominant notions of ageing women's sexuality as non-existent, diminished, or of little interest to mainstream readers. In the novella I experiment with writing an interventionist text, exploring a range of themes, including 'invisibility', 'the ageing body' and 'sexual fantasy'. In the critical essay I analyse these themes from a theoretical perspective, and consider how scholarship provides insight into the 'absence' or gap in representations of ageing female sexuality in contemporary Australian fiction. The process and findings of my research informed and helped shape the development of the creative work.

The thesis is underpinned by Julia Kristeva's theory of 'abjection' in relation to the ageing female body, and Michel Foucault's theory of disciplining discourses that describe how bodies are culturally trained and shaped by everyday routines, rules and expectations to produce 'docile' bodies. I also consider feminist analysis by Zoe Brennan and Sally Chivers on representations of ageing women in popular culture and literary production, and scholarship from the emerging field of social gerontology which argues that social constructionist theory has tended to focus almost exclusively on the discursively produced body at the expense of the material body. Finally the thesis investigates representations of ageing female sexuality in novels by three Western Australian writers: Elizabeth Jolley, Dorothy Hewett and Liz Byrski.

Declaration

I certify that this thesis does not, to the best of my knowledge and belief:

i. incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any institution of higher education;

ii. contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text of this thesis; or

iii. contain any defamatory material;

Signed: _____ Lauren Marsh

Date: _____

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Sexuality, Desire and the Ageing Female Body

On the eve of the release of *The Toucher* in 1993, Dorothy Hewett, in an interview with Janet Hawley, discussed a key motivation for writing her novel:

I wanted to make a statement about sex and passion for older women, sex for physically handicapped women and romantic love between an older woman and a younger man. (Hawley, 1993)

Hewett's comments called attention to prevailing assumptions about older women and sexuality and their lack of representation in Australian fiction.

Seventeen years later, Liz Byrski (2010) also drew attention to the under-representation and misrepresentation of ageing female protagonists in Australian fiction, television, and radio production. Byrski claimed that where ageing characters did exist they tended to be peripheral and defined by a limited range of age-based stereotypes, such as:

bossy, interfering mothers-in-law, nosy neighbours, crotchety spinsters, pathetic empty nesters, or feeble demented burdens hampering the lives of really important people; men, younger women and children. (p. 3)

Kathleen Woodward, in her study of representations of ageing female bodies in American popular culture, added the 'sexless and comfortable grandmother' to the list of stock images of ageing women (2006). Stock characters not only 'dehumanize' and 'de-feminise' representations of older women, but *de-sexualise* as well. Where representations of sexualised ageing women do appear in cultural production – and one only has to think of the images of aged women in the greeting card industry – they are often reduced to caricature and targets of derisive humour; the over-sexed granny, the predatory 'cougar'. These images operate as symbols of female excess, of ageing female bodies out of control, predicated on notions of ageing sexuality as inconceivable, even monstrous.

The focus of this thesis is the under-representation of ageing female protagonists and sexuality in contemporary Australian fiction. The thesis consists of a creative component, a

novella entitled ‘One Night in Hong Kong’, and this critical essay ‘Sexuality, Desire and the Ageing Female Body.’ In the novella, I experiment with writing an ‘interventionist’ text with the aim to challenge popular assumptions of ageing female sexuality as ‘monstrous’, non-existent, or as declining, so that women ‘naturally’ gravitate towards more passive expressions of intimacy and companionship. I was interested in investigating erotic and passionate impulses for my protagonist.

In this essay I explore the lack of representations of sexualised ageing female protagonists in Australian fiction from a theoretical perspective and link this to my investigation of key themes in my novella. The first section entitled ‘The “Invisible” Ageing Female Body’ considers feminist explanations for the absence of the ageing female body from cultural production, noting that ageing female bodies have been historically ‘invisible’ within feminist discourses. I also consider the bio-medical model of ageing sexuality, and how ‘narratives of decline’ have informed and continue to underpin widely held notions of ageing female sexuality as diminished or non-existent. In ‘Fiction as a Political Space for Representing Ageing Sexuality’ I discuss fiction writing as a strategy for resisting and deconstructing popular assumptions about ageing female sexuality. In ‘Interventionist Texts’, I begin an analysis of three ‘interventionist’ texts: *Miss Peabody’s Inheritance* by Elizabeth Jolley (1986), *The Toucher* by Dorothy Hewett (1993), and, *Food, Sex & Money* by Liz Byrski (2005), and discuss how these texts informed the development of my creative work. In ‘Sexual Fantasy’, I continue my analysis of the selected texts, and discuss how findings from broader research into sexual fantasy fed the representation of my protagonist’s sexuality. In the final section, ‘Mid-life Sexual Re-Awakening’, I consider Margaret Tally’s critique of representations of ageing female sexuality in mainstream American film and consider how aspects of her analysis might have implications for fiction writers seeking to challenge stereotypes.

Throughout this essay I refer to the sexualised ageing female body as ‘abject’, informed by Julia Kristeva’s theory of abjection in *Powers of Horror* (1982). She contends that in the process of establishing symbolic order we identify what we find most ‘repulsive’ or threatening to the stability of that order, identity or system. We are compelled to reject it as ‘abject’ and to separate ourselves from the ‘contamination’ of what it represents. In a

complex process of defining what is considered 'inside' or 'outside', or acceptable or 'abject', we set up 'borders' in an attempt to differentiate and extricate ourselves from what we have deemed to be abject. But it is always an unstable border that not only threatens to 'encroach upon everything', but also binds us to what it is we reject, where 'from its place of banishment, the abject does not cease challenging its master' (p.11). Kristeva drew on the example of the corpse as something of the 'utmost abjection', as ultimately it signifies our fragile mortality and is a reminder of what must be 'permanently thrust aside in order to live.' But, of course, it can never be permanently thrust aside; we carry our own corpse within us from the moment of our birth. Instead we find ways to 'expel' it symbolically, through strategies such as culturally inscribed taboos on death and death rituals, or by relegating the event of dying to a separate space like a hospice, removed from our day-to-day lives. Such banishment is unstable, tense, as the very existence of hospices continues to call attention to the event of death.

Within western-based cultures 'youth' is privileged as a symbol of social vitality, health and productivity necessary for successful nation building. The ageing body is often constructed as antithetical to attaining these goals. Recast as an economic and social burden, it is viewed as a drain on public resources, non-productive, 'abject.' Notions of productivity also permeate discourses on sexuality, where within the context of patriarchy the fundamental purpose of female sexuality is reproduction. In this model the young and reproductively 'healthy' female body is privileged over the ageing female body, which is recast as 'non-productive' and therefore not useful within that symbolic order. Given the ageing female body was once productive and, like the corpse, is carried within the body of all young women, there is a compulsion to expel it by creating symbolic distance. A primary category for constructing hierarchical difference is sexuality – the younger female's sexuality is socially sanctioned, provided it is contained within the boundaries of acceptable models for procreation, while the non-productive ageing sexualised female body is made 'abject', disparaged and cast out. Zoe Brennan (2005) asserts that western societies are 'untrusting of acts that are not involved with procreation', and Sally Chivers contends acknowledgement of ageing sexuality, devoid of the goals of reproduction, confronts us with 'sexual desire for its own sake' (2003, p. xxiv). In this way, ageing female desire and sexuality threatens clearly demarked borders; it lurks as a rupture to the symbolic order of which bodies are afforded social value and access to sexual

pleasure. The image of an ageing female, free from reproductive constraints to experiment and enjoy her sexuality for the sake of it, is radical and unsettling within a patriarchal social order.

Hand-in-hand with discourses that reduce or deny aspects of life for ageing women are the discourses that construct what is an acceptable identity for an older woman. These discourses seek to define, monitor and regulate a set of sanctioned behaviours and beliefs about ageing women and their role in the communities in which they live. Michel Foucault identified these as 'disciplining' discourses, how bodies are trained and shaped by everyday routines, rules and expectations to produce docile bodies 'regulated by the norms of cultural life' (Foucault, 1975; Bordo, 2003). Foucault drew on the design and function of Bentham's panopticon prison as a metaphor to describe the workings of disciplinary power within western societies, whereby mechanisms of surveillance, regulation and control ensure that individual bodies conform to prescribed and collective rules, codes, and behaviours. Within such social organisation, mechanisms of power are not only invested in institutions of political and social authority, but also permeate all levels of society and are enacted locally to ensure compliance with 'normative' behaviours.

The concept of social policing includes self-policing, as individuals internalise the expectations, prescribed roles, and discourses of the social whole. Foucault contends that, for disciplinary power to be effective, it is not necessary for the individual to be subject to actual or verifiable surveillance, but that s/he believes they *could* be, and in this way becomes 'the principle of his own subjection' (1975, pp. 202-203). Conforming or 'docile' bodies are rewarded with the spoils that come with social inclusion, whereas transgressing bodies are punished or exiled and deprived of benefits. A set of culturally sanctioned roles and behaviours, learnt 'directly through bodily discourse: through images that tell [her] what clothes, body shape, facial expressions, movements and behaviours' (Bordo, 2003, p. 312), prescribe a very reduced range of ageing identities for women.

