

INTRODUCTION  
THEORETICAL  
UNDERPINNINGS

Crip Theory

Over the last two decades there has been a flourishing of writing at the intersection of queer theory and disability studies. I will here be calling this intersectional discourse “crip theory,” after Robert McRuer’s 2006 book, *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability*.<sup>1</sup> The first time I saw McRuer’s title, I immediately loved the attitudinal kinship of “crip” with “queer” and felt that was the direction I wanted my theorizing to head.

The intersection with disability studies has become one of the liveliest sites in twenty-first-century queer theory. Most strikingly, within queer theory, disability studies is not a special-interest application, but an advance in theorizing queer. For example, Eli Clare writes:

My first experience of queerness centered not on sexuality or gender, but on disability. Early on, I understood my body to be irrevocably different from those of my . . . playmates . . . a body that moved slow, wrists cocked at odd angles, muscles knotted with tremors. . . . I heard: “wrong, broken . . . unacceptably queer” . . . as my classmates called out *cripple, re-*

tard. . . . This was my first experience of queerness. Only later came gender and sexuality. Again I found my body to be irrevocably different. At nine, ten, eleven, my deepest sense of self was as neither boy nor girl.<sup>2</sup>

This quotation from Clare exemplifies what I find most exciting about the intersection of queer and disability theory. Disability here is queer, queerer than queer, a more powerful way to resist normativity, a more radical affirmation of bodily difference.

The present book began with my reading a lot of crip theory. This book is, first and foremost, rooted in the way crip theory resonates with my own experience as someone who, since the beginning of the twenty-first century, has slowly been losing the ability to walk or even stand—with my experience as a part-time wheelchair user. As a scholar in queer theory, I found disability an attractive identity and a compelling theoretical move.

I have been particularly drawn to a tendency in disability studies that valorizes what Rosemarie Garland-Thomson has memorably called “extraordinary bodies,” a tendency to “claim physical difference as exceptional rather than inferior.”<sup>3</sup> For an explicitly sexual example of this viewpoint in which disabled comes off as superior to the norm, I would cite the disabled woman who, when surveyed for a study of sex and disability, responded: “If you are a sexually active disabled person . . . it is remarkable how dull and unimaginative non-disabled people’s sex lives can appear.”<sup>4</sup>

When disability becomes overtly queer, we find provocations such as Riva Lehrer’s in the 2012 volume *Sex and Disability*: “I will be one of the crip girls whose bodies scare the panel of judges. They are afraid that our unbalanced shapes hint of unsanctioned desires. On both sides of the bed.”<sup>5</sup> For those of us who glory in the threateningly antinormative, “crip” can look like a wildly sexy identity.

What I am here calling crip theory includes not just twenty-first-century work in explicit interaction with queer theory but also writing from the “disability sex rights movement” of the 1990s.<sup>6</sup> Although this work by social scientists is less well known to those of us in the humanities, it paves the way for queer writing on disability

and shares the pro-sex antinormativity that for me is the hallmark of crip theory.

Anthropologist Emily Wentzell explains this movement thus: “In keeping with the disability movement’s celebration of ‘crip culture’ . . . the disability sex movement sought to champion non-normative forms of sexual expression developed by . . . individuals with specific impairments.”<sup>77</sup> For example, in a review published in 1996 Barbara Waxman and Carol Gill refer to “the different sexual styles . . . inspired by disabilities” and “the rich and creative array of . . . sexual behaviors and expressive styles that persons with disabilities have developed.”<sup>78</sup> Waxman and Gill’s language here speaks both the appreciation for plural sexualities (“rich . . . array”) and the emphasis on the agency and creativity of disabled people that characterize crip theory.

A major figure in the 1990s disability sex movement, sociologist Tom Shakespeare, considers what the movement is doing as analogous to queer. In an article in *Sexuality and Disability*, Shakespeare writes: “In exploring disabled sexuality, we are faced by similar questions to the lesbian and gay . . . scholars who have explored gay and queer sexual politics. Are we trying to win access for disabled people to the mainstream of sexuality, or are we trying to challenge the ways in which sex and sexuality are conceived . . . and limited in modern societies?”<sup>79</sup> While conceding that many disabled men and women opt for the first choice (trying for access to the mainstream), Shakespeare comes down definitively on the side of the second option. This choice aligns him with “queer sexual politics”; it makes him and his colleagues part of crip theory.

In the same article, Shakespeare articulates the theoretical ambitions of what I am here calling crip theory: “We can . . . challenge a whole lot of ideas that predominate in the sexual realm, and enable others—not just disabled people—to reassess what is important and what is possible.” Rather than trying to join the mainstream, the disability sex movement could “enable others—not just disabled people”—to move beyond limited conceptions of sexuality. Shakespeare suggests one form that challenge could take: “Disabled

people can challenge the obsession with fitness and youth.”<sup>10</sup> Who is not constrained and oppressed by this obsession?

My notion of crip theory not only includes those thinking about disability within the framework of queer theory; it not only includes social scientists in the disability sex rights movement. As used here, it also includes scholars theorizing from a similar position, even though not explicitly connected either to queer theory or to disability studies. For example, I was surprised and pleased to find what I could call crip theory in an article from 2013 in the journal *Cancer Nursing* authored by researchers from the School of Medicine at the University of Western Sydney.

In this article, “Renegotiating Sex and Intimacy after Cancer,” Jane M. Ussher, Janette Perz, Emilee Gilbert, W. K. Tim Wong, and Kim Hobbs write: “Rather than the cancer-affected body being positioned as site of illness, failure or abjection, it can be conceptualized as a ‘key site of transgression,’ serving to break the boundaries that define sex within a narrow, heteronormative framework.”<sup>11</sup> Rather than the cancer-affected body being considered pitiful or inferior, it can provide us with a theoretical resource, a conceptual basis from which to challenge the normative sexual framework. Although Ussher and her colleagues have no citations from queer theory or disability studies, their qualitative study of the renegotiation of sex by individuals with cancer finds its way to a very queer, very crip conclusion.

While I will go on to elucidate a number of other theoretical discussions underpinning the present book, I begin here with crip theory, not only because that is where this project began but also because it remains the fundamental theoretical perspective throughout the book. Whatever theoretical complications and explorations follow, I want to begin by grounding us in an affirmation of “the rich and creative array of . . . sexual behaviors and expressive styles” arising from nonnormative bodies and especially in the way such bodies can “challenge a whole lot of ideas that predominate in the sexual realm.”<sup>12</sup>

## Aging and Queer Temporality

The crip theory framework I originally envisioned for this book began to change in January 2013, even before I started writing. In the hotel lobby at the convention of the Modern Language Association (MLA), I found myself by chance standing next to Devoney Looser and a couple other people who were discussing a session for the next year's convention, a session that would be called "Age and/as Disability." Eavesdropping unabashedly, I came to realize something that had not occurred to me before. For more than a decade, I had been dealing with a progressive disability that began at the age of forty-nine; yet, up until that moment, I had thought of my situation *only* as disability, not as aging. Wanting to do writing based in this experience, I had been drawn to crip theory; it had never occurred to me to turn to aging studies.

