Ageing landscapes: Real and imagined

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Abstract

Geographers have been consistent contributors to understanding the landscapes of ageing; offering insight into such 'real world' issues as 'age-friendly' urban design, supportive housing and service provision. However, within such important yet potentially homogenising accounts lie other landscapes of ageing: the imagined and more idiosyncratic worlds of older people as they contest, create and curate their identities within increasingly diverse western societies. This chapter reflects on the changing contexts of 'real' landscapes of ageing then examines two examples of imagined landscapes: the role of views as generative of memories and imaginings of self; and the role of place-specific intergenerational musical performance that, in embracing diversity and contesting stereotypes, keeps participating seniors 'young at heart'. We conclude that while there are objectively documented 'real' landscapes of ageing such as retirement communities, these publically-recognisable 'singular stories' can overlook and serve to override the varied ways that people imagine and narrate their particular place-in-the-world.

Introduction

According to Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie there is a danger in assuming there is a 'single story'. To her, complex experiences and situations are too often simplified into uniform narratives. Using the example of Africans being stereotypically regarded as impoverished victims she makes the point that every person and population embodies a heterogeneous

compilation of stories. In this chapter we argue that Adichie's observation applies to older people and their geographies of everyday life. Hence, although there may be objectively documented 'real' landscapes of ageing such as retirement communities, these publically-recognisable 'single stories' can overlook and override the varied ways that people imagine and construct their own place-in-the-world. In other words, reducing people's experience to a singular story risks detracting from the diversity of their place-experience and ultimately their humanity itself (Brooks, 2016).

We seek to survey ways in which conventional 'landscapes of old age' (Laws, 1993) are challenged by the place-preferences and mobilities of older people especially given the diversity of contemporary western societies. We argue that imagined and virtual landscapes are as important as real ones; the places we associate with older people and the metaphors we use to 'place them', as well as the places older people create for themselves, are all part of the broader landscape of ageing in western societies. We contend that thinking in terms of real and 'objective' landscapes risk creating singular stories about the experience of old age; rather we suggest that there are always 'other'' stories anchored in the less visible geographies of everyday life. However the rationality of 'real' landscapes can overlook the multiplicity of less immediately visible landscapes of significance to older people—places to which they return in memory or create in response to a sense of loss or closure that might otherwise engulf people in advanced years. Our interest is in both stereotypical 'real' landscapes of old age as well as examples of imagined (but arguably no less real) creative expressions of ageing. In the remainder of the chapter we survey the changing contexts for 'real' landscapes of ageing; we then consider two examples of imagined landscapes: the role of views as generative of memories and of

imagining both a present tense and future self; and the role of place-specific intergenerational

musical performance keeping seniors 'young at heart'.

Diverse landscapes, diverse experiences

Geographers regard landscapes as both objectively observable and creatively imagined. To

understand the places of ageing and ageing in place, we need to embrace the idea of

landscapes—those accumulations of elements, resources and symbols—of which specific places

are a necessary but not sufficient part. We are reliant on observable patterns and material

evidence in assessing landscapes as 'real'. Imagined landscapes are idiosyncratic and created so

therefore they are often dismissed in policy discourse or by social services as ephemeral or of

less consequence. Yet, unquestionably, with reference to imagined engagements and

relationships, humans "recognize; remember, and memorialize; maintain a sense of belonging;

and commemorate their connections to landscapes" (Russell, 2012: 401), locating the self with

real consequences. In other words, the manner in which people imagine and feel connected to a

given landscape is dependent upon empathy, or "the projection of one's own consciousness into

another being, thing or place" (Whiston Sprin, 2008: 44). The real consequences associated with

human connection to imagined places are clear in the manner in which people describe and

experience who they are.