These identities are also highly performative. In her work on the construction of gender, Judith Butler argues that gender identity is not biologically determined, but culturally and performatively produced, 'constituting the identity it is purported to be' (Butler, 1990, p. 25).

Ageing studies theorists extend this concept to ageing performativity, whereby ageing identities ‘are formed and perpetuated through the repetition of behavioural scripts connected to chronological age and life stages’ (Swinnen, 2012, p. 12).

In developing the novella I considered some of the performative ‘scripts’ associated with ageing female identity, such as dress codes, and social and private behaviours, and explored alternative ways for my protagonist to ‘perform’ ageing. In constructing the hospital setting in my novella, I borrowed from Foucault’s depiction of the hospital as a site of disciplinary power whereby individuals (patients) are organised and regulated within an enclosed space and subject to the efficiency of timetables. My character describes the ordered repetition of each day – the doctor’s rounds, serving of meals, showering, visiting hours – each item segmented into a parcel of time and recorded on a schedule. It is not only time and space that are regulated by the routines and rules of the hospital; her sexuality is also monitored and controlled. When she imagines her lover waiting for her in the hotel room in Hong Kong she stretches out her arms and begins to stroke her skin. A nurse walking past stops her and she summarises: ‘they don’t like to see the elderly touching themselves’ (p.30). It is only through her imagination that she can be free of both her physical confinement and the function of the hospital as an ‘apparatus’ of power and regulation.

This research project, like a lot of scholarship and creative work, has a personal element to its genesis, and I trace my interest in the topic to three key experiences. Firstly, in the 1990s I was involved in several social history projects recording the ‘life stories’ of elderly Indigenous and non-Indigenous women. Through telling their stories the women sought to redress a number of ‘hidden’ or expunged events in Western Australian history. Over the course of our work together I developed a friendship with several of the women and our conversations became more personal. While candid in discussing off-tape the changes in their sexuality as they had aged, they were mortified at the thought of capturing these stories as a personal or public record. At the heart of their concerns was how their family members would react. How would they be perceived as grandmothers and great-grandmothers if they recounted stories detailing past sexual experiences, or, even more challenging, their contemporary sexual attractions? It was somewhat ironic that while we were working to

reveal past injustices and the ‘silencing’ of women’s voices in histories, we were also maintaining the silence or ‘invisibility’ of another important aspect of women’s lives.

Secondly, prior to embarking on this project I re-read Helen Garner’s novel *Monkey Grip* (1977). It was an influential text for me as a young woman growing up in 1980s Perth. Although Garner’s novel was set almost a decade earlier in inner-Melbourne, there was much in the depiction of her characters’ lives that resonated with my own; share-housing in cheap inner-city rentals, sleeping on mattresses on the floor, living resourcefully on the dole or student allowances, friends who would visit at all hours and group meetings held around the kitchen table. Like the characters in the novel, we referred to one another’s households by the street name and many of my friends – like the characters in the novel – got around on second-hand bicycles. And, like Nora, the main protagonist in Garner’s novel, we experimented with bands, pubs, love and sexual partners.

Not far into re-reading Nora’s story a single question struck me, and stayed with me until the last page. What has become of Nora? Where is she now? If Nora, or a character of her Whitlam-era and experience were to be represented as an ageing protagonist today, how would her sexuality be constructed? It seems implausible that Nora’s pursuit of love and sex would come to a screeching halt when she reached middle-age. And yet, where were those protagonists? I can only think of one example that comes close, which is Hewett’s depiction of Esther La Farge Summerton in *The Toucher* (1993).

The third experience, which not only sparked my interest in this project but also fed directly into the creative work, happened about 10 years ago, when an elderly relative passed away in Sydney. I had the task of sorting through the huge collection of clothes, shoes, jewellery and papers she had stacked in cardboard boxes throughout her house. In the course of disposing of the contents of most of the boxes – old lotto tickets, horoscope magazines, receipts that dated back over the past 30 years – I came across a collection of handwritten letters. The letters were written to her by a man she had shared a passionate relationship with in the 1960s and 1970s. The letters were a surprise, as I had previously done some oral history work with her and she had never mentioned this man, who had clearly been significant in her life, evidenced by details in the letters and the fact she had kept them for over 35 years.

The letters were beautiful; they spoke of ‘the warmth of the sun radiating from your smile’ and the ‘tingling and glowing from the caress of every touch of your lips and fingertips.’ They recounted late night interludes in bars and supper clubs around 1960s Sydney and trips they had made to exotic locations. Along with the letters were intimate notes scrawled on the backs of cardboard drink coasters and messages written hurriedly on scraps of paper that had once been slipped under her apartment door. At the time of the ‘affair’ – for it was revealed in the letters that the man was married – my relative was in her late 40s.

Although she never intended for me to see the letters, I could not destroy them. I reasoned to myself, and still do, that I would keep and preserve them in the spirit of love and admiration in which they had been written by the man and kept by her. When I began writing the character at the centre of my story, the elderly protagonist, bed-bound, unable to escape the fate of life in a nursing home, I did not realise that I was unconsciously drawing on aspects of my relative’s life. She had ended up crippled by ill-health and struggling to make ends meet, living on a pension in an increasingly expensive city. In the novella, my protagonist tells of waking in her hotel room after recurring nightmares of returning to her life of cardboard boxes stacked to the ceiling in her house. It was through the process of writing the novella that I discovered I was constructing a version of my relative’s story that I knew I would never be at liberty to write in non-fiction.

The lack of diverse representations of ageing female sexuality in popular culture and Australian fiction generates a number of questions, including, most obviously, why is this the case? What is informing the construction of such a limited range of identities? And, given such depictions are so widespread – from novels to films to television productions, advertising and stand-up comedy routines (Chivers, 1993, p. x) – what social functions do they serve? How might the uncritical consumption and reproduction of these images and underlying notions, in turn, limit our own experience of ageing?

To explore these and other research questions, and as the process of inquiry for this project, I utilised the research methodology of ‘practice-led research: research-led practice’ (2009). This methodology builds on the understanding of practice-led research as relating both to the work of art as a form of research and to ‘the creation of the work as generating new research

insights which might then be documented, theorised and generalised’ by including the reverse, whereby academic work can lead to creative practice (p. 7). This process is described as ‘bi-directional’ by Dean and Smith (2009), that is, not as two separate processes, but as a collaborative and dynamic process ‘interwoven in an iterative cyclic web.’ They note that in creative writing ‘research-led practice is mainly conceptual and tends to be driven by critical and cultural theory’ (p. 8). In this essay I describe the key academic works and theories that informed and impacted on my practice-led research methodology – often generating new questions and suggestions for investigation through writing – and how my novella, as research, contributes new insights and findings to the emerging discourse of ageing female sexuality.

The ‘Invisible’ Ageing Female Body

Once past the age of fifty women rapidly discover that they have become invisible. We can see each other well enough, can observe our peers living dynamic lives, running businesses and marathons, surfing the waves and the net, travelling the world, trading shares, returning to work or study, falling into and out of love, but we also see that we are caught in a cultural blind spot (Byrski, 2010, p. 4).

The ‘cultural blind spot’ that Byrski refers to in relation to cultural production also extends to theoretical work on the specific category of female ageing. My research found ageing female sexuality is often absent or ‘invisible’ in sociologically based studies on gender and sexuality, and that there is very little critical work specifically addressing the absence of ageing female sexuality in cultural production. Given the limited Australian research critiquing ageing female sexuality in fiction, my research in this area was largely guided by the following international texts: *The Older Woman in Fiction* (Brennan, 2005) and *From Old Woman to Older Women: Contemporary Culture and Women’s Narratives* (Chivers, 2003).

According to Chivers, early feminist attempts to make ageing visible, such as Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Coming of Age* (1972), while attempting to expose ageist stereotypes, actually pandered to cultural anxieties on the ‘horrors’ of ageing and unintentionally helped to perpetuate negative attitudes (p. x). Woodward (2006) drew attention to the lack of critical

work in the early years of feminism noting, with the exception of disability studies, that the ‘body as a category of cultural criticism’ was implicitly assumed to be a ‘youthful healthy body.’ She argues this should not be surprising, as ageism pervades all levels of American culture, including feminism and cultural studies in general (p. 162). Julia Twigg (2004) notes that after an initial ‘reluctance’ by feminists to engage with issues of ageing female bodies, the influence of postmodern and poststructuralist perspectives on feminist discourses has enabled new writings about the body and ageing to emerge. While the bodies in critical texts may be relatively young, such as those in Butler’s *Bodies that Matter* (1993), much of the theoretical framework can be extended to an analysis of ageing female bodies.

