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Adventures in ageing: the gender-ageing nexus and older North American women's engagement with communities of care through lifestyle migration

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Abstract

Drawing from ethnographic research and interviews with older North American women who migrated alone to retire in Ecuador, this article grows the body of literature on gender and ageing, examining how these women position themselves within a gender-ageing nexus, contradicting certain gender norms in their attempt to obtain later-life self-fulfilment. Particularly, we examine how this group positions the third age as a time of individual adventure and self-actualisation, challenging normative gender ideals about femininity and care but meeting (many) social expectations to "age well." We argue that the lifestyles of these women demonstrate new experiments with gendered ageing, facilitated by global inequalities but challenging some normative ideals around femininity and old(er) age.

Keywords: dating, friendship, gender, migration, successful ageing.

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In contemporary culture, there are marked contradictions emerging around socially normative ways of being an *older* woman. The meanings associated with new cultural ideals of ageing – focused on the development of the self, busyness, adventure and living in the "here and now" (Katz 2005; Shimoni 2018) – sit uncomfortably alongside ideals of appropriate femininity, especially those oriented towards family responsibility and the care of others (e.g. Fileborn et al. 2015; Lankes 2022). New cultural ideals of the third age, or "young-old age" (Neugarten 1974) – forwarded by those who came of age in the 1960s, when baby boomers began entering mid-life and beyond – advise the old to devote their attention to extending their youthful vitality through consumptive habits (Gilleard & Higgs 2013) and to avoid age-related decline (Allain & Marshall 2017). These new cultural ideals of ageing impact sex and relationships (Katz & Marshall 2005), normative gender ideals (Calasanti 2007), leisure activities (Hitchings et al. 2018) and romance and dating (Cooney & Dunne 2001). In this context, it is instructive to consider how shifting cultures of ageing reorganise gendered relations of care.

Using older, white women who migrated upon retirement from Canada and the United States to Cuenca, Ecuador, as a case study, we examine the meanings that some later-life heterosexual women bring to their social relationships within the context of successful ageing. This group of older women offered narrative accounts of their sociability that presented contradictions between normative ideals of gender and age in their lives. In this article, we examine how these research participants drew on new ideals of successful ageing, rejecting some of the normative ideals of gender, as they justified their moves and negotiated their social relationships with friends, family and (potential) romantic partners. We refer to the somewhat contradictory life space that research participants reflected upon, spoke about, and negotiated as the gender-ageing nexus. Exploring the gender-ageing nexus through this particular case study enables us to grapple with gender through the life course and consider ageing as a gendered (and not merely embodied) process, affecting different bodies differently. The concept of a gender-ageing nexus developed here provides a new way of thinking about the life course, taking into account the transition that is occurring in the gender orders of Canada and the United States, notably through the integration of women into the capitalist paid

labour force over the last 50 years. Conceptually, the gender-ageing nexus offers a life course perspective to theories of gender, which may help to capture how women's experiences moved from paid labour to new cultural ideals of self-fulfilment in retirement that eschew normative ideals of gendered care.

In this paper, we first describe the gender-ageing nexus of older women in relation to the contradictory ways that new notions of "successful ageing" – that is, ageing without becoming old (Katz & Laliberte-Rudman 2005) – affect gender expressions in later life. We situate the gender-ageing nexus within the scholarship on gendered care and then contextualise ageing and the historical development of the "third age." This article then discusses the methods used in the study before proceeding to two empirical sections. The first focuses on the tensions between women's projects of self-fulfilment in ageing – which align with cultures of active and successful ageing – and the gendered relations of care in heteronormative families from which participants sought to distance themselves. Participants developed projects of successful ageing in relation to biographies marked by a disproportionate responsibility for care work during earlier phases of their lives. The second empirical section explores this tension in relation to the realignment of social relations of care in communities of women to which the participants belonged. These communities of women looked out for one another in a way that enhanced the members' ability to pursue individualistic forms of ageing, shaped by social activity. We conclude with reflections on the context of these experiments in gendered ageing, and on the importance of a sociological analysis of the gender-ageing nexus.

Shifting Gendered Ideologies of Care

In this work, we develop the concept of a gender-ageing nexus to explore and understand narrative expressions of the tension generated in contemporary life when shifting ideologies of ageing interact with shifting ideologies of gender expression. Our key argument is that ideologies of ageing and later life are recasting practices and narratives of femininity, care, commitment and community in the third age, producing new dynamics of the ageing process that are visible and tangible in the lives of research

participants. We apply a life course analysis to the sociology of gender and build on existing scholarship on ageing, which often overlooks gendered patterns in a shifting age order. Our case study exhibiting the tension between age order and gender order – a tension held together by ideals of appropriate ageing and femininity – is a transnational one, which makes evident the gender-ageing tension. We submit, however, that empirical studies of ageing women (and of other ageing people) in other contexts may exhibit similarly tangible and verifiable signs of a tension between contemporary ideologies of ageing and dominant gender norms (e.g. see Allain 2024). Conducting this work in environments that are attentive to overlapping fields of inequality, marked not only by gender, but also race, ability, sexuality and socio-economic status, will be especially important in assessing the robustness of this approach.

