Editorial Response to Issue 32(1) on *Materialities of Age & Ageing*
Reassembling Ageing, Ecologising Care?

Tomás Sánchez Criado

Ageing is not what it used to be. Even if this is a world-wide trend (Lamb 2015), in what might be called Euro-America – a conceptual project, beyond a peculiar set of infrastructural modes of sociality, engaged in a developmentalist drive – the processes of growing old have indeed turned in the last decades into (i) the object of scrutiny of new health disciplines: dissecting and intervening the phenomenon of ageing; (ii) the target of a 'grey' market segment developing a wide variety of services and products, as well as into (iii) matters of concern and policy-making, developing these health and market agendas further by promoting fit lifestyles according to 'active ageing' agendas, producing interesting governmental subdivisions ('young old', 'old old', 'third age' or 'fourth age') having both embodied and economic effects (Lassen and Moreira 2014).

Indeed, Welfare states and market actors across the world have transformed what ageing as a process and being old as an embodied identity might be today, through a wide range of equipment, services and infrastructures: accessible transportation systems; sidewalk and public space designs; senior cohousing projects; older people's residential apartments; newer forms of pensioner migration and retirement tourism; ageing-friendly residential care facilities; or leisure and wellness infrastructures: ranging from cruise ships to thermal spas. The investment has not just been technological, since many administrations have begun unfolding participatory governing processes and policies searching to combat different forms of 'ageism' (stereotyping or discrimination based on age), so as to provide older citizens with a voice in the management of their habitats (as is the case of the WHO's *Global Network for Age-friendly Cities and Communities*).

This 'material', when not 'materialist' drive is the object of analysis of the proposals gathered in *AJEC*'s 32(1) special issue, which features different case studies aiming to foreground hitherto under-analysed 'age-related matters' to offer conceptual and ethnographic proposals to better understand what the editors call 'landscapes of ageing and pressing gerontological concerns.' The backbone of this special issue addresses how 'material culture' works in anthropology might be

affected by what in other neighbouring disciplines like STS and Ageing studies is being addressed as a 'socio-gerontechnological' approach: that is, a joint attention to how ageing is a material process, as well as how materials inscribe or support peculiar meanings or ontologies of ageing (Katz 2018; Peine et al 2021). In these studies, which also draw from feminist ethics of care, the attention to the material is far from being just a fetishist interest in technology, covering crucial material aspects like the bodywork and care labour (Buch 2015).

The case studies pay attention to the variegated modes of 'ageing' in different material settings, beyond the obvious: the ageing or decay of bodies is not the same as the decay of a home or another infrastructure, the same that their care practices, even if intertwined, are not homological (López 2015). Indeed, the peculiarities of the 'lived body' (Scheper-Hughes & Lock 1987) in different situations require attention to their particulars, as well as different forms of the materialisations of the processes of ageing in buildings, homes, residential care facilities, etc. The boldest proposal that the works gathered might be hinting at is to say that the materials and spaces where one ages matter have diverging material effects, and these differences matter, since they impact on the very processes of ageing (Kontos 1999). Hence producing what Margaret Lock (1994) discussed in her ground-breaking work on the different approaches to menopause in the US and Japan as 'local biologies' – a denomination she later changed to 'situated biologies' (Niewöhner & Lock 2018), searching to provide a less culturalist/ethnicist lens and more processual descriptions of the practices whereby these profound embodied transformations are enacted.

Even if I had worked with analogous premises, contributing with my own ethnographic research to a similar agenda,[1] in the last decade I found myself working on other material care issues – such as accessibility design activism and more-than-human atmospheric health concerns. But in my last year (2021-2022) working at the Institute of European Ethnology of the Humboldt-University of Berlin I had the chance to coordinate one of the yearly research-driven projects that students in the MA in Ethnography. These are intensive courses taking a full day a week for a year, where students learn to develop and undertake their own ethnographic projects, under the supervision and following a theme provided by a given lecturer. With an interest in reconnecting my past concerns on ageing with my present interests in more-than-human urban care, I called the *Studienprojket* (study project) 'Ageing Cities: The Crisis of Welfare Infrastructures.'

