

ARTICLE

# ‘Sometimes you gotta get out of your comfort zone’: retirement migration and active ageing in Cuenca, Ecuador

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(Accepted 17 July 2020; first published online 7 September 2020)

## Abstract

The article extends notions of ‘active’ and ‘successful’ ageing by exploring the narratives of ageing in the retirement migration of Canadian and American older adults in Cuenca, Ecuador. The article is based on 83 semi-structured qualitative interviews (11 of which are follow-up interviews), most conducted in the first half of the 2010s. I explore how notions of finite time and imaginaries of a fourth age of decline and death inform the migration decisions and imaginaries of Canadian and American retirement migrants. I argue that their desire to seek self-expansive, new experiences through migration and contact with cultural difference dialogues with an increasingly competitive neoliberal culture of ageing, that emphasises success through activity, youthfulness and consumption. While there are certainly other ideals that help inform North American migration to Ecuador, I argue that these particular ideals illustrate how discourses of ‘active ageing’ have been taken up ‘from below’, by ageing North American adults, many of whom identify with the aspirations of policy and corporate discourses of activity and success, but who find themselves ageing into material conditions that preclude them. Migration to a lower-cost country, like Ecuador, helps them to experience these aspirations more positively, but may have uneven effects on lower-income workers and their ability to remain in place in the communities marketed for this type of migration.

**Keywords:** active ageing; successful ageing; international retirement migration; cultures of ageing

## Introduction

Experiences of travel and migration in the third age speak powerfully to cultural ideals of ageing, which are shifting after a generation of neoliberal restructuring. While retirement migration has been noted for some time, and international destinations – especially in Europe – have received considerable academic attention, the growing movement of North American retirees to destinations in Central and South America is relatively new. In part, this is the result of declining retirement security and growing inequality within the United States of America (USA) and

Canada – though no doubt, it is also furthered by real-estate and marketing companies, who have sought out ‘new frontiers’ of accumulation in lower-cost regions. It hints at a new type of international retirement migration, linked to an unequal global political economy – one that articulates new styles of ageing and new regimes of migration and transnational mobility. The focus of this article is on the cultural codes that international retirement migrants in Ecuador use to make sense of their ageing process.

International retirement migrants in Ecuador express their ageing ideals through binary cultural codes which emphasise the accumulation of intense experiences, novelty, youthfulness and adventure through travel. It is often easy to identify with these ideals, but I wish also to trouble them here, because these positive conceptions of ageing are dramatically juxtaposed to other forms of ageing, associated with routine, inactivity and established gender ideologies (especially for women), which speak to how ageing ideals – the culture of ageing – structures the interpretations of individuals increasingly attuned to finite notions of time and the ephemerality of life. International retirement migration is, I suggest, a new material strategy that enables some older adults – especially those affected negatively by the economic consequences of fiscal austerity, labour market changes and the 2008 financial crisis (Polivka and Luo, 2015; Gatta, 2018) – to continue to live up to ever-increasing expectations associated with active and successful ageing, which often cause financial and other forms of stress. As Ann Swidler (1986) might suggest, in the ‘unsettled lives’ of older adults living through the crisis of neoliberalism, the cultural codes around activity and successful ageing may prove to be longer lasting than the post-war political economic settlements that gave rise to the material condition of mass retirement. While the coronavirus pandemic seems to undermine these material conditions further, the relative stability of the cultural codes coupled with the material interests of important industries, suggests that international retirement migration could continue to expand, despite temporary travel restrictions.

The paper is divided into five parts. The first, following this introduction, situates the current study within existing literature on ageing in international retirement migration. I draw attention to cultures of ageing in a global perspective. The second section discusses the methods for the research presented in the second and third sections. The third demonstrates how retirement migration to a lower-income country is premised on ideals of active ageing, which have become prominent in high-income countries. By focusing on ideals associated with travel and cross-cultural encounter, I deliberately wish to move beyond narrow policy-focused definitions of ‘active ageing’, and engage instead with narratives of people undertaking activities that they reflect upon in relation to ageing. The fourth section discusses how retirement migration influences these ageing ideals, providing opportunities for realising culturally valuable forms of youthful ageing and continued activity. A concluding section situates these cultural manifestations of the ageing process in socio-historical perspective, hinting at broader work that must be done to clarify how ageing is changing in high-income countries, and how increasingly competitive and neoliberal forms of ageing have important repercussions on communities in the Global South, whose economic futures are being tied to new forms of mobile ageing.

## Ageing in mobility

The growing popularity of international retirement migration in particular, has given rise to a rapidly growing body of scholarship at the intersection of migration and ageing (Ciobanu and Hunter, 2017; Ciobanu *et al.*, 2017; Horn and Scheppe, 2017; King *et al.*, 2017; Näre *et al.*, 2017). Attempts to build a scholarly approach to ageing and migration often focus on older adults' pursuit of culturally significant forms of 'positive and creative ageing' or 'active ageing' (*cf.* King *et al.*, 2017; Toyota and Thang, 2017). Yet, as scholars of the sociology of ageing point out, these contemporary discourses are of recent construction, and are related to cultural codes that privilege youth, busy-ness and productivity (Katz, 2000; Gilleard and Higgs, 2005). By focusing on activity and ways of remaining healthy and busy, policy makers and corporations have encouraged older adults in high-income countries to see themselves as individually responsible for their own ageing, and to think of themselves in relation to a conception of 'successful ageing' (Rowe and Kahn, 1998; Dillaway and Byrnes, 2009).