In this section, we attend to the two moving parts of a gender-ageing nexus and demonstrate how the concept builds on existing scholarship. First, we draw attention to work in the sociology of ageing, which emphasises a shifting age order marked by new practices of ageing, especially "active" and "successful" ageing. As we note, some scholarly literature focusing on these practices has observed the importance of travel and adventure to successful ageing and self-fulfilment in the third age. Yet, the gendered patterns within these practices and narratives are often overlooked. These gendered patterns are also changing as a result of material and ideological changes in the life course of women. Our participants became adults in the 1960s and 1970s and exhibit ideas of successful ageing that conflict with dominant, heteronormative gender patterns, especially with respect to care for men and families. This section highlights the changing gender order occurring within older adults' ideologies of care, which provides ripe empirical terrain for theorising about transformations in the gender-ageing nexus. It then discusses the literature on later-life dating and friendship in order to firm up our conceptualisation of the gender-ageing nexus as a fundamental, contemporary tension between ideologies of ageing and gendered ideologies of care, each of which is profoundly intertwined with the economic, cultural and social changes that have marked the period since the 2008 financial crisis. With this in hand, subsequent sections will explore the actualisation of this nexus in the lives of Canadian and US-American lifestyle migrants in Ecuador. Gender and ageing are important

coordinates in existing scholarship on lifestyle migration (see especially Bender & Schweppe 2022; Croucher 2014; Gambold 2013; Lafferty & Maher 2021; Lundström 2014), though the topic remains under-theorised in relation to shifting age and gender orders, important to the dynamics of retirement and lifestyle migration to the Global South. The empirical work presented below provides a life course perspective on gender that demonstrates how older adult women in the so-called "baby boomer" generation are recasting the tension between ideologies of adventure and self-fulfilment on the one hand and gendered practices of care on the other.

As Gilleard and Higgs (2013) point out, the baby boomers have challenged ideals about the self and produced in their third age a new consumer lifestyle that emphasises youthfulness and activity as signs of successful ageing. Breaking with the past, this consumer lifestyle focuses on identity and "authentic" living (i.e. following one's inner desires, rather than living up to externally imposed expectations and constraints). These new identities have generally not disrupted entrenched gender inequalities (or inequalities based on race, class, ability and sexuality).[1] However, they have generated new common-sense ideas about ageing, encouraging individuals to defy old age and maintain youthful cultural practices into midlife and beyond (Gilleard & Higgs 2013). Katz (1995) has argued that these practices have resulted in the reconstruction of "elderhood … as a marketable lifestyle that connects to commodified values of youth" (p. 68). These new ways of being old are premised on being busy (Katz 2005), staying sexy (Marshall 2014) and investing in the present (Shimoni 2023). From the vantage point of a sociology of ageing, older adults experience "successful ageing" to the extent that they are able to demonstrate signs or patterns of ageing that reflect the lifestyles actively marketed to them by an expanding age industry, keen to profit from the demographically important baby-boomer generation. But as Higgs and Gilleard (2021) also point out, this culturally specific form of ageing is shaped by a "third age" of leisure and life projects beyond the paid labour market, existing in relation to a fourth age of physical and mental decline and death.

[1] For example, the gender wage gap has persisted despite white women's mass entry into the paid labour market (Peetz & Murray 2017), as the changing division of labour in the family home resulted in a "second shift" for many women in the baby boomer generation (Hochschild, 2003).

Thus, self-projects of living for today (Shimoni 2023) are also emotionally charged with a sense of fleetingness, and perhaps at times with a tinge of existential angst. Existing scholarship, therefore, has privileged the role of intense emotions and experiences as particularly significant to actualising contemporary ideals of ageing (Boyes 2013; Hardy et al. 2018; Hayes 2021).

The new pattern of ageing described above also developed in a political and economic context in which national policies sought to intervene in the age order, recasting ideologies of ageing in response to previous forms that (from the vantage point of baby boomers in North America) presented the ageing process as a burden (Rudman 2006). The emergence of successful ageing strategies aligned with the turn to neoliberalism amongst Western governments, as the state offloaded responsibility for ageing societies onto individuals, who subsequently became responsible for their own ageing and for avoiding illness – a process premised on the rationalisation of health (see Foucault 2008). Whilst elements of these ageing strategies resonate with findings from our study, we suggest that the attainment of active ageing ideals also clashes with normative gender ideals for many older women, which focus on care for family and commitment to long-term heterosexual relationships (see Fileborn et al. 2015).

