

# Three faces of ageism: society, image and place

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper elucidates and champions a spatiality perspective in social gerontology, by arguing that relationships between older people and the spaces and places they inhabit illuminate deeply-ingrained societal attitudes and values. The trilogy of society, image and place is explored through an interpretive reading of images and scripts in ‘successful ageing’ and ‘anti-ageing’ created and promoted by the booming ‘retirement industry’ in the United States. Six tropes are revealed in an interpretation of prevalent images of ‘Sunbelt Retirement Land’: geographic cornucopia, ageless selves, near perfection, the right stuff, down home living, and nomads of desire. This reading serves as a springboard in elaborating Cole’s (1992) notion of bipolar ageism, as we vacillate between negative stereotypes of old age and positive elixirs, such as anti-ageing and agelessness, that are cloaked denials of decline, disease and death. The paper concludes with a series of troubling questions about the perpetuation and depth of ageism in society and culture.

**KEY WORDS** – successful ageing, anti-ageing, retirement industry, place-based images and scripts, agelessness, bipolar ageism.

Every present day is determined by the images that are synchronic with it: each ‘now’ is the now of a particular recognizability. (Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 1999: 462–63)

## **Introduction**

In popular culture, wise lifestyle choices and active engagement in life are touted as pathways to happiness and longevity. Such prescriptions are codified in biomedical and social writing, as in the prestigious MacArthur Foundation study and well-received book, *Successful Ageing* (Rowe and Kahn 1998). One arena in which an activity-rich view of old age is reaping handsome dividends in the United States is retirement migration and attendant forms of adult living for seniors. Strategies for marketing retirement migration and active adult communities draw upon potent place-based

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images of 'successful ageing' as 'anti-ageing', suggesting that they apply to particular places and settings but not others. *Where to Retire?* – a popular magazine title – is not an idle question. It encapsulates the lifeblood of the burgeoning retirement industry, and the secret to longevity for retirees who seek the fountain of agelessness.

This paper is an interpretation and critique of images and scripts in successful ageing that are being created and promoted by the American retirement industry. The production and promotion of spaces and places in 'successful ageing' exemplifies what Lefebvre (1984) terms the bureaucratic society of controlled consumption, as our everyday lives are shaped by organised groups and institutions sanctioned through the corporate state for the purpose of socialising consumers. My central argument is that place-based images and scripts can be interpreted not only as marketing ploys and strategies but, more deeply, as mould and mirror of ageist attitudes and cultural values.

This critique deploys what is termed the socio-spatial dialectic or spatiality perspective in social geography, a view that begins with the central proposition that *spaces* and *places* are more than passive containers of social life (Soja 1989; Couclelis 1992; Laws 1997). Paradoxically, geography is oftentimes rendered invisible; that is, the spaces and places of our everyday lives are taken for granted and 'naturalised', with little heed for interpreting what geography can tell us about society and culture. Far from being inert backdrops, both real and imagined spaces and places are socially produced and charged with contested meanings (Lefebvre 1991). At its core, the spatiality perspective regards society and space as inseparable or mutually constitutive (Soja 1989, 1996). In this paper I treat the trilogy of society, image and place as indivisible facets of the social world.

The paper draws heavily upon images and scripts of active adult lifestyles in the State of Arizona, a popular retirement destination. Its government has forged an alliance with the private sector in developing marketing and promotional strategies for attracting retirees. In 1996, an Office of Senior Living was created in the Arizona Department of Commerce to work with retirement-related businesses in 'selling' the Grand Canyon State to healthy and wealthy retirees and pre-retirees. The name was changed in 1999 to the Senior Industries Cluster (SIC), a designation that more accurately reflects its mission to maximise the economic benefits to Arizona communities and businesses. The SIC has held a 'Senior Industries Conference and Expo' each year in Phoenix since 1996. The events showcase public-private efforts in promoting retirement migration and retirement living in Arizona. Representatives from several States attend. These conferences provide ample evidence of the commodification of place, and ways that seniors and senior markets are viewed by the corporate state.

The textual analysis of this paper draws both from Arizona SIC conferences and from advertisements and promotional materials in popular national senior travel and Sunbelt retirement magazines. Its interpretation of place-based images and scripts in retirement living is woven around six tropes: geographic cornucopia, ageless selves, near perfection, the right stuff, 'down home' living, and nomads of desire. In the conclusion, the interpretation forms the springboard for an elaboration of the potency and persistence of ageism in American society and culture.