In our work on ageing in place on Waiheke Island (Auckland, New Zealand), for example,

several older people described themselves as "put out to pasture" and "past it" in response to

living at a distance from the mainland (see Coleman & Kearns, 2015). For these seniors,

imagining themselves as set apart from the mainland intensified negative perceptions of ageing

as being separated from the mainstream and being of less value than others in society. Others in the study expressed a strong sense of insideness and agency in everyday life through decorating their home spaces with objects that reminded them of previous achievements (e.g., certificates, photographs and other memorabilia). This process allowed people to construct a landscape imbued with affirmations that buffered them from stereotypes associated with ageing. In these examples, imagined landscapes participate in the reproduction of, or resistance to, social life and norms. Further, social identity is produced with reference to landscape and diverse experiences and feelings. Indeed, people commonly desire to assert diverse identities through marking out both individuality and group membership with reference to real and imagined places (Russell, 2005) in order to belong and to fit into a preferred landscape (real or imagined). The act of imagining and feeling connected to a particular place is, therefore, part of the performance of belonging (Bell, 1999), yet also gives form to individual selves. Exploring the diversity of human engagements with real and imagined landscapes, including how such engagements inform processes of identity-construction and belonging, highlights the complexities associated with peoples' interactions with their environments, as well as unique human experiences of place and ageing. Whereas 'real' landscapes can be understood as sets of tangible places, those that are 'imagined' are less easy to specify and identify. One immediate distinction involves time and space; the imagination can creatively transport the self to other (frequently past) times and (frequently distant) places. By way of example, Blaikie (1997; 2005) examines representations of ageing with respect to maritime as well as rural heritage through the lens of nostalgia and reminiscence.

Both 'real' and imagined landscapes are, in our estimation, inherently more complex given the diversity of contemporary western societies. Cities have always been diverse in terms of housing and population groups but in recent decades the 'restless urban landscape' (Knox, 1993) has seen new levels of diversification: lifestyles, ethnicity, attitudes, consumption patterns and preferred activities. This 'hyper-diversity' (Tasan-Kok et al. 2013) has been fueled by increased rates of immigration and more fine-grained segregation within and among groups in terms of ethnicity, age and socio-economic status, leading to widening sets of opportunities and inequalities. The imperative of ageing in place no longer necessarily implies particular and predictable landscapes of ageing.

A key part of the 'single story' of ageing is the prevailing imaginings of seniors' 'real' landscapes: residential concentrations and environments of high dependency. Hence images of stylish retirement villages and/or bland pensioner units occupy public imaginings of landscapes of older age. Advertising adds a persuasive sense of inevitability to such destinations: smiling seniors happily embedded in contrived surrounds, maintaining relaxed poses or undertaking passive pursuits. Laws (1993) asked what such readings of the observable 'real' urban landscape can tell us about society's attitudes toward the ageing process as well as aged citizens themselves. Her conclusion was that ageing involved not only separations in time, but also generational separations in space. Such spatio-temporal segregation is most graphically seen in mass-market retirement destinations like Florida or Arizona where, in some instances, opportunities to take up residence is formally codified by age restriction. Master-planned communities which feature a minimum age create, *de facto*, a real landscape of ageing and the

localised phenomenon of retirement villages become entire landscapes, albeit affluent, of old age.

One of the challenges to stereotypical 'landscapes of old age' has been an embrace of the 'new mobilities paradigm' which has helped researchers recognise that a focus on fixed places risks diminishing the importance of mobility and the mobile life of older people (Sheller and Urry, 2006). This view tacitly argues against a 'sedentarist' view of ageing that treats stability, meaning and place as normal and distance, change and movement as the exception. The influence of digital technologies is a further influence that is increasingly important as a means of maintaining relationships at-a-distance. Thus the use of cell phones and email can, for some, at least potentially compensate for a lack of social relationships with proximate neighbours.

While the term 'ageing in place' has been readily adopted by both researchers and policy-makers, the term ageing has arguably been better understood than place. Place, we contend, has been too easily reduced to location. However, geographical scholarship has offered a rich vein of nuance that has helped extend understanding of the imagined as well as real landscapes of ageing. Place, according to Pred (1984), is always in a state of becoming – a description that helps account for not only the inertia that comes with the built environment but also the accumulation of other less concrete, but no less potent, building blocks: memories. This conceptualisation of place as involving deeply interwoven influences of space and time can be complemented by more recent scholarship acknowledging the enabling possibilities of places.