Attention to the antinomies between gender order and age order – or what we refer to as a gender-ageing nexus – helps clarify emerging forms of femininity in the third age, and therefore dialogues with a growing body of literature on the pursuit of neoliberal ideals emphasising self-fulfilment in later life (see Shimoni 2018). It also moves beyond self-fulfilment and suggests that some older women reimagine care communities beyond the heterosexual family. Canadian and US-American women of the baby boomer generation began to age into their retirement years in the 2010s, on the heels of the 2008 financial crisis and following a life course marked by significant transformations in the gender order, most notably through the large-scale incorporation of middle-class, white women into the paid labour market. Thus, the demographic from which our participants were drawn has challenged established gender ideologies throughout the life course, both in the workplace and with respect to care work.

Nevertheless, data on the gender pay gap have noted that women have not achieved pay equality with men, and their careers are often taken less seriously than men's (OECD 2023; Statistics Canada 2022, 2024) – asymmetries that have diminished women's access to pension savings and incomes, therefore making it more difficult for them to remain independent as they age (OECD 2021). Moreover, despite large numbers of middle-class, white women entering the paid labour market beginning in the 1970s, expectations around women's care work appear not to have substantially changed (Fraser 2016; Hochschild 1989, 2003). As Hochschild (2003, pp. 213-223) has pointed out, labour markets did not adjust to the needs of women with care responsibilities in the home. Nor did men's gender expectations change enough to pick up the slack of care work in heterosexual households. Household care work continues to reflect patterns reminiscent of earlier gendered ideals of the division of labour, even as women have taken on added responsibilities in the labour market. This has often led to women providing greater household care than they receive.

However, whilst normative femininity may sanction this unequal burden of care work as particularly meaningful for women, individual women throughout the life course have also contested it (e.g. Hochschild 1989; Lankes 2022). Here, normative femininity rubs up against a shifting age order that prioritises independence and getting as much out of life as possible. This tension brings into focus a changing orientation to care, which is central to the gender-ageing nexus. As previous research suggests (see Bulcroft & Bulcroft 1991; Calasanti & Kiecolt 2007; Fileborn et al. 2015; Roseneil & Budgeon 2004), later-life heterosexual women have re-evaluated heteronormative relationships that often require expenditures of care on men or other family members. Instead, this literature notes that women have seemed to privilege the self and later-life adventure whilst rejecting family care work. Whilst this literature has remarked on the reorganisation of care in later life, it has not fully theorised the transformation of a gender order in relation to ageing, or applied a life-course perspective to gender ideologies. Our research participants created new communities of care in relation to dominant cultural ideals of ageing. In the process, they challenged dominant gender ideologies and produced new gendered patterns of ageing.

Methods

Our research is based on ethnography and semi-structured qualitative interviews (n = 18) with single women in the North American migrant communities of Cuenca, Ecuador. The interviews are part of a larger data set of North American migrants that include many couples and single men (see Hayes 2018). Initial interviews were conducted in 2011–2013 (n = 14) by the first author (a man in his 30s at the time of the interviews), with supplemental interviews conducted in 2015 (n = 1) and 2019 by three research assistants (women in their 20s) under the first author's supervision (n = 3). Interviews lasted between 45 min and 2 h and focused on motivations for relocating to Ecuador and impressions of the host community. Supplemental fieldwork consisted of nine field visits between 2011 and 2020, totalling over 43 weeks spent on location. The larger research project also included interviews with Ecuadorians who provided services for North Americans (n = 12), and some of this data also helped triangulate findings.

Although the initial focus of this work was on motivations for relocating to Ecuador, issues associated with gender and ageing arose organically during the interviews and in ethnographic observation. This was especially true for older single women describing their reasons for migration, which the first author had not initially expected when designing the research programme. Based on these conversations, the first author attempted to focus part of his recruitment on older single women, recruiting at social events and through snowball and convenience sampling. Research participants seemed keen to share their migration stories. Furthermore, beginning in 2012, the North American migrant community and Ecuadorian research participants in Cuenca began speaking quite a bit about an "adventurous" group of single women who had moved there. This helped shape recruitment and questions for participants.

Sociology of ageing did not initially inform the research process of the first author, whose main concerns as an early career scholar were the events of 2008 and their transformation of middle-class experiences and life possibilities in Canada and the US. Thus, whilst retirement was of interest, ageing *per se* was not. Cultures of ageing and a life course perspective became more central under the influence of the second author's research and teaching and other thoughtful critique of previous work (see Koh 2021).