Sociologists of ageing argue that 'active' and 'successful' ageing place too much attention on individual lifestyle and fail to address the social context of the ageing experience, especially the unequal distribution of resources along racial, gender and class lines under shifting forms of capitalist accumulation. These discourses also promote a negative perception of ageing, focused on staying young, remaining active and fostering a subjectivity of the 'ageless self' that in many respects exhibit the neoliberal expectations of an increasingly competitive and individualist labour market (Katz, 2000; McHugh, 2000; Rudman, 2006; Allain and Marshall, 2017). These cultural ideals of activity and agelessness are also important in contemporary retirement experiences of travel (Hitchings *et al.*, 2018), yet have received less attention in retirement migration scholarship. Yet, retirement migration is one way that older adults realise cultural ideals of active ageing, sometimes seeking out what Ahmed and Hall (2016) call 'optimal ageing'. Relatively few studies at the intersection of migration and ageing draw attention to the cultural imaginaries of ageing in international contexts (but *see* Oliver, 2008; Gambold, 2013). These imaginaries of ageing are important, however, since they may motivate retirement migration and modify experiences of ageing. This is especially the case for migration to lower-income countries, where retirees from higher-income countries on fixed incomes can take advantage of inherited global inequalities to improve their material quality of life (Ormond and Toyota, 2016). This is an important historical context that modifies experiences of ageing in migration. Because ageing is not ontologically given, but, as sociologists of ageing point out, culturally constructed and socio-historically variable (especially *see* Gilleard and Higgs, 2005, 2011; Katz, 2005; Baars *et al.*, 2016; Higgs and Gilleard, 2020), it is also geographically contingent, and expresses unequal and unjust historical regimes of capitalist accumulation that have distributed the benefits of industrial productivity very unevenly and in a colonial pattern. For international retirement migrants, this too is part of the context of ageing.

As a cultural construct, the variability of ageing is certainly not foreign to scholars of the retirement and lifestyle migration of older citizens of high-income countries, often to Spain or France (O'Reilly, 2000, 2017; Oliver, 2008; Gambold, 2013),

but sometimes also to lower-income countries (*see* Botterill, 2017). As Oliver (2008) points out, older migrants develop a sense of their international mobility that helps them confront their ageing process. They develop identities around autonomy and activity in migration that shape how they experience ageing itself, and that they use to distinguish themselves from others. Similarly, Gambold (2013) discusses the resourcefulness of older women migrants to Mexico and France, who narrate their ageing process as a sharp break from an apparently more mundane and restrictive ageing process in their home countries. As she notes, this break is narrated in terms of a 'fear of the known', in which migration becomes a way of escaping an apparently pre-arranged path of ageing. Similarly, Japanese retirement migrants narrate self-identities that seek autonomy and meaning from integration into a different culture in the third age (Toyota and Thang, 2017). In these cases, the personal experience of migration from high-income countries affects the subjective identity formation of ageing adults, producing new cultural codes and lifestyles in the third age.

A sociological approach to the intersection of ageing and migration must attend to the ways that both objects of study – ageing and migration – have shifted in recent years. It also focuses on two primary objects: the self-understanding of individual research participants, and the historical trajectories of socio-economic structures which provide a material context for self-understanding (but which are also sometimes influenced by these understandings). The literature in gerontology and sociology of ageing locates the meanings that older adults give to the ageing process in the historical development of structural forces (Katz, 2005; Gilteard and Higgs, 2011; Phillipson, 2013). These structural forces include the growing policy focus of Western governments on the health and material wellbeing of older populations, which have become demographically important in the last few decades, and which have spawned significant public debate about the implications – economic, cultural and social – of an ageing population (World Health Organization, 2002; Phillipson, 2013). International retirement migrants to lower-income countries are often relocating against the backdrop of personal financial circumstances that motivated them to seek out retirement destinations in lower-cost countries (Hayes, 2018; *see also* Lardiés, 2011; Botterill, 2017; Toyota and Thang, 2017). The 'crisis of neoliberalism' (Duménil and Lévy, 2011) has contributed to growing economic inequality amongst older adults, and increased job and financial insecurity affecting those at or near retirement<sup>1</sup> (Grenier *et al.*, 2017; Gatta, 2018), spawning new practices of international mobility based on utilitarian cultural evaluations of living costs (or geographic arbitrage; *see* Hayes, 2014), which contrast with policy discourses focused on 'ageing in place'.

Discourses of 'ageing in place' emerged in response to the desire of older adults to avoid ageing in residential care homes and is defined in relation to maintaining individual autonomy and independence (*cf.* Wilers *et al.*, 2012; Iecovich, 2014). However, they also reference debates about the costs of elder-care in a neoliberal society that is increasingly care-averse. Ageing in place refers, therefore, to a transition from third to fourth age, which ageing migrants will no doubt eventually face. Relocation to a lower-cost country is sometimes undertaken in the hope of finding affordable and readily available long-term care in the event of sickness or infirmity. Opportunities to increase autonomy and lifestyle through geographical mobility has

a longer history, but its manifestation in contemporary retirement migration to Latin America should be understood against the changing backdrop of state responsibility for provision of elder-care, as well as the shift in the household from producer to consumer of care (Hochschild, 2013). As Bender *et al.* (2018) point out, provision of care is an important amenity for some older migrants, spawning a growing industry in lower-income countries (*see also* Bender and Schweppe, 2019).

