

# Assisted Living: “Acting Naturally” in *Room 335*<sup>1</sup>

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Documentary film and television have played, and continue to play, a major role in shaping public conversations about standards of care today for those in later life who are no longer able to live independently. The starkest example in the UK in recent years was the BBC Panorama documentary *Undercover Care: The Abuse Exposed*, aired in May 2011, which contributed heavily to official denunciation of the Care Quality Commission as “unfit for purpose.” This paper looks in detail at a less gruelling example of the genre. Neither an exposé of malpractice nor a fly-on-wall documentary, *Room 335* (HBO Documentary Films, 2006) is closer to participant anthropology—though it is not quite that either. The paper, delivered as a plenary lecture to the British Society of Gerontology Annual Conference, September 2013, makes a case for valuing the quality of the film’s improvisational, non-“findings driven” engagement with its subjects, and the light it sheds on the nature and significance of friendship in old age. The film can be downloaded from Apple iTunes at <https://itunes.apple.com/ca/artist/andrew-jenks/id563448630>.

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On 30 May 2005, Andrew Jenks, a nineteen-year-old freshman studying film at New York University, moved into a retirement and assisted living community in Florida with two college friends. The three young men lived at Harbor Place at Port St. Lucie for five weeks. During that period they shot two hundred hours of film footage, subsequently edited into an eighty-eight-minute, feature-length documentary. Bought by HBO, *Room 335* was shown at film festivals in the USA, Australia, and the Netherlands, and won Best Picture and Best Documentary at the 2006 Phoenix Film Festival. It is available as a download from iTunes, and I hope to convince you that it deserves an audience within gerontology and age studies as well as among cinema buffs.

Insofar as Jenks and his friends start out on their assisted living venture with a plan or thesis, they are motivated by awareness that there is a

political issue in twenty-first-century America about generational inequity of access to experience. “I feel like our generation is missing out on a valuable opportunity” (3:35-9), Jenks tells the camera at the start of the film: his intention is to give these old people “a voice in our society” (4:06-7). “I want to move in, he explains, because I feel like I could actually learn a lot from old people. They’ve lived life longer than anyone else. They’ve had more experiences than anyone else . . . I think I’ll fit right in there [at Harbor Place]. I mean . . . they are outsiders, they are outcasts, no one seems to understand them. Sounds like a perfect scenario for me” (3:35-53).

This is cute, in the complex sense of the word: at once charming and sharp. Jenks is happy for us to laugh, but he also (I assume) wants the idea to take root, even before we meet any of the permanent inhabitants of Harbor Place, that a nineteen-year-old college boy, not quite certain of his place or function in society, might have something in common with a person nearing the end of their life trying to maintain a modicum of independence. Jenks spells the point out in an online interview subsequently conducted for HBO. There he locates the germ of the idea for *Room 335* in his experience of the quick decline of his grandfather, who contracted an infection, followed by rapidly progressing dementia:

... while this was ... all going on, I was living in a dormitory with three hundred 18 to 19-year-olds. So I kind of put two and two together and wondered what would it be like if I was living in a dorm with 300 70 or 80-year-olds, and what their life is like.

When you’re in college you’re always looking at the future and wondering what you’re going to do tomorrow and in 20 years. I wondered if senior citizens were the same way or if they were nostalgic and only looked to their pasts. And that’s what gave me the idea to move down to the mecca of all retirement homes, which is Florida. (Jenks, “Interview”)

In this essay, I want to run with the analogy (highly imperfect as it is) between the assisted living community and the college, as a way of opening out two of the most important questions pertaining to a sociology of old age as it is put under the spotlight by these nineteen-year-olds’ experiment in documentary. The first question is obvious, and

much pushed about in the general press as well as the specialist literatures; the second is harder to frame, and the difficulty of framing it non-prejudicially is part of what makes it interesting to me.

The obvious question: What is the force or point of the political commonplace that something has gone badly wrong in a society that quarantines the old, or allows them to quarantine themselves, in residential settings that only admit those in later age?

The less obvious questions: What is the nature and quality of friendship for the interdependent old? Relatedly, what is gerontology doing when, like the young men who made *Room 335*, it puts the friendships of the old under critical scrutiny? *Room 335* is not sociology. It is improvisational, it is highly selective in the distribution of attention it gives to its interviewees, and it is overtly shaped according to the subjective concerns of the interviewers. It is also not what we might expect from a conventional documentary about aging: it doesn't fit the genre of the undercover exposé that has done so much to reveal the dismaying extent of abuse of the old in Britain and elsewhere; nor is it a fly-on-the-wall documentary. But it gets in some important respects closer to the subjective and inter-subjective experience of its subjects than either the more rigorous sociological interview or the journalistic exposé, not least because (a glued-on moral at the end aside) it is essentially non-judgmental. The judgments it went ready to make don't stick—which leaves it with a kind of sympathetic ambivalence that seems to me not a bad response to the complex social situations it records.

Harbor Place at Port St. Lucie, Florida, is home to more than two hundred residents aged from fifty to the upper end of the life span (the oldest person we see is ninety-six). Jenks and his friends Will and Jonah (“the crew” as they call themselves) arrive in the afternoon of May 30 to find the few visible residents fast asleep (“I feel like we might have arrived a little too late for the action,” Jenks quips [5:43-45]), so the first substantive engagement that we see with this way of living concerns the nature of the room.