The age differences between interviewers and participants also influenced some of the findings. For instance, cultural mores around gender and age ("never ask an older woman her age") impeded interviewers from recording the ages of some of the female participants. The age range of participants who disclosed their age (n = 11) was 54–70 years at the time of interview. Those not recorded (n = 7) were of a similar age; they were "young-old," or in the third age. The participants were all from Canada or the United States.

The research team followed the procedures described by Nowell et al. (2017). In this regard, they aimed for "trustworthy thematic analysis" (p. 4) by (1) ensuring that team members were familiar with the data; (2) producing initial codes; (3) drawing from codes to produce more general themes; (4) revisiting the themes; (5) defining the themes and aligning them with other triangulated data; and (6) documenting the findings. To do this work, the research team coded the interview transcripts using *NVivo*. The research team's thematic analysis of codes highlighted participants' reflections on adventure, intimacy and community. We have highlighted these themes here because they demonstrate the presence of a gender-ageing nexus that is undertheorized in gerontology and sociology. This nexus works through sometimes contradictory transformations of the gender order and the age order as they develop over the life course and through material and cultural transformations of society.

Antinomies of Adventurous Ageing and Gendered Care

The apparent adventure of living and migrating alone as a woman had special significance to the North American community in Cuenca – perhaps precisely because it marked a break with normative femininity and associated family care work. This emphasis on adventure and self-fulfilment demonstrates how ageing ideals are reshaping relations of care and draws attention to a new constellation of experiences at the gender-ageing nexus. Aligned with the definitions of adventure described by Boyes (2013) and by Simmel's (1997) iconic work in the field, adventure is understood as an experience different from those of everyday life. The possibility of new experiences enabled participants to experiment with new patterns of ageing associated with the pursuit of pleasure and success. These patterns reference a more individualistic and secular culture of ageing, one in

which "living for today" takes precedence over established norms that privilege social obligations towards family and partners. Of course, these expectations also belong to a heteronormative, patriarchal social order, against which older women are also reacting. In the process of abandoning patterns of ageing associated with patriarchy, older women appear to be embracing new patterns of active ageing that privilege sometimes expensive lifestyles.

One of the key adjectives North American lifestyle migrants in Cuenca used to describe women who migrated alone to Ecuador was "adventurous," also labelling them as brave and independent – a gendered pattern of adjectives that was never associated with men who migrated alone. For instance, Melanie, a 55-year-old former health administrator from Wisconsin, said, "I think the kind of single women that come here are more adventurous, and they are risk-takers too. And they are very brave. And they're willing to try new things, meet new people, have new adventures, travel. We don't sit at home at all." The community of single women had helped her through the grieving process when her husband died the previous year, illustrating how these women provided important networks of support and mutual aid, despite knowing each other for a relatively short amount of time – research participants often described "finding" a community of like-minded people amongst the cohort of active, social migrants. These networks provided elements of care and community that supplemented the pursuit of more active retirements. As Melanie explained, "We'll go to concerts. We'll go to movies. We'll go to festivals together. We'll help each other out shopping or, you know, we try to help out a lot of the newer people."

The pursuit of adventure and excitement expressed in the narratives of single women's post-retirement migration to Ecuador dialogue with key tenets of active ageing, especially the emphasis on activities, which in these cases included nights out and cultural events that often cost money to attend. As Laura, a retired teacher in her mid-50s, put it, "I can go socializing every day if I want to." She listed many events in which the North American retirement migrants participated: poker, charity work and volunteering, potlucks, biking, day trips to the mountains or to hot springs, and "Gringo Nights," which occurred several times a week at different eating or drinking establishments. This enabled her and others to perceive their ageing processes as successful and less constrained

(especially economically) than they would have been at home, where many participants said they would have had to continue to work in the paid labour market. The participants, who were relatively privileged in global social space, described elated feelings of success and self-fulfilment experienced against the backdrop of global economic structures. The lower cost of living enabled single North American women on limited incomes – sometimes less than a $1000 per month of pension income – to maintain busy social lives involving many acts of consumption, such as eating or drinking out, going on weekend trips or day excursions, or hosting parties for one another. They also benefitted from transnational mobility rights shared unequally with many of the workers who laboured for them. Global economic inequalities shaped these experiments in gendered ageing, facilitating consumptive lifestyles (Hayes 2018).