In this year we have explored ethnographically how cities & urban designers are responding to the challenge of population ageing, and how we could understand as ethnographers the social and material transformations underway in their efforts to make 'ageing-friendly' cities. Together with Maximilian Apel, Erman Dinc, Christine Maicher, Adam Petras, Doreen Sauer, and Anna Maria Schlotmann (the wonderful group of students with whom I have had the immense luck to work with) we conceived and undertook a series of ethnographic projects on variegated issues, most of them Berlin-based: intergenerational and intercultural gardens or queer housing projects; the urban activism of the grey panthers; the controversies in public space design, focusing particularly on the conflicts of bike infrastructure; and VR projects to enable urban displacement or travel for older people living in residential care homes. Our joint focus of study was to analyze the contested scripts (Peine et al. 2021) and the distinctive intergenerational challenges (Gibbon & Lamoreaux 2022) of these 'late life urbanism' projects (MONU 2019).

The course also included a field trip in April 2022 to Alicante, Benidorm and neighbouring urban enclaves in Costa Blanca (Spain). This is a very relevant area because of how ageing concerns have turned, since the 1960s, into a vector of urbanisation in the region – developing into what some geographers call "the pensioners' coast" (Membrado 2014). But also, and perhaps more importantly, they have sensitised urban designers from the area to respond to these intergenerational design challenges in different ways. This visit allowed us to explore different approaches to architectural practice where older people have more active roles in the design and management of ageing cities.

With this recent year-long experience in mind, in what follows I wish to take issue with the need to widen this material agenda around ageing bodies and their situated enactments, thinking beyond classic 'material culture' objects of study – the home and everyday technologies – and venturing into wider and more convoluted urban arenas, with their variegated scales and material entities.

***

In preparation for the trip, we had watched the documentary *El hombre que embotelló el sol* (The man who bottled the sun by Óscar Bernàcer, 2016), telling the story of the development of Benidorm. As a Spaniard, Benidorm is an extremely loaded significant. What for fresh eyes might simply look like an overcrowded resort (dubbed recently

"Skyscrapers-on-sea" by a journalist[2]), tacky to many, is a very interesting place to think with: perhaps one of the most finished incarnations of the approach to well-being by infrastructure and frantic urban sprawl that became the signature driver of many changes in the country.

Indeed, this place embodies the developmentalist passion from the 1960s: a city built from scratch by a cunning and venturous Francoist mayor out of a small fishing village. In a signature urban development process, all villagers saw their horizontal properties transmogrified into 20-storey tall skyscrapers, most of them to become hotels, and a series of well taken care of public beaches. Benidorm was one of the places where mass tourism, and that also means retirement migration for the working class, was invented in Europe (Oliver 2008; King, Warnes & Williams 2000): democratising the right to a better life, hence enabling, for the first time in history, for many older people to retire in better conditions than any of their predecessors. Interestingly, this meant that the city quickly became a paradoxically progressive place under the dictatorship, the site where, so it is said, the bikini was first worn in the country, defying strict Catholic morality!

Even if 'ageism' is still up and running, Benidorm is part of a series of other material formations of ageing that have started to emerge in the last sixty years, where older people no longer appear as fragile and powerless figures. At least in the urbanism of the 'young old' (as Deane Simpson, 2015, calls it), predominant in Benidorm, what we see is the complete opposite: perhaps there is no better example of this than the 'baby boomers' slowly turning into a force of planetary urbanisation, creating enclaves for active ageing to become older bodies unbeknownst to any human society of the past. What differentiates Benidorm and other places in Costa Blanca or Costa del Sol in Spain from more wide-known US retirement enclaves, such as The Villages, Youngtown, or Sun City, where similar 'snowbirds' go to retire is that instead of gated, ageing-segregated communities (McHugh et al. 2005), they are places 'for all:' a 'welfarist' beacon of the EU Mediterranean sunbelt.