There is, I have since learned, a wide swath where the categories of disability and aging bleed into each other. As Michael Bérubé, a leading figure in disability studies, puts it: "The fact that many of us will become disabled if we live long enough is perhaps the fundamental aspect of human embodiment."<sup>13</sup> Statements like this are found everywhere in disability studies, suggesting a widespread recognition that disability as a category is entangled with aging. The gesture toward this overlap appears in aging studies as well. For example, Margaret Morganroth Gullette, an important theorist of aging, remarks: "Without stereotyping old age or ignoring disabilities at younger ages, one can conclude that people are likely to have special needs as they age into middle and later life."<sup>14</sup> Yet, despite the frequency of this gesture, there is little critical or theoretical work that draws from both disability and aging studies.

Thanks to that chance hotel lobby encounter early in 2013, this book benefits from both of these theoretical frameworks. My focus here is in fact what Gullette terms "special needs as [people] age into middle and later life": the swath of experience that can be understood either as disability or as aging, the experience of what I will call late-onset disability, disability beginning in the middle years or beyond.

Back in 2013, as I eavesdropped at the MLA convention, I found myself wondering why I had never considered aging for this project. Why, as a queer theorist, had I found disability both an attractive identity and a compelling theoretical move, whereas aging, by contrast, had never entered my theoretical ambitions?

Riva Lehrer, one of my favorite crip theorists, offers a glimpse of an answer to this question. I previously quoted Lehrer to exemplify the attraction of “crip”; here is a longer version of the same passage: “Old women disappear into a slow molasses of obscurity, even when they fight to be seen. I can see the day coming when the shape of my body will be chalked up to age and I will join the ranks of the Invisible Women. *Until then*, I will be one of the crip girls whose bodies scare the panel of judges. They are afraid that our unbalanced shapes hint of unsanctioned desires.”<sup>15</sup>

I emphasize Lehrer’s “until then” because it marks the divide between disability and aging. When Lehrer’s disability is “chalked up to age,” it will no longer “hint of unsanctioned desires.” Her extraordinary body will devolve from scary, antinormative, hypervisible, and queer to invisible and desexualized. “Then,” she will *no longer be* “one of the crip girls.” The combination of disability and age threatens to undo the queerness of disability.

This move from crip to aging is not just a personal problem, not just an identity crisis, but a question of discursive fields and theoretical frames. My own preference for disability over aging as intellectual framework was, I came to realize, typical of the entire field of queer theory. While disability studies has generated much lively queer theory and vice versa, there is virtually no work at the intersection of queer theory and aging. According to Barbara Marshall and Stephen Katz, sociologists who study sexuality and aging, “theoretical and historical inquiries that address the different cultures and discourses in which age and sex figure prominently . . . generally fail to consider their areas of intersection.”<sup>16</sup>

Although a number of queer theorists have written about adolescents and children, I know of no queer theorists who have looked at adult aging. Recently, however, a few scholars of aging have made connections between old age and queer. One of the earliest of these

is Linn Sandberg's 2008 article "The Old, the Ugly and the Queer." Despite old age being "little discussed . . . within queer theory," Sandberg asserts that "age holds great potential for how to rethink sexualities, gender and embodiment."<sup>17</sup> I would like to think that the present book might flesh out Sandberg's bold assertion.

While Sandberg's article was published in a little-known journal for graduate student writing, three years later, Gullette's well-received book *Agewise* has a chapter on sexuality that builds to this rousing conclusion: "Later-life sexualities radically spoken have big things to teach. . . . Just believing there are thousands of different long-term sexual narratives out there might mean less current suffering . . . more liberty. . . . Queering the whole sexual life course we might call it, because it seems a more radical kind of sexual revolution than history has known."<sup>18</sup>

Gullette had already published three major books on aging, but this 2011 book is not only the first with a chapter devoted to sexuality; it is the first time she makes any reference to "queer." Gullette here associates "later-life sexualities" with queer, a connection reflected in terms like "radical . . . sexual revolution" and in the plural of "sexualities." This link between later-life sexualities and queer is absolutely central to the present book.

Beyond the general connection to queer here, Gullette's phrase "queering the whole sexual life course" can also link to what by the time of her 2011 book was the most prominent trend in queer theory, what I will here refer to as "queer temporality." In the twenty-first century, a range of queer theorists have brought the resistance to normativity and the valuation of alternative lives that characterize queer theory to bear on various aspects of temporality.<sup>19</sup> While no queer theorist that I know of has used the phrase "life course," this phrase appears when Sandberg's 2008 article advocates for the application of "queer temporalities" to old age: "Pre-given and naturalized moral codes of old age may be challenged through queer temporalities revealing the constructed nature of the life course."<sup>20</sup>

Although Sandberg is, to my knowledge, the first to suggest the applicability of queer temporality to aging, her article touches on the topic only briefly. A year later, however, Maria T. Brown, a les-

bian gerontologist, gives queer temporality much more extensive consideration, and the “life course” features prominently in her account. Brown discusses the work of two major figures in queer temporality, Judith (Jack) Halberstam and Elizabeth Freeman. “In terms of gerontological theory,” Brown writes, “Halberstam is stating that queer time falls outside of and rejects the institutionalized life course. . . . Both Freeman and Halberstam have rejected . . . the institutionalized life course in favor of making visible the many alternative kinds of lives and temporal orders of possible life events.”<sup>21</sup> Brown translates queer temporality into the “terms of gerontological theory”: central to that translation is the idea of the “life course,” a concept from the social sciences important for those studying aging. A life course is “a sequence of socially defined events and roles that the individual enacts over time.”<sup>22</sup> Using “institutionalized” for what queer theorists would call normative, Brown understands queer time theory as a rejection of the normative life course in favor of alternative, nonnormative, temporal orderings of life. With the help of Brown’s translation, we can see that the goal of queer temporality is indeed what we might call, following Gullette, queering the life course.

Brown recognizes what gerontological theory would call the institutionalized life course in what Halberstam calls “the paradigmatic markers of life experience—namely, birth, marriage, reproduction, and death.”<sup>23</sup> It is in particular the place of marriage and reproduction on this list of “paradigmatic markers” that queer temporality contests, challenging the sexual life course that privileges reproduction and devalues nonreproductive lives and moments. The addition of a temporal dimension to the queer critique of reproductivity could mean not just the reclaiming of queer lives outside of marriage-and-children but also the reclaiming of nonreproductive moments like postmenopausal sexuality. Queering the life course means contesting the temporal order that dictates which segments of life are properly sexual and which are not.

