

## An intersectional lens: challenging, resisting, and embracing old age in Lore Segal's "Ladies Lunch"

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### Abstract

Fictional narratives about female friendships in old age, Chivers (2003) argues, can be part of "constructive narratives of aging" in an "imaginary world that can reflect and especially affect circulating social thought." Such a representation of friendship in old age is at the core of Lore Segal's short story cycle "Ladies Lunch" (2023). In this narrative analysis, intersectionality is used as a lens to investigate age, ability, gender, and class in Lore Segal's fiction in order to investigate the stories' intrinsic mechanisms of resisting, challenging, and embracing old age in order to counter ageist stereotypes.

Keywords: short story cycle, intersectionality, friendship, old age, food

### Introduction

Through a narrative analysis of Lore Segal's literary fiction, this article analyzes the modes of resisting, challenging, and embracing stereotypes of old age in the short story cycle "Ladies Lunch" by the US-Austrian author Lore Segal. I analyze fictional texts based on close reading and a symbolic

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analysis of friendship as signifying cultural practice in the context of old age in America. Friendship in old age, in Segal's writing, constitutes a form of care – a way of relating and responding to one another (DeFalco 2020) and providing support and stability – among the women who partake in their regular lunch meetings in which they contest the readers' views on stereotypes of old age, and at the same time, also express personal vulnerabilities in opposition to a "decline narrative" (Gullette 1994: 13). Using a "gender lens" (Calasanti & Slevin 2001: 3), this paper teases out the potential of literary fiction to make the mechanisms of intersectionality visible by looking into Segal's female protagonists' stories and their fictional spaces and encounters. My analysis addresses the ways in which fiction shapes the public imaginary of what it means to age, and how it proposes alternatives to the prevailing negative stereotypes of old age. Especially when it comes to what Falcus et al. (2023) call the "decline master narrative [that] constructs ageing as a feared process that needs to be stopped or at least slowed down" (p. 2), literary representations offer powerful counter narratives that oppose decline and decrepitude by offering outlooks on aging and old age that do not suggest a slowing down or halting the process of growing older. Rather, these fictional representations provide a perspective on characters that roll with their aging, embrace it, and make the most of their lives, maybe not regardless of but even in spite of their age. I argue that fictional texts make these alternative outlooks possible in envisioning future scenarios, both individually and on a collective level and in communities. The affective quality of these texts disrupts cultural and political power dynamics when it comes to stereotypical and predominantly successful representations of aging and old age by providing powerful counter-narratives.

### Representations of Aging Successfully Through Friendship and Food

When determining the factor of success, a prominent example oftentimes discussed in the context of cultural age studies is Rowe and Kahn's (1987: 143–144) division between "usual" and "successful" aging, whereas the latter serves as a powerful opposition to physical decline and disease. The "maintenance of the activities popular among the middle-aged privileged

with money and leisure time” (Calasanti et al. 2006: 15) becomes the focal point of “age-resisting practices” (Calasanti et al. 2006: 15), upholding stigmatizations that reinforce patriarchal cultural understandings of good (i.e. healthy, successful, active) and bad (i.e. sick, decrepit, immobile) aging. In the *Bloomsbury Handbook to Aging in Contemporary Literature and Film*, Martina Zimmermann (2023) argues that:

[S]uccessful aging emphasizes masculinist ideals rife in capitalist societies, including individual achievement, productivity and autonomy, and, in comparison to concepts like affirmative old age or harmonious aging, denies that material changes of the body are part of the aging process. (p. 63)

Biological aging (Hamczyk et al. 2020), despite being considered a main contributing factor to success, thus becomes outside one’s own control and renders the older individual powerless. As Calasanti and Slevin (2001) argue, gender is a crucial factor of social organization that helps determine how we see and understand old age while also intersecting with other aspects of Crenshaw’s matrix of intersectionality. Especially when it comes to experiencing ageism and age-based discrimination, in addition to investigating a “double marginality” (Woodward 1999: xi) based on race and gender, an intersectional approach allows for a more nuanced and situational determination of ageism and the ways in which age is represented as a narrative of decline and frailty. Researching aging as relational “enables us to learn more about how all of our positions and experiences rest upon power relations” (Calasanti et al. 2006: 17). Broadening this perspective on aging allows for a more tangible understanding of how discrimination is and is not embedded in individual places and social hierarchies. It also highlights the volatility of those concepts and further puts their situationality to the fore.