These socio-structural transformations are also noteworthy for situating contemporary retirement migration to Latin America within migration scholarship. Drawing on global approaches to migration (Glick Schiller, 2009, 2013; Castles, 2010), retirement migrants to Latin America should be situated within a global political economy of migrations. In this respect, the migration of tens of thousands of North Americans without previous cultural or family ties to Latin American towns and cities needs to be understood in relation to the integration of a global political economy, with its uneven geographies of accumulation, leisure, extraction and work. Here too, the crisis of neoliberalism helps inform the growing popularity and economic importance of retirement migration to Ecuador and other Latin American countries. Retirement migrants often prioritise lifestyle ideals in the decision-making process and attach importance to places and landscapes that help them realise these lifestyles (Benson and O'Reilly, 2016). Their mobility is unrelated to demand for their skills, but rather demand for their post-productive incomes and savings, which can become important sources of real-estate consumption. In Cuenca, Ecuador where as many as 10,000 North Americans have relocated since the 2008 financial crisis, retirees are attracted to the city's historic urbanism and its cultural offerings, which international lifestyle marketers and local real-estate developers sell as desirable amenities (Van Noorloos and Steel, 2016; Hayes, *in press*). This has the effect of increasing the relative value of historic real-estate in cities of the Global South that could not be achieved without higher global incomes (Kurzac-Souali, 2013; Sigler and Wachsmuth, 2016). The importance that retirement migration is gaining as an industry (Toyota and Xiang, 2012) may reflect Gilleard and Higgs' central argument about the third age: that it is a cultural field stratified by symbolic capitals of ageing, which corporations have an outsized influence in defining (Higgs and Gilleard, 2010; Gilleard and Higgs, 2011). But as I point out below, it is also a reflection of cultural ideals of ageing, which following Swidler (1986), we can expect to be more durable than the material conditions within which they were fostered.

## Methodology

The results discussed below come from 83 semi-structured qualitative interviews undertaken with 91 North American retirement migrants in Cuenca, Ecuador, 47 of whom were men and 44 women. Eleven of those 83 interviews were follow-ups, and 19 couples were interviewed together. Most of the interviews were undertaken in 2011–2015 ( $N = 77$ ), with an additional six in 2019 (two of which were follow-up interviews). The youngest participant was 54, the oldest was 80, and the majority were in their sixties (55 of the 78 participants for whom age was recorded – for 13 participants, it was not recorded). While most participants migrated to Ecuador in relationships, 17 men and 17 women in my sample moved on their

own. Precise data on income and education were not collected from most participants, making it difficult to assess exact class differences. Class difference amongst North American migrants in Ecuador is important (*cf.* Hayes and Carlson, 2018; for differences amongst British retirement migrants in Spain, *see also* Oliver and O'Reilly, 2010), but when participants discussed class, they often said it was difficult to tell if people were telling the truth about their professions and status, and that 'border promotions' were common. Most participants can broadly be described as middle class, having spoken of steady jobs and middle-class lifestyles in their home countries. Some individual stories are peppered with job instability and career changes, which underscore how some middle-class positions have shifted in North America as a result of neoliberal austerity policies, and changing pension and retirement-financing regimes. Some participants held high-paying jobs in the USA, but most participants mentioned moving to Ecuador because they lacked economic resources (it came up without prompting as a reason for relocation in 46 of the 72 first-time interviews, *e.g.* not counting the 11 follow-ups). My sample has a significant number of formerly self-employed entrepreneurs and small business owners, but there was a dearth of professionals, such as doctors and lawyers (only one participant was a lawyer), or unionised workers – whose pension benefits may have given them other retirement options. Cuenca is marketed as a lower-cost retirement alternative to middle-class English-speaking Americans whose savings may not allow them to fulfil ideals associated with a successful retirement and ageing process (Hayes, 2018). While I met a few African-American and Filipino-American migrants, the overwhelming majority of members of the North American community would be perceived as white (only one participant was African-American). I met one Mexican-American woman married to a non-Latino white American who were also in Cuenca contemplating relocation there (not interviewed as part of this research). Though the North American retirement community in Ecuador was not ethnically very diverse in the 2010s, this may also change if marketers target other demographic groups, and may not be representative of other North American retirement destinations in the Global South (in 2019, for instance, Ghana celebrated its 'Year of Return' and is actively courting African-American migration and real-estate investment). Because of the sampling techniques used in this study, results are not intended to be representative of the North American population in Cuenca. Qualitative interviews enabled me to assess what topics were discussed frequently, and what variations emerged on themes, such as those related to ageing. Themes concerning the cultures of ageing emerged during coding of interview data, and through discussions with colleagues and students at St. Thomas University. Coding was conducted first using keyword searches of transcripts in a Word document and was supplemented with additional material obtained by rereading transcripts.

Ethnographic notes and discussions accompany my interview data. I was lucky to meet a dynamic and interesting group of people, with whom, as a white, settler-Canadian, I shared many cultural references, facilitating contact and conversation on a sprawling number of topics. Narratives relating to ageing occurred most frequently in response to other questions – especially when respondents were asked to explain their migration decisions. Older participants discussed their desire to live a more active, adventurous older age, while there was still time. These desires were

articulated in relation to an increasing cost of living that made it impossible for some to retire in their home countries. International retirement migration was one way to maintain sacred retirement ideals, especially about being active, experiencing personal growth and remaining youthful.