Although Brown establishes the terms for applying queer temporality to aging, her response to this trend in queer theory is in fact mainly disappointment: theorists like Halberstam and Free-



man may want to “make visible” alternative kinds of lives, but their conceptions of queer time “make invisible” the experience of aging.<sup>24</sup> Whereas Brown’s account of queer time was largely critical of the theory’s neglect of old people, in 2012, Cynthia Port, one of the editors of the journal *Age, Culture, Humanities*, explicitly embraced queer temporality as a resource for the study of old age: “Although there are significant differences between queer sexuality and old age as embodied subjectivities and categories of identity, these new approaches to queer temporality suggest intriguing possibilities for reconsidering the temporalities of old age.”<sup>25</sup>

While I certainly share Brown’s sense that queer temporality theory has neglected old age, I nonetheless heartily endorse Port’s appreciation of this theory as a valuable resource for thinking about aging. In fact, soon after realizing I needed to add aging to the intersectional focus of this book, I began to imagine thinking queer temporality and aging together. Just as crip theory makes it possible to think disability through queer, this second theoretical intersection could allow this book to queer aging.

Before I began working on this book, before I began reading extensively in crip theory, I was in fact working on and with “queer temporality.” I took the phrase from a 2002 article by Stephen M. Barber and David L. Clark on temporality in the work of Eve Sedgwick, which is, I believe, the earliest example of what grew into a major trend in queer theory.<sup>26</sup> In my last book, I used queer temporality to talk about writing and death, and following Sedgwick, I stressed that queer was a twisted temporality, not linear or straight, focusing on moments that were out of order.<sup>27</sup> This interest in twisted temporality persists in the present book, applying in particular to moments when sexuality puts a kink in normative time lines and narrative arcs.

Because I had thus been immersed in queer temporality theory, it was perhaps inevitably the viewpoint from which I would consider aging, since aging is, as Gullette says, what we call a “form of temporality.”<sup>28</sup> Indeed I would say that aging is all about temporality, is literally the lived experience of temporality. To add aging to our analysis is not so much to add another identity group as to add

temporality to our crip theory, to add temporality to our understandings of sexuality and the body.

As I was contemplating using queer temporality to think about aging, I was very happy to read Port's 2012 article, happy to find someone in age studies who believed this could be a productive theoretical intersection.<sup>29</sup> Like Brown, Port cites Halberstam and Freeman, but the queer theory Port finds most useful makes no appearance in Brown's article. Port titles her article "No Future?"—which refers to Lee Edelman's controversial and influential 2004 book *No Future*.

While Halberstam's and Freeman's understandings of queer time are rooted in queer culture, Edelman's temporality theory is rooted in what queers represent in the view of the normative social order. According to Edelman, normative temporality is a compulsory futurism (subordinating everything to the promise of the future), and queers represent a threat to the social order's compulsory preference for the future over the present.<sup>30</sup> It is this formulation that Port applies quite effectively to the old: "The old are often, like queers, figured by the cultural imagination as being outside mainstream temporalities and standing in the way of, rather than contributing to, the promise of the future."<sup>31</sup>

Edelman connects futurism to reproductivity; in *No Future*, the privileged figure for the promise of the future is the Child (with a capital C to suggest its sacred status). By practicing nonreproductive sexuality, queers pursue sexuality not imbued with the possibility of leading to the Child, not redeemed by the promise of the future. Though it is not Edelman's explicit concern, this privileging of the future and the Child can certainly be connected to the devaluing and desexualizing of people past their childbearing years.

Edelman's book has been both influential and controversial because of its aggressive, unyielding stance, often characterized as "antisocial." While Edelman's work does not play a central role in the present book, I would love to bring its edgy militancy into my challenge to normative aging. *No Future* urges queers to take up our place as threats to the Child and to the future. In the time since *No Future* was published, more and more openly gay people

are entering the institutionalized life course, getting married and having children. On this particular point, the American cultural imagination has changed so quickly that queer may no longer figure as the threat it was as recently as 2004. In the current moment, the worship of the reproductive future might in fact devalue old people even more than it does queers. Perhaps that is what Gullette means when she says that asserting later-life sexualities may lead to “a more radical kind of sexual revolution than history has known.”<sup>32</sup>

If *No Future* is Port’s most important influence from queer theory, her central influence from aging studies is in fact Gullette’s work on decline. Gullette’s decline theory is likewise central to the present book’s attempt to connect queer temporality to aging. Over the course of two wonderful books—*Declining to Decline* in 1997 and *Aged by Culture* in 2004—Gullette lays out her conceptualization of the temporal arc that dominates our ideas of adult aging.<sup>33</sup> Port refers to this as “decline ideology”; Gullette, grounded in literary temporality, more often calls it “the decline story.” According to Port, it is “a narrative structure that associates old age with inevitable decline.”<sup>34</sup> Introducing it in 1997, Gullette calls it a “Master Narrative of the Life Course.”<sup>35</sup> Gullette’s theory of decline names and elucidates a major normative temporality, the temporality that dominates our understandings and apprehensions of the second half of the life course, of aging into the middle years and beyond.

I share Port’s sense that Gullette’s theory works well in conjunction with queer temporality.<sup>36</sup> Gullette outlines and critiques the normative life course in which a person enters into decline after the age of reproduction, and that certainly accords with the queer critique of the devaluing of nonreproductive lives and moments. In her life and in her work, Gullette devotes herself to “declining to decline,” to resisting the cultural dominance of the decline story. Such resistance to normative temporality is a stance also taken by the various proponents of queer temporality.

Gullette’s decline theory is, however, crucial to the present book not just because of its aptitude for queer temporality. It is utterly central to this book because it can work with both queer theory and

crip theory. Gullette has given us a theory of aging that implicates not just sexuality but also, and perhaps more so, disability.

*Declining to Decline* fleshes out the concept of the decline story by telling about the debilitating back pain that befell Gullette at age forty-nine. She goes to a doctor who pronounces, “You can’t do the things you did when you were young”; the patient hears that, imagines a future of progressive decline, and is “plunged into planning [her] suicide.”<sup>37</sup> *Declining to Decline* teaches us that such moments of entrance into catastrophic loss typify our culture’s construction of aging.

This story is a good example of the present book’s particular focus: a disability whose onset arises in midlife, an experience that can be equally understood as either disability or aging, although Gullette understands this experience through the latter rubric. The connection to disability is not, however, just in her personal story; it is also in her general theory of decline. What Gullette calls the decline story is in fact the insistent entanglement of loss of youth with disability.