“[I]n a culture where the loudspeakers blare out positive aging,” (Gullette 1994: 134) it is up to us to “figure out how to live with it.” Following Gullette in my analysis of Segal’s work, I argue that what aging successfully means in her writing becomes apparent through friendships and food. Success, resistance, and acceptance of old age are not bound to physical ability and mobility but to the possibility of maintaining friendships and remaining within the designated space(s) that these friendships provide the women with. As the short story cycle’s title suggests, the ladies’

lunch offers a space for exchange and provides the women with a way of feeling comfort in a familiar place. Through the ladies' lunch date, food – regardless of what kinds of food the women eat – provides the space and reason for their meetings that maintain and nourish their friendships. Lore Segal's literary representations of old age "offer an alternative perspective on aging, not one that renders physical or mental decline invisible" but more so "one that incorporates these aspects that old age might hold for us, in ways that these become part of the characters' personalities, their everyday lives, and social interactions" (Trinka 2022: 193). This contribution, thus, sets forth to explore the protagonists' "freedom to choose lifestyles and ways of being old that are suited to them" (Calasanti et al. 2006: 26) rather than what is deemed successful by society.

### *Friendship*

In her 2003 monograph *From Old Woman to Older Women*, Sally Chivers so aptly proposed that it is a balance between "physical and other aspects of aging" that are "crucial to transforming current attitudes toward old age" that Segal's short story cycle portrays. Chivers addresses the importance of "constructive narratives of aging" in an "imaginary world that can reflect and especially affect circulating social thought" (p. 84). Friendships in old age, according to Chivers, "allow for a mutuality that might be lacking in inter- and cross-generational relationships" (p. 80). Friendship, in Segal's fictional texts, is thus discussed in the context of regular lunch meetings in which the women not only express their own vulnerabilities but also tackle the readers' pre-configured notions of stereotypes surrounding old age vis-à-vis a "decline narrative" as proposed by Margaret Gullette (1994: 13). Cultural narratives render age either visible or invisible, depending on the way age is being treated in a society. "If a culture lives by the understanding that aging signifies decline, and old age means sickness and decrepitude, a positive outlook on old age as a period of possibilities is automatically rendered invisible by the cultural implications posed" (Trinka 2022: 28). Contrasting this idea of invisibility, the kind of reciprocal care Segal's characters experience comes from a vulnerability that manifests as a "radical openness towards surprising possibilities" (Hirsch 2016: 81) where being old becomes a "space to work

from as opposed to something only to be overcome" (p.81). Segal's representation of friendship is a powerful counter-narrative that can be read as a strategic intervention against ageist thought (Butler 1969) while incorporating and embracing old age as a crucial part of the life that constitutes the characters' identities. By embracing friendship and challenging age-related stereotypical behaviors, the women in Segal's stories are "not [represented] as forbiddingly alien and other, but as sharing many problems and possibilities with us" (Nussbaum 1997: 85), meaning us readers. Through the spaces the women's friendship and their regular lunch meetings open up, the stories focus on trivial aspects of the women's lives that put other aspects of intersectionality, which would become visible in other social circles, into the background and allow aging to be one aspect, but not a defining marker of distinction and otherness.

### *Food*

In Segal's short story cycle, food is used as a narrative tool that helps constituting the spatial setting and backdrop to the story while simultaneously providing an element of coherence. In foregrounding the meaning of food for creating the backdrop to the analysis of intersectionality, I follow Pauline Adema (2009), who argues that "food is not merely a means of survival; it is encoded with symbolic significance and is a vehicle for communication" (p. vii). Food is utilized in the narration to create the spaces and places in which the women interact not only with each other but also with their families, with caregivers, and with friends and acquaintances. In its presence, it almost becomes a trivial aspect and is reduced to a narrative element; in its absence, its relevance in fostering community becomes evident and is thus both "medium and outcome in the construction of identities" (Kong & Sinha 2016: 4).

Food, as Carol Counihan (1999) outlines in her *Anthropology of Food and Body*, not only is extensively gendered but also brings aspects of intersectionality to the fore. As the analysis will show, "[c]lass, caste, race, and gender hierarchies are maintained, in part, through differential control over and access to food" and that [o]ne's place in the social system is revealed by what, how much, and with whom one eats" (Counihan 1999: 9). She further points out that "[r]ace, class, and gender distinctions are manifest through rules about eating and the ability to impose rules on others"

(p. 9), which will become visible in the ways in which parent–children relationships, as well as the protagonist’s relationship to her caregiver are represented in the story. Especially the aspect of company – eating in the presence of others, the protagonist’s son or her caregiver, as well as eating with friends, becomes a clear distinctive feature of how control is exercised. While gender and age become distinctive features in the protagonist’s relationships outside the ladies’ lunch, race, class, and age do not play a role within the friends’ group despite its distinctive feature to the outside world.