For feminist theorists, the key to understanding the representation of the ageing female body and sexuality in cultural production is how her gendered body is constructed, mediated, and given meaning in everyday life. Such discourses are both culturally and historically specific, and scholarship suggests that how ageing women’s sexuality has been viewed has changed over time. While most contemporary medical and popular discourses on ageing female sexuality speak in terms of a loss of sexuality, Germaine Greer argues that 19th century medical sources framed menopause as an illness, and, rather than a time of diminished sexuality, it was viewed as a time of heightened sexuality in women (1992, p. 321). Brennan refers to European witch texts of the 17th century, which portrayed older women suspected of witchcraft as having ‘monstrous sexual appetites’ (2005, pp. 62-63). In both examples, the existence of ageing female sexuality is acknowledged, but it was maligned, considered outside of acceptable models for ageing femininity, and therefore subject to medical treatment or state-sanctioned punishment and eradication.

Orthodox medical narratives on ageing construct ageing, and ageing sexuality, within a narrative of progressive life stages linking concepts of chronological age to biologically-based changes. In this continuum, characterised as a ‘narrative of decline’, the body ‘naturally’ and ‘inevitably’ begins to decay and fail, and sexual desire, linked to sexual function, gradually diminishes until it ceases altogether. The only alternative is medical intervention, including hormone replacement therapy for menopausal women and erectile stimulant drug therapy for men. Culturally there is a higher importance assigned to the sexual capacity of ageing men, as it is widely believed that male sexual desire and function does not

decline at the same rate as female sexuality. The orthodox medical models' effective 'silencing' of ageing female sexuality serves to legitimise and maintain the concept of a narrative of decline.

In my novella, I investigate assumptions about the decline and 'invisibility' of ageing female sexuality as both a theme and literary device. In part one of the story – where my protagonist invents the fantasy of being in a room with a lover in Hong Kong – there is no reference to her age; she is travelling independently, moves freely around the city, purchases pink snake-skin stilettoes, and indulges in passionate sex with her lover. It is not until part two that it is revealed she is an elderly lady confined to a hospital bed, fantasising about the sexual affair. The decision to structure the story in this way anticipated that the majority of readers will have been exposed to notions of ageing sexuality as diminished, accepting this as 'biologically normal', and perhaps even finding the idea of ageing female sexuality confronting. Therefore, they will assume the narrator is a younger woman based on 'normative' assumptions of which bodies engage in sexual behaviour or desire to wear stiletto shoes. The revelation that she is not who the reader assumes her to be is intended to disrupt and challenge the reader's sense of a 'normative' social order, particularly when in part three the story returns to the hotel room and the fantasy becomes more sexually explicit. This time the unfolding story is read with the knowledge that it is narrated by an elderly woman and the reader is forced to confront and question their assumptions and understandings of ageing female sexuality. Had they initially encountered her as an elderly protagonist, would they have responded to her sexual fantasy differently? Would it have been credible? Has it instigated new ideas or questions about ageing female sexuality?

Cultural studies, including feminist scholarship, provide diverse frameworks for interpreting the gendered female body, including revisions to essentialist discourses of sex and gender as 'natural' and biologically determined. Drawing on the work of Foucault and Butler, social construction theory, seeking to break with essentialist discourses, has tended to focus almost exclusively on the discursively produced body at the expense of the material body. More recently, however, the physical body has been reclaimed and integrated into theoretical work. Twigg contends that ageing forces an engagement with the material body, not only as most people experience ageing through physiological change, but also because of the

‘undeniability of death’ (2004, p. 63). Chivers argues that a balance between physical and other aspects of ageing is crucial to transforming current attitudes towards old age (2003, p. x).

In *The Rejected Body*, disability theorist Susan Wendell argues that the ‘biological and the social are interactive in creating disability’ and that external factors can transform physical differences into impairment (1996, pp. 39-40). For example, a person with restricted mobility is constructed as having a ‘disability’ in situations that require them to negotiate stairs. Wendell takes a holistic view of the construction of disability, asserting: ‘the entire physical and social organization of life tends to assume that we are [either] strong and healthy and able to do what the average, young, non-disabled man can do’ (p. 39). Similarly, ageing bodies acquire negative associations of dependence, frailty or being unproductive when the world they live in is structured to socially, politically and economically privilege younger bodies.

In an Australian context, with the exception of some contemporary feminist-based work, the ageing female body and sexuality continues to be largely ‘invisible’ even in publications where one would expect to find it. Texts with provocative titles, such as, *The Sex Lives of Australians: a History* (Bongiorno, 2012) and *Sex Lives of Australian Women* (Sauers, 2008), produced for a popular readership, do not contain dedicated analysis of ageing sexuality. Material for Joan Sauers’ study was drawn from an online survey where she garnered 1806 responses from Australian women in the 20-70 year age range. The actual number of respondents in the 50-70 year bracket was small, at 104 (6 per cent), a result reflective of the limited vision of the survey, which was not designed to capture specific data on older women.

Research for this thesis was made difficult by the paucity of critical work identifying and addressing the absence of ageing female sexuality in Australian fiction. For example, Xavier Pons’ study of representations of sex in Australian texts considers works by authors such as Henry Lawson, whom he claims represented female characters linked to sex as ‘bad’ women, and Linda Jaivin’s *Eat Me* (1995), which celebrates sex as ‘fun’ and a ‘delicacy to be savoured’ (Pons, 2009). While the range of sexualities in Pons’ study is diverse, what the texts have in common is that the bodies of the protagonists are young. On the subject of ageing protagonists and sexuality, Pons is virtually silent. He does include ‘sexual relations

between a middle-aged person and a much younger partner' as an example of erotic transgression in Australian fiction writing, but qualifies that this 'usually means a younger woman and older man' (p. 50). A clue as to why Pons apporions such little importance to depictions of ageing protagonists and sexuality can be detected in his assumptions about libido. Representing Freud's definition of libido as 'the energy that underpins sexual drive', he concludes:

It is libido which lies at the heart of the interest we take in the world around us, and the beautiful or not so beautiful people in it. When libido declines – through old age, illness or drugs – one loses one's interest in the world, and in life. Depression often sets in, and easeful death – which has been described as a state of being without desire – beckons. (p. 12)

Given that Pons readily accepts a 'narrative of decline' as implicit to sexuality and ageing, it is hardly surprising that he does not question the lack of representations, or research more widely to include the small number of available representations as part of his study. Such scholarship, by normalising orthodox assumptions and failing to address a critical absence in representations of sexuality, is a missed opportunity to draw attention to the status of ageing female sexuality and perhaps inspire the production of creative work to address the gap.

Fiction as a Political Space for Representing Ageing Sexuality

Predominantly, ageing female sexuality is relegated to the non-fiction domain of medical and sociological narratives. But is there a role for fiction writers in redressing cultural assumptions on ageing female sexuality – can or *should* fiction provide a political space for resisting and challenging prevailing stereotypes? And if so, how might writers set about constructing alternatives?

Chivers argues that 'narrative fiction, like critical theory, can help in the re-evaluation of social problems, such as ageism' (p. xv). The conventions of fictional narrative, which situate characters in time and place and in relation to the world they experience, presents an immediate counterpoint to traditional medical narratives. Orthodox scientific discourses tend to speak in the language of classification and generalisations, which reduce the sexual body into parts or units rather than seeing it as a whole (p. xxiii). A narrowed focus on the physical

body excludes ‘other dimensions of aging [sic]’ and necessarily results in a limited ‘imaginative framework available for understanding old people’ and their lives (p. xxiii). Fiction writing, with its very different conventions, can be an effective strategy to individualise and contextualise experiences of ageing sexuality and potentially change the way older people’s lives are understood (p. x).

It should also be noted that within contemporary medical scholarship there are challenges to the orthodox view of ageing as a predominantly biological phenomenon. The emerging field of literary gerontology utilises literary representations of ageing characters as teaching material in traditional gerontology courses. The aim is to expand students’ understanding of the diversity of older people by challenging their belief systems, which have been ‘shaped in part by prevailing social stereotypes’ (Gattuso, 2008). As a discourse, gerontology impacts on and helps to shape government and social policy, thereby linking fictional representations directly with the instruments of power that govern elderly people’s lives (Powell, 2003). For Byrski, an unproductive search for books with ‘interesting and realistic’ older female protagonists was the catalyst for her to write fiction (2012). Byrski considered her own life experiences and those of her friends, women in their late fifties ‘starting new businesses, enrolling in university, playing the stock market’ (p. 4), and found these experiences were not reflected in available fiction titles. She set out to fill a ‘representational black hole’ with characters she claims reflect the ‘reality’ of the lives of Australian women (2010, p. 3). Byrski refers to her fiction as ‘feminist realism’, and in her novels post-menopause is re-imagined as a time of new life choices and opportunities for change (p. 11).

Byrski argues that not only can fictional narratives influence changing social perceptions, but that they *must*. She contends feminist realism has an important social function as well as a literary one: by replacing stereotypes with positive images of successful and interesting lives, writers can act politically, transforming negative views on old age and ageing women and resisting cultural notions of ‘youth and beauty’ as the ideal. Byrski seeks to ‘infuse her work with the themes and values of second wave feminism: independence, self-realisation, and an awareness of the nature of sexual politics in private and public life’ (p. 9). Drawing on Thomas de Zengotita’s concept of ‘representational flattery’, where seeing oneself reflected in the products of culture flatters the self and makes it visible, Byrski argues for consciously

producing 'positive' representations of older women as the best strategy to combat negative ageism (p. 5).