These ideals speak to contemporary cultures of ageing which currently inform migration decisions in third age, especially in high-income countries. The narratives drawn out below are not meant to be totalising. I assume that many readers will find that they resonate with their own ideals of ageing (or even of travel at different stages of the lifecourse). I suspect research participants might also be sceptical, at least some of the time, about the narratives discussed here and may have more to say about them – hopefully a topic of future research. Finally, it is likely that there are other narratives of ageing stemming from experiences of international retirement migration to Ecuador, ones that may be grounded in contemplative traditions (Baars, 2016), in religious worldviews (there is an important American evangelical community in Cuenca, including many religious progressives), or in some other more secular, solidaristic and less-competitive disposition towards ageing. Many migrants may, therefore, not see their own beliefs reflected here. I draw attention to the narratives below because they were the most important and significant ones that my participants brought up in our specific interview setting. They also resonate as important ideals that may show how retirement cultures are shifting at this historical moment.

### Searching for adventure in the shadow of a fourth age

North American retirees in Cuenca often narrated their migration to Ecuador in relation to an imaginary of a fourth age – defined in gerontological literature as a period of decline and death (Higgs and Gilleard, 2020) – which spurred them to seek adventure and activity while there was ‘still time’. Participants often portrayed this aspirational notion of an ageing process filled with meaningful activities as the correct way of ageing, which was more attainable as a result of their migration, and which they contrasted to ‘sitting at home’. This cultural code helped structure life experiences in the third age, as retirement migrants sought to accumulate intense and meaningful experiences, marked by contact with cultural difference and novelty,<sup>2</sup> rather than ‘fading out’. This section attends to the shadow of a fourth age, one which motivates a search for more intense and meaningful experiences in a third age of activity. This cultural code in relation to ageing helps produce an imaginary of transnational migration (*see also* Benson, 2012; Marrow and Klewkoski von Koppenfels, 2020).

Faced with the inevitability of the fourth age, some migrants seek personal projects that prioritise individual autonomy. Sandy and Elise were a highly educated, well-travelled couple from Washington State, who had relocated to Cuenca in 2011, when they were in their late sixties. They had been working and ageing in a creative community on the US west coast that was undergoing intense gentrification as a result of its historic urbanism, making it difficult for them to age in place without continuing to work (*see also* Buffel and Phillipson, 2019). For several years, they had thought of leaving the USA, but care responsibilities towards frail and elderly parents had prevented them from making solid plans. Elise said:



We have other elderly family members, and they were trying to involve us in their life and their health, and offering us, you know, a house, but come and take care of us, and we said no.

'This is our turn', Elise said. 'We need to get out, because we'll be sucked up.' This notion that others had had their turn, and that it was now time for them to put themselves first, mimics, in some ways, the narratives of women interviewed by Allain and Marshall (2017), who asserted a need to care for themselves, after a lifetime of caring for others. In this instance, taking a 'turn' refers to asserting the self in relation to others' needs and obligations towards them. Moreover, this self-assertion is informed by a finite sense of time. Elise said:

[M]ore than anything, we knew that we were getting up in age, that if we wanted to do something adventurous, we had to do it then.

This recognition of finite life shaped Elise's desire to 'get into another culture'. As her husband Sandy put it, 'we had had enough of death and dying for a while'.

For both, the sense of adventure was tied to moving to 'another culture', one that was defined as unfamiliar, and therefore full of opportunities for growth relative to their routines in the USA. As Sandy put it, 'the American culture is all too familiar'. While acknowledging that he had been privileged with a creative career, Sandy nonetheless expressed that he

was ready for a change. I think that's just kinda the way I would say it. It's, like, looking for something new, and adventure.

When asked to specify what this adventure meant to him, he repeated that 'it means that, it's new, it's exciting. You know, uh, I'm not getting bored, here. That's important'. This sense of newness implies a binary opposite and taps a notion of success that is key to the narrative of adventure itself. This search for newness indexes normative gender ideals of wage-earning men and defines adventure in relation to the routine of work-life, but it is also related to youthful activities, such as travel to other cultures, that Sandy referenced in relation to my question about what adventure meant for him. Other male respondents similarly articulated a notion of adventure in relation to a break from work routines – a subjective feeling of liberation and self-expansion that is experienced as successful living. By contrast, women respondents often evoked breaking with established gender norms. As Elise put it, adventure was about 'taking a big left turn', by which, she clarified:

I don't like to do, to be, to feel like I'm locked into having to be a certain way ... I like to be rebellious. And go another direction. Or go off on my own, or whatever, and not follow the crowd.

This individualism and concern for being true to her own inner feelings clashed with her family's expectations, against which she had had to struggle, especially in her youth. Yet, in third age, her ability to continue to pursue 'left turns' taps cultural codes that mark new experiences and the unexpected as more meaningful



than following established norms. Being able to draw on this binary gave meaning to her ageing, and helped mark her transnational migration as part of larger cultural narratives that justify success in terms of individual authenticity over conformity.