So, there I was, after many months of preparation in Benidorm. April 2022. In the very last day of the field trip, my partner and I were just trying to relax after a crowded week, sitting by the beach, with our older daughter in the stroller, looking at the sea, with the gaze lost in the horizon, under the much-needed sun after a horrendous German winter,

in year 2 of the COVID-19 pandemic. We had very easily reached the beach using an accessible ramp, after coming from Alicante by train in a beautiful trip meandering the coast. I reckon that in this equipped seamlessness, it is rather easy to forget the material investment needed for this to happen. But if we force ourselves out of comfort and start looking around, Benidorm might enable us to 'reassemble' (cf. Latour 2005) the material aspects of ageing beyond an approach to everyday life with technologies and material culture. Hence amplifying the concern beyond bodywork and the lived aspects of older people's lives with materials, the home or the homeliness of residential spaces, perhaps thinking at the various scales of 'the urban.' Even if no urban scholar knows any more what a city is – because of their geographic and historiographic propensity to go beyond their own boundaries – , many in anthropology struggle to come to terms with the infrastructural complications (Harvey et al. 2016), and the multiple temporal folds of urban assemblages (Farías & Bender 2011): the vast circulation of materials connecting places as cumbersome planetary landscapes (Hutton 2020), or considered from their condition as socio-material palimpsests (Mattern 2017) In a certain sense, all contemporary urban arenas are a bit like Rome, caught in between deep and shallow time (Cheramie and De Michelis 2020).

So I had to look closer at the multi-layered and multi-temporal lovely mess I had in front of me. And there it was, how didn't I see this before? The ramp that we had used to come to the beach indeed continued, well into the sea! I quickly picked up the phone and took a series of pictures, also grabbing my notepad to scribble some notes, something pompous like "welfare incarnate", also drawing the ramp going into the sea. It was the last page of the notepad, without any more space, I must have thought I needed to make a good impression to my future ethnographer self. But there was something there that lingered and has been making me think ever since. I'll try to expound why this reinforced concrete ramp submerging in the Mediterranean struck me, and why I believe it condenses an important point I want to make.

Seeing the ramp go into the sea made me think of how social ideals of welfare, in this case 'bathing for all', need to undergo an artificial 'mineralisation' (De Landa 2007) made from faraway materials, where accessibility – conceived as a form of legal materiality of rights, operated through a market-driven approach to technologized inclusion – remakes landscape. This made me realise a more conceptual twist

might be needed when we approach material ageing in anthropology. Whereas in anthropology care practices and politics are regularly discussed drawing on environmental and ecological metaphors – so as to describe who cares where in more-than-human configurations, as well the forms of neglect and attention there enacted – what if we took ecological tropes more seriously to provide alternative readings of care, where the very landscapes and their complex material, spatial and temporal features might inform a more 'environmentalist' reading of what ageing in these landscapes might mean, particularly at a time when 'baby boomers' might have become a contested environmental actor (Jewusiak 2023)?

These problematisations, I believe, would force us to provide less metaphorical uses of ecological vocabularies, hence addressing the challenges that these materialised 'landscapes' entail for to our conceptions and practices of care: perhaps pushing us to consider the very environmental effects of ageing-friendly modes inhabiting and terraforming, and the new forms of care these landscapes – deeply affecting, in turn, ageing processes –– might need?

Coda

As I was writing these lines, Spain has been undergoing a rather harsh summer with four heatwaves. On July 13, 2023 Jonathan Swain, news correspondent, appeared live on ITV's Good Morning Britain from Benidorm.[3] He described the plans underway in the city to confront the terrible prospects of many more overheated summers to come, and reflected how that might be altering the plans of those retiring in that place: "at some point it's just going to be too hot to lie on the beach and have a holiday here." How will we age in these weatherworlds (Ingold 2011), and what will that do to our notions and practices of care? What might ageing and its materialisations mean in these atmospheric conditions, and what kind of ethnographic or more-than-textual experiments will ethnographers need to develop to unearth how to make these landscapes more liveable?

Tomás Sánchez Criado
Ramón y Cajal Senior Research Fellow,
CareNet-IN3 research group
Open University of Catalonia, Spain

x

Notes

1. My 2012 doctoral dissertation, part of a European project, was an ethnographic study of the infrastructures of home telecare for older people in Madrid (Spain), paying special attention to material concerns like the installation and repair of these services and their 'infrastructures of usership.' (Criado et al. 2014; Criado 2019).
2. See Heathcote, Edwin. June 25, 2021. FT, "Skyscrapers-on-sea: Benidorm, an oasis of Modernist design", https://www.ft.com/content/85c28915-e3ca-404f-bfee-0664c600f9bc (accessed September 1, 2023).
3. See https://twitter.com/GMB/status/1679360459487469568 (accessed September 1, 2023).

References

Buch, E D. (2015) Anthropology of Aging and Care. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 44, no. 1: 277–293.