Food, in Segal’s writing, highlights “distinct patterns that shape the way we read and interpret socially relevant narratives” (Trinka 2022: 67). Describing food as “endlessly meaningful” (Counihan 1999: 6) and as a “language accessible to all” (p. 19) provides the basis for my analysis of the relation of food and friendships in Segal’s short story cycle. By bringing those aspects together, Segal’s short story – in relation to old age – allows the reader insight into the different social spaces that the characters find themselves in while also providing access to various power structures highlighted in the stories. With food being both a backdrop to the story whenever it provides a meeting ground for the protagonists, as well as an element of negotiating power when it comes to its nutritional qualities, the short story cycle highlights the multiple and diverse negotiations and representations of old age that take away from a solely physical and healthy reading of successful aging, providing an alternate yet still powerful interpretation of what it means to age “successfully.”

### Resisting, Challenging, and Embracing Stereotypes of Old Age: An Intersectional Perspective

As Crenshaw (1991, 2017) proposes, intersectionality is not an accumulation of inequality patterns and criteria but a situational experience of people that depends on what kinds of environments they find themselves in. In her conceptualization, it “is a lens through which you can see where power comes and collides, where it interlocks and intersects” (2017) and where power structures render people invisible or place them at the margins. It is exactly this collision, intersection, and interlocking of a variety of power structures that I am interested in teasing out in this article in order to get a better grasp of how stereotypes about old age function in

literary fiction but also how literary fiction resists stereotypes by shifting those power structures. Reading Segal's short story cycle with a focus on intersectional entanglements, a pattern of stereotypes toward old age emerges that is also cleverly disrupted throughout the narration. The short stories outline intersectional entanglements in relation to the inside and outside of the women's circle of friends, bringing aspects of intersectionality to the foreground or background depending on their social environments. In line with Crenshaw's concept, the stories make visible how power structures change and people adapt or cope with the respective spaces they find themselves in. Whereas age, for example, is not an intersectional marker that differentiates the protagonists, it does become a defining issue when they find themselves in the presence of their families. The same is true for ability, both in the context of family and an extended group of acquaintances.

The idea that the "multiple stories that tell of the changing weave of identities and people's often sinuous life paths" (Grenier & Valois-Nadeau 2020: 7) that the characters in Segal's short story cycle embody are representations of various levels of intersecting hierarchies and power structures within their group of friends, as well as their families. Segal's stories do not depict women, in a Beauvoirian sense, as "socially marginalized group" that is "characterized by alienation, self-estrangement, and a loss of self" (Hartung 2017: 263-265), even though they do touch upon frailty, loneliness, and a threatening loss of "self-reliance" (Cruikshank 2013: 11).

Resisting, challenging, and embracing stereotypes of old age in Segal's narratives is subversively adhering to the expected structures and activities. The characters largely behave their age or act their age, following a notion of appropriateness while mocking or contradicting expectations. In their unexpected actions and activities, they antagonize prevalent social norms and requirements of old people, especially of old women, making the reader wonder, "is this what I want for myself?" There are several narrative strategies that highlight either resistance, a challenge, or an embracing of stereotypes, depending on the social setting the women find themselves in. Based on the short story cycle, I would like to foreground the reversal of the reader's expectations, situational irony, mocking and resisting care, and the acceptance of age and appreciation age markers in the texts.

