Commentary: Visual/Multimodal Anthropology of Aging, Care and the Life Course: Notes on an Emergent Field

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Abstract

In this commentary we map the recently burgeoning interest of anthropologists in mobilizing visual and multimodal methods to explore issues related to aging, care, and the life course. We demonstrate how within the anthropology of aging, visuality, multisensoriality and various media formats have been used as objects of research, epistemological tools and/or a mode of recounting ethnographic stories. We also highlight the current debates about ethical challenges involved in doing the visual ethnography of ageing and care. We conclude by suggesting solutions that may help create more sustained conditions for a visual and multimodal anthropology of aging to be pursued within academia and beyond.

Keywords: *Visual anthropology; Multimodality; Multimedia; Multisensoriality; More-than-textual publishing; Ethics; Care; Images*

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Introduction

A visual and auditory engagement with late life and the life course has a relatively long history in both photography and cinema. Increasingly, researchers from the humanities and social sciences – particularly anthropology – have begun to integrate these methods into their work (Berman 2021; Faircloth 2003; Featherstone and Hepworth 1995; Shay and McVittie 2016). Indeed, studying across photographic, cinematographic and anthropological archives, one can trace a meandering path from the static and quite dour photographs of older adults captured in Mathew Brady's New York City studio in the 1840s to the 1890 wax-cylinder sound recordings of elders performing Native American ritual songs (Hall 2013) and the first ethnographic film shot in 1898 during the Torre Straits expedition (Dunlop 1983) set among islands off the coast of Papua New Guinea.

These early rudimentary efforts in a multimodal/visual research engagement with late life can be understood in the context of a salvage anthropology, whereby older adults were asked to reveal what was assumed to be a rapidly disappearing cultural past. In striking contrast, recent efforts to push an anthropology of aging beyond text, and to even pursue a sensory anthropology, are decidedly forward-looking: these efforts are concerned with how multimodal engagement with late life can generate new and diverse articulations of aging experiences, and with the impact of rapidly changing modes of interaction and information on the life world of older adults (Cox, Irving, and Wright 2016; Nichter 2008; Pink 2014). In this commentary, we would like to highlight how scholars of anthropology of aging and the life course have been working to foreground visuality and multimodality as both the object of research and as an epistemological stance. What anthropologist Barbara Pieta has termed "the visual/multimodal anthropology of aging (and care)" (Pieta, forthcoming[a]) is a rapidly consolidating, but still rarely discussed, subfield. Our overview offers one possible map to navigate this emergent terrain.

When discussing this new subfield, we employ the terms 'multimodal' and 'visual anthropology' interchangeably, and we do so for a number of reasons. First, to acknowledge what visual anthropologists have been teaching us for decades; namely, that sight is always embedded in a multi-sensory experience (Geurts 2003; Howes 1991, 2005; Pink 2009). Second, to highlight various types of media and sensory modalities that this emergent scholarship employs. Indeed, it is this plurality of forms and registers that enables researchers to more broadly represent the experience of being in a culture, to cultivate collaborative, embodied, and affective research relations, and to have an impact beyond the academic realm (Edwards 2001; Kazubowski-Houston and Auslander 2021; Pink 2011; Postill 2011; Stewart 2013). Finally, by highlighting the affinity between visual and multimodal approaches, we emphasize the fact that multimodality is being increasingly embraced by some institutions and groups that have traditionally been recognized as the world's leading initiatives for

visual anthropology, such as the RAI Film Festival in Bristol, UK, and the Granada Center for Visual Anthropology at the University of Manchester, UK. Indeed, in anthropology, the concept of multimodality is usually mobilized not to mark disciplinary boundaries but rather to highlight shifts in emphasis observable within various, often overlapping, research communities. These shifts include moving the focus from vision (sight) to multiple sensory modalities and from visual research products (e.g., ethnographic film or other visual material) to 'more-than-visual' research outputs (installations, exhibitions, performances, apps, soundscapes, podcasts, social media platforms, etc.).[1] Even though visual and multimodal anthropology have distinct disciplinary histories, there seems to be an agreement across the two sub-disciplines that, firstly, visual anthropology has always been multimodal and, secondly, multimodal anthropology builds on the visual scholarship's efforts to move beyond text-centric analysis.[2] Hence, by keeping both terms – multimodal and visual – and using these interchangeably, in this commentary we point to the creative tension that has contributed to the simultaneous flourishing of both strands of research.

Here, we do not aim to provide a comprehensive overview of the visual/multimodal anthropology of aging and the life course. Rather, we explore various ways that multimodal approaches have transformed both ethnography itself as well as understandings and representations of the cultural context and experience of late life. After linking the recent explosion of visual/multimodal approaches with several institutional initiatives within anthropology, we discuss various examples of multimodal/visual applications in anthropological research on aging and the life course. First, we discuss ethnographic research projects that examine how older adults themselves use images and image-based technologies. Next, we describe how local communities' interest in digital image-making has inspired some ethnographers to transform their own research into living – multimedia-enabled documents. Then we focus on some recent examples of graphic ethnography, highlighting the potential of this method in intergenerational research. We also provide examples of multimodal strategies used in applied research contexts, both as tools for knowledge-making and for improving systems of care. Finally, we examine how, in some anthropological research about care, visuality has been mobilized as both a method and an object of research. Following this overview, we briefly consider the ethical implications of using visual/multimodal methods in ethnographic research on aging as well as future initiatives that could bolster visual anthropological research into aging and late life.