Migration to Cuenca was especially meaningful to participants because of the access it gave to cultural difference, and how contact with difference enabled all genders to experience growth and change, which they valued as they aged. Brett, 71 from Vancouver, illustrates this well. For him, 'the adventure is in the difference. That's why, if it were the same, it wouldn't be an adventure.' This notion of adventure and of accepting difference articulated a correct way to migrate as a Canadian, but it also gave meaning to the ageing process. When I asked him why difference was important to him, Brett pondered for a moment and then said:

It keeps you young. It, it, it's just, um, you don't fossilise ... I just liked the difference. I just liked, you know, I don't want to stagnate doing the same old same old.

Here too, adventure is defined by breaking from routine, but it is also understood in relation to avoiding an ageing process associated with stagnation and settling in – references to established codes of the third age as a phase of activity, mobility and busy-ness. This informed Brett and his partner's desire to continue moving – something that their experience in Cuenca facilitated, since it saved them money, and gave them knowledge of how to live in a different country.

Now that we're all settled in here, after four years, it's our home, we're comfortable here, [but] if we ever leave, it will be to go to the highlands of India or something, you know, and try that, because we can.

Other migrants harboured similar desires. Colin (68, Oregon), for instance, spoke openly on several occasions of wanting to explore new destinations, such as Colombia. Similarly for Christine, 68, formerly from Virginia. As she explained, the lower cost of living in Cuenca facilitated more travel:

it certainly gives me latitude to travel more, which I would like to do, not only in Ecuador, but when I have [Ecuadorian] residency, other Latin American countries – and I want to go back to France [a country she knew from her time there as a student].

The meaning of increased travel and transnational mobility is perhaps most explicitly expressed by Diana, a 60-year-old former social worker from eastern Canada, who conceived of her migration project to Ecuador against the backdrop of the inevitability of death and decline. Her family's genetics, she said, were 'terrible. We all die of strokes, and we all die young'. As a result, she said, she was 'looking for a little adventure before I'm on the other side of the grass' – articulating an imaginary of the fourth age of decline and death (Higgs and Gilleard, 2020) that gave rise to practices informed by an ethos of active ageing. Before migrating to Ecuador, she mentioned that she had been worried about getting bored at home. She had taken arts courses and sought to 'do something different'. This desire to do something different was articulated in relation to an acute awareness of her

own mortality. 'I figure I've got another 10 years of good health. Ten years, maybe 15 years if I'm really, really careful, and very lucky', she said. Conscious that this no longer seemed like a very long time to her, she echoed Elise, 'there was the recognition ... that if I'm going to do anything, it needs to be now.' While Elise and Sandy had thought for years about relocating abroad, for Diana the decision was much more spontaneous – she had decided to leave only a few months before she left and came with only a few suitcases. The ethos articulated here was one that contrasts new experiences (doing something different) with the boredom of routine, producing – for Diana – intense subjective sensations of success that tinted her perceptions of ageing. 'I wanted something completely different. This is it!'

Diana's search to do something different contrasts with the routine of her work life, but it also broke with normative gender ideals that might otherwise have constrained her. Diana's initial idea of retirement had been one of relaxing and spending time with her grandchildren, and 'continuing friendships I'd built up over decades'. But a decision to split from her husband changed that. 'All of a sudden, the whole world opened up to me', she said. 'I want to see how other people live.' Adventure, Diana said, meant taking risks, and

moving out of my comfort zone and doing something, experiencing something that frightens me, that unnerves me. Um, that makes me anxious. And especially doing it alone.

This 'doing it alone' may have differed from her own expectations of retirement, but it also broke with normative gender ideals, and in doing so, enhanced Diana's experience of her ageing process. By moving outside her comfort zone, Diana was not merely breaking from routine, as Brett had. She was embarking on a new experiment of defining what it meant to be a woman at this phase of her life, free from care obligations – much as Elise articulated a desire to break from established norms and define her ageing for herself. For Diana, moving out of her comfort zone meant 'personal growth', not merely a change of pace, as though by inventing ourselves beyond expectations enabled an extension of the self and expansion of life.

This notion of challenging or even improving the self appears to illustrate ways in which the subjectivity of retirees is being reconstituted in relation to powerful discourses that have shaped the third age as a space of active consumption (*cf.* Rudman, 2006; Gilleard and Higgs, 2011). But they also point to forms of self-improvement from below, in which self-responsibilised retirees seek to develop new identities organised around cultural codes of adventure that help them to confront the inevitability of a fourth age and of finite time and health. These personal projects of breaking with routine and seeking adventure and growth were experienced as valuable signs of good living, and were either explicitly or implicitly contrasted with binary opposites that were seen as less successful.