**Film clip. 5:49-6:56** Jenks walks down the third floor corridor, swinging the key to Room 335. “Well here we go, here’s the room,”

he says with some trepidation. He unlocks the door and walks into a small room furnished with a single bed, covered by a floral duvet and two pillows (one plain, one non-matching, apparently floral) and lined with a striped pink and beige valence. Also visible in the initial shot are a small white-fronted chest of drawers (five shallow drawers), a tiny beige-shaded table lamp and small vase of (artificial?) flowers on top. “This is where I’m going to be living for the next month”, Jenks comments (still swinging the key energetically): “Do you realize how weird that is?” The camera pans to show under wide windows a very small single-drawer side-table, pretty much covered by a beige-shaded table lamp; at the base of the bed are a rocking chair with a floral cushion facing a small television on an empty wooden video cabinet, and a small round wooden table (white painted column base) to the right. There is another small single-drawer side-table covered in another beige-shaded table lamp on the right of the bed, at the entrance to the small bathroom (not shown until later in the film). Beige walls (no pictures); beige curtain pelmet; beige—or it may be faintly pink—carpet. Jenks turns his attention to the bed: “Look at this bed,” he says laughing, “Do you think I can fit on this thing?”—and he throws himself backward onto it, feet flying up in the air then landing with half his lower legs and his feet hanging over the bottom end bouncing. “Awww—aw man . . . .”

Cut to an external view of the building, focused on a corner room (presumably one of those allocated to the boys; a silhouette is just visible inside), with Jenks in voice-over saying “Well, let’s go meet some people.”

Cut to the lift where a lady in (at a guess) her mid-eighties is standing supported on a Zimmer frame. “Two,” she says energetically, when the boys ask which floor she wants. A subtitle goes up, identifying her as “Peggy Correll, Room 231.” When they tell her that they have just moved up to the third floor she laughs, not believing them: “You just moved to the third floor,” she repeats, enjoying the joke. “You are not old enough,” she laughs, when they insist. Cut to the lobby, where various residents and members of the management staff are milling about. Cut again to show Jenks seated at the side of the lobby in a row next to two married residents, and encountering for the first time.

Armida “Tammy” Signorile:

“Oh, you’re the college boy?”

“I’m the college boy.”

“Oh, for goodness sakes, are you in for trouble, baby!” she says, touching him on the shoulder: “You have no idea” (shaking her fingers cheerfully at him). She raises the plastic pharmacy bag she is carrying: “I went to get my birth control pills.” He bursts out laughing, turning to face the camera and share the joke with his friends.

As a piece of improvised social geographic fieldwork or sociological self-experimentation this isn’t doing too badly, it seems to me. Very few people approaching their retirement home room for the first time will do so with the sense of adventure, as much as trepidation, that Jenks conveys. The latent comparison is with the standard student experience of booking into college accommodation—“this is where we’re going to live for the next month”—but there are differences, and one of the quieter effects of the film is to ask you why those differences arise and how important they are. Consider the décor. The bed is absurdly short. Jenks’s head isn’t quite at the bed board, but there is a lot of extra leg hanging over the end. As we know, the old tend to shrink, and the men and women five or six age cohorts before Jenks’s were on average shorter than his protein-fuelled generation, but even so there’s a presumption about body size here that isn’t going to work out well for everyone. (Some quite tall older men pass in front of the camera in the course of the film.)<sup>2</sup>

As strikingly, this is a room in which certain significant choices of taste have been made in advance—more choices than are typically made for students. To be aesthetically at home here you’d have to like floral and beige, and a degree of miniaturism (the tables and chest of drawers are very small indeed). The most prominent sign of personal taste in all the private rooms we see in the documentary is the picture above the bed, and the style of chair facing the TV, and sometimes a cushion. Visually, the scale and style of the accommodation put one in mind of a hotel. The website encourages that association: “It’s easy at first to confuse our community with a five star resort,” it says. “But after first inspection you will realize that Harbor Place is much more than that, it is a home” (Harbor Place). We hear quite a lot of skepticism about (and frank rejection of) that idea from the residents. They are not unhappy with

the management, but they maintain a clear category distinction between residence and home. Not that they use the term “residence” either: insofar as they have an everyday word for where they live, they prefer studiously non-descriptive phrases: “this place” (“deictic prodding,” as a literary scholar might say—wary linguistic acknowledgement); warier still, “some place to go” (0:53).

There is an obvious economic constraint in operation, of course: well cared for rooms, with carpet, bathroom fittings, fridge, and so forth all need to be in place before residents arrive, and unless the management is going to completely refit a room every time it falls vacant (with costs passed on to the consumer), a degree of standardization is obligatory. Florida is at the affluent end of the spectrum of care for the aged, in America, and Harbor Place positions itself fairly high in the market (residential costs start at \$2700 a month; assisted living at \$3000 a month on current prices); it’s not luxury but it’s comfortable, and the website makes much of the “gleaming marble floors and elegant décor,” the “fine dining,” partying, leisure, and exercise facilities (Harbor Place). So, how much does constraining the individual to a communal notion of domestic taste matter?