### Geographic cornucopia

At the 1998 SIC conference, Cindy LaRue, Director of SIC, announced the inaugural issue of their glossy magazine, *Arizona Living: A Guide to Active Retirement* (Figure 1). Adopting a geographic frame, the magazine divides the State into seven regions: Valley of the Sun, Central Territory, High Country, Old West Country, Grand Canyon Country, Arizona's West Coast, and Indian Country. The reader is invited to 'Imagine Arizona' as a State that 'offers tremendous lifestyle and geographic diversity', with 'communities and recreational amenities to please virtually all retirees'. In extolling the virtues of each region, Arizona is presented as a cornucopia of delights waiting to be experienced. The images of Arizona exotica – desert vistas, polychromatic sunsets, *saguaro* cacti with arms raised to the heavens, red rock canyons, snow-capped mountains, *Anasazi* cliff dwellings, rambling adobe ranch homes, emerald golf courses – reminded me of being a kid in the *Villa Mart*, the corner market in my Pittsburgh neighbourhood, with 25 cents in hand and too many candy choices before me!

Media images of exotic tourist landscapes and places tap alterity or 'otherness' (Goss 1993), eliciting what has been termed 'imaginative hedonism', as the vicarious pleasure of anticipated travel may outstrip the actual trip experience (Campbell 1995; Urry 1990). It is emphasised that prior 'flights of fancy' shape the travel experience. Americans and Canadians 'discover' Arizona and the Southwest through a plethora of media images, and by hearing tales from relatives and friends who have visited or moved to the Grand Canyon State. In the ideal sequence, the image and reputation stimulate the desire to visit Arizona, that leads to repeated visits and, if hopes are realised, the trips, in turn, lead to a more permanent relocation at the time of retirement (McHugh 1990). Seniors project idealised images and pleasures they experience in daydreams, and this halo – a romanticised, idyllic vision – tends to remain as residue, shaping long-lasting views about place as a discovered home.

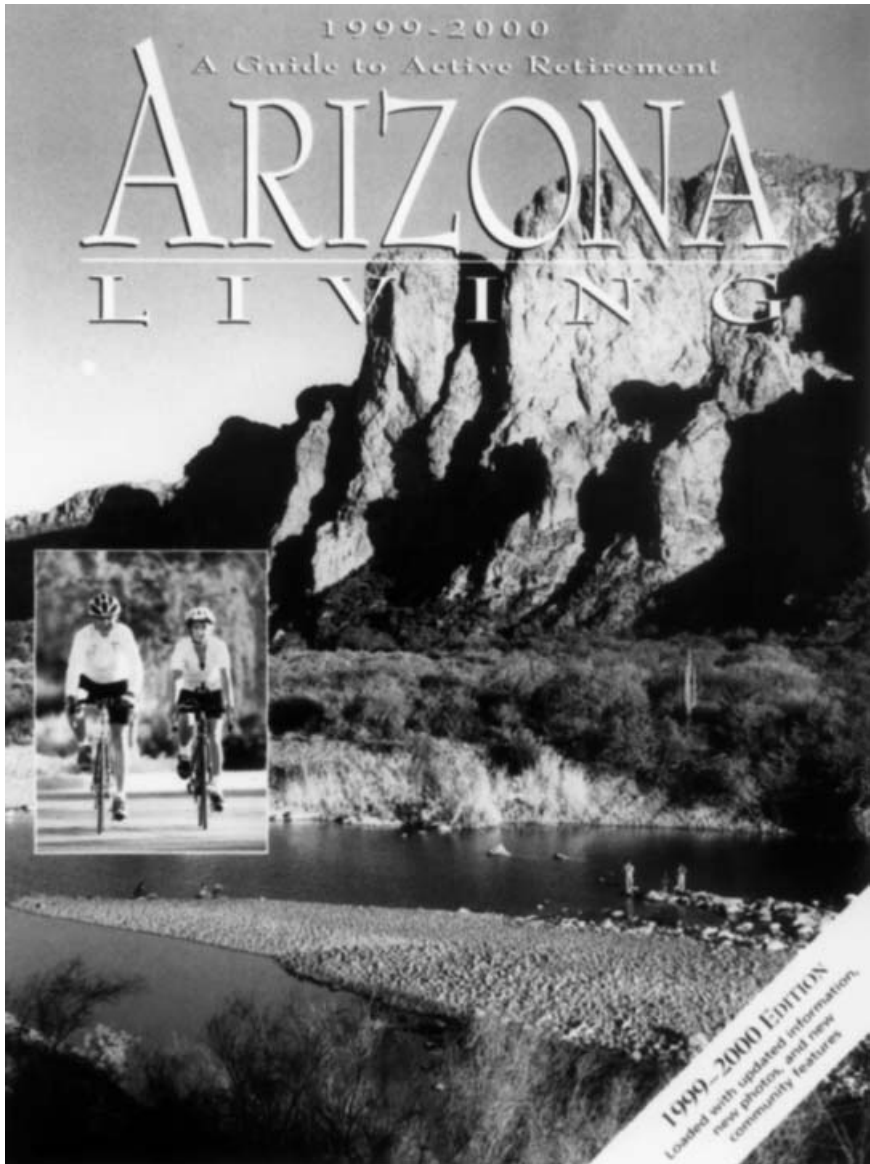


Figure 1. *Arizona Living* magazine, 1999–2000 edition. Arizona Department of Commerce, Office of Senior Industries Development. Phoenix, AZ.