Building on the ideas of Duff (2011) allows us to see a range of resources embedded in the local landscape—material, social or symbolic—as potentially enabling wellbeing. The subtlety, if not elusiveness, of these combinations of enabling properties can mean that significant landscapes of old age can lie 'beneath the radar' of policy-scans and service organizations yet nonetheless be potent anchors within the geographies of everyday life. In the next two sections we draw on case examples to explore the contention that how older people behave, identify and *feel* within particular places arises from everyday encounters and relations with place itself. In so doing, we claim the benefits of conceptually broadening the idea of place as an enabler of older people's mobility, agency and wellbeing.

Imagined landscapes I: Views, memories and the self

People commonly interpret places of physical beauty as offering emotional, aesthetic and spiritual opportunities, and the feeling of dwelling closer to nature (Kearns and Collins, 2010; Peart, 2009). Landscape views offer opportunities for moments of stillness, reflection, and vicarious participation in everyday life, as well as productive engagement with memories. In turn, such views play a role in generating and sustaining affective ties and a sense of wellbeing (Kaplan, 1995; Kellert, 2005) by facilitating reminiscence, and providing opportunities to imagine both present and future selves (Coleman and Kearns, 2015). In this section, we consider the role of landscape views as generative of memories and supportive of cultivation of the self and wellbeing during ageing.

Living within landscapes that offer physical beauty such as views of water bodies has been shown to have a positive influence on daily life and wellbeing. For instance, Mahmood et al. (2012) suggest that older people who consider their neighbourhoods to be aesthetically pleasing are more engaged in everyday activities and intentional physical exercise. In this sense place is both an enabling resource and generative of activity. Others claim that 'bluespaces' have stress-reducing, mood-enhancing powers (Karmanov and Hamel, 2008). Views themselves can be enabling. Troubles can seem less significant, and a settled sea can calm the inner waters of the human spirit.

Views of bluespaces enjoyed from the comfort of home may increase older adults' opportunities to cope with increasing frailties associated with ageing, as well as mitigate wider issues and problems occurring within their broader social contexts (across time and within place) (Coleman and Kearns, 2015; Coleman, Kearns and Wiles, 2016). Waiheke is an island reachable from downtown Auckland, New Zealand's largest city, by a 35 minute ferry ride (population 8k). There, views of bluespaces were found to enable people to imagine themselves living in a beautiful, peaceful and healing place, even in the context of dilapidated housing, economic constraints and health issues. As one participant commented in the larger study, despite reduced income and mobility which meant he could not repair a leaking roof in his home:

> I still feel peaceful. The sea moves me, its beauty and rhythm. I feel a deep
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> connection to here and now, and to things years ago, looking at the in and out of
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> the sea [from the kitchen window]. There are a few problems… but I look at this
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> view and feel good, I can keep moving Tom (aged 80)

As this narrative illustrates, in addition to providing an alternative literal and metaphoric view in the context of challenges, water views, may be deeply moving. They offer a window on

mobilities that may now be beyond reach, allowing connection to where one is in the here and now. They can also facilitate a 'looking back' and a 'moving forward' as the ebb and flow of water is perceived. Witnessing the peace, beauty and movement of water is also an undemanding way for people to imagine themselves as fortunate, content and located in the 'now' with strong connections to the past as well as possible futures. As another study participant described it, viewing the sea "takes you away from whatever is on your mind, you remember things…you imagine things… then your life seems blessed" (Rose, aged 80). The opportunity to put challenges in perspective, relax the mind and spirit, and engage in remembering and imagining through an undemanding view may be particularly important for those experiencing physical, social and emotional difficulties related to ageing.

Participants would pause when encountering a view from a window at home, describing themselves as deeply moved by the topography beyond: the beaches, the hills, the changing light and the greenery. For some, pausing to consider such views led to imagining the landscape observed as a mirror image of their own bodies in turn enabling them to cope with their bodily ailments. One participant, Jenny (aged 83), for instance, spent long periods of time gazing at a view from her bedroom window which showed a vast seascape and several distant islands, framed by an expansive blue sky. She explained that as she considered these small islands, the water surrounding them and the sky above, she imagined her body itself as an island. By doing so, Jenny perceived her various ailments as part of the landscape. This allowed her to understand and take control of her health through likening ailments to 'natural' landmarks. Experiences of pain and discomfort became topographical features that could be, in Jenny's own words, "gently drifted away from".