A classic sociological study of care home arrangements conducted by Ellen Langer of Harvard and Judith Rodin of Yale in the mid-1970s, at one of the “finest” nursing homes in Connecticut, found that deprivation of opportunities to make simple choices about one’s surroundings and daily activities had a rapid and substantial impact on mental health—both happiness levels and cognitive competence (Langer and Rodin, “Effects of Choice” 191; and see Langer and Rodin, “Long Term Effects”). This is an excerpt from Betty Friedan’s popularizing summary in *The Fountain of Age* (1993):

[P]atients, aged sixty-five to ninety, were randomly assigned to two different floors. The patients on one floor were told by the administrator: “You should be deciding how you want your rooms to be arranged ... whether you want to rearrange the furniture ... how you want to spend your time ... whether you want to visit your friends ... in your room or ... theirs. We’re showing a movie two nights next

week, Thursday and Friday ... decide which night you'd like to go, if you choose to see it at all." [Pot plants were also available if wanted, to be cared for by the resident.]

... [T]he residents on the other floor were told: "We've tried to make your rooms as nice as they can be ... We want to do all we can to help you ... We're showing some movies next week. We'll let you know which night you're scheduled to go." And each resident was handed a plant "to keep. The nurses will water and take care of [it] for you."

Three weeks later, the first group showed a significant improvement in alertness, activity, and general well-being, as rated by nurses and themselves, while the comparison group showed a negative change. All but one of the first group ... showed improvement in physical and mental well-being, whereas only 21 percent of the comparison group showed any improvement. (52-3)

What struck me, first encountering that study in Friedan, was how painfully predictable the findings were, or should have been (this isn't a criticism of Langer and Rodin; sociological field studies can be powerful precisely because they spell out the potency of contingent social arrangements whose negative effects should have been evident to everyone). There are many examples of excellent residential care today, where the expression of personal taste in one's own living space is respected and actively encouraged.<sup>3</sup> It's also essential to recognize the very wide variety of provision potentially targeted by such criticisms: assisted living, residential care homes, sheltered housing, extra care sheltered housing, retirement villages. Experience of visiting care homes in New Zealand, as a child, and in the United Kingdom more recently, nevertheless makes me naggingly aware of how difficult it may be for any institution aiming to enable "living with care" (the preferred term now among UK gerontologists) to abide by the principle of autonomy in small things once physical or mental competence starts to decline. My aunt lived in a series of increasingly medicalized care homes from the time I was around eight and she was around seventy-one. Her movement through these institutions as her mental and physical health deteriorated was accompanied by a gradual attrition of personal possessions. I recall looking at

these comfortable-enough but (in terms of taste) unowned rooms and wondering what she had done with all the things she must once have possessed, and that I was busily acquiring at eight and onwards.

At least some of the sociological literature post-Langer and Rodin has been skeptical about how much personalization of environment counts for. It matters, certainly, but my aunt was not, I think, unusual in being more interested in what she did in the spaces she lived in (whether she could smoke, whether she was comfortable knitting) than in their appearance. A 2009 study of residential care in New Zealand, by Janine Wiles and others, is following what I take to be a wider trend within environmental gerontology towards recognizing the complexity of engagement with place when it concludes that the reduced living environments of many old people are only one element in the way they inhabit their social spaces, which are the product of “elastic physical, imaginative, emotional and symbolic experiences of and connections to people and place across time and in scope” (Wiles et al. 670).<sup>4</sup> A recent specialist study of people with dementia in care homes concurs: “For people with dementia the most important factors in the care home environment were not the layout or design of buildings but the ability to make choices, engage in activities, and the staff approaches to care” (Popham and Orrell 186).

So, does the analogy Jenks offers between assisted living and college living shed any further light here? Sociologists don't tend to accent the quality of student accommodation as a significant factor in young people's well-being, though they do commonly talk about other social effects that place of residence has (its function as social capital; the part it plays in assisting or inhibiting access to education).<sup>5</sup> To the best of my knowledge it is not territory as yet much explored in the literature on intergenerational shared-site living, either (see Melville and Bernard). The retirement home/college dorm analogy is obviously very imperfect. The temporariness attached to their dorms for students is, after all, a different kind of temporariness from that anticipated by many (not all) of those who choose assisted living, and it carries a very different set of expectations and reputational baggage with it. Many older people who choose residential care



designed for the later stages of life are hoping to live out the rest of their lives in these places—which, if they make the move at fifty-five, may be for a very long time. College rooms tend to be less impressed than the Harbor Place by strong institutional decisions about taste (studiedly neutral, functionally modern), and there is an expectation that students will actively—in some cases energetically—personalize them (though there is, of course, a wide range of practical investment in doing so).<sup>6</sup> Good residential care, as already noted, is now doing this, too. But the comparison encouraged by viewing *Room 335* isn't, I think, either vacant or shallow. For college students as for the interviewees in *Room 335*, the room is more instrumental than it is an aesthetic projection of self. It grants access to a community of others who have a shared reason for being there; it provides for their basic needs (more complex on average for the old than for the young); and it allows that critical element in the preservation of personal agency, control of one's front door.