Chivers, however, cautions against the replacement of negative ageism with positive ageism, 'which like ageism more generally, results in negative perceptions of what age actually entails by reducing it to false optimism and cosmetic, youthful activity' (p. xxv). Positive ageism seeks to deny decline altogether and insists on its opposite, a 'wonderful' and 'healthy energetic midlife and old age' (p. xxv). At the extreme end of the spectrum, positive ageism – as a denial of the ageing process – is evident in aspirations to hold onto youth through cosmetic and surgical procedures. But in a more modified sense, and in line with how Byrski represents 'positive' images of ageing women, mid and later life is recast as a time of new business opportunities and creative ventures, travel, and exciting new romances. As an alternative vision of ageing, while well intentioned, it potentially excludes a significant proportion of the ageing population. What if a women's experience of ageing is not optimistic? What if she has experienced long-term poverty, illness, disability, or domestic violence – debilitating factors that have limited the range of choices she can make in later life? For Chivers, 'to pretend that physical changes do not cause physical, social and emotional pain is to avoid the complexity that offers age studies such potential' (p. xxv). Accordingly, fictional representations of ageing experiences can only benefit by a similarly complex approach.

In her paper on representations of female masochism in women's writing, Maya Clair Linden questioned the notion that female writers have a responsibility to only present positive images of women and sexuality (2010). Concurring with Carla Kaplan that 'feminist critique has often looked to women's writing to mirror feminist criticism', Linden asks: 'Why should the feminist critique of literature posit a feminist utopia as its cause or presume and seek affirmative feminist narrative in female-authored texts?' (p. 5). For Linden, female-authored texts are a legitimate space for explorations of diverse perspectives on sexuality, including transgressive sexualities. In this way, women's writing has the potential to 'confront us with otherness' and is an 'opportunity to explore and inhabit fleetingly, alternative subjectivities' to our own (p. 7).

My position in undertaking this project was to explore the potential for fiction writing to challenge and resist some of the prevailing stereotypes about ageing women and sexuality that I observed were being [re]produced in cultural production. I felt particularly concerned about representations of sexuality that depicted ageing woman as humorous, derogatory, or repulsive, as it fed into an insidious narrative of misogyny and highlighted how judgment on female sexuality extends over the entire course of a women's life. To effectively critique or redress this calls for a more complex response than the production of 'positive' representations of ageing female sexuality – stymied from the outset by the task of defining what is meant by positive – in favour of extending the narrow range of representations to reflect the diversity of women's lived experiences.

In 'One Night in Hong Kong' I investigate representing the sexuality of a 78-year-old protagonist through her construction of a sexual fantasy. I particularly liked the potential for subversion and resistance offered by sexual fantasy; that despite any assumptions we may make about a person, we do not know what is going on inside their thoughts and imagination. It allows ageing women political agency to explore and invent narratives more diverse, pleasurable or transgressive than those that they may experience in their everyday lives. I discuss my exploration of sexual fantasy in my novella in more detail in the section 'Sexual Fantasy' later in this essay.

Interventionist Texts

Within the context of my research, an 'interventionist' text is a work of fiction that resists and disrupts dominant narratives of ageing female sexuality as non-existent or diminished and explores sexuality as a central component of characterisation. In this section I consider novels by three Western Australian writers that feature ageing female protagonists. Together, the texts explore a diverse range of sexual identities for older female protagonists: *Miss Peabody's Inheritance* explores female same-sex relationships, *The Toucher* explores a cross-generation heterosexual relationship, and *Food, Sex & Money* explores both female same-sex and heterosexual relationships, including one between two octogenarian lovers.

I begin my analysis with a brief outline of each text and the representation of sexuality central to the characterisation and story development. I then discuss four key aspects of representing ageing female sexuality: how the authors have constructed the body; the protagonist's relationship to their ageing body; sexual fantasy; and, informed by Tally's critique of filmic depictions, consider if there is a tension created in the texts by the authors seeking to challenge one set of stereotypes while reproducing another. In each of the sections I also discuss my own investigation into these research categories, and how my findings impacted on the development of my novella.

In *The Toucher*, Hewett continues her interest in exploring complex heterosexual relationships through the story of 68-year-old writer Esther La Farge Summerton and her lover, 26-year-old Billy Crowe. Esther is confined to a wheelchair and recovering from the recent death of her husband. Billy and Esther are depicted as outsiders in the small coastal town where the story is set. Billy is a member of the Crowe family, mutton bird hunters who keep to themselves and are socially excluded by the residents of the town. Esther, as a writer, is positioned outside the normative roles for women living in country towns. She has rejected the narrow range of approved 'scripts' for women of her generation. She has 'failed' as a mother; her adult son is estranged after she abandoned him as a child. Esther's recollection of past lovers suggests a history of transgressions: adultery, abortion, abandoning relationships.

Esther's house is in a remote location, away from the prying eyes of the townspeople. Threats to the legitimacy of Esther and Billy's relationship come from external sources, such as visitors to the house, the reaction of Billy's relatives and Esther's children. Esther confesses her fear of taking a trip with Billy into town: 'I am afraid they'll destroy us.' When he asks how they could do that, she refers to their disciplining stares; all they will see is 'an old woman in a wheelchair with a young man, a toy-boy she pays to attend her' (p. 68). By establishing geographic and social isolation, Hewett is free to create an alternative world, a space where unconventional relationships are possible. Initially Esther regards her attraction to the younger man as a distraction from loneliness and, at the end of the novel, declares it was 'her one last chance' to experience a male lover. She understands that the emotionally unstable Billy is 'a bird of passage', a temporary visitor in her life (p. 44).

Hewett's female protagonists are almost always engaged in exploring their sexuality and negotiating politics within male/female relationships. For Hewett, heterosexuality is not a comfortable site of happy couples, loving families or modern shared partnerships. Her representations are almost always volatile, passionate, risky, sites of abandonment, betrayal and bitter accusation. The men her female protagonists are drawn to tend to have dark sides, reflecting her own view of sexual dynamics:

I wonder why it is that nice, decent honourable men don't excite we women, don't satisfy us? We want a bit of brinkmanship and challenge; we like a bit of bad, mad, cad, danger, we want to be pushed around by real men. (Hewett quoted in Hawley, 1993)

Throughout her career, Hewett's representations of female sexuality attracted criticism from feminist reviewers and critics who claimed that, while her work appears to be female centred, it is 'counterproductive to feminism' in that it confirms a 'male-oriented ideal', defining female identity 'in relation to men' (Williams, 1992, p. 131). But, as Margaret Williams points out, along with representations of the 'nostalgic seductiveness of the feminine ideal' often depicted as the femme fatale, Hewett also positioned this feminine ideal 'as an intolerable prison' (p.131).

I doubt Hewett would have been troubled by claims her representation of female sexuality was antithetical to traditional feminist concerns. As a writer she was interested in exploring and exposing the darker impulses and contradictions of women in heterosexual relationships, rather than in constructing narratives of how she might wish them to be. Linden draws attention to the 'volatile nature of desire' and claims that 'we do not always want what is best for us' (p.3). She cites a common feminist response to texts depicting female masochistic characters, which asserts, 'romance plots involving masochistic female characters are damaging to women and the feminist project because they encourage women to respond erotically to the conditions of their own oppression' (p. 3). Linden rejects this proposition and argues that such texts are often misread. She suggests critics tend to view masochistic women as 'wholly passive victims, acquiescent to the sexual scripts of patriarchy' and overlook their agency 'as subjects who exert will, even at the cost of self-destruction' (p. 6). Furthermore, without representations of diverse sexuality the literary landscape would become a sanitised space, expunged of complexity and ambiguity, reflective only of a particular political view

and thereby failing to tell the ‘whole story.’ She regards texts that explore transgressive themes as opportunities to explore the often silenced space of dysfunctional power relations and understand more about ‘women’s fraught relationship to men, to patriarchy and to feminism’ (pp. 6-7).

In *The Toucher* Billy and Esther’s unconventional relationship is doomed to fail. Esther’s sexuality, the men she is attracted to, the mistakes she makes, and the way she responds are represented as an inescapable cycle, one that she has repeated from her youth and continues into her old age. In this way Hewett rejects a popular stereotype associated with ageing; that as people enter old age they are imbued with greater wisdom born of learning lessons in life.

In *Miss Peabody’s Inheritance*, Jolley tells the story of lonely Dorothy Peabody and a transformational correspondence between her and an Australian author, Diana Hopewell. From the other side of the globe, the author sends Miss Peabody sections of her unfolding draft novel, which Jolley develops as an ‘inner-novel’ within the text, and where most of the story in *Miss Peabody* takes place. Hopewell’s inner-novel details the adventures of Miss Arabella Thorne, headmistress of the Pine Heights school for girls, her assistant and lover, Miss Edgely, and her friend Miss Snowdon, a hospital matron, all of whom take a trip to Europe accompanied by Gwendaline Manners, one of the school girls.