### **Activity, competitiveness and youthful ageing**

A search for newness and growth was common amongst research participants, and it did not just motivate their retirement migration to Ecuador. Often, the meanings

they associated with migration were narrated in relation to activity and youthfulness – especially for male participants, such as Brett, mentioned above. Thus, their migration also informed how they experienced the ageing process. Sometimes this was brought up in relation to less-desirable or less-successful ways of ageing, which participants preferred to avoid. John, for instance, had a management job in the construction industry before he moved alone to Ecuador in 2008. By the time I interviewed him, he was an old hat in Cuenca, and had seen the ‘expat’ population there grow significantly. Speaking of his own ageing process, John was reflexive. ‘I try to imagine my dad’, he said. ‘Unfortunately, he died right after he turned 65.’ John recollected how he felt his father was ‘cheated’ out of a good life in retirement, especially since he had been prudent and ‘had the money’. This echoes Elise’s sense of the third age as a sort of entitlement, or ‘turn’, which one anticipates as a normal part of the lifecourse. ‘I didn’t realise how young he really was’, John said of his father, and this influenced how he saw his own retirement planning. ‘One of the things that his dying convinced me was that I wasn’t going to work a day over 65.’ But retirement itself was not the main way that John interpreted his ageing process. Rather, it was in relation to activities that made him feel younger than his father was in his ageing process:

I couldn’t picture my dad doing what I’m doing. Even though he could afford to do it, and he travelled all over the world himself, because he liked to travel, I just don’t see him kayaking at 65, and that’s when I started kayaking, when I was 65.

This is another way in which the ageing process is potentially competitive – new generations of people in the third age may also sometimes compare their ageing against that of their parents.

John’s desire to be more active and to get more out of life was partly the result, it seems, of a reflection on the things his father apparently lost out on. John said he came to Cuenca because he was still adventurous enough to give it a try, and this sense of adventure carried with it a subjective sense of successful ageing. ‘Could I imagine [my father] riding his bike, or coming down here to Cuenca? Nope’, he said. John was not merely outliving his father, but also remaining more youthful in the process, at least perceptually. ‘Perceptually, I saw them [his parents] much older than they really were’, he related. In this respect, he felt that his experience of ageing in migration kept him younger than his parents, he said. But he also felt that his constant activity made him avoid fading into a fourth age of physical decline that precedes death:

I’m afraid if I stop running, death will catch up to me. And until I’m stopped in my tracks, I don’t have any intention of slowing down ... There’s a lot of people like me, too, you know?

Other participants echoed themes that associated travel and moving to another culture with activity, staying young, remaining relevant and continuing to grow as opposed to an ageing process evocative of an imaginary of a fourth age of stagnation and decline. Walter, a retired banking professional in his early seventies, provides another variation on this. As he put it, he and his partner ‘wanted to enjoy

our lives when we had the opportunity to do so. We wanted an experience, an adventure'. But to do this, Walter, like many others, needed to relocate to a lower-cost region:

Do we stay [in the USA], live on social security and my pension savings and not do the things that we can do in a foreign country?

By moving to a foreign country with a lower cost of living, Walter could live out culturally important ageing ideals associated with activity and youthfulness. 'I am more active, less sedentary, [my lifestyle here] gives me a chance to do something like [give back to the community].' For him, remaining active included opportunities to socialise with others, going out for dinner and moving around the city without having to worry about expenses.

Because of the climate, you don't need heating, and you don't need many different types of insurance, on homes and so on. You don't need a car. You eat better and you walk more.

As a result, life was 'much more affordable' compared to the expenses that sucked up his income in his suburban US lifestyle prior to migration. In light of that, it was, he said, 'not as important to stay', as it was to 'go somewhere more free with an easy lifestyle'. This conflation of freedom with consumption speaks, perhaps, to the cultural rootedness of capitalist forms of organising and justifying everyday life in the USA, since freedom and autonomy here are equated with having more purchasing power, not with having greater rights to socially produced goods or greater democratic control over their distribution. 'Here, we go out for dinner 10 or 12 times a month', he related. 'I couldn't do that in the US.' Walter was not merely describing his lifestyle. This justified, for him and for others like him, why he would move abroad. Rather than reworking cultural expectations in relation to new material conditions, international retirement migration has become a way for some to live up to ageing ideals that industrial and financial interests also helped foster during an earlier period of capitalist accumulation.

Moreover, because the relocation allowed Walter to shift class positions dramatically, it also enabled him to conserve other cultural values that he deemed important. 'Moving here ... gave us an opportunity to do something different and give back', he said. For him, remaining active and young was also related to being involved in the community. 'I think being involved, in my opinion, keeps us active and young.' Relatively higher incomes in Ecuador allowed migrants who would have been on the margins of the class and status hierarchies of the USA and Canada to be benefactors and patrons of civic organisations, lower-income Ecuadorians or other 'deserving poor' in Cuenca. Walter articulated a maxim of life similar to that of Robert Bellah's republican individualism (Bellah *et al.*, 1985). For Walter, relocating to Ecuador enabled him to be part of a community that worked together to resolve problems, something he no longer saw in an overly bureaucratic and rationalised North American culture, but which was important to his sense of self. 'I enjoy growing into being part of this community. It is rewarding and important.' This sense of integration into a foreign culture gave meaning to his

retirement and ageing process. But it also attenuated the economic motivations of his relocation, which Walter also recognised as potentially polluting his desire to integrate and be a good migrant (on good migrants, *see* Hayes and Carlson, 2018). Being involved

demonstrates to the community that we are not all here to sit on our butts and do nothing. It is important if we are going to enjoy the fruits of the community, we have to give back and be involved ... [It] demonstrates that we are not here just to be economic refugees.<sup>3</sup>

This involvement was something that Walter was nostalgic for, and that informed his critique of American society, which had sharpened since his migration to Ecuador:

From what I remember, people in corporate America would go to work, take their kids to soccer, do yard work on Saturdays. They wouldn't do philanthropy, at least what I saw. Maybe the opportunities weren't there, but people in the US are more siloed than they are here.