The invocation to ‘Imagine Arizona: a place you’d love to call home’ is the keynote of the SIC marketing campaign, and a slogan that invokes imaginative hedonism as a critical phase in the process of place consumption *qua* home construction. The notion that ‘home’ is awaiting your

arrival – that it can be created instantly – derives from the long tradition of geographical mobility and the ‘image of elsewhere’ ingrained in the American psyche (Morrison and Wheeler 1976; Packard 1972). Home is a portable commodity in America (Sopher 1979), a cultural value that reaches an absurd level in those newly-constructed residential developments in Arizona that display conspicuous advertising signs that read, ‘Welcome Home’.<sup>1</sup>

### Ageless selves

One of the most intriguing concepts related to identity in later life is the ‘mask of ageing’, the notion that a person’s coherent sense of (youthful) self is masked or hidden beneath an ageing face and body (Featherstone and Hepworth 1991; Öberg 1996; Biggs 1997; Andrews 1999; McHugh 2000). Looking into the mirror – or the eyes of others – presents incontrovertible evidence that one is ageing (de Beauvoir 1972; Améry 1994), yet human beings are indisposed to accept reality at ‘face’ value, especially their own ageing and mortality. Freud, and a century of psychoanalytic thought, has demonstrated that our capacities for denial and repression are immense, even unfathomable: this theme has been developed in the genre of ageing studies and literature by Woodward (1986, 1991). The mask of ageing speaks to the repression and denial of old age and mortality in a society that adulates youthfulness. It alludes to the Cartesian split of mind and body, a split that has so thoroughly permeated western thought that it is taken for granted as common sense (Andrews 1999; Öberg 1996).

Ageing is not only an *embodied* process but is *emplaced* as well (Laws 1995; McHugh 2000). Identities are wrapped up in place, figuratively as one’s ‘place’ in the world, and geographically in terms of house, neighbourhood, community, region, nation and the places one consumes through travel and tourism (Tuan 1996; Marcus 1995; Urry 1990). Who you ‘are’ is related to where you live and the space and places you traverse. Shields (1992: 1) deploys the masking metaphor in a geographic frame when referring to media images as ‘consumption sites’, places where ‘images can be purchased as ready-to-wear masks’. The retirement industry in Arizona and other Sunbelt locales offers a most alluring mask, the ageless self located in idyllic settings outside time and change.

An example of ageless selves is provided in the glossy brochure published by the Arizona SIC, entitled *Retiring in Arizona: A Place You’d Love to Call Home*. Depicted on the front cover are two ageless couples who are hiking with beaming smiles in the Sonoran desert, pausing conveniently along the trail to be photographed (Figure 2). Viewing this snapshot of robust seniors



Figure 2. Cover photo from *Retiring in Arizona: A Place You'd Love to Call Home*. Brochure of the Arizona Office of Senior Industries Development. Phoenix, AZ.

hiking in the timeless Sonoran desert, my mind's eye registers its absent antithesis, the image of 'unsuccessful ageing' that is implied but never shown: perhaps a frail older housebound woman living in a deteriorating neighbourhood in a dreary northern city. These images, present and absent, are frames from the positive and negative scripts of later life.

That the active lifestyle fostered in retirement communities lengthens and improves life is accepted as unquestioned fact by retirees, a mantra that has been noted by researchers and journalists who study and write about such settings (Jacobs 1974; Schoenstein 1986; FitzGerald 1986; McHugh and Mings 1996). These places are selective of healthy, upper-middle-income retirees to begin with, but residents typically prefer to emphasise the inherent live-giving qualities of active adult communities. Schoenstein (1986: 36) recorded a characteristic comment by a woman from the Bronx who retired in Boca Raton, Florida: 'Living in Century Village is a *dream*. I wish I'd retired sooner. It's added 15 years to my life'.

There is considerable discussion and debate about the ‘best’ place to retire, as amenity locales compete for the hearts (and money) of retirees (see Westerberg-Reyes 2000; Savageau 1999). Reflecting this healthy competition, seniors in Arizona relish ‘bashing’ Florida, the leading retirement destination in the United States. A story told by Fran Park of Sun City, Arizona, exemplifies the perception among Arizona seniors that the Grand Canyon State is superior to Florida as a place to spend one’s golden years. Responding to an interviewer about the geographic origins of retirees in Sun City, Mr Park stated:<sup>2</sup>

We also have a high number of people from Florida who either didn’t like the bugs [or] they could not take the barometric pressure changes. We have one guy who literally could not walk. He was so crippled from living in Florida. [He] came here to visit some friends. After three days, he could walk; and after a week, he said: ‘My golly, we got to buy a house here’. (1995: 16)

Mr Park’s story of miraculous healing in Sun City, Arizona, calls to mind the long history of pilgrimages for the purpose of restoring body and soul. From the standpoint of the Arizona SIC and the Del Webb Corporation, the real estate development and management company, the happy ending is that this restored soul purchased a house in Sun City.