A range of sexualities is represented in *Miss Peabody*, including the relationship between ageing Miss Thorne and Miss Edgely, the heterosexual desires of young Gwendaline to marry and have children, and the repressed sexuality of Dorothy Peabody retiring each night to her ‘virginal’ bedroom. There is also the eroticised relationship that develops between Miss Peabody and the author Diana Hopewell through their correspondence. Jolley’s exploration of female sexuality writes against normative sexual identities for women and the invisibility, in mainstream literature, of same-sex relationships between older women. Jolley’s representations of lesbian relationships have received some criticism. Dean Kiley is dismissive of Jolley’s representations of lesbian characters, claiming they are ‘two-dimensional (ventriloquised)’ and operate more as ‘narrative fragments’ within texts which only serve to authorise ‘critical disengagement with the full problematic of same-sex desire or lesbian love’ (Kiley, 1998). For Maureen Bettle, Jolley’s definition of lesbianism in *Miss*

Peabody is reductive, setting up a mutually exclusive choice between lesbianism and motherhood (1991). However, such interpretations are dependent on there being a fixed category of 'lesbian' for Jolley's representation to be measured against. When Jolley was asked about the kind of relationships she was interested in exploring in her writing, she did not reference lesbianism, but included:

relations between two women who possibly set up house because it's economical to do that, or women who are living in institutions, well institutional lives, and perhaps are a bit lonely, perhaps women who have grown up without (or men for that matter) any kind of physical caress at all. (Reid, 1989)

For Jolley, expressions of female sexuality can develop fluidly, out of particular circumstances and situations. Brian Dibble links representations of sexuality in Jolley's work to the pursuit of love, as an 'escape' from the 'anguish of loneliness by loving/being loved.' He contends the attainment of love 'trumps any normative morality's imperative to heterosexual love' (pp. 189-190). Viewed this way, Jolley's representations of female sexuality are less bound by the political expectations some critics may have regarding 'true' or 'authentic' constructions of lesbian relationships.

Jolley's representation of three older female characters in a soft-core porn novel, traversing Europe, leaving a collection of broken beds in their wake, is delightfully playful. It is not intended as a realistic representation of lesbian sexuality. This is not to suggest that the construction of ageing sexuality in *Miss Peabody* wouldn't be confronting to mainstream readers. Perhaps most confronting is Miss Thorne's sexual gaze, grooming behaviours, and manipulation of several of the young school girls in her charge. I found myself wondering if the novel would be received differently if it were published today, into a context of heightened public anxiety over paedophilia and the current Royal Commission into Institutional Response to Child Sexual Abuse.

In *Miss Peabody*, Jolley explores sexuality as a site of shifting power, vulnerable to destabilisation. In one scene, school girl Debbie Frome performs a private disco dance for her headmistress: 'Come on Miss Thorne, Miss Arabella Thorne, I can teach you. I can teach you a lot of things. I can teach you what to do with your hands' (p. 39).

The young girl dances closer to the older woman.

‘In disco there’s no touching,’ she says, ‘you turn me on I’ll have to come,’ she sings, looking up at her Headmistress through the ragged, long fringe of hair. Her eyes through the fringe have a teasing look. ‘Are you turned on Miss Thorne? You like this Miss Thorne. Huh? Huh! Huh! Huh! Would you like to touch me now, she sings, dancing up and back, ‘Would you like to touch me now.’ (p. 39)

By manipulating Miss Thorne’s sexual attraction, Debbie successfully transgresses an established line of authority (headmistress/student) and momentarily subverts Miss Thorne’s social power. In this way, Jolley creates greater complexity in her representation of female sexuality than the humour in the novel might suggest.

Food, Sex & Money is the second title in Byrski’s body of fiction aimed at an older female readership. The novel focusses on the story of three protagonists, Bonnie, Fran and Sylvia, convent-educated school friends who are reunited in later life. It explores the women’s friendships with one another, their respective families, new love interests and sexual relationships.

While all of Byrski’s novels feature the lives of older female protagonists, sexuality is not always intrinsic to their characterisation. Byrski links sex with romance, and as ‘romance is only one, minor element of the life issues’ her characters explore, ageing female sexuality is often absent in her work (2010, p. 11). Her characters are often dealing with the after effects of infidelity, abusive spouses or the death of a partner, and her interest when representing new heterosexual romances is providing positive models for women. In her stories, aged protagonists have learnt lessons in life and bring their experience and wisdom to new relationships. Couples tend to treat each other nicely, and men respect and are attracted to independent women. There is often a ‘turning of the tables’ on conventional heterosexual roles, where it is the men who become anxious over unreturned phone calls from a female love interest, or worry the woman they are interested in might only want them for casual sex. Byrski’s female characters are commonly well-exposed to radical feminism; they privilege their female friendships or ‘sisterhood’ over relationships with men and insist on financial and emotional independence. When 80-year-old Irene begins a relationship with 81-year-old Hamish she insists that it operates outside of the traditional structure of marriage: ‘She needed equality in the relationship with Hamish and while she could stay at his place it was

too one-sided. He might start to think about her moving in and that was definitely not on the cards' (p. 211).

Food, Sex & Money is perhaps the only contemporary Australian novel to deal with a heterosexual relationship between two 80-year-old lovers.

Hamish climbed into bed and lay on his side facing her, his head propped on his arm. 'Look,' he said, 'I know I started all this but I should warn you – I'm a bit lacking in the er...er...what I mean is that...I'm afraid erections are a thing of the past.' 'That's good,' she said with a smile. 'I couldn't be doing with all that grunting and heaving, anyway. I always thought that penetration was a bit overrated.' 'Really?' There was relief in his voice. 'Well, then, that's good, isn't it? 'Funny, really, this feels like...like the first time ever.' 'Yes,' she nodded. 'Hamish...?' 'Yes?' 'I'm really nervous.' 'So am I,' he said, moving closer. 'Silly old things, aren't we?' (p. 126)

The night is spent holding one another and feeling intimately connected. In the morning Irene wakes and watches Hamish sleeping on his back 'in the posture of a young man.' He is described as 'sated', and she playfully jokes that she will announce to her friend that he is 'a great fuck' (p. 128).

Byrski's depiction of ageing sexuality conforms with medical narratives of ageing and declining sexual function. Interestingly, her ageing lovers do not despair at the knowledge their bodies are no longer able to engage in physical sex, but, instead, are relieved to be liberated from all that 'grunting' and 'heaving' of sex in their youth. As part of her agenda to provide 'positive' relationship models in her stories, Byrski constructs a version of sexuality for older women that values the supposedly feminine traits of intimacy and tenderness over more physical 'male-driven' penetrative sex. It is a version of sexuality that is accessible to all ageing bodies, and no doubt appeals to many of her female readers. But, within the context of a text that is breaking new ground by representing late-life sexuality, it can also be seen as a missed opportunity to explore more diverse and challenging possibilities of ageing female sexuality and desire.

While the three novels explore ageing female sexuality in different ways, it is Hewett's depiction of a rawer more physical sexuality for her ageing protagonist that I found most

interesting and challenging to stereotypes of ageing female sexuality. As an interventionist text it resists the notion that older women's sexuality is limited by reduced physical function and declined sexual desire. The risks Hewett took in *The Toucher* cleave open a fictional space for other explorations of ageing female desire.

In 'One Night in Hong Kong' I set out to explore my protagonist's sexuality through a heterosexual fantasy she invents while lying in a hospital bed. In the initial writing stages I felt completely comfortable constructing passages describing her family history, her travels through Europe as a younger woman, her mother's art classes for inmates at Fremantle Prison. However, that sense of comfort quickly evaporated when I attempted to write the fantasised sex scenes – the raunchy imaginings of an elderly woman – that were so critical to the central theme of my novella and my research. I was forced at this point to consider my own assumptions and normalised views on ageing female sexuality. I abandoned several vignette drafts after feeling awkward and disrespectful, unsure if my representation of an ageing woman's desires was 'permissible.' Was I 'allowed' to attribute erotic thoughts and action to someone my mother's age? It gave me new insight into the reaction of the elderly women I had worked with in oral history, and was a stark reminder of just how taboo writing elderly female sex scenes is.

It became very clear that the 'absence' of representations of ageing female sexuality in fiction production, the lack of a foundational or common language, works to perpetuate a powerful silence. Unsure of how to even start writing eroticised scenes, I turned to Hewett's novel, particularly her depiction of sexual encounters between Billy and Esther. Hewett is upfront and explicit in her use of eroticised language and imagery, confronting her readers with her character's robust libido.

'Do y' want love?' he mumbled. 'Tell me.'

'Yes,' she gasped.