These experiments with ageing were also premised on freedom from heterosexual social relations of care, which were central to many participants' narratives of adventure. For example, Diana, 60, who best articulated a new philosophy of adventurous ageing as a single woman, also wanted something different from her retirement than her husband, separating from him and moving away from her family (including young grandchildren) to pursue her own interests in Ecuador. A group of like-minded single women in Cuenca quickly pulled her into their group upon her arrival. She commented that she felt she had a limited amount of time of good health remaining, and she was looking for "a little adventure" before moving to the "other side of the grass." Like Gambold's (2013) focus on "fear of the known," this desire for adventure stemmed from comparing her own ageing process with that of family members, and from intimate knowledge of her own mother's fourth age of decline and death, during which she actively provided care. She explained that her family members "all die of strokes, and we all die young." Therefore, she felt an urge to "take risks," feeling that this was the last decade of her life in which she would be able to take them. She exclaimed, "Coming down here … was the most risk-taking thing I've ever done in my life."

Diana defined risk-taking in relation to gender, as a break from normative expectations about women's ageing that would have bound her to a male partner and a caretaking role. For her, risk meant "moving out of [her] comfort zone" and doing something that made her feel anxious. But she understood fear as something to push past in order to experience

"personal growth." Moving to a lower-income, Latin American city was one such experience, one that was enhanced by "doing it alone."

Other migrants touched on similar themes, emphasising an imaginary of the third age as a time of activity before eventual decline and death. For these participants, life was to be lived to the fullest, whilst there was still time to do so. Krista, 64, was a former nurse and homemaker who took care of her husband throughout 15 years of Alzheimer's-related decline. She had been widowed 8 years prior to our interview. Her husband's illness "really put a stop, really, to our life, as we knew it," she said. Prior to that, they had enjoyed an active life with travel. Faced with rising insurance costs and limited savings, she moved to Ecuador because, as she put it, she had always wanted to live in another country. "My family, obviously, is raised and gone and have their own families. So I figured, 'no time like the present'."

Like Diana, Krista's decision meant abandoning responsibilities towards family, who were left behind. Whilst Diana did not experience this as an issue – rather, it enabled renewal and mutual understanding – Krista's decision led to significant tension with her children, especially her son, who had relocated his family and changed jobs so he could live closer to her when she was still in North America. But her move made sense to her in part because of the cost savings and in part because she was able to make so many friends during her brief exploratory visit. Whilst acknowledging that cost of living played a factor in her decision to move to Cuenca, she admitted a big part of it was "because I wanted a bit of adventure in my life."

Krista's role as caregiver to a dependent husband was a major influence on her decision to move on her own to Ecuador. His illness and an acute episode involving her own health "just taught me … enjoy every single day … because you don't know what's going to happen." Her relocation to Ecuador appeared to live in the shadow of the fourth age (Higgs & Gilleard 2020). She knew that if she had another major health scare – like the one she had experienced a few years prior – her children would force her to return home, where she would become dependent. Krista was already very familiar with the fourth age, and it had shaped her sense of independence. She stated, "I'm very independent, and I've had to be. [My husband] was totally disabled, probably 3 years before he died. So I've pretty much been it, for about the last 11 or 12 years. And, so I'm really, really

independent, I don't want to have to move in with my kids." "Fear of the known" (Gambold 2013) forms of ageing and decline seem to haunt parts of her interview transcript. Krista's search for adventure in Ecuador came at a cost in terms of her proximity to her children and grandchildren, with whom she described herself as extremely close. But the cost did not seem too great either. She said that after their move to a subdivision 10 min away from her own in Arizona (prior to her relocation to Cuenca), she did not see them a whole lot more than she did when they lived in a different city in the US Midwest. "There would be times where 2 or 3 weeks would go by and I wouldn't see them," she said, rationalising her decision and intimating that she did not agree that she had abandoned her family.

Ageing and Care Beyond Heteronormative Families

As research participants looked to align their ageing process with neoliberal pressures to age successfully, they not only sought out travel and relocation to Cuenca, but they often appeared to realign their expectations about romantic relationships to maximise their ability to be adventurous and independent. This section looks at how research participants renegotiated expectations about intimacy and care, exploring the tension between normative gender ideals associated with heteronormative relationships with men and the possibilities of greater independence through emerging and alternative forms of solidarity. These latter represent a new nexus within the constellation of gender and ageing norms – one that supported participants' more individualistic ageing ideals.

Older North American women in Cuenca often narrated their experience as a break from established normative ideals of gendered ageing, rejecting or abandoning heteronormative romantic relationships. Diana, for example, explained that the experience of migration in later life was particularly meaningful to her because she was doing it alone. Being independent was an important part of many participants' identities and shaped the type of community they sought out. One of the commonalities amongst research participants was a personal shift in focus from romantic or sexual relationships with men to friendships with other women, a finding coincident with existing literature on dating in later life (Connidis et al. 2017; Watson & Stelle 2011). Thus, despite the large number of single

later-life men and women in the community, most participants described a lack of interest in finding a partner and instead narrated alternative projects of caring for one another as a way to avoid loneliness and find meaning in later life.