Maximizing personal choices within institutional care settings is a good principle. But in practice what Jenks and his crew discover as they start to interview residents is that the projection of personal taste in one's domestic arrangements is (as some sociological studies after Langer and Rodin have intimated) not as "salient" (Street et al. S130) as other considerations. While we don't see much evidence of assertive aesthetic choices, we do see a lot of interest in instruments for time keeping. All the residents live by the clock. Since meals and entertainments are focal points of the day, it matters not to miss them. Talking watches are, for several visually impaired interviewees, crucial aids to socializing (though they create some confusion for one resident who also suffers from impaired hearing). Tammy, the oldest resident interviewed and the film's comic star, buys watches, phones, hearing aids, and glasses in multiples to avert the risk of mislaying them and the trouble of replacing them. The social life of Harbor Place is, after all, structured according to daily schedules advertised prominently on magnetic letter boards in the dining hall: June 5, Sunday, "1.00 Residents Choice, 2.00 Ice Cream Social, 3.00 Card Games, 6.30 Bingo" (28:08). Again, there is a comparison available

with the student timetable, and again the comparison is only very partially valid but not null. “It is an hour out of your room,” Eleanor replies when Jenks asks why she likes Bingo: “You know: it gives me something to do at least for an hour” (28:11-18). In other words, liking Bingo isn’t the point (one gets the sense she doesn’t), but having an activity timetabled fulfills the function of getting her through another bit of the day with others. As it does for the boys wanting to engage with the social life of Harbor Place, and as it does for the more rudderless among college students.

What quality of life is to be found here? Does it justify Jenks’s starting position—and a widely held public intuition—that retirement communities of this kind are a manifestation of social neglect?<sup>7</sup> That question gets some blunt answers when it is raised. No one complains about the standard of care (and, from what we see of it, it’s admirable: health problems are very quickly spotted; the pastoral support seems genuinely caring, the waiter doubling as chaplain). But nobody really wants to be there. At any deeper emotional level the question of happiness is to be fended off with irony or comedy or, occasionally, a warning that that way lies corrosive self-pity so it’s better to try not to think about it. Those among the interviewees who actively chose to come to Harbor Place were doing so in order to avoid an alternative that seemed to all those with children clearly much worse—being dependent on the next generation in the family. Only one resident, Josie, is seen being taken off by her daughter for a day outing. A few have tried cohabiting with children and found it intolerable; others haven’t even tried. The old saw “you can’t have two women in the kitchen” operates as shorthand among the women for a strongly held view that the young should be free from obligation. So much for Aristotle, upholding care for the old as a function of friendship and a duty of children (1155a14, 1165a22<sup>8</sup>), or for the long tradition of philosophy thereafter that has upheld care of the old as an element of natural law.

When the possibility of attributing blame to the younger generation arises, it’s barely entertained—the cliché rises easily to the lips but is quickly dismissed: “This generation can’t be bothered. Not that they can’t be bothered, they probably don’t have the time.” So, although none of

these people is in love with their situation, complaint (it's "like being in a prison" [2:34]) has no obvious recipient. (In Britain we would very likely be blaming the NHS or the state.) The corollary of having made it in democratic, upwardly mobile America is that you don't keep the next generation tied down. This is a predominantly white, solely affluent problem to be having, as the interviewees are well aware, but the idea that other ethnic groups within America are treating their old better doesn't wash with them because, well, one's culture is one's culture for good and ill. Independence, in short, is a mixed blessing—but one of the things it entails is a refusal to accept that "neglect" is a proper description of your own situation.

This rating of independence over other possibilities for happiness presents an obvious problem in the way of the thesis the young men have brought to the home. If we are dealing with neglect (as Jenks continues to hold, even at the very end of the film) then it's a neglect that these people fiercely prefer to the available alternatives. External observers might want to call that false consciousness, but it equally entails a demand upon us to respect what autonomy remains for the residents. Summarizing an extensive sociological literature on this subject, Robert Slater observes (in *The Psychology of Growing Old* [1995]) that "[k]in relationships often have a perceived obligatory aspect, and generational differences in interests, expectations and experiences may induce strain, resulting in relationships that are relatively symbolic or ritualistic" (99).<sup>9</sup> It is a view very much in keeping with the outlook of the *Room 335* interviewees.

The observation that family relations may be constrained by duty as elective social relations are not raises in turn a deep question about the nature of friendship for the competent but physically vulnerable old: might it be better to opt for a living situation in which one's social relationships, though they lack historic depth, are more obviously voluntary? Again, the force of the aversion (what is being avoided) feels much stronger in *Room 335* than any force of attraction to this way of life. We hear complaints about the lack of "real" friendships—"There's no one here to talk to," Eleanor complains, "there's very few people here that you can really have a conversation with—so when I finally talk, I *talk*" (30:14-23).

Even Tammy, the great optimist of the film, briefly lets her cheerfulness slip and seems to agree: “All my friends are dead,” she tells Jenks (they are in the car with Libby on the way back from seeing Dotty in hospital):

**Film clip 24:05-26:10:** “That’s what happens when you live this ... this long. I don’t know if it’s a blessing or a ... ” The somber mood prevails for a while—“I’m not lonesome, I, I don’t mean it that way, but you, you miss the people that, you know, you had so much fun with all your life, and they go, one by one. They’re gone.” But then a sudden change of tone: “Oh I have to tell you a joke!”

“George died and he went up to the pearly gates, and he said to St. Peter “Are you gonna let me in?” And St. Peter said, “George we can’t let you in unless we give you a test.” And George said, “What is it?” And St. Peter said, “Spell the word Love.” “Oh”, George said, “That’s easy. L O V E.” And St Peter opened the pearly gates and let George in. About a month later Peter said to George, “Would you mind: watch the pearly gates, I have to go on an errand for the boss.” And he said, “Don’t forget, if anybody comes up you have to give them a test.” So George is at the pearly gates and one day a week later up comes his wife. And [...] George says, “Mabel! What you are doin’ up here? [...] I left you in good health.” And George says, “Mabel, I can’t let you in; I have to give you a test.” She says [brightly], “All right George, I’m ready.” He says, “Mabel, spell Czechoslovakia.”