### *Mocking and Resisting Care*

Segal's short story "Ladies' Lunch," the short story cycle's namesake, was originally and slightly differently published in the US magazine *The New Yorker* in 2017 than its adaptation in the 2023 published collection. The story is about five women, immigrants from different places in the world, but fully fledged New Yorkers, who have "grown old coming together, every other month or so for the last thirty or more years, around one another's table" (Segal 2017). It is narrated through the perspective of Lotte, one of the women, who is trying to get rid of a caregiver her children arranged for her but also taps into the individual stories of the other women from the ladies' lunch. What connects the women to one another is their social status, which becomes evident through the places they live in (an Upper West Side New York apartment that is described to be "commodious" in Lotte's case), their level of education represented through the professions mentioned (doctor and activist), the language they use, the books they read and pastime activities they share, as well as their advanced age ("They were of an age when they worried if one of them did not answer her telephone" [Segal 2023: 62]). What differentiates them from their surroundings and people outside their group of friends are their different places of origin. The characters' former residential places, "California, County Mayo, Tehran, Vienna, and the Bronx" (Segal 2023: 2), are a commonality among them. Being an outsider inside New York especially becomes visible in Lotte's comment about herself being "the refugee that keeps telling the old story" (Segal 2023: 56). Further, their slightly deteriorating physical ("Ilka had turned out to need a hip replacement" [p. 60]) and cognitive abilities ("Mom messed up her medicines" [p. 67]) become markers of difference but do not take away from their wish to remain independent regardless. Especially when it comes to having to leave the physical space of their friendship, their ladies' lunch, and move into a nursing home, negotiations are necessary in order to remain independent. Despite initially having – and being able to afford – an in-home caregiver who "sits and watches television" on the "velvet sofa in Lotte's living room" (p. 58), Lotte's children eventually decide to move their mother into a nursing home. They are worried that Lotte, against their strong recommendations, will "put sugar on her bread and butter" (p. 66) as a deliberate act of resistance rather than an unhealthy preference and a

hyperbolic depiction of resistance to control on the focalizer's end. What is seen as a bad habit and acting out of not knowing better by her children is Lotte's challenging her family's patience as well as their well-meaning intent to exert control over her eating habits, which also becomes visible in the snarky comment Lotte makes to her friend Farrah, a doctor, who she wittily challenges to "do a study of the correlation between salt-free food and depression" (p. 61). Despite the character's financial possibilities to afford an in-home caregiver, a service that could be considered a result of financial privilege, she describes it as a burden rather than a help. Before being moved into the nursing home, there is a resistance to in-home caregiving through a mocking of the caregiver on Lotte's end.

"Your Sarah [the caregiver] seems pleasant enough," Ruth said. "What's wrong with her?"

"That she's in my living room," Lotte said, "watching television; that she's in my kitchen eating her lunch, which she does standing up; that she's in my spare room asleep, and in my bathroom whenever I want to go in."

Ruth asked Lotte what Sarah did for her. "Do you need a caregiver to help you dress?"

"No," Lotte said.

"Do you need a caregiver to help you shower?"

"No," Lotte said.

"Get your meals?" "God, NO!"

"So what do you need help with?"

"The caregiver," Lotte said. (Segal 2023: 61-62)

Eventually, the protagonist tries to rid herself of her aid by torturing her in the same way that she feels tortured by her carer, clearly pointing out the intrusion into her privacy she experiences from the woman who stays in her home all day and who she has to share her "commodious" (p. 58) apartment with.

### *Reversing Expectations*

In Segal's short story cycle, irony is created by breaking with the reader's norms and expectations toward the text, as well as toward old age. This is cleverly done through the use of unexpected situations and encounters. A common misconception that still has popularity despite its demystification by age studies scholars is the decreasing use of technology in old age (Dalmer et al. 2022; cf. Hatzifilalithis & Dalmer 2022). One ironic instance in the short story "Ladies' Zoom" becomes noticeable when the old women transition from having a lunch date among friends to having a Zoom meeting during the lockdown of the COVID pandemic. When decontextualized from the short story cycle and read on its own, the story highlights the technologically savvy women who, despite their advanced age, try to make a Zoom call work in order to see each other during the COVID-19 pandemic. When read in the context of the short story cycle, however, the spatial connection to food, as well as the importance of friendship and the continuity of the meeting, becomes evident. The story is an extension of another short story in the cycle, entitled "Ladies Lunch," which offers the women a place to discuss their everyday queries and be in touch with each other, despite their families' occasional hesitations. Moving the meeting online, the story becomes an extension of controlling family mechanisms that emerge in the form of concerns and care from younger family members. Meeting the families' concerns of becoming ill with the virus, the women react with a strategic intervention to move their meetings and take back control over their meetings, taking going online and connecting with each other into their own hands.