'Not yet,' he said and, turning on the bed, lay with his fly undone and his cock against her mouth. 'Suck me,' he ordered, and they lay together until she tasted the thick flood of his sperm in her mouth.' (p. 63)

Her depiction of Esther not only writes against the stereotype of de-sexualised older women, but also lays down a critical foundation for understanding ageing female sexuality. In the text, Esther's desire as an older woman is not described differently to Esther's desire as a

younger woman. It is a continuum approach to female sexuality, which actively resists the orthodox notion of a 'narrative of decline' and represents female sexuality as an ongoing and intrinsic part of ageing. By re-positioning female sexuality on a continuum, free of 'life-stages' or biological limitations it provides a more complex and limitless framework for writers to explore ageing sexuality in fiction writing. From this, I realised any physiological changes/limitations my protagonist had were only a minor factor or obstacle to her expression of sexuality. I would just have to be resourceful and find an expression of sexuality that was suited to her particular circumstances. Furthermore, her sexuality was not 'other' or different because she was elderly, but common and identifiable with other female experiences. This understanding enabled me to move forward and begin constructing my protagonist's sexuality in a way I felt credible to her characterisation.

'The Body' Re-writing the Ageing Female Body

Western discourses on ageing are organised around a youth/age binary, with the youthful body idealised as a symbol of life (fertility) and desire (sexuality). The ageing female body, perceived as non-reproductive, is an abject female body. Cultural associations of ageing with the loss of cognitive capacity and declining body function also frame the ageing female body as out of control. How then did each of the writers in the three sample texts represent the ageing female body?

In each of the three novels, there are examples of ageing characters caught in a disciplining narrative of critically comparing their physically changed bodies to their younger selves. Esther bemoans her reflection in the mirror: 'heavy mottled arms, sagging breasts, wild white hair on end' (pp. 12-13), and later declares to Billy that she 'once was very beautiful.' Miss Peabody 'knew her muscles were slack, horribly so round the regions of the waist and buttocks' (p. 12), and when 80-year-old Irene looks at her image in the mirror she sees 'crumpled fabric', the deteriorating body of an old woman 'entirely lacking in sex appeal' (p. 212).

While physical ageing tends to be constructed within a conventional paradigm, each of the texts challenges the pervasive notion of ageing bodies as bodies out of control. It is the bodies

of the younger characters that are commonly represented as lacking control. Miss Thorne and Miss Snowden, who possess a 'portliness brought on by years of responsibility, plenty of money, comfortable accommodation and good meals', have a greater bodily discipline than the younger Miss Edgely, who 'is not handling her menopause at all well' (p. 35). Thorne's and Snowden's sixty-year-old, self-disciplined bodies are even more sharply contrasted with the unruly body of Gwendaline 'flooding' in a police cell in Vienna when her period arrives unexpectedly (p. 95). A post-menopausal body is therefore represented as one that is more efficiently managed and controlled.

The older, educated and financially secure Esther La Farge Summerton, while surrendering to passion and desire in an engulfing relationship with Billy, is shown to have more control than the ill-fated Billy and younger Iris. It is Esther who physically and emotionally survives the ménage a trois, while the younger Billy ends up in prison for the murder of Iris. It is youthful passions and inexperience that are depicted as being out of control. Hewett also explores the protagonist's relationship to her own body. Before embarking on the affair with Billy, Esther is ambivalent towards her body. Disparaging of its physical changes, she also considers masturbation in her old age as an act of 'humiliation', not only a poor replacement for a lover, but a punishment for no longer being attractive to men. However, as the relationship with Billy develops, Esther ceases to describe her body in negative terms and is re-awakened to it as a source of pleasure, both for her and her young lover.

An emphasis on the physicality of the ageing body renders it 'visible' within the text, thereby re-writing the status of invisibility commonly assigned to an older sexualised body. As Billy helps Esther into the bath, he evaluates her: 'Y' look alright in the nuddy,' he said. 'Y' got nice tits. I like women with a bit of flesh on 'em instead of them scrawny things' (p. 42). The younger man's approval of Esther's ageing body and claim that he prefers it over another body type is an important strategy for establishing credibility in the unconventional sexual relationship. Her body is described in terms usually associated with younger, reproductive bodies. It makes her sexuality highly visual and her 'abject' non-reproductive body something to be desired.

Hewett confronts her readers with images of her protagonist's ageing body and its capacity for desire and sexual fulfilment. She subverts images of raunchy shower sex scenes, popular in Hollywood films of the 1990s:

Afterwards he would support her in the shower recess, their bodies wet and glistening like fishes, her broad hips clasped tightly to his flat loins, her heavy, veined breasts flattened against his chest where two coarse black hairs sprouted out of the nipples. He would kneel at her feet on the cold tiles, holding her upright and trembling, his lips buried in her groin until she opened up under his tongue. (p. 97)

In *Miss Peabody*, Jolley also utilises the erotic potential of a shower scene, having Miss Thorne (Prickles) and Miss Snowdon strip down and take a shower:

“Oh Super! Prickles! A water fight! Oh rather! Come on! Race you!”
“This bathroom is very nicely tiled. Good strong jets of water too.”
“Mmm yes. Erotic. My deah [*sic*] this is madness!”
“Madness! But do go on!”
“Let's have the water just a bit warmer. Ah! That's more like it. Oh wicked! Prickles. Shall I soap you?”
“Of course you may do that again. As often as you like. You exquisite naughty. Oh indecently exquisite.”
“Prickles! This is Bigger than both of us!” (pp. 10-11)

It is a high-camp, delightfully over-the-top scene that would not be out of place in a John Waters film. While it is deliberately overwritten, it is also a rare example in mainstream literature of two ageing women playfully and sexually enjoying one another's naked bodies.

In *Food, Sex & Money*, while ageing female bodies are re-cast as sexualised bodies, it is not the physical body that is given primacy in the text. Byrski is more interested in challenging stereotypes of mid-and-later life as a time when personal and professional options 'naturally' reduce. She does this by re-positioning her ageing female bodies out of the domestic sphere of the home and family and into new roles in the public space. Characters use mid-life as a time to reassess what they want their future to be, reconnecting with lost or neglected talents and skills to create new opportunities for themselves. For example Sylvia, who embarks on a fling with a younger, successful man, feels 'thrilled' at the opportunity to rediscover her sexuality, but she also regards the affair as 'just a stage' in a wider plan of changes to be made in her life (p. 261). In Byrski's re-writing of the ageing female body it is not the solitary body that is rewarded with an interesting or successful mid-life, but the body that acknowledges and seeks out a new community of women. The storylines often read as a kind

of feminist parable; along the rocky path to self-discovery and change are markers of feminist doctrine that, if heeded, will guide the characters to a renewed and better life.

In 'One Night in Hong Kong' I chose not to represent my protagonist's ageing body by in-text comparisons between her older and younger self. Where I encountered examples of this in the selected texts I found the comparison to be judgemental; none of the protagonists accept the changes in their bodies, but all mourn the loss of their youthful appearance. Instead, I decided to investigate the possibility of other ways of bodily experience for an elderly, bed-ridden woman. In the opening vignette my protagonist proclaims that old women 'dream about exactly the same things they did when they were young girls, but in brighter colours, borne of an appreciation for how delicate each moment is' (p. 6). While her body is confined to a hospital bed, it is represented as sensually alive: she feels the 'warm chemicals' that 'flood her veins', tastes the fizzy tang of wine on her tongue, smells the delicate fragrance of jasmine rice and the scent of her lover lingering on the sheets. Rather than ageing diminishing her senses, memory has heightened them, increasing her potential to fantasise and dream of the things she desires.

Her body in her fantasy story is free to travel independently to any world city, to eat what she desires, dress how she likes, play the role of the seductress; a break with conventional 'scripts' of behaviours for ageing women. When she invents the story of the first meeting with her young 'lover' it takes place in a bar at midnight in a busy neighbourhood of Hong Kong. In writing this section of the novella it occurred to me how rare it is to see elderly people out in the entertainment precincts of Perth after dark. The cafes, restaurants, streets are exclusionary spaces for older people at night, no doubt caused by heightened anxieties about personal safety. It is a form of social segregation that is rarely questioned or challenged by town planners, governments or the general public.

While I investigated ways to represent my protagonist's ageing body outside the binary of comparing it with her younger self, the reality of her ageing body and physical limitations could not be ignored. Her body, injured after a fall, is a source of frustration to her: 'lying like a sack of potatoes in a hospital bed with no glimmer of escape' (p. 29). She proclaims herself to be 'angry with my body for failing and bringing me to this unearthly, garden-less

place' (p. 38). When she does draw attention to her physical ageing, such as the strands of silvery pubic hair floating in the bath water with her lover, or her older image in the reflection of the train window, she states it as an observation devoid of judgment or mourning for her younger self. She does not imagine herself as a younger woman but enjoys the fantasy of breaking the taboo of an elderly woman in a sexual relationship with a much younger man.

Sexual Fantasy

So far, my analysis has focussed on an embodied experience of sexuality, but the body is also a site of imaginative experiences. Sexual fantasy is rarely discussed in medical literature as an available sexuality for ageing women, and my research indicates it is an under-explored theme in contemporary fiction. It would seem, then, that sexual fantasy is a particularly taboo form of sexuality for ageing women.