The joke is so beautifully told that it is easy to miss the aggression that drives its punch line: it’s a joke about not loving, turning off the presumption of fidelity, about not wanting your supposedly nearest and dearest, about being empowered into the expression of hostility (and thus being out of place in conventional descriptions of heaven); at the same time it’s a restorative gesture towards sociability, repairing an atmosphere that was getting very bleak.

It’s pretty clear to Jenks, and I think to any viewer of *Room 335*, that friendship at Harbor Place is complex along similar lines to the joke. It is certainly fulfilling other functions than confessional intimacy. Cultivating friendship involves investing in a social fabric sufficiently to keep oneself going; but it’s also much more generous than that. These people care for each other in very practical ways that count partly because, living in an

old body (in whichever way age affects them), each of them is acutely aware of subtle differences in capability: I can't do this, but I can do that—and for her or him; I don't have that quality of temperament, but I do have this one. Libby can't see well enough to read, for example, but she can push Tammy around in a wheelchair.

Julian Hughes pointed out recently that the history of philosophy has not given us a very rich picture of what friendship in old age entails.<sup>10</sup> Aristotle is not as much help as he might be, though (as I've reflected elsewhere) he's instructive in what he neglects. I argued in *The Long Life* that Aristotle's view of the deteriorating character of the old (stereotypically excessive as it is in the *Rhetoric*) commits him implicitly also to the more positive view that a life impaired by age requires, at its end, more in the way of virtue from others: greater compassion, greater magnanimity, more selfless friendship. *Room 335* suggests a subtler way of construing the value and nature of friendship: repositioning it from its elevated place, in Aristotle's thinking, as "the greatest of the external goods" to something flatter, as it were, more ordinary or day to day but also strongly practical. Friendship is acknowledged to be instrumental at Harbor Place, and that doesn't lessen its importance.<sup>11</sup> It means helping one another pass the time; helping one another get down to dinner; sustaining a game of bingo; not talking about the past (after all it's not a shared past); allowing one another the emotional release of a "fight."

The texture of these friendships is strikingly abrasive, as well as affectionate. There is a lot of aggression in *Room 335*, typically rerouted into comedy or countermanded with gentler physical gestures. (So, a resident may be extremely rude to another's face but patting them affectionately on the arm at the same time.) We see rough banter, argument, mockery, play fisticuffs, some real acrimony. The residents are almost all plain speaking, partly, one suspects, because they have been selected on that basis as good interview material, but partly because their circumstances exaggerate that quality and (not least) they value social robustness. Not being constrained by regard for, or indebtedness to, family, they are relatively free to say how they feel (or retreat to their rooms in a huff

if they want to) without having to worry unduly about wrecking relationships. They all understand the lure of complaint and bad temper as a reasonable response to frustration, and the necessity of keeping it in bounds. If social relations on these terms don't go very deep by some standard measures of friendship, which would emphasize intimacy as enabled by length of familiarity and extent of shared experiences, they nevertheless take very firm roots in present predicament.<sup>12</sup> Hence, perhaps, the recurrent pattern of playing at gestures of friendship that are no less important for being hammed up.

Let's look at the extreme case, Bill Delarme. He is singled out for attention by the crew because he is something of a puzzle to them: he is keen to be of help to others, but also something of a loner. His behavior is a striking combination of exuberance (loud Hawaiian shirts; a lot of goofing about) and stubborn reserve.

**Film clip 43:02-44:19:** Jenks and Bill sit side by side, both wearing sunhats, Bill in a bright red Hawaiian floral shirt. (They have just been reviewing his shirt collection.) The Buckaroos' "Act Naturally" is playing on the film soundtrack. Bill whistles, takes a banana from his breast pocket, sticks the end of it in his mouth, then begins whacking Jenks lightly on the side of the leg with it (still whistling).

"You want half of this?" he asks. "Huh?" "You want half?" "Sure." They split the banana, Bill ensuring that Jenks doesn't take more than a fair share. "See ... I'm smart." "I'm not doubting it." "Cheers!": they salute each other and start eating. "78 cents for the four of them," Bill remarks. "Really?" Jenks looks impressed, laughs: "That's a steal!" "Huh?" "That's a steal." A smile of agreement from Bill. There's a sound off screen, and the camera cuts briefly to show a female resident carrying a jacket, watching the filming session through the internal window. "You want to come in?" Jenks asks.

[Bill, puzzled] Who was that?

[Jenks] Your friend?

[Bill] My friend? Have I seen that woman before?

[Jenks] Do you want her to sit here?

[Bill] I don't know her.

[Jenks] Shall I ask her to sit?

[Bill] Huh?

[Jenks] Shall I ask her to sit here?

[Bill, conspiratorially] Go ahead.

[Jenks] Yeah?

[Bill] Go ahead.

[Jenks] OK.

He lets her in, offers her his seat, which she takes. She and Bill sit side by side unspeaking, he looks at her briefly, then he breaks the silence by clapping. More silence, then the woman gives a short appreciative laugh, mouth closed.

[Jenks] Have you guys ever, do you ever hang out? Eat together?

[Bill] No.

The Buckaroos start up again on the soundtrack.