That is, they 'live in their own worlds. I don't think they realise it', Walter said. This critique of late capitalist work routines and inward-focused individualism informed Walter's desire both to be involved for others, and to live an adventure that might provide new meaning to an ageing process that was increasingly insecure in the USA – which he had to leave in order to live an 'easier life'.

One particular group of active agers that was widely discussed in the North American community in Cuenca in the 2010s was the community of single older women, who had migrated on their own, and whose experiences – like Diana's, noted above – seemed to illustrate an ideal of ageing successfully, in a new, active and adventurous way that broke from normative gender ideals. These breaks were generally more important than remaining young, and perhaps reflect different normative gender ideals for women, who may find it more difficult to be perceived as young in a North American culture that generally assigns youthful femininity to domesticity and reproduction, as opposed to activity and productivity. But their ageing ideals were also often articulated in relation to economic limitations, inherited from a more marginal structural position within North American political economy (Hayes, 2018: 46–51). Rose had retired to Cuenca from Wisconsin. 'When I lived in the States it was difficult for me to engage in a lot of different types of activities', she said.

Here I practise Tai Chi four times a week, I have tango lessons, salsa lessons, um, belly dancing lessons. I have Spanish lessons, I am a volunteer two times a week ... what else do I do? ... I would say I am a lot more active than I was because it is affordable to do all sorts of things.

Women narrated their experience and activity in relation to sociability, and the facility with which they were able to meet new people and partake in social activities that would often have been unaffordable at home.

As Melanie, 55, a working-class woman from Wisconsin mentioned, 'I think the kind of single women that come here are more adventurous, and they are risk-takers too', she said, echoing a notion of risk-taking that Diana had internalised as well in relation to moving outside her comfort zone – a way of life perceived as morally noteworthy. '[T]hey're very brave', Melanie added. 'And they're willing to try new things. Meet new people. Have new adventures. Travel.' These women were not, she felt, the types who sat at home and waited for the end. '[W]e're always out and about. Always. We don't sit at home at all.' Some women mentioned this sociability as being a key influence on their ageing process, and its evocation implies a binary that defines success in relation to staying home. As Jennie, a divorced former bookkeeper in her early sixties put it, 'you don't have to sit in your apartment and stare at four walls just because you are living on Social Security'; or as Daniela, a retired administrator put it:

There is an incredible support group here, among the expats. Much more – and I've had this talk with other friends – much more, than [in the USA], I mean, I *sat* in Little Rock for four years, basically.

The perception of broader sociability contrasted with loneliness and economic segregation associated with decline, isolation and poverty, which many single women I interviewed said was their alternative if they remained in the USA.

For retirement migrants, Cuenca enabled a more active, sociable life, one that broke from routines and added new experiences that influenced ageing in a positive way. Ageing transnationally was often articulated in relation to less-desirable and inactive forms of ageing, such that success was measured as distance from this spoiled form of old age. As Daphney, a retired professional, African-American migrant stated:

I realised that people around the age of [my husband], who live here, they seem happier than in the States. For instance, if I go to Walmart, or Costco and I see those older people pushing carts filled with stuff ... they are barely moving, and from their demeanour, you could see they were not fully happy ... I never see people like that in Cuenca ... they are always energised, you know? They go to dancing lessons. You see them walking in the parks.

This youthful ageing taps an imaginary of third age as a lifestyle of self-fulfilment, but it is also evocative of the relative privilege of migrants, whose relatively higher global incomes enable them to elevate their social position in a lower-cost city of the Global South, where they can live out active ageing ideals more easily than in parking lots and the more familiar, but apparently 'siloes' experiences of mass-produced North American suburbs. Faced with heightened cultural expectations of the third age, retirement migration to lower-cost countries in the Global South became a personal strategy for achieving desired cultural ends. Those unable or unwilling to do so risk being made to feel responsible for their own perceived failure, which may subjectively take the form of a 'fear of missing out'. This imaginary too helps produce international retirement migration.

These binary codes enact a neoliberal culture of ageing, one that is competitive and which posits individual responsibility for attaining cultural ideals of success.

The binary cultural codes mentioned above helped many respondents feel that their migration decision was a smart one – and from a certain angle, it no doubt was. Arguably, however, these codes around how to live a successful third age are socially located (notably in the Global North) and reference social forces that have influenced the cultural field of the third age since the time of its expansion in the mid-20th century (Gilleard and Higgs, 2011). The coloniality of the global political economy is what makes this libertarian paradise of individual freedom possible in its current configuration. These ageing ideals, however, also have material consequences on receiving communities (Hayes, 2018, in press).

Even as they help produce new global social relations of ageing, some of these narratives may remain trapped in the normative contradictions of late-modern individualism. As outward signs of success in the ageing process, ideals of adventure and activity are also potentially conformist, even as they are mobilised around conceptions of newness and originality that mark distance from conformism and routine forms of ageing. Since individual success is defined in relation to socially produced and culturally circulating codes and binaries, the ‘moral horizons’ (Taylor, 1991) of what defines successful ageing derives meaning less from established norms and standards than from comparisons with others (*see also* Bellah *et al.*, 1985). These comparisons – and their deployment in everyday life and in advertising – help produce a culture of competitive individualism, which further stimulates consumption-type activities amongst fixed-income older adults, who seek secular signs of successful living in relation to one another’s experiences of activity, travel and sociability.