The next time – it was in response to their several children's anxieties – Ruth offered to try to host ladies' lunch on Zoom. "It might be a good idea to hold up a hand to signal when you have something to say," she told them. "We have forty minutes, and another forty if I can figure out how to work it." They could be guaranteed to quarrel with the technology. "We're talking to little movies of ourselves instead of with each other." Only Farah held up a hand to say, "It's this blessed technology that lets me carry Kafka and all of Jane Austen and King Lear, and What Maisie Knew in my handbag and make the letters large enough to read." (Segal 2023: 150-151)

The story reflects on the possibility of regaining agency that a regular lunch meeting would not allow. At the same time, the potentially unexpected knowledge of online technologies of women who need walking

aids, need their children to arrange lunch meetings for them and take them to said meetings, or struggle with their memory. On top of the casual use of Zoom in order to schedule meetings, the story also highlights their use of digital libraries and brings aspects of technology use to the fore that are not necessarily age related. These emerge in observations and utterances such as “[i]t might be a good idea to hold up a hand to signal when you have something to say” or that “the little moving pictures on the computer screen nodded their heads up and down” (p. 151). By explicitly not foregrounding a struggle with the technology, the story normalizes the use of Zoom calls among the group of friends as an extension to their lunch meeting, placing the food in the background, but foregrounding their occasional memory loss and how they tackle it instead. Old age, thus, becomes normalized by addressing aspects of online conversations that are unrelated to aging. Within their circle of friends, it is a common ground for the women and not a marker of difference that distinguishes them from a cohort more technologically literate or quick.

### *Acceptance*

Apart from ironic resistance, the reversal of expectations, and the mocking and challenging of stereotypes, acceptance plays a crucial role in Segal’s short story cycle. The story harbors an impactful irony in the never-explicitly addressed confusion of a character attending a funeral, calling it a party for the old (Segal 2023). While the story never makes it explicit whether the reader’s expectations are being challenged by the character’s careless attitude toward the place, she finds herself in, or whether the challenge in understanding the text is based on the reader’s inferences that someone acting that way can only suffer from forgetfulness or dementia never becomes clear and leaves an open end. When entering and complementing a woman’s scarf, Lotte, the protagonist, “could not have said if she had forgotten the woman’s name or had never laid eyes on her” (p. 19), which is a sensation reciprocated by the other woman. Since Lotte only ever converses with her friend who she is joining the “party” with, the reader does not get an outside perspective of other guests’ thoughts and comments and is left with the ambivalent understanding that Lotte could be joking, suffer from dementia, or just have a bad memory when it comes to names and faces.

"I like parties." "If you want to call it a party. I hope they do martinis."

"Why isn't this a party?" asked Lotte, following her friends, who seemed to know the geography of the handsome modern apartment. (Segal 2023: 20–21)

The short story uses stereotypical notions of decline in old age on the reader's end, however, does not take away from the characters having fun at a "party" that turns out to be a wake for a mutual acquaintance in the end.

By granting the characters the flexibility of calling their social event whatever they want, and not having consequences in the way they are being treated by other guests, the question of age is only negotiated between the text and the reader, not the characters in the story. Just like the challenging and mocking of events in the previous stories, the negotiation of old age, physical and mental ability, gender specific stereotypes, and their respective class identities remain silent when in the group. What is presented to the reader as markers of intersectionality only become visible outside the women's ladies' lunch – as long as they remain together and do not have to negotiate their social identities outside their group of friends, markers of otherness do not come into play.

## Conclusion

This narrative analysis addresses the ways challenging, resisting, and embracing aging manifest in Lore Segal's short story cycle *Ladies' Lunch*. As this analysis shows, using the lens of intersectionality, class, gender, race, ability, and age are shifting markers that depend on the (social) context the characters find themselves in and are not fixed categories that add to a person's identity. Rather than highlighting age deficits juxtaposed to ability, gender, or class, Segal's stories provide creative visions of aging successfully that go beyond the characters' physical capabilities and highlight the relevance of friendship and belonging for a feeling of comfort. Despite the existence of physical and mental decline, and without euphemizing old age, Segal's stories outline the potential of community and care through friendship and a common ground. Such counter-narratives of old age that possess the quality of addressing prevalent stereotypes and reconstructing their meaning can thus have an affective quality on the reader and help challenge the status quo of the intrinsic ageism of active

aging or successful aging that strips the individual of the multiplicity of capabilities they possess beyond the physical. Utilizing a lens of intersectionality allows the reader to understand the shifting potentials of old age, which are situationally embedded, and highlights creative ways of negotiating, challenging, resisting, and embracing the changes that come with growing older.

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