Restorative powers figure prominently in promoting Arizona as a mecca for retirees. At an educational session during the 1998 SIC conference on ‘Selling to seniors’, in which tips of the trade were offered by marketing experts, the delegates were offered the sage advice to ‘offer them a deal’ and ‘to use large type’ in advertising. The marketing tip that caught my attention was the advice ‘to show seniors that staying where they are is not as powerful as *restoration* in the realms of youth, sex, money, health and memory.’ Anti-ageing is indeed the ultimate restoration project.

### **Near perfection**

The word ‘perfect’ is used frequently in the marketing of retirement places to seniors. The Arizona SIC draws upon perfection, or more precisely near-perfection, in their marketing campaign, as expressed in the opening statement of the brochure, *Retiring in Arizona*:

For decades, people have chosen Arizona as their home during the best years of their lives – retirement. No wonder. When it comes to things like climate, cost of living, lifestyle, scenic beauty, cultural and outdoor activities, Arizona is as close as it gets to perfect.

The phrase ‘as close as it gets to perfect’ is chosen carefully, because it would be unrealistic (and boastful) to claim outright perfection, for everyone



Figure 3. Retirement Was Never More Perfect. Photo from advertisement for Ocean Ridge Plantation, Sunset Beach, NC. In *Where to Retire* magazine, Winter 2000 edition, p. 31.

knows that perfection in time-space, that is a utopia, lies beyond the horizon, is beyond attainment, and is not a real place (Kumar 1987; Marin 1993). Sir Thomas More's neologism *utopia*, which ambiguously means both 'no-place' and 'good-place', was his imaginary island of political and social perfection. The term is now used both as a common noun to signify systems of thought and visionary schemes that seek idealised perfection, and pejoratively to ridicule unrealistic and flawed prescriptions for living that are deemed impracticable, including schemes espousing socialistic and communitarian ideals (Kateb 1972; Kumar 1987, 1991). Utopia in advanced capitalism is more likely to be conceived as 'lifestyle shopping' than in terms of social justice, equality and community (Shields 1992).

Whatever the members of the Arizona SIC promote, (near) perfection in retirement is not restricted to the Grand Canyon State, as shown by the carefree, attractive couple in Figure 3. They are seen on the 'uncrowded white sands of Sunset Beach' in North Carolina, a setting that kindles (or perhaps rekindles) romance. We gaze at the atypically handsome couple strolling the beach at sunset: events for the remainder of the evening are left to the imagination. This depiction sublimates desire onto the image of place, a potent marketing device used in promoting tourism, especially to exotic destinations, where beaches and pounding ocean surf often signify romance and eroticism (Goss 1993). Consumer advertisements hail and invite us, the target audience, to see ourselves as we imagine we are



(Goldman and Papson 1996). In this sense, advertising is most effective when spectators imagine it to be confirmatory: we are a romantic couple, so Sunset Beach could be our place.

In addition to perfection, one often finds the utopian invocation *to escape* in advertisements for Sunbelt retirement communities: ‘Escape to the unspoiled natural beauty of Arizona’s high desert and Sierra Vista, Arizona, the “nicest little town under the sun”’. ‘Escape to Winterhaven’s gated privacy and the stunning natural beauty of life on the fairways of Pueblo del Sol’s spectacular championship golf course. A lot of good people are escaping to Winterhaven’ (advertisement, *Where to Retire*, Winter 2000). Escape is central in utopian thought, especially in America where many people hold the notion that they can shuck off personal histories and start over again, that they can make new lives in new settings (FitzGerald 1986). Escaping to a better life is the great founding myth of America, a cultural motif that has been expressed throughout American history as a heightened propensity to migrate to greener pastures wherever they are deemed to be, and as a proliferation of experimental (utopian) communities, especially during periods of marked societal change, as during the mid-19th century and the 1960s and 1970s (Pitzer 1997; Berry 1992; Kumar 1987). The idea of starting anew in older age – of creating age-segregated reserves for seniors to pursue leisure *en masse* – is a uniquely American invention. We tend to see this blandly as another lifestyle choice, but it is nothing less than a grand social experiment in escapism and community, an experiment in progress with profound social, cultural and political implications (FitzGerald 1986).

### The right stuff

A critical aspect of retiree attraction programmes is luring the ‘right’ sort of seniors, meaning the affluent and comfortable middle class with the appropriate cultural cachet. This issue was raised in the keynote address at the 1999 Senior Industries Conference, ‘A visionary picture of Arizona in the mature millennium’, which was presented by Elliot Pollack, former executive with Bank One Arizona, and at the time of writing president of an economic and real estate consulting firm. Arizona and the SIC, according to Mr Pollack, should work to attract retirees who are affluent and family-oriented, for they spend more money and are more likely to have (adult) children who will care for them when they get old and sick. Also, family-oriented retirees are more likely to return home to die, and therefore not to be a social service and health care burden for Arizona in advanced old age.