## Conclusion

These narratives of seeking adventure may be developed in relation to the ephemerality of human life, but they are also structured by cultural binaries, as I have shown above. These binaries are no doubt undergoing some change, and have been socially produced in no small measure by the corporate interests mentioned in previous scholarship (Gilleard and Higgs, 2011). The idea of a period in life after retirement from the active labour force, but before the onset of physical decline – the third age – emerged within the political consensus of the New Deal and the post-war settlements in the core countries of the colonial, capitalist world system, in which a regulated form of labour exploitation co-opted workers with rewards in exchange for their acquiescence at the point of production. This context of social security produced a phase of life in which older workers in the Global North no longer needed to work to survive (Higgs and Gilleard, 2010). That world has been increasingly stripped away since the late 1970s, in part by a turn to neoliberal forms of individualism, which prioritised autonomy and freedom above economic security and solidarity (Boltanski, 2002). As the neoliberal social consensus has overtaken the post-war Keynesian one, a shift has taken place in the culture of ageing, fostered by policy-oriented debates about pensions and an ageing population. This has pushed key institutions to prioritise ideals of active ageing, which promote notions of individual autonomy and responsibility for retirement planning and healthy ageing (Rudman, 2006; Foster and Walker, 2015). Active ageing, however, is also a cultural ideal that gives meaning to a lifestage of relative



activity and health – an ideal that has been fostered by material conditions of the post-war period, and accentuated by workers' experiences of neoliberal, competitive labour markets, in which notions of self-worth and deservingness, rather than social context and social risk, shape cultural codes and individual identity.

Institutional discourses of individual responsibility circulate beyond the state and are taken up by individuals in their own lives, helping inform new strategies of ageing in changing material contexts. The cultural codes of the third age seem more durable than the material conditions that fostered them. This is one way that transnational strategies of ageing have emerged as a way to associate meaningful travel and adventure with culturally important notions of activity that are perceived as 'successful' in relation to other, less-active and less-desirable forms of ageing, which are more attached to routine places and established norms. Research participants exhibited a desire to accumulate intense experiences and 'adventures' that take them outside their 'comfort zones' in order to experience 'personal growth', or a sense of personal expansiveness.

This seems to be an important way that Canadian and American international retirement migrants demonstrate, to themselves and to others, signs of successful ageing. These successes – snatched from potential failure for some research participants – are perceived to be each individual's responsibility to seize. Rather than fighting to secure meaningful and potentially more inclusive ways of ageing in place, retirement migrants to lower-income countries like Ecuador demonstrate how the style of active ageing ideals are morphing through the crisis of neoliberalism, as the cultural codes of competitiveness and productivity confront the material limitations of financialised accumulation. Lacking financial security, a growing number of ageing North Americans are resorting to international retirement migration as an alternative to ageing into isolation and poverty, and they are developing new ways of thinking about successful ageing in the process – ones tied with the pursuit of adventure and the 'flexibility' to adapt to a new culture. Retirement migration, lifestyle marketers note, 'is not for everyone'.<sup>4</sup> Unable to address the social context of their ageing process as individuals – including the spiralling competitiveness of individualised cultural codes themselves – citizens of higher-income countries rely on notions of resilience and adventure-seeking to justify new forms of international retirement migration in lower-income communities of the Global South. In the process, they give us a glimpse of the future of ageing in a highly stratified global division of labour.

**Acknowledgements.** I am grateful to Kristi Allain and participants in the Trent Aging Conference held in Peterborough, Ontario in May 2019 for conversations and feedback on this research, and to Russell King for comments on an earlier draft of this article. I am also grateful for the research assistance of Mackenzie Deas, Katie Corlett and Jensen Elliott.

**Financial support.** This research was supported by the Canada Research Chair in Global and International Studies at St. Thomas University.

## NOTES

**1** It is important to acknowledge, as Gilleard and Higgs (2020) note, that income inequality decreases amongst retirement-age populations relative to later-life workers, because older workers gain access to

benefits programmes and pensions. As austerity programmes seek to extend the working life and delay provision of benefits, however, these inequalities are worsening for older adults in the workforce. Moreover, Gilleard and Higgs (2020) note that inequalities amongst older households are increasing. These increasing inequalities occur as status hierarchies in the third age are realigned with respect to narratives of active and successful ageing, against which older adults define and measure themselves (Rudman, 2006).

2 This desire to live in another country also comes up in other studies and is evidently not specific to North Americans. Toyota and Thang (2017) mention it as an important disposition of Japanese retirement migrants seeking to live more autonomous lives in South-East Asia, and it is a central aspect of the emotions expressed by lifestyle migrants to the Lot in France (Benson, 2016).

3 Economic refugees are mentioned often by lifestyle migrants in Ecuador. It is partly a class-based distinction narrative, designed to separate individuals' own migration decisions from those of others, whose migration is seen as less deserving. But it was also a possible ethno-cultural stereotype, which migrants fought to overcome (see Hayes, 2018). Toyota and Thang (2017) also note that the term is in use amongst Japanese retirement migrants in South-East Asia.

4 See, for instance, *Forbes* (2019).

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**Cite this article:** Hayes M (2021). 'Sometimes you gotta get out of your comfort zone': retirement migration and active ageing in Cuenca, Ecuador. *Ageing & Society* 41, 1221–1239. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0144686X20001154>