“Act naturally”: the soundtrack is nicely in keeping with what is happening. No one is pretending it’s a natural situation, and once you acknowledge that you can start to enjoy yourself.

If this is the quality of friendship between the old—abrasive, made up out of the resources of the moment, practical, inclining to ironic comedy—what is the effect when representatives of a much younger generation ask for admission to the group? Quite a lot of the intergenerational interaction in this movie consists in the old turning back the expectation that they have some major revelation to offer about the meaning of life. The crew come wanting to learn what the old can tell them by way of long experience, but that turns out to be the wrong question. Indeed the interrogative mode (that basic tool of sociological data collection) turns out to be the least revealing kind of conversation they have with the residents. “If you could speak to yourself, when you were twenty, what advice would you give yourself?” Jenks asks Eleanor: “Stop smoking!” she laughs (she certainly isn’t about to) (26:58). By the time you are ninety-six you have seen it all and you are afraid of nothing, Tammy volunteers more positively, but she is contradicted by Dotty who is “afraid of everything.” Length of experience has familiarized all of them with death, but it hasn’t consistently or obviously made death easier to watch or to anticipate. The fact of having experience at all is deployed, instead, to momentarily equalize the conversational ground with these young men: “[My husband and I] would go to the beach

and ride the waves,” Mary tells Jenks: “Did you ever do that?” (38:44-55). Yes he did. The fact of having that experience in common matters much more, for the purposes of connection, than when it happened or whether it will happen again. Many of the women, and the men, flirt with Jenks, and flirtation creates a similar kind of equality in the moment. It is good for everyone’s spirits; no one is really offering to act on it. Perhaps most tellingly, given that this is a film in the making, several of the residents offer to take control of the camera or boom (some actually do). “It’s complicated,” Jenks concedes when Dotty indicates that the technology is a barrier; “we don’t even know how to use it” (53:17-19).

That’s not just a courtesy. Emotionally astute though this movie is, it is not technically sophisticated. Its “neophyte” quality, as one reviewer put it, tells in its favor (Southern). The picture quality is sometimes erratic; the frame control sporadically lapses; poor sound quality sometimes has to be compensated for by subtitles. To a certain extent these roughnesses generate an accidental technical evocation of the impairments that have come to the interview subjects with age—not least in the heightened awareness produced in the viewer of the crew’s (and our) dependence on technical assistance. The most effective scenes, in this regard, are those shot when a power transformer in the area blows one night and for four hours Harbor Place is without electricity beyond a generator which provides light and power only in the hallways. The boys wander the hallways, encountering distressed residents, including one whose oxygen supply is close to running out. “If I took this off and stop breathing, would I die?” she asks, extracting the nosepiece – “Will I die? That’s *good*.” “No, no stop!” Jenks responds in alarm (02:10-20; 33:00-39:40).<sup>13</sup>

None of the notional equality enacted in the frame of the boys’ daily social interactions with the residents, or at the level of the film’s technological dodginess, makes it easier for Jenks to deal with the fact that an old body functioning pretty well one day can be seriously malfunctioning a few hours later. The biggest threat to friendship indeed isn’t, as one might expect, the fact that everyone knows the boys are only there for five weeks (though I’ll come to that), it’s something just as predictable but which the crew seem



to be unprepared for. That may be their naiveté, or it may be a sign of how effectively assisted living has marketed itself in America as pleasurable, and the *preference* of many of the affluent old. The extent to which these fairly affluent, cognitively unimpaired men and women (the film shows very few with dementia) have to struggle in small and large ways with the vulnerability of their bodies takes Jenks and his friends by surprise.

The ninety-six-year-old Tammy suddenly isn't at breakfast one morning. She returns, but only after an operation to clear her esophagus. The dramatic crisis of the film involves Dorothy (Dotty) Shepard (80), who doesn't show up for Jeopardy one night in week two (the TV game show watched religiously of a night by a core group of residents). She has been hospitalized with pneumonia. The crew follow her, providing a ride to the hospital for Tammy and Libby, and find a startlingly reduced Dotty from the woman they interviewed in week one. On this occasion she comes back again, but two weeks later she is rehospitalised and she dies—not quite on camera, but very nearly—having clasped her hands shakily in prayer as Jenks and the residency chaplain say a blessing over her (1:10:40-13:30). The scene is a moving instance of intuitively good care for a dying person, on Jenks's part.

The fact that the boys are visitors and not “there for the duration” has been a glaring obstacle in the way of equality of terms for friendship throughout the film. Right at the start of *Room 335*, Jenks raises the question every sociologist of aging—every sociologist conducting field work, indeed—must ask themselves: “Are we exploiting these people by making a film about them?” The answer he gets from his physician (an old family friend, I'm told) is a degree of concern about where the psychological cost is likely to be felt hardest: “It's not something I know of anybody having done before. I'm a little nervous for you. . . . If you're exploiting anybody you're exploiting yourself” (3:07-27; and see 3:55-8). He means, I take it, that Jenks is exploiting his own capacity for empathy, and that it may give him more grief than has prepared himself for.<sup>14</sup>

As the movie goes on, the physician's concern starts to look prescient: *Room 335* works as well as it does because Jenks is exceptionally empathetic. He has gone on to host *World of Jenks*, a popular MTV mini-documentary

series in which he “embeds himself in various worlds and live[s] in the shoes of people from all walks of life” (a girl living on the streets, a young man with autism, an animal rescuer, a poker player, and so on). As with *Room 335*, the scenario works because he puts himself at risk. Literally so, in the case of Bill:

**Film clip 1:17:34-1:18:35:** Bill and Jenks are sitting side by side on an outdoor bench in the entrance area to Harbor Place. Jenks, arms folded, leans over and asks Bill (with teasing heaviness), “What do you think the meaning of life is?” “I don’t really know what it is,” Bill answers (as if to say, “How could I possibly know?”). Cut to Bill grasping Jenks’s far hand in his, so that Jenks’s arm is pulled across his body towards Bill (Jenks is smiling). As Jenks exchanges greetings with Jessie, who is going out for the day with her daughter, Bill starts twisting the arm. “You’ll be back for Bingo, right?” Jenks checks with Jessie, and Bill releases the arm briefly.

Jenks turns to Bill and picks up his near arm: “Yeah, I can do moves to you too”; but as he tries to twist Bill’s arm, Bill jabs it towards Jenks and warns him he’ll get a poke in the nose. Then Bill’s right arm comes up and he starts to smack Jenks on the arm, lightly at first then a little harder, and, as Jenks bends forward, Bill competently seizes the rear of his elbow and twists the arm so that Jenks is bent double. “90/80 years old,” Bill crows to two passing male residents, “beating 2 year old kids.” The horseplay stops, and Jenks straightens up, breathing out “Ooo yah” (his and Bill’s standard greeting). “I don’ wanna hear ‘Ooo yah’,” Bill retorts.

A few seconds on, Jenks pats Bill on his bald head. Bill suddenly leans over, grabs Jenks by his thick hair and starts pulling hard, so that Jenks has to cry out (laughing, but evidently in some pain) “Help help, Bill, help! help! ...” A passing manager, alarmed, asks Bill, “What are you doing to him?” “I was hurtin’ him, that’s all,” Bill replies. “Don’t hurt him!” “It’s fine, it’s fine,” Jenks reassures her. “It’s fine?!” she asks, unconvinced because Bill’s fingers are clutched firmly in the hair, Jenks is bent double trying to prise Bill’s fingers off. The scene continues in this vein of precarious comedy and danger for some seconds.

This is the sociological equivalent of the animal biting the zoologist's hand. It is hard to tell whether Bill is participating in the documentary at this point or offering to wreck it. He is certainly asserting his equality in the relationship with Jenks, and putting the equivalent of two fingers up to the constraints of politeness that would oblige him to treat a pat on his bald pate with good humor. One of the conclusions this and similar scenes in *Room 335* might lead us to is that friendship doesn't require equality of terms. But it is also a vivid reminder that equality of condition is the basis for a special kind of friendship that exists among the inhabitants of Harbor Place and that can't be there in the relationship with the crew (who will leave and make their movie). "You made me feel twenty years younger," Tammy tells Jenks when the boys finally take their leave (1:20:10-11). The comment has at once the quality of a warm embrace and a restatement of fundamental distance. In Jenks's company, Bill got to be blokishly male—there's a great deal of Navy-style arm-twisting and mutual teasing about success or lack of it with women. Only at the very end does he acknowledge the difference in situation and offer, for the future, to play the role of more experienced advisor rather than co-conspirator. It feels like a painful concession.

Given the relatively open-ended and busy life that lies ahead of the boys, it was predictable that it was they who would bear the responsibility for keeping these friendships going. The extent to which they did so isn't part of the film. Scanning Jenks's blog and (as historians say) "private communications," it seems that they did it pretty impressively. Tammy and Bill died in 2006; Libby and Eleanor are also now dead, but lived to see the critical success of the movie and relish having one of the film's trophies on a table outside Libby's room (Jenks blog Nov 2006 "For Bill and Tammy" and Jan 2008 "Libby"; Jenks personal communication).

Slater, writing in 1995, poses this rhetorical question about the fostering of age-support organizations and age-specific clubs:

It is worth asking if the development of such groups ... is a defensive response, a consequence of age-segregation found elsewhere in society and of the relative marginalization of older people. Or are age-segregated patterns of association initiated by some older people because they have a preference to associate with their peers, because peers can provide resources of various kinds that non-peers cannot? (104)

Florida has long been the extreme version of such defensive/voluntarist segregation. I may be wrong, but it seems to me that its retirement and assisted living communities are getting a more tolerant press on both sides of the Atlantic than they used to (Betty Friedan quoted an extreme example of the hostility that has flared up periodically in America in the past: a *New York Times* op-ed from 1983 equating them with concentration camps [17]). The increasing use of these communities to provide a litmus test of generational political attitudes whenever a major political issue comes under the spotlight in America—education, health care reform, voting laws—suggests that they have produced a form of collective “voice” and political empowerment for their inhabitants. British radio soap listeners may also recall the romanticization of Florida-style assisted living in episodes of *The Archers* from 2010 when Peggy’s one time G.I. boyfriend Con was found to be living an incomparably better life than that of her dementia-afflicted English husband, emailing from “Waving Palms, a ... retirement home with ruby-throated humming birds” (Banks-Smith). Certainly the Harbor Place model poses some challenges both to intuitive convictions we may have and to sociological findings that “aging in place” is the best scenario (e.g. Reed et al. 860; Golant). As documented in *Room 335* these are very far from ideal solutions to the physical difficulties of aging, but they do indeed, as Slater suggests, provide goods that their residents have chosen, rationally or not, to value above other possible goods available to them.