The “master narrative” that Gullette has identified actually applies as well to our normative understandings and apprehensions of disability that befalls adults. If no one has yet applied Gullette’s theory of decline to disability, it may be because we have not thought disability enough in relation to temporality. Disability tends to be thought of as a lifelong identity category; we have generally not considered crip temporalities, have not reflected enough on ways bodies change over time.<sup>38</sup> To add temporality to crip theory, and to focus as we do here on the particular temporality of late-onset disability, is to find Gullette’s theorizing an absolutely crucial resource.

Approaching this intersection from the other direction, crip theory has a lot to offer the analysis of aging—in particular, its militant resistance to the privileging of the normative body. For example, as mentioned earlier in this introduction, Tom Shakespeare, in an article from 2000, suggests that “disabled people can challenge the obsession with fitness and youth” that characterizes our culture.<sup>39</sup> A thorough consideration of aging, an integration into our analyses of the fact that all bodies change over the life course, can

open up crip theory to relevance for everybody who fears that aging will mean a decline into disability.

The present book uses crip theory to resist the decline story, because what Gullette calls the decline story, which dominates our fears and responses to adult aging, is not only based in the cultural privileging of “fitness and youth”; it is ultimately based in the assumption of the inferior humanity of the disabled.

That assumption of inferior humanity is also an assumption of inferior sexuality. A crip perspective is perhaps particularly useful for attending to and valuing later-life sexualities. “Aging populations,” writes Emily Wentzell, “face similar issues in the realm of sexuality as disabled individuals; they are presumed to be asexual, their sexual expression is discouraged, and their physical expressions of sexuality may be devalued.”<sup>40</sup> Wentzell, one of the very few scholars familiar with both disability and aging studies, proposes that we apply crip theory to the sexual issues of old people.

The present book focuses on a range of experiences that can be understood as either disability or aging, what I here call late-onset disability. The particular concern of this book is how late-onset disability is lived sexually: how it is lived as a threat to one’s sexuality and to one’s gender, but also how sexuality survives and transforms in the process, a sexuality becoming, in these older, less able subjects, more perverse from a normative (ageist, ableist) standpoint. Taking its antinormative audacity from queer and especially crip theory, this book explores and celebrates the perverse sexuality of the no longer young, no longer so able.

### Aging and the Phallus

The “phallus” in this book’s subtitle is the aspect of the book that I have consistently found the most embarrassing. When friends or colleagues ask what I am working on, as they so often do, I easily and proudly say “a book on sexuality, disability, and aging,” but I almost never tell anyone that the book is also about the phallus. In fact, I often wish I could excise this aspect.

The phallus here is a psychoanalytic concept. It derives from my

decades of familiarity with Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytic theory. I did not, in fact, set out to write a book about the phallus, but as I progressed into this work on the intersection of sexuality, disability, and aging, I was surprised to find this concept suggesting itself, persistently and insistently. Over the years I worked on this book, I came to believe that the notion of the phallus (denatured by three decades of queer theory) has a substantial contribution to make to our theorization of sexuality as lived in and over time.

I find this not only embarrassing but also ironic. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, I wrote about psychoanalysis from a feminist point of view. And while I found psychoanalysis invaluable as an antinormative theory of sexuality, my writing over those two decades was consistently critical of the dominance of the phallus in psychoanalytic theory. For example, in 1980 I wrote, "It is the rule of the Phallus as standard for any sexuality which denigrates women."<sup>41</sup> As someone who contributed to the feminist critique of the psychoanalytic concept of the phallus, I feel sheepish indeed to return here to the phallus as a term for thinking about sexuality.

The relation between the psychoanalytic phallus and androcentrism has in fact been the subject of debate for nearly a century now.<sup>42</sup> There have been cogent and persuasive arguments made on both sides. One can convincingly argue both that the phallus is a fatally androcentric concept and that it is not. In psychoanalysis, the phallus is not the penis. As Lacan puts it, "Clinical facts . . . reveal a relation of the subject to the phallus that is established without regard to the anatomical difference of the sexes."<sup>43</sup> On the other hand, as I myself argued in the 1980s, the phallus cannot simply be separated from its association with the penis, however much psychoanalytic theory would like to make that separation.<sup>44</sup>

Having taken up the phallus again in this book, I find myself once again ensnared in this debate. Whenever I have presented material from this book, while the audience is generally enthusiastic, I always get a question about the androcentrism of the term "phallus." And I always find myself unable to answer to either my questioner's or my own satisfaction. I wish I could definitively prove that the phallus was not male centered, or I wish I could find a better,

more gender-neutral term for what I am talking about in this book. But, at least for now, I am stuck with the phallus, and with its sexist baggage.

The phallus might not even be the worst of the terms I am here getting from psychoanalysis. That dubious honor probably goes to the phallus's polar opposite. In the most sexist understanding of psychoanalytic theory, women are considered "castrated." In this formulation, women not only do not have the phallus; they are devoid of any sexuality, simply lacking, empty. Despite this unsavory association, I in fact regularly use the concept of castration in this book.

Both late-onset disability and aging are experienced as threats to one's sexuality and to one's gender (regardless of the gender with which one identifies). This sense of impending loss, a loss tangling together gender and sexuality, can best be understood, I propose, as a form of castration anxiety. Yet, despite its centrality to my argument here, I continue to feel squeamish about the term "castration." Which is why I am heartened to find it in the writings of two of my favorite theorists of aging.

Kathleen Woodward was a pioneering advocate for age studies in the humanities and for decades has been a major figure in the field; she is also well versed in psychoanalytic theory. Her 1991 book, *Aging and Its Discontents*, looks at aging from a psychoanalytic perspective. "Old age," writes Woodward, "in Freudian terms is castration."<sup>45</sup> Although Woodward admits that her book does not focus much on sexuality, this recognition of the relevance of Freudian castration to old age is crucial for my present attempt to think sexuality and aging together.<sup>46</sup>

I am grateful to Woodward for applying a psychoanalytic perspective to adult aging. "Lacan has insisted," Woodward writes, "that the 'fear of castration is like a thread that perforates all the stages of development.'"<sup>47</sup> When we think of "stages of development," especially in relation to psychoanalysis, we think of stages on the way to adulthood. But after quoting Lacan on the presence of the fear of castration in *all the stages* of development, Woodward proceeds to elaborate on our "anxieties about aging in middle age": "Does not

identification in middle age with a parent in an infirm old age represent precisely . . . future castration[?] . . . In an infirm old age the body of the father embodies the very fact of castration.”<sup>48</sup>

The Freudian perspective here is recognizable in notions like “identification with a parent,” although the figure identifying with a parent is not a child but a middle-aged person. The phrase “fact of castration” can be found in Freud’s writings (as well as other psychoanalytic theory) and has been roundly criticized by feminists (myself included) since castration is not a fact but a surmise. Yet while Freud uses “fact of castration” to refer to women, Woodward redeploys Freud’s phrase to refer to old men (to fathers, no less). Woodward’s idea that the body of the old father “embodies the very fact of castration” depends on and reinforces a dramatic differentiation between penis and phallus. Her book in fact begins by discussing a photograph of a naked old man, “sitting . . . , his knees wide apart, . . . his alcoholic stomach . . . as slack as his penis. His entire body seemed to be hanging down, depressed.”<sup>49</sup> This old man’s body, complete with visible penis, represents the very opposite of the phallus, “embodies the very fact of castration.”