Listening to Pollack’s exclusionary views, I realised immediately that they combine economic class preferences with the ‘fixed period’ principle of

useful life (Cole 1992: 162–74). I asked myself, ‘How can we implement Pollack’s vision?’ and imagined a retirement migration visa system whereby pre-retirees would apply to ‘retire’ in Arizona for a fixed period, subject to means-testing, health screening, and evidence of good family values and support. Once admitted to Arizona for the contracted period, all seniors would wear an official identification tag that legitimated their presence (much as some residents of Arizona retirement communities wear badges with their names and home towns proudly displayed). Visa over-stayers, those in failing health, and those who lose family support, all would be deported back to their home States, as would retirees guilty of ‘entry without inspection’. At the conference, I resisted the temptation to express this proposal for fear that the SIC would establish a committee to study its feasibility.

### **Down home living**

A revealing educational session at the 1998 Arizona SIC Conference was about the State of Mississippi’s retiree attraction programme, entitled *Hometown Mississippi*. The presenter, Barbara McDonald, explained to the geographically uninformed that Mississippi does not have all the amenities of Florida, Arizona or California, so the State had developed a personalised programme that plays upon its ‘down home’ (or friendly and welcoming) nature. Rather than encouraging migration to all parts of the Magnolia State, the programme concentrates on 20 towns officially certified as great places for retirees. To qualify, each town completed a multi-step certification process under the guidance and purview of the *Hometown Mississippi* staff. The keys to success are to muster support from town government and local business leaders, and to recruit local volunteers to support the promotional effort.

In terms of marketing, each town creates an identity and related slogan that is employed in promotional and advertising literature. The brochure for Oxford, Mississippi, for example, depicts a path through towering stately oak trees, with the punchy slogan: ‘Discover a haven for bookworms, tax evaders, and a chicken or two’. Low down the brochure, it reads: ‘Oxford, Mississippi: where the next chapter begins’. This plays on Oxford as the home of several noted writers, including William Faulkner, John Grisham, Willie Morris, Barry Hannah and Larry Brown, and the fact that Oxford is the home of the University of Mississippi. I interpret the phrase ‘chicken or two’ as an attempt to counter misperception of Oxford as overly stuffy and intellectual: it signifies that the city should not to be confused with *the* Oxford across the Atlantic.

The ‘tax evaders’ appellation, undoubtedly popular with the U.S. Internal Revenue Service, is a striking way to impress that Oxford, like all towns in Mississippi, has meagre taxes and a low cost of living. This is the strongest marketing ploy for retirement migration to Mississippi. Barbara McDonald derives great pleasure in brandishing her ‘comparative slide rule’, a device that compares Mississippi with all other states on a series of measures deemed important in choosing a retirement destination. For reasons that are readily apparent, Ms McDonald sets the slide rule according to the local taxes and cost of living and proclaims that Mississippi is the best place for retirees.

I noted that only two of the 20 towns certified as great places for retirees, Vicksburg and Natchez, are located in the Mississippi delta, an extensive region that has had a large African-American population since the era of slavery and the Old South plantation economy. As retirement migration is commonly viewed as a form of economic development (Laws 1996; Longino 1995; Rowles and Watkins 1993), I asked if any of the certificated towns have substantial African-American populations. Ms McDonald did not answer directly, but commented that ‘African-Americans do not do this sort of thing’, implying that they do not engage in retirement migration. There is substantial return migration to the South (including Mississippi) from other regions of the United States, but returning African-Americans are evidently not in mind for the retiree attraction programme. Ms McDonald added that *Hometown Mississippi* staff and volunteers are ‘instructed not to discriminate against any potential retiree on the basis of race, nationality or religion’.

A distinctive feature of the Mississippi programme is its ‘down home’ touch. Once a potential retiree couple is identified in their system, they are repeatedly contacted by telephone. The couple is encouraged to visit the town of interest where they receive VIP treatment that includes meetings with town officials and publication of their photograph in the local newspaper. The town guides are instructed to avoid cemeteries and rundown neighbourhoods when giving tours. One town, McComb, enlists the help of the Mississippi Highway Patrol in recruiting retirees: its troopers are instructed to stop retirement-age couples on the interstate highway and invite them as special guests to ‘McComb Hospitality Day’, where the honoured couples receive lunch at the Dinner Bell restaurant.