However, it is not only a taboo subject for older women. Based on the findings of her sociological survey, Sauers noted that many of the young women surveyed felt 'deviant' or 'ashamed' of the 'raunchy and risky' stories taking place in their imaginations (p. 9). She contends, '[i]n spite of the influence of women's liberation, or maybe partly *because* of it, women are still insecure about what goes on in the privacy of their own heads' (p. 28). In the forward to *Sugar in My Bowl* (2011), Erica Jong describes being in a 'state of palpitating terror about revealing sexual fantasy' when writing *Fear of Flying* (1973).

Sexual fantasy has the capacity to place women in the driving seat of their sexual desire and offers identities outside of normative roles. Sauers found that women's fantasies often contradicted the realities of their lives; women in positions of social power and responsibility may fantasise about being overpowered and rendered submissive (2008, p. x). Likewise, those who perceive they have little social power are free to imagine themselves in positions of sexual control. Because of their liberating possibilities – they are not dependent on a partner and are not subject to any physical limitations on bodies – sexual fantasy would seem an accessible and highly plausible category of sexuality to explore in narratives of ageing female sexuality.

Both Hewett and, I will argue, Jolley provide some interesting investigations of sexual fantasy in their texts. In *The Toucher*, female sexual fantasy is identified as a threat to male heterosexual power rather than as a liberating possibility for an ageing woman with a disability. A jealous Billy accuses Esther of fantasising about a previous lover: ‘you’re comin’ for him, you’re not comin’ for me (pp. 69-70).

In most critical scholarship, *Miss Peabody* is described as ‘a metafictional piece involving a novel-within-the novel and a character who regards its fiction as fact’ (Milech, 2010, p. 11). In this reading, the inner-novel is the single creation of the author Diana Hopewell. Miss Peabody, reading the stories in letters, finds them to be such a transformative experience that she eventually begins to confuse the fictional characters and settings with real life. However, some critical interpretations have revised this assumption. Maria Suarez-Lafuente argues that Miss Peabody ‘becomes so proficient in the art of communicating that between herself and Diana they create Miss Thorne and her world’ (1991, p. 21). Seen this way, the often eroticised stories of Thorne, Edgely and Snowdon are a co-creation of two women who are both ‘trapped’ in particular situations. Miss Peabody is trapped in her ‘drab’ life, working in an office and tending to her elderly, bed-ridden mother, and Diana Hopewell is revealed at the end of the novel to be living out the last years of her life in a nursing home.

Re-framing the inner-novel as a co-creation is not to suggest that Miss Peabody is involved in the writing of the stories from the very beginning but rather that the stories Diana pens are shaped by her interaction with Miss Peabody and nourished by their developing relationship. Often the stories unfolding in the letters are interrupted by Diana’s intimate questions to Miss Peabody, such as, ‘What sort of dresses do you wear?’, ‘Have you a small straight brave back?’ and ‘Are you in love? Tell me about your love, for I am sure you are in love’ (p. 12). Miss Peabody keeps Diana’s letters in her stocking and hanky drawer, a place traditionally reserved for stashing letters from a lover. She indulges in fantasises about the author: ‘Images came one after the other. She saw the novelist charmingly dressed, mounted on her horse and galloping, with passion and grace’ (p. 6). As the relationship continues, Miss Peabody’s fantasy images of the author grow more erotic: ‘Diana, the Goddess of the Hunt, would be a tall woman graceful and shapely about the neck and breast. She would wear tall riding boots’ (p. 8).

Miss Peabody is delighted to discover that the 'lesbian-themed' stories of Thorne, Edgely and Snowdon begin to resemble Diana's earlier book, *Angels on Horseback*. It was her enjoyment of that book that had inspired her to make contact with the author. Passages from the developing text have a sensual effect on Miss Peabody. She finds herself 'disturbed' by the shower scene but it is 'exciting' to feel that way (p. 11). The images linger in her mind: she thinks of the mess it would have left in the bathroom, then wonders 'if it was possible to have a water fight by oneself' (p. 12). She tries to come to terms with her feelings regarding the transgressive interaction between Miss Thorne and the schoolgirl Gwendaline: 'I am still trying to reason out [...] how your writing can get me so emotionally involved. I feel I am having a disturbing experience' (p. 114). The older woman and experienced author of erotic fiction quickly reassures her: 'If you feel disturbed and strange this is perfectly natural. It is disturbing to explore the breast of a sixty year old woman in relation to a girl of sixteen' (p. 115). As a co-creation, and form of eroticised fantasy, the two women find an imaginative space to explore a life more exciting and raunchy than the ones they live. Re-read as a sexual fantasy, it extends the potential for a greater diversity of sexual representations of ageing women in contemporary Australian fiction.

In 'One Night in Hong Kong' I investigate sexual fantasy and masturbation for my protagonist as it frees her from any physical limitations and the 'reality' of lying in a hospital bed. It allowed me to be playful, to reimagine the clinical image of a hospital bed as an erotic site, antithetical to how it is usually perceived. Instead of a place of medical instruments, stiff laundered sheets and thermometers in glass beakers, my protagonist's bed becomes a kind of magic carpet on which to travel the world. Through her use of fantasy she is able to initiate and control sexual encounters, visit exotic locations, make impulsive decisions, and enjoy the attention of a younger man. My protagonist, who had conformed to the expectations of her parents as a young woman can – as Sauer's research suggests – invent an alternative version of herself. Her attraction to her lover is visceral, their sexual encounters erotic, raw and physical; she desires to 'plunge into him, grab his face firmly' and 'lick and sip and suck and explore every inch of him' (p. 16). With the power, and the privacy, to invent any story she desires I could not conceive of her fantasising about sitting passively on a park bench holding hands with a lover or spending quiet nights together in front of the television.

Through the process of investigating sexual fantasy for my protagonist it became apparent that her desires would extend beyond the physicality of sex to encompass a range of experiences that her age and health might also limit. This discovery generated new creative ideas and material for vignettes that I had not initially considered. Along with encounters with her lover, I developed stories around freedom of movement, the ability to eat whatever foods she desired, the sanctity and personal space of the hotel room, and a number of stories around the themes of intimacy and connection to her lover. She chooses to invent him as Sicilian, which gives her the opportunity to reconnect with her travels as a younger woman, and re-write an episode of regret in her past. This broadened the scope and landscape of the novella and allowed me to develop a more complex and credible range of desires for my ageing female protagonist. It also allowed me to reflect on the limitations of an invented or sexual fantasy which, at some point, falls short of being able to fulfil all of my protagonist's desires. After imagining herself lying on the bed with her lover, listening to intimate stories about his childhood, she reveals that she yearns to share her stories too, that without exchanging stories 'it isn't possible for women to feel love' (p. 21). In her narrative she says that he won't think to ask her, because at this point she is forced to admit to herself that, because it isn't a real relationship, her desire for reciprocity will go unmet.

Mid-life Sexual Re-Awakening

While, with some exceptions, ageing female sexuality is under-represented in contemporary Australian fiction, there are examples of sexualised older female protagonists in popular Hollywood films that have successfully screened in Australia. This might suggest Australian consumers of popular films are both familiar with and accepting of more radical depictions of ageing female sexuality than the premise of my research suggests. However, while it is beyond the scope of this essay to consider these representations in detail, Tally's (2008) analysis of these films as an emerging sub-genre demonstrates that depictions of sexualised ageing female characters are permissible, as long as they only go so far.

Tally critiqued films such as *Anywhere But Here* (1999), *Something's Gotta Give* (2003), *The Banger Sisters* (2003), *Thirteen* (2003) and *Freaky Friday* (2003), which all explore representations of ageing female heterosexuality. She claims that while these films portray

seemingly affirmative stories of ageing female sexuality, and celebrate older women's sexual re-awakening, they are also politically conservative. The storylines allow older women to explore their sexuality – stepping temporarily outside of their role in the family – provided that, by the end of the film, they 'reinscribe that sexuality safely within the confines of the traditional family' (p. 12). This, she claims, underwrites the narratives with a sense of 'ambivalence about older women's sexuality' (p. 120). She argues that there is an 'almost compulsive need to show that these women come back into the family fold' (p. 130). Their voluntary return re-establishes order in both their own lives and the lives of the other family members, which have been thrown temporarily into flux. In this way the films validate and preserve the traditional family and women's roles within it as wives and mothers.

Tally's suggestion that the power of an alternative representation of ageing female sexuality in film may be lost if that representation is simultaneously inscribed with conventional roles and expectations for its female characters, is also pertinent to fictional texts. This is particularly so if writers have stated their intention to challenge and deconstruct stereotypes of ageing female characters.