In Woodward’s elaboration on old age as figuring castration, I would also note her repetition of the phrase “infirm old age.” The image of aging as castration here cannot be separated from an image of infirmity. Not only does Woodward’s representation of castration thus reinforce the theoretical conjoining of aging and disability in the present book, but it also intimates our focus here on castration as a temporality of the phallus.

The phrase “future castration” in the passage from Woodward’s book suggests that the middle-aged person contemplating his (or her) infirm old parent anxiously beholds a scenario in which his (or her) present phallus will sometime in the future be lost. Yet “future” is not the only temporal marker in this passage. The phrase “the fact of castration,” the very use of the psychoanalytic notion of castration, suggests that sometime in the past this old father was phallic but then lost his phallus. Castration, as used by psychoanalysis, is itself an inherently temporal notion in that it configures *whoever does not have the phallus as having had it in the past*.



This sense of castration as a temporal notion is at the center of the present book. Whereas castration's inherent temporality makes it a dubious fit for representing gender difference, it may make the notion particularly apt as a way of talking about age. What Woodward sketches for us in the middle-aged person's contemplation of infirm old age is what in this book I term the "classic temporality of the phallus"—here, however, distributed not on the basis of gender, but on the basis of age. The classic temporality of the phallus is one where those who are "castrated" were phallic in the past (in Freud, women; in Woodward, the infirm old) and those who are phallic fear "future castration" (in Freud, men; in Woodward, the middle-aged).

While Woodward's topic is aging and old age generally, she locates castration anxiety specifically in middle age. In so doing, she makes reference to the premier theorist of middle age, Margaret Morganroth Gullette.<sup>50</sup> While Gullette is much more ambivalent about the use of psychoanalytic theory than is Woodward, the concept of castration does appear, sporadically, across her work.

In the book Woodward refers to, *Safe at Last in the Middle Years*, castration appears via a John Updike character. Published in 1988, *Safe at Last* is the first of Gullette's books on aging, and it is much more based in literary criticism than are the later books. Gullette begins the first chapter of *Safe at Last* by talking about trouble with teeth in midlife novels, which leads her to the dentist in Updike's *Couples* who declares: "Losing a tooth . . . is a classic castration symbol." Gullette goes on to comment: "The limp, castration-concerned dentist gets to enunciate the decline theory of life."<sup>51</sup>

While we would not want to confuse Gullette's point of view with that of Updike's dentist, it is worth noting that in her comment about him, she connects castration with the decline theory. This is the first mention in the first chapter of her first book of what will become her major contribution to the theorization of aging. Her next book is titled *Declining to Decline*, and her work henceforth is focused on identifying and resisting what she here calls the decline theory of life. Because my project involves connecting Gullette's decline theory with the psychoanalytic notion of castration, I am

happy to see that, early in her formulation of the decline theory, she herself makes that connection, if only tangentially, anecdotally.

Gullette's later references to the Freudian castration complex, while all definitely fleeting, are more substantively connected to her theorizing, rather than to the point of view of a fictional character. In an article published in 1998, for example, while discussing a change that occurred in the relative valuation of younger and older men in the early twentieth century, Gullette writes: "'Penis envy,' which Freud named but misidentified, became a problem for older men."<sup>52</sup> In the Freudian schema, penis envy is what those who are castrated feel toward those who are not. While Woodward focused on the fear of castration that the younger man feels contemplating the older man, Gullette reverses that gaze and attributes penis envy to the older man.

From a feminist perspective, penis envy is probably the most offensive aspect of the Freudian castration complex, even more so than castration anxiety. Freud's use of "penis" in the phrase makes this aspect of the castration complex harder to defend, unsuitable for the usual tactic of separating phallus from penis. Well aware of the feminist distaste for the term, Gullette suggests that while penis envy is mistaken as a way of understanding women, it could be useful as a way of understanding older men's relation to younger men.

In her 2011 book, *Agewise*, Gullette brings up the Freudian concept of castration in a discussion of menopause: "For those who accept the theory of menopause as an endocrine deficiency, it functions somewhat as the Freudian concept of female castration used to do, except it comes later in life. The universal menopause represents women as suddenly damaged and desexualized bodies."<sup>53</sup> Here again Gullette cites the Freudian concept while also taking distance from it. For her, as for most of us feminists, female castration is an outmoded concept ("functions . . . as the Freudian concept of female castration *used to do*"). Yet, while marking her distance from this objectionable concept, she also finds it useful, in the context of her critique of ageism.

"Castration," as Gullette uses it here, means not the loss of a male sexual organ, but "suddenly damaged and desexualized bod-

ies.” That definition is very much the operative one in the present book. I thus want to note a couple things about Gullette’s definition of castration. By connecting “desexualized” to “damaged bodies,” she gestures toward the intersection of disability and sexuality central to my deployment of *crip theory*. And Gullette’s “suddenly” points to an insistent temporal dimension in the concept of castration. In the drama of castration, damage and desexualization occur to the body not as a process over time, but as a traumatic event, changing everything in a moment.

Although Gullette’s use of castration here would seem to apply specifically to women, it nonetheless jibes with Woodward’s image of castration. Woodward’s example is definitely male (the old father’s body), but she also uses the gender-neutral terms “parent” and “child.” While Gullette’s example is menopause, she goes on to say that this “later in life” castration applies to men, too.<sup>54</sup> In both authors, castration is connected to gender and yet also seems to apply without regard to gender. This contradictory relation to gender indeed seems to inhere in the psychoanalytic concept of castration.

In both Woodward’s and Gullette’s usages, castration threatens those in middle age. The use of the term by these two pioneering and widely influential age theorists, especially taken together, reinforces my belief that castration is a pertinent concept for understanding the projections connected to ageism and the anxieties connected to aging. Let me be clear: neither Woodward nor Gullette is saying that old people are castrated; nor am I. But we all have noted that castration, as delineated by Freud (however mistaken it might be), functions in our apprehensions around aging. The specific temporality of castration anxiety—the scenario of a future losing it once-and-for-all—is the prospect we find over and over in midlife aging (and also in relation to late-onset disability).