### **Nomads of desire**


Ekerdt (1986) argues that the leisure-based model of retirement has been justified by the ‘busy ethic’, as retirees pursue leisure with the same vim,

vigour and sense of purpose that they gave to work and raising their families. The busy ethic serves as the *raison d'être* and moral foundation for retirement in American society, a later life substitute for the work ethic. Ekerdt points out that while only a relatively small proportion of the American older population actually lives in retirement communities, such places have been 'most influential in the creation of an active, if shallowly commercial, image of the elderly' (1986: 242). Indeed, active adult communities are the apotheosis of the busy ethic, as 'talk' about pulsing schedules – if not actual activity – is pervasive and continuous and constitutes a mantra (Jacobs 1974; FitzGerald 1986; McHugh 2000). The man who purportedly invented the idea of congregating retirees in planned, amenity-rich communities, Delbert Eugene Webb, was hailed as a legend in his own time and a visionary genius, as the spectacular success of his Sun City communities gave rise to the Del Webb corporate empire (Freeman and Sanberg 1984).<sup>3</sup>


In concert with the busy ethic, retirement is justified as reward for a productive, diligent life. You have sacrificed and worked for others, 'Now's the time to relax and enjoy life. Play a little. Or a lot. Indulge your passions' (advertisement for Stonecrest Active Living Community in Central Florida, *Where to Retire*, Fall 1998). More sophisticated marketing statements link retirement with the opportunity for deferred self-actualisation: 'The freedom you dreamed about all those years has become a reality. At last, you can call your time your own ... you'll find endless possibilities to fulfil the promise of who you really are. ... We have clubs and amenities for every imaginable activity – and the choice is always yours' (advertisement for Del Webb's Sun Cities, *Where to Retire*, Fall 1998). They signal that retirement is all about you – *your* time, who *you* are, *your* choice – that the third age is a time for justified narcissism (Lasch 1978).


A remarkable image in this genre, of retirement as your time and the busy ethic justified, depicts a woman from River Landing retirement community riding a bicycle with a look of wilful determination on her face, and has the startling caption: 'A place your children will love to visit – when you have time to fit them in' (Figure 4). This strident advertisement overturns the view that retirement connotes older people being discarded by society and their families. While visiting retirement communities across America, Schoenstein (1986) found that seniors, removed from their families, spoke often about not wanting to get in the way of their children, of not wanting to interfere in their lives, of not wanting to be a burden.<sup>4</sup> A common expression is: 'They have their own lives to live'. In River Landing, seniors may not have time for their children owing to their pulsing schedules. The advertisement poses the rhetorical question: 'When you retire, how would you like to be busier than your children?' Retirement is not about grousing because you have been directly or indirectly 'put out to pasture'

A place your children  
will love to visit.  
When you have time  
to fit them in.



When you retire, how would you like to be busier than your children? That just may be the case at River Landing, a new, continuing care retirement community in the heart of the Piedmont Triad. The focal point will be a nine-hole golf course within walking distance of your town home or cottage. But that's only the beginning. To find out more, please call us at (536) 883-9111. Our completion date is the year 2000, but you can make a reservation today.

  
River Landing  
at Sandy Ridge



A Division of The Piedmont Homes, Inc.

Figure 4. A place your children will love to visit. When you have time to fit them in. Advertisement for River Landing retirement community. In *Where to Retire* magazine, Fall 1998 edition, p. 53.

in your career or profession, nor about pining away because your children and grandchildren are too busy to see you, and not a time to connive with the diminishment of your self-worth. Retirement is the serious business of choosing a style of leisurely living (from many choices), pursuing your choice with gusto and, in the process, finally discovering who you really are.

Images of retirees as ‘nomads of desire’ are part and parcel of the ‘third age’ (Laslett 1996) as a new class of consumers in advanced capitalism. Social theorists have pointed out that our age is dominated by consumption, media images, cultural materialism, and the hyper-reality of simulation and simulacra (e.g. Baudrillard 1975, 1981, 1994; Debord 1995; Bourdieu 1984; Lefebvre 1984; Eco 1986). The ‘cultural logic of late capitalism’ (Jameson 1991), and the discourse on postmodern ageing, is fixated on fluidity and uncertainty in identities, and their framing in terms of language, signs and symbols. This thrust is captured in Baudrillard’s (1975, 1981) depiction of consumer society as an infinite play of floating signifiers that elicit inexhaustible desire. The human subject here is the evolving network or collage of signs consumed, what some refer to as styles of living or lifestyles. We are bombarded with a multiplicity of images of youthful lifestyles in ageing that all revolve around the phantasm of the vital, competent, going-on-forever ageless self (Kastenbaum 1993; Blaikie 1999; McHugh 2000).