A key quality of water is that, in calmness, it can act as a mirror (Illich, 2000). While it literally reflects light, the sea can also symbolically reflect one's life back, perhaps re-awakening memories of engagement with the sea (Coleman and Kearns, 2015). One study participant, Sam (aged 70), described viewing the sea from his dining room windows where the "light moving across the water" would elicit memories of his childhood sailing trips and successes as a fisherman in his younger years. Sam imagined he was "out there again, advising the captain a wind is coming or saying to the fisherman 'you won't catch anything today'". Views of water and light, then, allow vicarious participation in everyday life and interests in an undemanding manner from the comfort of home. For Sam, such views not only allowed connection to the past and previous achievements (journeys made, fish caught) but also provided opportunities to resolve present challenges. In the context of deteriorating relationships with his adult children and painful memories of a difficult childhood, it was possible for Sam to "pause, think, ask questions and see different possible solutions" through contemplating the reflectiveness of water and being moved to "reflect deeply on life".

Engaging landscape views from the comfort of home may enable seniors and others spending considerable time in home spaces to connect with past relationships. Eileen (aged 80) maintained a relationship with her deceased husband by gazing at the sea, which her husband had loved, from the windows of her home. Engaging with views of the sea enabled Eileen to process her feelings about her husband's death and their relationship. Similarly, Maggie (82) looked out through her lounge windows to a gazebo located in her garden that was built many years earlier by her long term partner. This view enabled her to connect with memories of her partner who

had died ten years earlier. Consequently, Maggie felt warmed by her partner's imagined presence and recalled shared happy events. By providing positive memories, these reminiscences—generated through recollection triggered by landscape views—facilitated a pleasant daily experience for participants and lessened the weight of their concerns and challenges. By connecting to the world beyond and providing a bounded space within which the past may be memorialised (i.e., via views), people may perceive their home environments as therapeutic, thereby supporting wellbeing by (re)affirming positive affective ties to place, relationships and identities. This process may provide security and restoration, as well as a pleasant experience (Dyck et al. 2005; Curtis et al. 2007).

Imagined landscapes II: Engaging diversity across intergenerational and intercultural soundscapes.

In this section we remain on our field site of Waiheke Island, but turn to consider a case example of boundary-crossing involving performance and music to illustrate the potency of re-imagining ageing identities. Our starting point is that a widespread imagining of older people within a youth-centric western culture is their placement in landscapes of immobility, nostalgia and conservatism. Through the 'metaphors we live by' (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980), public perceptions can 'place' especially frailer older people in (dis)positions of passivity. Whether it be 'rest' homes or 'nursing' homes, the implication of these prefixes is that passivity prevails and residents possess a distinct lack of agency. Even the term 'retirement' bears a connotation of stepping back from useful and productive activity into a liminal zone of 'betweenness' (Entrikin, 1991) involving temporal and locational zones that bridge having a 'worldly' identity and

experiencing mental and bodily dissolution. While some have discussed the 'age-less self' as the quest of older people to maintain a veneer of youthful vigour (McHugh, 2000), in this section we examine the case of older people incorporating cultural practices of youth, but self-consciously celebrating their age.

While music is widely recognised as a medium for the evocation of memory and a link with the past (Jones, 2011), it can also offer opportunities to embody other images of ageing. In so doing, participation in alternative musical forms can endorse as well as forge new links between music, place and wellbeing (Andrews, Kingsbury and Kearns, 2014). In this section we explore the potential of music to be a site of resistance to perceptions of confinement and decline among otherwise frail older people. Specifically, we profile the example of a group of middle class 'white' seniors who have embraced a distinctly 'other' form of musical expression in terms of 'race', age and class.