In *The Toucher*, Hewett constructs a radical depiction of ageing female sexuality on the one hand, but also undermines this with a more conventional treatment of 'femininity' and the role of the mother to preserve the traditional family unit. In the text, Esther's femininity is anchored to her need to be with a man, a position she remonstrates is the result of the 'awful programming of her generation' whereby 'without a man to define her she didn't exist' (p. 58). She chose motherhood for 'the security of belonging to a family circle, not just a leftover, a lonely discard' (p. 58). However, as a normative mother figure, Esther has a patchy success-rate. She has three children to three different fathers, and, while her relationships with two of her children function well, she is estranged from her eldest son, Ben. The sexual relationship with Billy takes place outside the knowledge of her family. Early in the story she lies to her son and daughter about her carer arrangements, concealing Billy. Towards the end of the novel, when her daughter Cara announces she is returning home on holidays from university, Esther is vexed about how her daughter will respond to her affair with Billy. The return of her daughter reinstates Esther's identity as a mother, a role she considers incompatible with a transgressive affair with a young lover. But Esther need

not worry; before Cara returns, Billy's murder of Iris is discovered and, after time spent as a fugitive, he is captured and expelled from her family home.

As a young mother, Esther's sexual exploits, where she chose her carnal desires over her maternal ones, resulted in her being punished with the loss of her relationship with Ben. It is a regret in her life, and she is haunted by the memory of him as a 12-year-old boy in striped pyjamas standing in the doorway of his bedroom, accusing her: 'You've done terrible things to my family, Mother' (p. 13). She accepts his estrangement as pay-back for her maternal failure. At the end of the story, when Billy is serving a life sentence in prison, Esther attends an art exhibition where she encounters Ben. After a strained but polite greeting, there is a moment when, amused at the expense of Ben's lover, they exchange knowing glances. It is a moment of familial connection that signals the possibility of a future when Esther, now free of her relationship with Billy, might be able to return to her central role as a mother in the family unit.

Similarly, in *Food, Sex & Money*, the preservation of the family unit is primary. Hamish and Irene are long-time friends who discover their sexual attraction while on a holiday in Greece. Away from her normal life, where she lives with her widowed adult daughter Bonnie, Irene is free to explore a new sexual identity for herself. When she returns from her trip, Irene's storyline orbits around the question of whether Bonnie will accept her new found sexual identity. Initially Bonnie rejects the relationship outright, unable to 'overcome her embarrassment and distaste' (p. 196).

'But you're eighty, Mum!' she said. 'People don't have....aff...relationships, at eighty.'

'Of course they do, Bonnie, don't be so naïve. People have affairs when they're even older than us, even when they're in hostels and nursing homes. It's just that everyone pretends it doesn't happen.' (p. 195)

Initially pandering to Bonnie's 'sensibilities', Irene forbids Hamish from staying overnight in the house she shares with her daughter. Eventually though, the tension is resolved, with Bonnie coming to terms with her feelings and accepting Irene and Hamish's relationship, and the sanctity of the family unit is re-established and preserved.

The depictions of sexualised ageing female protagonists in Hewett's and Byrski's texts remain important interventions into how ageing female characters are commonly portrayed. However, by validating conventional female roles and aspirations for their protagonists, the writers limit the possibilities for new narratives and outcomes for their ageing protagonists.

In 'One Night in Hong Kong', my protagonist is elderly, single and does not have children. By positioning her outside of the traditional family, the role of a wife, ex-wife, or mother, I was able to develop narratives and explore themes not commonly depicted for ageing female characters. I developed a counter-narrative to normative assumptions that heterosexual women 'naturally' aspire to motherhood and being part of a family unit. In her invented story my protagonist is a lone agent, free to make a diverse range of choices independent of any prescribed expectations. In the opening vignette she decides to extend her stay in Hong Kong and is able to do so without seeking approval, or having to negotiate her decision with anyone else.

In her biographical story, she travels to Catania, and, free of chaperone by the Rosenblatts, she wanders the piazzas and visits Roman ruins. She describes feeling like an adult for the first time: 'a complete and separate shape' (p. 53). When she goes on a tour to the volcano with Mrs Rosenblatt and her daughters she is resentful and feels confined by the presence of the family unit. Upon her return to Perth, and the family home, she becomes restless; having experienced personal freedom outside of the family unit she is unable to re-integrate and eventually breaks with convention and moves out to live in a rental flat on her own. While living outside of a traditional family structure, she is free to attend dances, make new friends, and embark on a sexual relationship, none of which she discloses to her parents. Eventually, however, she agrees to return to the family home to fulfil the expected role as a carer for her unwell mother, and, while bargaining with herself that it is only a temporary move, remains living in the family home long after the death of her parents. Her return to the family unit – her family of origin – to fulfil the expected role of a single, unmarried daughter to look after her parents is represented as confinement and compromise.

In developing an alternative view of the family unit for my protagonist, it was important that I did not unwittingly conform to another female stereotype, that of the bitter, resentful

spinster. One of the key aims of this project was to experiment with writing an interventionist text to disrupt and challenge prevailing assumptions about ageing female sexuality. In the course of doing so it became apparent that for an ‘interventionist’ representation of ageing female sexuality to be most effective it also needs to question and challenge a much wider range of normalised expectations and accepted roles and aspirations for female characters.

Conclusion

It is timely to consider representations of ageing protagonists and sexuality in contemporary Australian fiction given the unprecedented looming increase in the nation’s ageing population. As ‘baby boomers’ and ‘generation x’ move towards chronologically constructed ‘old age’, what representations of ageing women and sexuality will reflect the ‘reality’ of their lives, and how might their ageing identities impact on social policy, particularly in the area of social services and provision of care in nursing homes?

The research component of this project identified a number of key ideas and theoretical works for [re]thinking ageing female sexuality which I then investigated through the production of my creative work. As a general finding, my research contends that the current misrepresentation and absence of ageing female sexuality is out of step with the lived reality of older women’s experiences and offers a primary category for the creation of new fiction works.

One of the key research categories of this project was the ‘invisibility’ of ageing female sexuality, not only in cultural production, but also as part of a wider history of invisibility that includes scholarship and critical work. It was clear that the bio-medical model of ageing, with its link to declining sexuality for women, has had significant influence on popular understandings about ageing, which have flowed through to how ageing female sexuality is represented in cultural works. In this way, the ‘absence’ or the invisibility of ageing female sexuality is as potent as hyper-visual images of negative stereotypes.

In my novella I explore the category of invisibility as both a structural device and a theme. I deliberately confront readers with images and language to make my protagonist’s desires and

sexuality visible. Interestingly, my character also relies on the lack of acknowledgment of ageing female sexuality to be free to fantasise her erotic adventure. Had the nurses been aware of how she was using the benign image of the Hong Kong skyline in the travel poster, would it be considered convincing that it remained sticky taped to the ceiling above her bed? In this way the ‘invisibility’ of ageing female sexuality, the assumption that ageing women are not sexual, worked in my character’s favour, allowing her to subvert popular assumptions and gain the necessary time and place within the regulated hospital to indulge in her imaginative escape.

Another key area of research investigated in my creative work is the theoretical concept of age performativity. This scholarship contends ageing identity is informed, ‘normalised’ and perpetuated by the repetition of socially acceptable ‘scripts’ linking particular behaviours to biological age. However, ‘since a repetition can never be identical to its original script, there is always the possibility of subversion and change’ (Swinnen, 2012). It is the ‘possibility of subversion and change’ in the enactment of prescribed scripts that I found most compelling in this research. I link this idea to the function of ‘interventionist’ texts, on the basis that these texts actively challenge the expected ‘scripts’ of ageing female behaviours and offer alternative versions of ageing female protagonists and sexuality.

In ‘One Night in Hong Kong’ I investigate the possibility of new scripts on ageing female sexuality by exploring the erotic imagination of an ageing protagonist. While my representation is informed by Twigg’s assertion that ageing is as much a physical process as it is a discursively produced one, her ageing process does not translate to a decline in her sexuality. I was interested in exploring sexual fantasy and masturbation, a sexuality for older women that is rarely represented in medical scholarship, let alone cultural production. I also challenge the bio-medical narrative of ageing in stages of decline by investigating a continuum approach to female sexuality. In doing so, my novella contributes to new research into the area of representing ageing female sexuality in contemporary Australian fiction.

The interventionist texts that informed my research and generated new ideas for me to investigate were produced by older women writers able to draw on their subjective experiences and interests in constructing the desires and choices of their female protagonists.

This is not to suggest that there is an ‘essentialism’ to writing older characters and plots so that only older writers can construct credible representations of fictional ageing, but it does speak to a seeming lack of interest by younger writers in exploring these identities.

By humanising ageing female protagonists and placing them in situations and circumstances that resonate across a wide age-range of readers, fiction writers can help to collapse an inflexible binary of age/youth that informs social attitudes and helps to perpetuate and maintain the social category of ageing ‘otherness’. As Jolley contends, ‘All aging [sic] people have been young and all younger people are getting older so it is not a question of *us* and *them*’ (Jolley quoted in Lurie, 1992, p. 181).

Woodward suggests that, by re-imagining ourselves and our subjectivities outside of reductive models, it is possible to begin to re-imagine ageing, not in terms of ‘invidious’ oppositions but through acknowledging that ‘we are made up of different age-selves...a continually fluctuating oscillation between our older selves and younger selves’ (p. 166). The potential of such re-imaginings presents exciting opportunities for alternative versions of ageing performativity and new representations of ageing female sexuality in contemporary Australian fiction.

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