In its promotion of Sun City Grand, an upmarket retirement enclave in northwest Phoenix, as a ‘Festival of Living’, the Del Webb Corporation presents an evocative image in the genre of meandering desire that can be interpreted at three levels (Figure 5). First, and most importantly for the target market, the advertisement can be accepted at face value as a depiction of the ‘good life’ in retirement. The Corporation is the acknowledged master in scripting the active adult lifestyle. Second, the advertisement can be viewed as a tongue-in-cheek pastiche, an overdrawn caricature of the active retiree lifestyle, one that is intended to bemuse but which carries a tinge of ageism. At a third level, the image imparts an eerie quality in its portrayal of seniors as mannequins, dislodged from family and place, smiling maniacally as they pursue a festival of living in fabricated neighbourhoods. Staged in the hyper-reality of ‘Retirement Land’, the image parodies the third age.<sup>5</sup>

### **Bipolar ageism**

What does our exploration and critique of images and scripts in active retirement living tell us? What are the broader implications of this

**A Festival of Living**

It happens every day: Neighbors and families get together for special occasions, celebrations, or just because. It's this friendly atmosphere that gives Sun City Grand its small-town charm. Designed around a Village Center concept, this festive new community just northwest of Phoenix is made up of small, distinct neighborhoods – each with its own unique appeal. Yet they all share the resort-style amenities

that make the Sun Cities famous. To see all the neighborhoods, call or visit Sun City Grand today. We'd be proud to show you around.

1-17 to Bell Road, West to Grand Avenue, Then North Three Miles. Or call 602-546-5149 or 1-800-341-6121.

**Del Webb's Sun City Grand**

## Your Neighborhood Pride Is Showing Again.



21 models from the \$90s / [www.delwebb.com/scg.htm](http://www.delwebb.com/scg.htm) / Models open 9-5 daily

Figure 5. A Festival of Living. Your Neighborhood Pride Is Showing Again. Ad for Del Webb's Sun City Grand. In *Arizona Living* magazine, 1998–99 edition, p. 36

excavation? I conclude by arguing that promotional spaces and places in active retirement are illustrative of the power and persistence of bipolar ageism. This stream of thought leads to troubling questions about the perpetuation and depth of ageism in our society and culture.

That ageing and old age are subjected to negative stereotypes is rightly bemoaned and criticised by gerontologists (*e.g.* Bytheway 1995). A suite of positive interpretations and concepts – continuity, coherence, integrity, individuation, activity, agelessness and ‘successful ageing’ – have been proselytised in recent decades as antidotes to entrenched negative attitudes about old age as a period of loss and decline. This paper’s examination of a particular commercial adoption of the positive representation of later life provides grounds, however, for the charge of rampant if largely unintended ageism. The verdict of this analysis is ‘guilty’. So-called positive views signify cloaked denials and repressions of the facts of human ageing and old age, are rife with happy delusions that adulate youth and productive adulthood, and fail to accord meaning to the third age and beyond (Cole 1992; Öberg 1996; Torstam 1996; Biggs 1997; Andrews 1999; McHugh 2000).

In his magisterial cultural history of ageing, Cole (1992: 230) points out that since the early 19th century images of old age have been split into positive and negative poles: ‘a “good” old age of health, virtue, self-reliance, and salvation, and a “bad” old age of sickness, sin, dependency, premature death, and damnation’. Now a secularised version of the positive pole predominates, pushed by the scientific management of ageing and joined by consumerism and a flowering of third age lifestyles (Featherstone and Hepworth 1991; Blaikie 1999). Yet, positive stereotypes centred on anti-ageing, agelessness and successful ageing stand in dialectic relation with enduring negative stereotypes of old age as dependence, decay and disease. Unable to hold the opposite poles in creative tension – unable to accept the ambiguous and paradoxical nature of ageing – we vacillate between positive and negative stereotypes, both of which are imbued with strains of ageism (Cole 1992).

Institutional representations and images of successful anti-ageing, such as those promoted in active retirement living, are insidious in that they cultivate and parade an impossible ideal. Cole (1992: 238–9) argues that ‘we are all destined to live in fear of failure’ in a society in which health, the cornerstone of successful ageing, has been transformed from a ‘means of living well into an end in itself’, and that successful ageing is a bankrupt ideal ‘that cannot accommodate the realities of decline and death’. Blaikie (1999: 216) echoes these sentiments in *Ageing and Popular Culture*, concluding with the remark: ‘When agelessness becomes the elixir, the meaning of life evaporates’. Decline and death lurk just below the surface, forming a web of repression and denial that innervates agelessness as a cultural ideal for, as Baumann (1992) shows, death is ‘present’ throughout human institutions, rituals and beliefs. Embedded in the ideal of successful ageing is a deep-seated fear of our decline and erasure, projected outward in the form of



disdain and disgust for 'old' people who do not 'measure up' and who tumble down the spiral of 'bad' old age.