What *Room 335* adds, quite possibly uniquely, to the continuing debate about their desirability, and to the less-well-developed terrains of study focused on the nature of friendship in old age and intergenerational

living practices, is a tentative image of what it would mean for another, much younger generation to bring its own age self-consciousness to the table and into dialogue with that of the segregated old. I'm not a gerontologist, but if that kind of exchange is happening in the professional literature, it is pretty well hidden. The connections the documentary forges—dormitory living, separation from family, uncertainty about the future, above all a practical, even instrumental investment in friendship—work only because they are so imperfectly valid, their very imperfection providing a basis on which to forge an intergenerational relationship. “Obviously I’m a pretty big outsider here,” Jenks admits, “cause you know I have ... I think I have very specific reasons for being here. I just hope they can come to understand that.”

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Film clips from *Room 335* are reproduced in the digital edition of this article by kind permission of Andrew Jenks. I am grateful to him for answering questions about *Room 335*; also to Bruce Jenks for making the connection and bringing the film to my attention in the first place. Very many thanks also to Sarah Harper, Robin Means, and the other organizers of the British Society of Gerontology annual conference, University of Oxford, 2013, for giving me the occasion to write about this subject and learn from discussion with experts. I am indebted to Miriam Bernard for assistance with the gerontological literature on residential care and friendship.

<sup>2</sup> Andrew Jenks clarifies that this was a standard room. “Nearly all of them were like that. 5 or 6 rooms had a small area when you opened the door then two rooms so you had a ‘roommate’ of sorts (Eleanor and Dotty had that). There was an independent living facility in the building next to it (for senior citizens) with bigger rooms, like an apartment. And then a nursing home on the other side of the assisted living facility. The ‘joke’ amongst residents was that you start in independent living, then go to assisted living, then the nursing home, and there was a graveyard down the street” (Email communication, 12 September 2013).

<sup>3</sup> For a succinct, up-to-date overview of the literature and elaboration of the ways in which autonomy is respected in long-term care environments, see Bartlam et al.; Rowles and Bernard, esp. 143, on the US-led “culture change movement”; and on changes and continuities in UK residential care since Peter Townsend’s classic study in 1962, see Johnson, Rolph, and Smith.

<sup>4</sup> See also Bernard et al.; Liddle et al.; Peace and Holland; Rowles and Bernard; Sim et al.; Street et al.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Smith, Beaulieu, and Seraphine; Turley and Wodtke.

<sup>6</sup> See “How Are You Decorating?”

<sup>7</sup> I am not attempting here to summarize the huge literature on age segregation, but for an indicative sample see Bond and Corner; Hughes; and (on the need for qualitative

assessments based on interviews with residents) Kane.

<sup>8</sup> 1165a22 asserts that our parents have first claim on us for maintenance, because they are “the authors of our being.”

<sup>9</sup> See also Graham A. Allan and Rebecca G. Adams, “Aging and the Structure of Friendship,” on reasons not to over-emphasize the voluntarist aspect of friendships, given the degree to which they too are bound by social conventions.

<sup>10</sup> I am distinguishing the philosophical literature from the gerontological literature here (though it is not an absolute distinction). The gerontological literature on friendship is extensive (much of it focused on how friendly relationships provide informal support in old age). See Rebecca G. Adams, “Conceptual and Methodological Issues in Studying Friendships of Older Adults” for a critical overview, close analysis of the definition of “friendship,” and discussion of the most pressing problems for sociological analysis. It will be clear that my interest here is in what Adams calls “in-depth” description of friendship (30), difficult to elicit with standardized sociological questionnaires, even when employing open-ended questions that aim at qualitatively rich information.

<sup>11</sup> For a thought-provoking discussion of the importance or otherwise of equity as a contributory factor to how old people value such instrumental aspects of friendship, see Karen A. Roberto, “Exchange and Equity in Friendships.” Roberto tentatively concludes that equity may be a less important consideration than we might expect, for those in later life, but adds a cautionary note on the poverty of the sociological data needed to make robust comparisons with friendship at other life stages (161-62).

<sup>12</sup> It is striking how little conversation there is about the past, the conversations shown in *Room 335* hardly ever relying upon life-story narration. On the importance of soliciting life stories as an aid to qualitative care for the old—now a stable component of good nursing and care practice—see (indicatively) Clarke, Hanson, and Ross.

<sup>13</sup> Jenks adds that this was the one scene the managers of Harbor Place were unhappy with: “I am not sure what management thought [of the film overall]—I’ve always wondered. I purposely didn’t really ask because the movie was about those living there and I didn’t want them to start giving opinions and picking it apart. They didn’t like the ‘blackout’ section and asked that we change a few parts—which we didn’t. They thought that part in particular made them look bad—which I assume it did. They have always remained nearly silent about the film. I think they liked it but also didn’t look at [it as] a promotional tool so never really put it on their website, etc.”

<sup>14</sup> Jenks agrees, but adds: “I also think he was saying that since you see me from beginning to end, I am exploited more than anyone. Additionally, I think he was saying that by telling the story of my change as a person and journey from start to finish, and then also sharing my emotions—such as when I cry—I am exploiting myself. Since I edit the film, I don’t know if I agree but I thought it was an interesting way to put it” (Email communication, 12 September 2013).

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