Similar tensions between intimacy and independence have been noted in previous studies of older, heterosexual women's dating experiences. As Watson and Stelle (2011) found in their research, many older women understood dating as an important part of their lives, allowing them to move beyond social positions as widows or grandmothers. But they found tensions between how the participants expressed desire for a partner and their declarations of being content on their own. Similarly, Calasanti and Kiecolt (2007) noted that older heterosexual women value intimacy and partnerships with men whilst at the same time prizing attributes associated with independence. We submit that this tension exhibits the renegotiation of social relations of care along the gender-ageing nexus.

This tension meant that, as in previous studies, participants often remained attached to normative ideals of heteronormative intimacy. However, some participants began to shift expectations around intimacy when it failed to materialise. Paula found that one of her disappointments about migration was the lack of "appropriate" men. As she put it, "That's missing for me, in Cuenca … there aren't enough single men." Paula expressed interest in having a partner and was concerned that she might not find one in Cuenca, stating, "If nothing's here in 3 years, I'll probably be gone." Ana Jane, a retired designer from Texas, also thought dating was important. She had just turned 60 and said that she would "totally" like to meet someone new in this phase of her life "because I love guys." At the same time, Ana Jane noted that there were few good dating options, a theme that ran through most other interviews. Daniela, a retired administrator in her 60s, said of the North Americans in Cuenca, "The men are old farts. They basically seem to be total losers." This type of sentiment was shared broadly amongst participants.

Andrea, 67, a single woman originally from Chicago, said she did not understand why so many single women like herself came to Ecuador. She remarked, "If it was to meet their next husband, I'm not sure they're going to have a lot of luck here." North American women sometimes narrated this critique of men in terms of the differences between men's and women's ageing bodies. Flipping the script of men's desires for young and attractive women

(McWilliams & Barrett 2014), Allie, a librarian from Florida, said, "There's all these guys with these guts and it's like *really*?" Mirroring fatphobic and neoliberal attitudes about care of the body, which necessitate that one be thin and "fit" to demonstrate good health (White et al. 1995), Allie commented that women took better care of themselves than did men, an attitude expressed in several interviews and related to dissatisfaction with the ageing body.

Women participants were also highly critical of the way North American men in Cuenca dated, especially when they dated Ecuadorian women. Perhaps signalling the kinds of care relationships they were looking to leave behind, they commented that older men could purchase care through the dating market. Laura noted that a North American man had "the choice" of finding a younger Ecuadorian woman "who's gonna wait on him hand and foot."[2] North American men could also gain in an Ecuadorian partner an interpreter in a foreign culture, reducing the inconvenience of not knowing how to speak Spanish. "So, most of them will go for the Ecuadorian, that's what I've noticed," she said.

This perceived imbalance left some participants, like Ana Jane and Paula, feeling that their options were extremely limited – especially because they expressed reticence about dating Ecuadorians. But for others, like Andrea, it only confirmed a need to move on from searching for a partner altogether. Martina, a 69-year-old from Texas, summed up the attitude of several women towards dating and later-life care work, asserting, "For men, whenever they get old, the best thing they can do is get married." In contrast, she claimed:

> The best thing a woman can do, when they get old, is have other women friends…. If you get married again, you have to take care of some old guy [*laughs*]. If you have other women friends, you can just have fun!

Her comments echo the findings of McWilliams and Barrett (2014), who noted that older women privileged friendships that allowed them to break with gender norms associated with care by opting out of romantic relationships, whilst men looked to have their care needs met *through* their romantic relationships.

[2] These narratives misrecognized the shifting gender order of Ecuador, where women's liberation and queer and trans rights movements have challenged the patriarchal gender regime, fought for abortion rights, and challenged femicide and sexual harassment. On women's movements in Ecuador, (see Santillana and Aguinaga 2012). On queer and trans liberation, (see Viteri et al. 2021).

The critique of men's ageing was also part of the way women like Christine (who was widowed) articulated their own sense of themselves as single and independent – and thus illustrated how ageing ideals lead to a realignment of gender expectations. According to Christine, women did not move to Ecuador looking for relationships with younger men whose affections they could buy.[3] As she put it, "I think we [women] tend to come here, not only knowing we're on our own, but wanting to be." Though some women desired a heteronormative partner, most participants expressed indifference towards relationships. But this did not mean they were totally on their own as they constructed new lives and new identities as older women. Instead, participants focused on other social projects, namely, friendships with other women. This was very important, operating as an alternative social network where they could provide a caring community for one another whilst supporting a project of self-actualised ageing. This desire to maintain caring connections whilst living up to active ageing ideals in a lower-cost country appears to be the pivot point that links the modern, self-focused form of women's ageing with its family-focused and place-specific precursor.