In this book, I consider castration anxiety as a “temporality of the phallus.” In this anxious scenario, the phallus is an inescapably temporal concept: if present, it threatens to disappear suddenly in the future; if absent, the assumption is that it was once present but was traumatically excised in some past moment. This is the classic temporality of the phallus, present in every psychoanalytic ac-

count of the phallus and castration. I consider this temporality to be normative.

In addition to outlining the normative temporality of the phallus, I track alternative temporalities of the phallus, where one might move *from* castration *to* phallus as well as in the other direction, where the lost phallus is surprisingly regained, or where the phallus might appear not only in the past but as a promising future. These alternatives echo the promises of queer temporality and may lead to less-anxious castrations and queerer phalluses.

### The Queer Phallus

The queer phallus is a somewhat hazy, possibly dubious, idea circulating in or around the discourse of queer theory over the past two decades. While never, to my knowledge, clarified or affirmed, it nonetheless persists. And this queer phallus, whatever it might mean, whether or not it exists, has a role to play in this book, whether as theoretical concept or perhaps as the book's obscure object of desire. The phallus, Lacan has said, "can play its role only when veiled."<sup>55</sup> That seems at the least to be true of this "queer phallus."

Perhaps the most substantive appearance of the queer phallus is in a book by Jan Campbell, published in 2000, that includes a chapter titled "Queering the Phallus." This chapter title speaks to me since my goal here is not to posit the queer phallus *per se*, but to queer the phallus, to denature and denormativize the phallus and its temporalities. "Queer theory," according to Campbell, "tak[es] Freud's theory of the phallus and reinvent[s] it in a more positive understanding of female or lesbian desire."<sup>56</sup>

While Campbell's phrasing suggests a general use of the phallus in queer theory, she in fact adduces only two examples of theorists who queer the phallus: Teresa de Lauretis in 1994 and Judith Butler in 1993.<sup>57</sup> These examples are, admittedly, pretty high-profile figures in queer theory (especially as it appeared in the 1990s). Butler's work is widely recognized as formative for the queer theory that arose in the early 1990s, and de Lauretis is often credited with originating the phrase "queer theory."<sup>58</sup>

Butler and de Lauretis were not in fact talking about a “queer” phallus; what was at stake for both theorists was a “lesbian” phallus. Versed in psychoanalytic theory, both de Lauretis and Butler in the early 1990s argued for something like a phallus in lesbian desire and sexual practice.<sup>59</sup> Based on the psychoanalytic distinction between phallus and penis, they point to the operation of the phallus in this sexuality without a penis.

Butler comes right out and puts “the lesbian phallus” in the very title of her essay. De Lauretis, on the other hand, though she takes a position similar to Butler’s, stops short of endorsing the word “phallus.” De Lauretis declares that a “notion of castration and *some* notion of the phallus—some notion of signifier of desire—are necessary to understand the processes and forms of subjectivity.” De Lauretis italicizes the word “some” in the phrase “*some* notion of the phallus,” suggesting a question about which notion of the phallus she will use. She then goes on to say that “Judith Butler proposes . . . ‘the lesbian Phallus,’” but notes, “I prefer to call the signifier of perverse desire a *fetish*.”<sup>60</sup>

Allowing that *some* notion of the phallus is necessary, in contradistinction to Butler, de Lauretis prefers the term “fetish,” “in order to avoid the unavoidable semantic complicity of phallus with penis, even at the risk of evoking the negative (reductive) connotations that the term *fetish* also currently carries.” The phallus, for de Lauretis, is a “signifier of desire,” but when she wants a “signifier of perverse desire”—that is, a queer phallus—she prefers not to use the term “phallus” because it cannot be separated from penis. Instead she uses “fetish,” another psychoanalytic term, despite her awareness that this term has its own drawbacks. I share de Lauretis’s desire for a phallic signifier that can “avoid the unavoidable semantic complicity” with penis, but unlike her I don’t believe “fetish” can solve the problem—especially when I see that by 2000, Campbell assimilates de Lauretis’s lesbian fetish back into the general category of the (queer) phallus.

If we were to respect de Lauretis’s preference for not using the term “phallus,” we would then be left with really only one example of queering the phallus: Judith Butler’s essay “The Lesbian Phallus

and the Morphological Imaginary.” It is odd to think of one essay as representing an entire trend in queer theory. But Butler’s essay does have a pretty interesting profile, both in Campbell’s account and in queer discourse more generally.

According to Campbell, Butler “does not leave the phallogocentric discourse of psychoanalysis behind; instead she performs it differently.”<sup>61</sup> While Butler is indeed known for bringing notions of performance and performativity to psychoanalytic theory, Campbell seems here to be talking not about Butler’s theory of performance, but about her performance of theory, about how she performs phallogocentric psychoanalysis. It is in light of this statement about Butler’s performing that I remark that Campbell’s chapter has a section titled “Butler’s Performing Phallus” and that this section opens with the phrase “Judith Butler’s famous lesbian phallus.” The idea of fame resonates with the idea of performance here.

Campbell concludes her discussion of Butler’s essay expressing doubt and asking a question: “Butler’s notion of a mobile lesbian phallus remains problematic. If the sign of the phallus is so mobile that it can symbolize lesbian bodily parts, then why still call it the phallus?”<sup>62</sup> Campbell’s account of Butler’s essay thus ultimately comes back to the perennial objection to using the male-centered term “phallus,” but this unavoidable logical objection coexists with a playful, admiring response to Butler’s performance, to her “performing phallus.” Not just in Campbell’s account but more generally, I would say that the response to Butler’s essay combines persuasive logical objection to the concept with enthusiasm for the performance of the “famous lesbian phallus.” Based on over twenty years of response, I would say that Butler’s lesbian phallus seems to be both wrong and thrilling.

More than a decade after Campbell’s “Queering the Phallus,” Lili Hsieh proposes to “query the queering of the Phallus . . . by queer feminists.”<sup>63</sup> “Isn’t it time,” Hsieh’s article begins by asking, “to sweep the ‘Empire of the Phallus’ . . . into the dustbin of history?”<sup>64</sup> This rhetorical question suggests that what Hsieh calls “queering phallus” was still in 2012 a flourishing theoretical direc-

tion in need of critique.<sup>65</sup> “Queering phallus” is here exemplified by Butler’s essay.

Mounting a knowledgeable and attentive critique of Butler’s use of the term “phallus,” Hsieh refers to “her celebrated concept of the ‘lesbian phallus.’”<sup>66</sup> “Celebrated” here recalls Campbell’s “famous,” but it also connotes twenty years of enthusiastic reception for Butler’s concept. To exemplify that reception, Hsieh cites a 2010 blog post by Tavia Nyong’o: “Judith Butler is ‘pulling the strings of the nation’s impressionable youth through film and video’ because . . . Lady Gaga is showing us her lesbian phallus.”<sup>67</sup> This connection to Lady Gaga (not to mention “film and video” and “impressionable youth”) provides perhaps the perfect instantiation for the fame/performance nexus that Campbell attached a dozen years earlier to the lesbian phallus.

