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## Theater Review

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Review of *The Other* (2020), a play by Megan Moodie.

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What is it to be human? Anthropology both asks and answers this question in many ways. Megan Moodie, an associate professor of Anthropology at the University of California, Santa Cruz, and who suffers from a genetic condition called Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome, has written a brief, semi-autobiographical play in which the protagonist, Kathleen, asks the question of herself. In fact, within the confines of the play's reality, Kathleen quite literally poses the query to her own, younger self in a surreal situation that finds the two women – older Kathleen, younger Kathleen – in conversation on a park bench one mild autumn day. The year is either 1994 or 2019, or both, or neither, “somewhere in the northeast or the Midwest” of the USA. Don't be mistaken by the indeterminacy of the situation: the atmosphere is not one of weirdness; that is not the point of the play. The play, called *The Other*, is loosely based on the conceit that Jorge Luis Borges used in his short story of the same name (“I just straight-up stole his title,” Moodie says cheerfully during a Q&A after the show).

I watched the performance of *The Other* on May 20, 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic, in the midst of deep lockdown.<sup>1</sup> The Jersey City Theater Company (JCTC) ingeniously arranged for actors to give dramatic readings from remote locations. All the world's a stage, with Zoom. On this particular evening (local time) the staff of the JCTC, four actresses, and three playwrights explored the theme “Return to Love” in three single scenes, either monologues or physically-distanced dialogues. The audience sat in their homes and watched in two dimensions on their own small silvery screens.<sup>2</sup> The event was curated by Catalina Florina Florescu, a professor of drama at Pace University, with Olga Levina as artistic director.

Moodie's play, directed by Mark Cirmigliaro, formed one of the trilogy. It required dialogue between two characters: Julia Patella played the 17-year-old Kathleen while Tara Westwood depicted the same character in her early forties. Young Kathleen several times refers to her interlocutor as “old,” spurring playful objections. Older Kathleen eventually convinces the younger woman to accept her for who she claims to be: her own future self. She proffers at one point a dollar bill with the date ‘2019’ (an idea lifted from the Borges story) but her sharp insight into Young Kathleen's dreams and fears goes further toward persuading the dubious teen about the elder's identity, for instance poignantly and accurately describing the pride that Young Kathleen feels about her recent star ballet performance. In spite of these moments of recognition, both characters acknowledge the evanescence of their encounter and the great probability that neither will remember its occurrence, neatly leaping tedious discussion of the time-travel conundrum.

With that dubious layer of amnesiac protection in place, Older Kathleen tells her younger self that she carries (that *they* carry) faulty genes, a mistake of DNA, erroneous chromosomes that affect connective tissue. Younger Kathleen's immense flexibility is part of what makes her excel at dancing, but is also a harbinger of the devastating disability lying ahead. It brings to mind the story of Achilles' heel, a fatal flaw; vulnerability.

And yet the play forms part of a trilogy about love. The JCTC has mounted performances on various themes; that *The Other* is included in "Return To Love" raises interesting considerations on the emotion attending the intergenerational dialogue in the play. Moodie's older (current?) character reveals to the younger what lies ahead in her life, both the glories and the horrors. Is that an act of love? The young Kathleen reacts to the information with suspicion and befuddlement, but not, apparently or overtly, grief. She runs away—"I have to go home for dinner"—and then turns back, ambivalent, to hug her(older)self, this intimate stranger, and hangs onto the scarf Older Kathleen handed her (as in the Borges story, in which the younger Borges acquires a dollar bill from his future self). Meanwhile, we are left to wonder whether either elder or younger Kathleen do in fact keep and safeguard a memory of the encounter, or whether only we, the audience, remember.

Borges, enjoying more leeway and a higher word-count than a fifteen-minute play offers, delves further into this question of memory, self, and continuity. His narrator says,

I have thought a great deal about this encounter, which I've never told anyone about. I believe I have discovered the key to it. The encounter was real, but the other man [the younger Borges] spoke to me in a dream, which was why he could forget me; I spoke to him while I was awake, and so I am still tormented by the memory.

In his version the protagonist is called Jorge Luis Borges. In Megan Moodie's, the protagonist is called Kathleen. The floating associations of real and imagined, dream and waking, and of different versions of the self—and thus of the other—make both narratives as absorbing as they are universal. The author clarifies in her stage directions that Ehlers-Danlos syndrome is not linked to a particular population and thus that the actors, while they should look similar to one another, need not be of any one race or ethnicity.

What would anyone—with a progressive genetic disorder or without—choose to share with their younger selves? Those of us interested in the anthropology of aging and the life course may find reverberations of this question in their research. Moodie brings up the point during the Q&A: her imagined scenario is not just about illness, she comments: it is about cultivating compassion throughout the life course, and using art to capture this process in a moment, imagining a discrete milestone in maturation. While a progressive illness brings into sharp relief issues such as the aging self and genes that travel beyond the self across generations, it is not only flawed chromosomes that make the aging process a force to be reckoned with. Genes act as determinants – but "life intervenes" as well. Aging happens to everyone who is lucky enough. In this play, we are invited to ponder whether knowledge that accrues to the older and the wiser is fit to be shared with the young and the raw.

## Notes

1. The full programme of this evening is available on the website of JCTC: <https://www.jctcenter.org/e/jctc-new-play-festival-return-to-love-103998879448/>.
2. This plan and its execution were novel and amazing when I viewed the play; now, seven months later, just pre-publication, it is nothing special.