As a genre, hip hop has its origins in African-American, Caribbean and Latino youth subcultures, especially in New York, in the early 1970s. It incorporates rapping, DJ-ing, dance moves and dress-styles as well as being associated with particular forms of graffiti-art. Elements of hip hop have been associated with an amplification of the virtues of the otherwise disparaged neighbourhood (the 'hood) or 'ghetto' (Hess, 2009). In the case of the 'Hip Op-eration Crew' based on Waiheke Island, participating in this genre is a vehicle for a 'breaking out' of the normative discursive ghetto (ageism) and an act of reclaiming their place (in society, and on the island).

Hip Op-eration is registered in the Guinness World Records as the world's oldest dance group and was founded by Christchurch earthquake survivor Billie Jordan. At the time of writing, the dance crew consists of seven senior citizens aged 71 to 96 years old. The average age is 80 and there are two men and five women in the group. In a challenge to perceptions of passivity in advanced years, the Hip Op-eration website states:

> one member is legally blind and partially deaf, one member uses a mobility aid, one member is profoundly deaf, two members have had major heart surgery . . . many have artificial knees and hips, there is a married couple in the group (aged 83 and 85 years old) and all members have arthritis. (http://www.hipop-eration.com [About, ¶3]).

They started as a flash mob in August 2012, offering spontaneous performances around Auckland but soon specialised in hip hop and eventually fund-raised their way to the world hip hop championships in Las Vegas. An explicit aim is to use this form of dance as a medium through which to promote change in societal attitudes towards older people as well as forming intergenerational connections with young people. According to the founder, the group seeks "to also address . . . mis-perceptions and prejudices whilst forming a stronger connection with youth" (http://www.hipop-eration.com ["Beliefs"]). The result has been described as "one of the most bizarre, improbable and joyful sights you will ever see" (Perrott, 2014: ¶2).

The founder expresses an explicit attempt to cross boundaries and bestow agency on elders:

> 'When we started I treated them like porcelain, but you have to understand life for old people…they're treated like they can't do anything, they can't make a cup of tea, they can't go to the bathroom alone. They're incompetent and nobody has any expectations of them. That's demoralising' (Perrott, 2014: ¶9).

Hip hop is a genre which, for many in New Zealand, is associated with racialised Maori and Pacific youth in the poorer southern suburbs of Auckland, a considerable social and spatial distance from largely white Waiheke Island. In choosing this genre, Jordan was tacitly embracing the diversity of post-millennial Auckland (Murphy, Friesen and Kearns, 1999). To underline the intergenerational connectivity, their motto is RHY, Respect and Honour Youth, and they maintain a programme of exchange visits with the Dziah Dance Academy in Otara, a suburb commonly associated with poverty and deprivation (Friesen and Kearns, 2010).

The 2014 documentary titled Hip Op-eration follows the group as they prepare for, and travel to, the World Hip Hop Dance Championship in Las Vegas in 2013. The film focuses on three nonagenarian dancers in the ensemble—Maynie (95), Kara (94), and Terri (94), also known as Quicksilver, Kara Bang Bang, and Terri 2-Cents—as they rehearse moves. The film recounts the story of amateurs moving from an ignorance of the genre to performing on the world stage. Participants include nonagenarians who intermittently embody alternate personas and transform whatever landscapes they occupy, subtly contesting the predictable and 'realistic' landscapes of old age (Laws, 1993). The message is that engagement with sound and music can bridge communities and that while elders can learn from younger people, their youthful mentors in turn develop respect for elders by cheering on the ageing dancers.

How can we 'read' Hip Op-eration (along with precedents such as the Young at Heart chorus from Massachusetts which similarly involved a younger facilitator enabling the participation of elders in music outside their stereotypical tastes)? As Twigg suggests, "we are aged by culture" (Twigg, 2004: 61). Her argument is that as the body is central to identity in old age, we need to