There is something about Butler’s “lesbian phallus” essay that, despite its meticulous close work with Freudian and Lacanian theory, operates as brazen, ballsy performance. This essay may in fact be Butler’s most playful; there seems to be something seductive going on. Perhaps because the idea of a lesbian phallus is so desirable, so titillating to readers—or maybe it’s just me.<sup>68</sup>

“The Lesbian Phallus” opens: “After such a promising title, I knew that I could not possibly offer a satisfying essay.” This opening presumes her readers want to hear about the lesbian phallus, that we are eager to get what she is promising us, that the phrase “the lesbian phallus” provokes desire. The first paragraph goes on to talk not just about “the promise of the phallus” but also about its “allure”: “Perhaps a certain wariness with respect to that allure is a good thing.”<sup>69</sup> The phallus according to Butler: alluring, so beware.

Butler bases her contribution to the theorization of the phallus on Lacan’s assertion that the phallus is not the penis. She then goes on to posit that the phallus is displaceable, that “the phallus can attach to a variety of organs,” and beyond that, to “other body-like things.” The “displaceability of the phallus,” writes Butler, “opens the way for the lesbian phallus.”<sup>70</sup> While she carefully shows that the phallus in Lacan is displaceable, transferable, mobile, her close tex-

tual work with psychoanalytic theory merely “opens the way” for the lesbian phallus; it does not get us there. “The lesbian phallus,” she writes, “may be said to intervene as an unexpected consequence of the Lacanian scheme.”<sup>71</sup> *Intervene, unexpected*: the lesbian phallus is an intruder in the Lacanian scheme, an interloper in the psychoanalytic theorization of the phallus.

The move to the lesbian phallus, although carefully prepared through a reading of Lacanian theory, ultimately occurs by gesturing toward lesbian sexual practice. For example, “‘having’ the phallus can be symbolized by an arm, a tongue, a hand (or two), a knee, a thigh, a pelvic bone, an array of purposefully instrumentalized body-like things.”<sup>72</sup> This list intimates a repertoire of ways someone without a penis might “satisfy” a woman, might give sexual pleasure to a woman.<sup>73</sup> The parenthetical “(or two)” is a playful, knowing wink. Not only does Butler’s lesbian phallus intervene where not expected, but it then proceeds to flaunt its familiarity with the ways of pleasuring a woman, operating its lesbian seduction.

In a less playful tone, however, the essay insistently marks the lesbian phallus as wrong. For example, Butler reminds us that “the phallus is . . . excommunicated from the feminist orthodoxy on lesbian sexuality.”<sup>74</sup> The lesbian phallus, the essay goes on to say, is doubly prohibited, both by misogyny and by feminism, both by heterosexism and by lesbian discourse. Under all this prohibition, the lesbian phallus cannot help but be “a source of shame.”<sup>75</sup> Butler’s delineation of the shame attached to the phallus she brings forth, as I reread it now, sets me to thinking of my own embarrassment at the phallus in the present book’s title.

Even as she advances the lesbian phallus, Butler makes clear that it is unavoidably wrong, in a number of different ways. Yet it remains nonetheless bold and thrilling, a promise of pleasure and of alternative sexual theorizing, “the production of an anti-heterosexual sexual imaginary.”<sup>76</sup> It is the insistence of its promise along with the persistence of its wrongness that makes Butler’s lesbian phallus particularly “queer.” This is the sort of queer phallus, wrong but nonetheless alluring, sexy and incorrect, which is at play in the present book, in my use of the phallus here.



Butler's phallus is wrong, queer, because it is lesbian, because it belongs to someone who does not have a penis. As such, its inappropriateness belongs to the nearly century-long critique of how psychoanalysis applies the term "phallus" to women's sexuality as well as to men's. But I would like here to gesture toward an even broader queerness, a more generally inappropriate phallus.

In her 2012 article, Hsieh writes: "Lacan chooses the unfortunate signifier of the phallus. . . . The phallus is a misnomer of something larger that lurks in human sexuality."<sup>77</sup> For Hsieh, it is not just Butler's lesbian phallus but Lacan's phallus that is wrong. "Unfortunate signifier," "misnomer": Lacan is wrong to choose the word "phallus." The Lacanian phallus is not just wrong for women; it is wrong for everyone.

Yet unlike de Lauretis, who proposed we replace it with "fetish," Hsieh does not propose a more "fortunate signifier" to replace phallus. She does not offer a correct name for this "misnomer"; she proffers instead the phrase "something larger that lurks in human sexuality." I like this evocative phrase. There does seem to be an insistent connection between the phallus and "something larger." The verb "lurks" suggests the shady, inappropriate, threatening side, as well as the veiled nature, of the phallus's operation. And the entire phrase implies that we cannot identify it, don't know exactly what it is, although we do know it is connected to sexuality, and it is larger.

While I thoroughly agree with Hsieh that "phallus" is an unfortunate signifier, I cannot get beyond the misnomer here, cannot do without this word. The phallus in the present book is a misnomer for something we don't (yet) have a correct name for. The phallus in this book is queer that way.

### Anecdotal Theory

Before I bring this introduction to a close, a few comments about a particular aspect of the book's methodology are in order. The book that follows is made up of two chapters, both of which begin with a short personal narrative that I wrote especially for this book. The first chapter opens with an account of problems with my feet

and walking that arose as I approached the age of fifty. The second chapter includes a brief chronicle of sexual activity and attitudes during a two-year period starting when my partner was diagnosed with prostate cancer. This personal writing functions here as catalyst and focus for an extended critical and theoretical inquiry, delving into related issues and texts. This procedure, starting from personal narrative in order to theorize, is something I have called, in an earlier book, “anecdotal theory.”

As that 2002 book explains, during the 1990s “I experimented with writing in which I would recount an anecdote and then attempt to ‘read’ that account for the theoretical insights it afforded.”<sup>78</sup> When I collected those experiments together in one volume, it was this particular practice, this method of theorizing, that I wanted to indicate by the title *Anecdotal Theory*. While that book focused on pedagogy, feminism, and the academy, this book, despite having decidedly different theoretical concerns, shares its methodology.

The idea of combining personal writing with theoretical inquiry came to me, first of all, from feminist studies. Since the beginning of the movement for women’s studies, feminist academics have criticized the way a certain professionalization of knowledge denied connections between knowledge and the world. Feminist epistemology emphasized the value of revealing the concrete conditions that produce knowledge. The inclusion of the personal within the scholarly was seen by some of the pioneers of academic feminism as a way to consider thoughts, responses, and insights that would not traditionally be recognized as knowledge.