For Daniela, a retired administrator, friendship took the form of platonic, joyful relationships with other women. "There is an incredible support group here, among the 'expats'. I mean, I sat in [my hometown] … for 4 years, basically," she said, recalling how her social world in the US had atrophied as she aged – a reflection on gendered patterns of ageing and perhaps a description of a changing class position. In contrast, a dense schedule of events put on by various charities and clubs anchored the network of single North American women in Cuenca in the 2010s, as they participated in philanthropy, played cards, travelled, cooked, shared writing and listened to live music. As Diana, who was also elated about her experience with her community of friends, put it, "Most of the women I know here [Cuenca], who are my age, have really vibrant, vibrant social lives. We travel together. We eat together. We socialize together." Although this community included men and couples, single women appeared to look out for one another. Their friendships with each other were a focal point of their identities and sense of belonging. Together, they formed a

[3] Other participants did mention dating younger Ecuadorian men. In other circumstances, women sometimes do purchase sex for money (see Herold et al. 2001).

community of "expats."[4] Participants regularly remarked on how many more friends they had in Cuenca, almost always referring to other North American migrants. "I have more friends here than I did in 23 years in California," Laura said. This rich social life of what Stephen Katz (2005) calls "busy bodies" (p. 121) is a place-based form of ageing in which "new enclaves of lifestyle and retirement … foster new identities and ways *to be* older in body, mind and spirit" (emphasis in original, p. 14). Increasingly, cohorts of older North Americans are producing this form of ageing in communities throughout the Global South, in addition to the "sun belt" locations of the 20th century, producing material contexts that are significant both to cultures of active ageing generally, and to single women's ageing experiences in particular.

Whilst much of the literature on older adult social identities focuses on acts of public consumption (see Gilleard & Higgs 2011) – which were important for the single women in this study – scholars have paid less attention to new ways of being older in a community of care, which were in evidence here. Participants frequently discussed how they took care of one another. As Paula put it, "There are a lot of single women, here, and we rely on each other, you know, because there's no men." This extended to caring for each other through ageing and even death. Despite their good health, participants seemed haunted by what Higgs and Gilleard (2020) call the "social imaginary of the fourth age." Participants acknowledged that they were getting older, and that they would need to plan for a time when they would need more care. They were often attuned to the care needs of older members of their community, who were frail or dependent on caregivers. Frequently, they not only made plans to look after one another but also relied on the low-cost care work of Ecuadorian women – labour that was indispensable to participants' imaginaries of the fourth age, and which seemed to provide an alternative, offshore social safety net (cf. Bender et al. 2018). Ecuadorians who provided service to North Americans often discussed this care work, not only describing the projects of active ageing and adventure as inspirational, but also finding their

[4] It is important to note the epistemological work done by the term "expat" to distinguish the privileged transnationalism of our research participants from Latin American migrants who move to the United States or Canada (and are often prevented from doing so). As Hayes (2018: 14–20) points out, this terminology participates in stratifying transnational social fields.

loneliness and precariousness in the fourth-age disturbing. Participants who were still in late midlife or early old age would keep track of one another, apparently to reduce vulnerability. Daniela, for instance, supported informal women's groups "to ensure that there's someone that's looking after them." She said, "I play cards every week with a group of women. And they call me once a week to tell me where we're going to play cards. And if I don't answer, they get mad." Some of the participants found these networks a hassle or critiqued them for being cliquey, but they were an effective way of providing mutual aid in a context so far away from family. In a few cases, these groups even took the place of family altogether. Women helped organise (sometimes with men) information groups about death, dying and medical emergencies, so that in the event something might happen, friends could inform doctors and authorities about a person's end of life care or burial wishes.

These communities of care granted participants greater social security and more opportunity to lead lives marked by social outings, travel and friendships. But this did not mean that they had entirely collectivised their way of life. Rather, loose networks of mutual aid supported more individualistic lifestyles and identities. As Diana put it, "I have had some women who've been interested in sharing a house or an apartment." She responded, "Not interested." Having left a relationship in Canada to move to Ecuador on her own, she wanted to cultivate a new relationship with herself and her own needs, stating, "I'm living alone … I love it." She expanded, "I'm happy with my own company. I'm happy with going out to dinner by myself with a book." Louise, 67, a retired social worker from Hawaii, had a similar perspective. She also enjoyed her life in Cuenca and had developed an active social life there with plenty of time for herself. She explained, "I like being alone, I like coming home and my house isn't messed up, it's just like I left it." Research participants reported that the communities of care they produced enabled them to live lifestyles adjacent to successful ageing ideals, including the individual self-satisfaction most often associated with contemporary men's ageing ideals (e.g. bucket list adventurism). This reorganisation of social relations of care was partly the product of participants' commitments to a new style of ageing that challenges gender ideologies associated with older women. It also demonstrates, therefore, how the gender order in the third age is undergoing important changes because of shifting ageing ideals.