Cheramie, K., & De Michelis, A. (2020). *Through Time and the City: Notes on Rome* (London: Routledge).

Criado, T. S. (2019). "The Lady is Not Here:" Repairing Tita Meme as a Telecare User. In F. Martínez & P. Laviolette (eds), *Repair, Breakages, Breakthroughs: Ethnographic Responses* (Oxford: Berghahn Books) pp.67.

Criado, T.S., Lopez, D., Roberts, C., & Domenech, M. (2014). Installing Telecare, Installing Users: Felicity Conditions for the Instauration of Usership. *Science, Technology & Human Values* 39, no. 5: 694–719.

De Landa, M. (1997). *A Thousand Years of Nonlinear History.* Cambridge: Zone Books

Farías, I., & Bender, T. (eds.) (2011). *Urban Assemblages: How Actor-Network Theory Changes Urban Studies* (London: Routledge).

Gibbon, S., & Lamoreaux, J. (2021). Toward Intergenerational Ethnography: Kinship, Cohorts, and Environments in and Beyond the Biosocial Sciences. *Medical Anthropology Quarterly* 35, no.4, 423–440.

Harvey, P., Jensen, C. B., & Morita, A. (2016). Introduction: Infrastructural complications. In P. Harvey, C. B. Jensen, & A. Morita (eds), *Infrastructures and Social Complexity: A Companion* (London: Routledge) (pp. 1–22)

Hutton, J. (2020). *Reciprocal Landscapes: Stories of Material Movements.* Routledge.

Ingold, T. (2011). Landscape or weather-world?. In *Being Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge and Description* (London: Routledge) (pp. 126-135).

Jewusiak, J. (2023). *Aging Earth: Senescent Environmentalism for Dystopian Futures* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

Katz, S. (Ed.). (2018). *Ageing in Everyday Life: Materialities and Embodiments* (Bristol: Policy Press).

King R. Warnes A. M. & Williams A. M. (2000). Sunset lives: British retirement migration to the Mediterranean (New York: Berg).

Kontos, P. (1999) Local Biology: Bodies of Difference in Ageing Studies. *Ageing and Society* 19, no6: 677–89.

Lamb, S. (2015) Beyond the view of the West: Ageing and anthropology. In J. Twigg and W. Martin (eds) *Routledge Handbook of Cultural Gerontology. Routledge Handbook of Cultural Gerontology* (London: Routledge) pp.37-44.

Lassen, AJ and Moreira, T. (2014) Unmaking Old Age: Political and Cognitive Formats of Active Ageing. *Journal of Aging Studies* 30 no.1: 33–46.

Latour, B. (2005). *Reassembling the social. Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

Lock, M. (1993). *Encounters with Aging: Mythologies of Menopause in Japan and North America* (Bekeley: University of California Press).

López, Daniel. (2015) Little Arrangements That Matter. Rethinking Autonomy-Enabling Innovations for Later Life. *Technological Forecasting and Social Change* 93: 91–101.

Mattern, S. (2017). *Code and Clay, Data and Dirt: Five Thousand Years of Urban Media* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press).

McHugh, K. E., & Larson-Keagy, E. M. (2005). These white walls: The dialectic of retirement communities. *Journal of Aging Studies* 19, no. 2: 241–256.

Membrado, J. C. (2014). Pensioners' coast. Migration of elderly North Europeans to the Costa Blanca. *Mètode Revista de Difusió de La Investigació, 4.* https://doi.org/10.7203/metode.81.3111

MONU (eds) (2019). Late Life Urbanism. *MONU,* 39.

Niewöhner, J., & Lock, M. (2018). Situating local biologies: Anthropological perspectives on environment/human entanglements. *BioSocieties* 13, no.4: 681–697.

Oliver, C. (2008). Retirement Migration: Paradoxes of Ageing (London: Routledge).

Peine, A. Marshall, BL, Martin, Wand Neven, L. (Eds.) (2021) *Socio-Gerontechnology: Interdisciplinary Critical Studies of Ageing and Technology* (London: Routledge).

Scheper-Hughes, N., & Lock, M. (1987). The Mindful Body: A Prolegomenon to Future Work in Medical Anthropology. *Medical Anthropology Quarterly* 1, no. 1: 6–41.

Simpson, D. (2015). *Young-Old: Urban Utopias of an Aging Society* (Zurich: Lars Müller).