Through the 1980s and 1990s, more and more feminist scholars began “doing theory,” incorporating poststructuralist theory into their feminist work. While some thought this would mean the end of personal scholarly writing, I was far from the only feminist at that time bringing personal writing into our theory. In her study of academic feminist memoirs of the 1990s, Cynthia Franklin in fact notes there was a movement “to combine personal experience and theory.”<sup>79</sup> While often critical of 1990s academic memoirs, especially personal writing seen as a retreat from theory, Franklin applauds writing that combines memoir with theory, praising books

that “successfully bring personal narrative and theory into a dialectical relationship.”<sup>80</sup> Franklin values memoir for what it can add to theory: “Personal writing can address complexities and contradictions that escape even the most nuanced theoretical formulations.”<sup>81</sup>

While feminist thought was decisive in my turn to “combine personal experience and theory,” there is also a second crucial theoretical influence on those 1990s essays of mine: the experiment derives not just from feminism but also from psychoanalysis. Proclaiming that “psychoanalysis is an anecdotal theory,” my 2002 book went on to explain that “by grounding theory in case history, psychoanalysis demands that theory test itself against the uncanny details of story.”<sup>82</sup> This may be what I most value about what I call anecdotal theory: that by beginning in case history, theorizing must honor and answer to the detail of lived experience.

The psychoanalytic background to anecdotal theory is not, however, just about the relation between theory and case history; it is also about sex. My 1990s essays and the present book, despite their broad divergence in topic, share a focus on sexuality. *Anecdotal Theory* was concerned with pedagogy, whereas this book addresses disability and aging, but both writing projects locate themselves in an exploration of how their particular topics are lived sexually. In both books, the memoir component is not just personal but specifically sexual.

My 2002 book articulates some of the goals of anecdotal theory thus: “Rather than reach a general understanding via the norm, I choose to theorize via a . . . marginal case. I’m trying to theorize . . . in a way that resists the norm. . . . The usual presupposition of theory is that we need to reach a general understanding, which then predisposes us toward the norm, toward a case or model that is prevalent, mainstream. To dismiss something as ‘merely anecdotal’ is to dismiss it as a . . . marginal case.”<sup>83</sup>

Psychoanalysis can be this sort of anecdotal theory as well;<sup>84</sup> psychoanalytic thinking can participate in this resistance to the norm. Freud theorized sexuality based on perversions rather than the reproductive norm. This Freudian understanding of sexuality challenged the reigning model of sexuality as defined by repro-

ductive teleology, a model that would restrict sexuality to acts and people capable of biological reproduction.<sup>85</sup> Not only did Freud define sexuality so as to include in its crux practices defined as perverse (by not being reproductive), but he more famously expanded it to prepubescent behavior, thus radically unseating reproductivity from its position of dominance within our understanding of sexuality. It is this antinormative heritage of psychoanalysis that I embrace for anecdotal theory.

By the time I published *Anecdotal Theory*, two things had happened to me that together would eventually lead to the present book. I had begun to understand my work as located within the field of queer theory, and I had begun to have foot pain that drastically reduced my ability to stand or walk. These two changes in my life seemed at first to have literally nothing to do with each other.

In the early 2000s I was reading extensively in queer theory. At the same time, queer theory as a field was beginning to establish connections with disability studies. My reading in queer theory led me into some radical crip theory, and sometimes I would connect to my reading not just as a queer theorist but as a crip. These brief crip reading moments occurred sporadically over a decade while my writing pursued other, less personal topics. I was no longer trying to do anecdotal theory, but every once in a while, reading at the intersection of queer and disability, I would have a fleeting fantasy of trying to theorize from my crip “standpoint.”

Reading in crip theory, I rediscovered anecdotal theory. Scholarly publications at the intersection of queer theory and disability regularly included personal narrative among the theoretical work.<sup>86</sup> And reading those personal narratives, I would sometimes fantasize writing one myself. In the summer of 2011 I read the volume *Gay Shame* out of a theoretical interest in shame and sexuality. The book included an entire section devoted to disabled shame, and in that section was a piece of personal writing by Abby Wilkerson called “Slipping.”<sup>87</sup> As I read Wilkerson’s essay, I could not stop imagining writing up my own wheelchair story. The intensity of that urge is the origin of this book.

From the moment I read Wilkerson’s “Slipping,” I began obses-

sively composing my foot story in my head. It was two years later that I finally wrote up this account of my foot pain and how it affected my sexuality and my gender. Although I felt quite compelled to tell this story, my ultimate goal was not to write memoir, but to use that experience as a starting point to think through the relation between disability and sex.

Later, as I have already recounted in this introduction, I added aging to my theoretical agenda. Early in my attempt to catch up with critical aging studies, I read Gullette's *Declining to Decline* and discovered anecdotal theory there as well. The theorization of decline in that book begins with a chapter outlining how in midlife Gullette was overcome by serious back pain, and how that led to her grappling with decline ideology both in her life and in her theorizing.

In *Anecdotal Theory* I wrote: "While the impetus for theorizing is often the need to think through a life occurrence, the occurrence is generally not included as part of the theorizing (although it may sometimes be alluded to in prefatory material). . . . A whole lot of theory turns out to be 'anecdotal': that is, the thinking is inspired, energized, or made necessary by some puzzling, troubling, instigating life event."<sup>88</sup> Gullette's back pain is the "life occurrence" that instigated her theory. Unlike most theory, which relegates life event to preface or to silence, the work that I find most valuable, like Gullette's *Declining to Decline* or Eli Clare's crip classic *Exile and Pride*, includes life occurrence as more than prefatory, as part of the theorizing.<sup>89</sup> A lot of the theoretical work that the present book takes as inspiration, from disability and aging studies, in fact combines life writing with theory—it is not just implicitly but explicitly anecdotal.

In 2002, trying to explain why I did anecdotal theory, I wrote: "I theorize . . . in order better to negotiate the world in which I find myself. . . . Subjecting theory to incident teaches us to think in precisely those situations which tend to disable thought, forces us to keep thinking even when the dominance of our thought is far from assured."<sup>90</sup> This is a plea for the life value of theory, for theorizing as help in "negotiating the world." Although I would still subscribe to

every word in this passage, rereading it now, I am quite surprised to discover the verb “disable” there. I wrote that word before I identified as disabled, wrote it actually just before the pain in my feet had become a central fact in my life. Finding it there, it seems uncanny, perhaps a prescient harbinger of the way my disability would, a decade later, make anecdotal theory newly relevant for me. Encountering it now after my immersion in crip theory, I’d like to read it as suggesting the way disability not only can threaten thought but also can at the same time teach the value of embodied thinking.