Conclusion

In this article, we have explored what we refer to as the gender-ageing nexus. This nexus exists in all our lives, as social forces remake various elements of the gender order and the age order over our life course. For women of the baby boomer generation entering the third age, this nexus involves a tension between ideologies of ageing and gender, especially for those who had participated in shifting gender orders throughout their life course. In some ways, this experimentation with new forms of ageing amongst single women should come as no surprise, even if it may also be overlooked by sociologists of gender.

Our case study of single, older women who retired to Ecuador in the early 2010s demonstrates one way that women are experimenting with the gender-ageing nexus, formulating new social relations of care that support ideologies of active and successful ageing. Despite drawing attention to active ageing as an ideology, we are particularly aware of the pleasure, joy and meaning our research participants derived from these innovations in the life course, particularly in relation to established patterns of ageing centred on care for families and partners, which were not always available or preferred. Though our case focuses on a group of relatively privileged, white North American lifestyle migrants, we submit that this particular group of women articulate aspirations and tensions that are similar to other groups of older women. Other communities of Canadian and US-American older adults form similar types of cohort communities who engage in social activities together and may exhibit a similar type of gender-ageing nexus, one that develops cultures of care and intimacy beyond heteronormative families (see Roseneil & Budgeon 2004). Moreover, men also experience tension between ageing and gender ideals (Allain 2024). Research examining the unique ways that the gender-ageing nexus overlaps with other social positions will further enhance our understanding of gender and age in later life. We hope that new work in this field will investigate the ways that this nexus is changed by race, ability, sexuality and social class.

Our findings suggest that the particular form of gendered ageing discussed in our case owes something to the ability of Canadian and US-American adults to relocate savings earned at high latitudes of the global division of labour towards spaces with lower costs of labour power

(Hayes 2014). This no doubt also helps inform the normative dispositions of lifestyle migrants such as our participants, whose economic conditions often afforded few privileges in their home countries. It is, furthermore, perhaps too soon to tell if the pandemic and its impact on older adults will have a disproportionate impact on the social structures of ageing in the 2020s and beyond, curtailing similar types of experiments that connect communities of care with self-actualisation through adventure in third age. If active ageing was a neoliberal response aimed at giving individuals a sense of control over the ageing process (control that was mostly ideological), the persistence of COVID-19 may yet rehabilitate discourses of frailty and vulnerability that reshape the experiences of older adults, especially women, who appear to be at higher risk of long-term sequelae from repeated COVID-19 infections (Stewart et al. 2021). However, these risks may only further oblige older, single women to further innovate social relations of care beyond heteronormative intimacy and family.

The notion of a gender-ageing nexus attends to life course elements of the gender order, which are currently undergoing important transformations that have nonetheless remained marginal in the sociology of gender and of ageing (see Spector-Mersel 2006). Here, we have drawn attention to the gender dynamics of an emergent form of active ageing, which premises success in the ageing process on an ability to remain active – not just physically, but also socially, through participation in social events and consumption activity (such as going out or travelling). Research participants realigned gender expectations in the third age with these ideals of active and successful ageing, albeit not always in ways that dispelled the stress and tension of conflicting ideologies. Migration to a lower-cost country provided more women with the material basis to experience meaningful adventures whilst avoiding more vulnerable paths of ageing in social isolation, which have perhaps encouraged ageing heterosexual women's reliance on family members and partners in the past.

Participants demonstrated what we refer to as a new nexus within the constellations of ageing and gender. This nexus draws our attention towards the ways that gender is being remade through the life course, around new social forces that enable older, single women to realise meaningful forms of self-actualisation as they age – forms of self-actualisation associated until now with men. For our participants, communities of care beyond heteronormative families and partners became important sources

of intimacy and friendship that served as support systems for more individualistic forms of ageing. As the gender-ageing nexus continues to change in response to new social forces in the 2020s, the innovations outlined earlier signal how heterosexual gender ideologies may change in the future and recast gender relations more broadly.

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Hayes contributed 60% of the work for this piece, whilst Allain contributed 40%.

Statement of conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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