know more about how prevailing cultural perceptions age the body and person. To her, performance of self and identity are critical to one's position, degree of empowerment and care for self (Twigg, 2000). Ultimately performance and identity literally and metaphorically *take place*. The soundscapes and choreographies of wellbeing that are produced (Andrews et al, 2015) amount to mobile and, arguably, subversive landscapes of old age. Hence, engagements like Hip Op-eration can be read as the performance of resistance to the passivity of 'rest' homes and an explicit engagement with the otherwise dissonant influence of the hyper-diverse city. Notably, the Hip Op-eration Crew's 'performance' is costumed such that they embody, and are re-named, into hip hop character (but in other ways do not hide evidence of their age). In this act of simultaneous age-denying and age-embracing agency (Twigg, 2007) the participants play with an audience's perceptions of what is, or is not, age-appropriate. Interestingly, this 'audience' comprises not only those who come to their shows, but also fellow residents of the island who are aware of their boundary-crossing activity. Indeed, some Waiheke residents expressed disdain towards the activities of those involved in Hip Op-eration. By implication, the Hip Op-eration crew were being disciplined and told to 'grow up'. Unlike the nostalgic 'saucy' postcards of older people that Blaikie (1997) analysed in coastal England, this contemporary group actively contests rather than fully embraces advanced old age. Indeed, Blaikie (2005) suggests there are two ways of denying the difficulties of the present: to disclaim continuity with the past as instead assert self-sufficiency; or to embrace the past so fully that reality is subsumed by nostalgia. We believe the Hip Operation Crew epitomise a third possibility: emulating contemporary trends in popular culture while self-consciously parodying one's old age. The net result is embracing a more light-hearted landscape of ageing. In engaging in performances cutting across divides of

age, ethnicity and class, these geriatric dancers are therefore, and paradoxically, growing up' and growing into an embrace of the hyper-diverse city (Hodkinson, 2013; Tasan-Kok et al. 2013).

Conclusion

With considerable understatement, the introduction to an edited collection on ageing published a quarter century ago claimed that "to present the elderly population as a uniform group is misleading" (Koopman-Boyden, 1993: 2). In this chapter we have considered some of the ways a diversity of experiences and landscapes of old age exist 'beneath the radar' of objectively measured and mapped gerontological patterns and processes. This diversity confounds any assumptions of there being a 'single story' of ageing in place.

As our first case example indicated, views and memories are closely connected in imagined landscapes, whether as actual windows on the world or as evocation through photographs or other visual representations. Views of physical beauty may be a catalyst for memories, dreams and fantasies. Such views may entail connection and isolation, and the performance of emotional and imagined realities while being at an island-like distance (Baldacchino, 2007). We conclude that it is possible for people to imagine views in multiple and contradictory ways. This imagining is facilitated by the island-like boundaries of a given view itself. Views are in a sense akin to a defined landscape with clear boundaries (what can be seen through a window or from a particular position). Yet, like islands, they are connected to in- and out-flows (of other times, places, ideas, people, identities, emotions and experiences). While it is possible to picture a particular view in one's mind as if it were a singular landscape, a 'single story'—it is possible to

imagine so much more. Thus, views offer multiple opportunities for metaphorical engagement with everyday life and phenomena such as ageing.

Our second case example, drawn from the same island setting, illustrated a very different story. The evolution of Hip Op-eration amounts to a narrative of independence, wellbeing and mobility that actively re-imagines landscapes of ageing, subverting the negative stereotypes associated with decline and dependency (Katz and Marshall, 2003). In a sense, then, what may, on first sight, have seemed a camp appropriation of youth culture revealed the ultimate malleability of the hip hop genre and has highlighted the fact that youth culture itself is increasingly ambiguous and open to imaginative interpretation (Bennett & Hodgkinson, 2012). Through this performative boundary crossing, the presumed and otherwise 'real' landscape of old age is being re-imagined and music is enabling the reproduction of place (Hudson, 2006, Andrews et al. 2014).

We have suggested that the social and cultural diversity of contemporary societies offer opportunities for creativity as well as new forms of social cohesion (Tasan-Kok et al. 2013). Yet, as bodily and mental capabilities change and older people's activity spaces contract, 'outlook' on the world takes on a new meaning. We conclude that in ageing societies, the enumeration of people's needs and locations is an emphatically important task. This engagement with 'real' landscapes of hope as well as despair needs to be complemented by analysis and identification of service delivery solutions. However the diversity of 'windows' into the human significance of place and performance offered by geographical theory and methods is opening new horizons of understanding both imagined and 'real' landscapes of old age.

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