In a trenchant essay, Andrews (1999: 304) mounts a direct assault on 'the seductiveness of agelessness', offering a barbed retort to the rampant hyperbole about active living and successful ageing: 'mission amorphous, mission impossible'. She criticises the Cartesian mind/body split, stating that the mask of ageing, rather than being a positive affirmation of identity, is a pretence and form of self-hatred. Andrews argues persuasively that agelessness denies elders a most precious possession: 'the years they have lived ... the selves they have evolved from, and the selves they are becoming' (1999: 309). She believes that a corrective course is to abandon the delusional myth of agelessness and embrace the developmental opportunities in later life that arise from the tension between continuity and change.

I am in accord with Andrews's condemnation of agelessness, especially 'parasitic' strains in which anti-ageing is commodified and marketed (McHugh 2000). The promotion of retirement migration and active adult living is a case in point. While I am critical of plasticised media images, there are obvious benefits associated with positive ageing for seniors in retirement settings: health, invigoration, opportunities for personal development and growth, and feelings of belonging and camaraderie. This last point regarding collective identity in later life is crucial. We should not forget that older people, including those who congregate in retirement enclaves, are resident in an ageist society that represses and denigrates old age. That retirees find solace in 'escaping' to a place with their peers should not be surprising, for age takes on another cast in a community where everybody is old so nobody is old. In his treatise on *Ageing and Popular Culture*, Blaikie (1999: 196) demonstrates an understanding of the relation between ageism and escape: 'beyond the gloom of societal rejection or incarceration lies the stark inevitability of death. Is it any wonder that our elders should be so diligent and ingenious in their attempts to escape while they can?'

This leads to thorny questions about the degree to which ageism is ingrained in our society and culture, including the enterprise of gerontology. Is criticising positive views of ageing – such as the notion of agelessness – itself a form of ageism? To what degree are gerontologists and other 'sideline academics' (Kastenbaum 1993: 182) implicated in perpetuating ageist thinking (Bytheway 1995, 2000)? Are the gerontologists who proselytise successful ageing 'a new priesthood of professionals'? (Moody 1986: 35). Negative images of elders are ageist, so-called positive images of elders are ageist. Bipolar and equivocal views of ageing dominate our age, and regress in an infinite series that leads inexorably to the most perplexing question of all: is non-ageist thinking fathomable or culturally possible?

## NOTES

- 1 During a discussion of the concept of home in a social geography class at Arizona State University, one student, whose family had moved repeatedly, explained that home was inside her and that she carried it with her wherever she went. As Arizona is a land of migrants – only about 30 per cent of the adult population is native to the State – many other students readily understood and identified with this portable view of home as self. The notion of home is geographically elastic, ranging from person (this student's expressed feelings) to house, neighbourhood, community, region, nation and planet earth (Tuan 1975; Porteus 1976; Sopher 1979).
- 2 The interview with Fran Park was conducted in August 1995 by Elizabeth Larson and Philip Vandermeer for a project sponsored and funded by the Arizona Humanities Council entitled 'Voices from communities in transition'. Thanks to Elizabeth Larson for speaking with me about the project and to Dan Schilling, Executive Director of the Arizona Humanities Council, for giving me access to the interview materials for participants from Sun City, Arizona.
- 3 Tom Breen, a lieutenant in the Del Webb Company, is the person who actually came up with the idea for Sun City, Arizona, based on the modest success of a small retirement community nearby initiated in 1954 by Ben Schiefler (Youngtown, Arizona), and based on observations made in Florida in small *de facto* retirement villages. Breen became convinced that there would be high demand for active adult communities, and he convinced Del Webb to put up \$2 million to develop Sun City. It was a spectacular success from the celebratory opening day of sales, 1 January, 1960. Webb himself quickly claimed credit. The public relations office in the Del Webb Company began to promote the story that Del came up with the idea because his grandfather, Jimmy Webb, used to 'grouch about being old with nothing to do' (Freedman 1999).
- 4 Similar sentiments were detected in an ethnographic study of Arizona 'snowbirds' – retirees from the North who spend all or part of the winter season in the Southwest. We discovered that couples who had been highly migratory and career-oriented in their adult lives (or footloose) tended to express strong feelings of autonomy from their children and a marked desire not to be a burden in old age. Conversely, snowbirds who had lived all or most of their adult lives in a single city or town (or were still rooted) tended to have greater contact with, and attachment to, their children, and expected their children would care for them in older age if necessary (McHugh and Mings 1996).
- 5 It is interesting to contemplate why many people, especially baby boomers and young adults, tend to regard this Sun City Grand advertisement as a caricature or pastiche of the active retiree lifestyle, whereas many seniors ostensibly interpret it straightforwardly as a happy depiction of the 'good life' in retirement. In *Another Country: Navigating the Emotional Terrain of Our Elders*, Mary Pipher (1999: 19) suggests that 'Our parents' generation was pre-irony', and that 'many people older than a certain age grew up believing that the surface is all there is'. Pipher cites Freudian thought and advertising as influential in helping to create a culture of irony for 'my generation' (baby boomers), an overarching mindset that appearances are deceiving.

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