Visuality and Multimodality Enters the Anthropological Mainstream…and the Anthropology of Aging and the Life Course

For many years, visual anthropology had been considered by some to be an exciting but peripheral – if not rather esoteric – subfield within the broader discipline of anthropology. But with the recent arrival of multimodal approaches, we are now witnessing an explosion of visual and multisensory work in contemporary anthropological research. Indeed, as we suggested above and as the anthropologists Samuel Collins, Matthew Durington, and Harjant Gill (2017) note, multimodal anthropology is not a decisive break from the past, or a substitute for visual anthropology, but rather a new ethnographic platform moving "…across multiple platforms and collaborative sites, including film, photography, dialogue, social media, kinesis, and practice" (142). The authors continue to argue that "[a]t its core, multimodal anthropology acknowledges the centrality of media production to the everyday life of both anthropologists and our interlocutors" (2017, 142; see also Collins and Durington 2020; Banks and Morphy 1997, 1).

Indeed, increasingly, the broad global access to small digital cameras, smartphones, and internet-based social-media platforms over the past two decades has transformed both the work of ethnography and how our interlocutors use media and images to communicate about themselves. However, it is not only

younger generations who are active agents of this change. For example, in connection with the Anthropology of Smart Phones and Smart Aging project (ASSA), anthropologist Daniel Miller and his colleagues assert that smartphones – and digital-visual applications – are no longer a 'youth technology' in many areas around the world, and are thus critical to understanding how older adults use media today (Miller et al. 2021; see also Neves and Vetere 2019). As such, visual and multimodal approaches are emerging not only in the methodological framework of ethnographers but also in how late life is represented both by researchers and older adults themselves, especially as they engage with various social-media platforms. (The ASSA project will be featured in a Special Issue of *Anthropology & Aging* later in 2023.)

As of the early 2000s, increasing efforts to embed multimodal and visual production into ethnographic practice have become allied with the multiplying modes of presenting these materials to various audiences. A number of transdisciplinary research groups have contributed to the consolidation and popularization of the multimodal field. These collectives include the Center for Imaginative Ethnography at the University of South California; the Sensory Ethnography Lab at Harvard University; the online platform Allegra Lab; and, within the European Association of Social Anthropology (EASA), Visual Anthropology Network, the Multimodal Ethnography Network, and #Colleex–Collaboratory for Ethnographic Experimentation.[3] Among academic publishers, the most important journals include AnthroVision (est. 2013), Visual Ethnography (from 2012), and Journal of Anthropological Films (from 2017). Moreover, multimodal production has been amplified with the emergence of the University of Toronto's ethnoGRAPHIC book series launched in 2015 as well as the Anthropology, Creative Practice and Ethnography series at Manchester University Press. Much of this latter series focuses on visual anthropology and design but also includes a sonic ethnography examining how musical traditions shape heritage in southern Italy (Ferrarini and Scaldaferri 2022; https://lorenzoferrarini.com).

More mainstream anthropology journals have also begun to include a section for multimodal research output: e.g., *Cultural Anthropology* introduced sections titled "Sound + Vision" (Boyer et al. 2016) and "Fieldsights" (Theodossopoulos 2022a), and, in 2019, the *American Anthropologist* began publishing articles under the rubric: MULTIMODAL. The success of the online open access journal *Entanglements: Experiments in Multimodal Ethnography* is another indication that multimodal research has been gaining momentum.[4] Ethiraj Dattatreyan and Isaac Guillamón, anthropologists who write extensively about the multimodal approach, suggest the importance of such inclusion, stating that:

> …multimodality offers a line of flight for an anthropology yet to come: multisensorial rather than text based, performative rather than representational, and inventive rather than descriptive. This reimagined anthropology requires a move away from established forms of authorship, representation, and academic publishing toward projects that experiment with unanticipated forms, collaborations, audiences, and correspondences—including questioning what the 'open' in 'open access' should signify… (2019, 220).

Within such academic platforms, scholars are attempting to creatively demonstrate the value of various multimodal forms of ethnographic fiction and non-fiction. Sometimes, this may also include incorporating videos, images and sounds from social-media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok into fieldwork data.

To encourage similar efforts directed toward late life and the life course, EASA's Age and Generations Network (AgeNet) – in collaboration with EASA's Visual Anthropology Network (VANEASA) and the Association for Anthropology, Gerontology and the Life Course (AAGE) – launched the Aging and

Visual Anthropology Award (AVA)[5] in August 2021. To the best of our knowledge, this award is the first prize given to works that employ visual methods to address anthropological questions about aging, the life course, care, and (inter)generational relations. The launch of the award was preceded by methodological training organized by AgeNet: i.e., a webinar by visual anthropologist Angela Torresan on using a smartphone as a visual and sensory research tool (watch the recording here: https://ageneteasa.org/agenet-webinars-2021/). Moreover, as of 2016, the Medical Anthropology & Film Group, based at Oxford University in the United Kingdom and led by anthropologist Paola Esposito, has examined the capacity of film to advance anthropological analysis on the topics related to illness, healing, and well-being, with aging being one of the recurrent themes. In a parallel effort, the *Journal of Aging Studies* has offered space for multimodal exhibitions that explore themes relevant to the journal's readership (Bonilla and Rato 2018; Sherwood González 2022; Skinner 2014; Young 2015). In 2022, AAGE devoted its Biannual Conference to the topic of *Creativity and Aging*, inviting contributors to reflect on how the creativity (including multimodal engagement) of anthropologists of aging, and their interlocutors, can be a tool for radical change in precarious times.

Ethnographies of Image Management in Later Life

Some multimodal projects have explored how the digitalization of people's lives may impact ongoing and future ethnographic efforts (Rupert, Irving, and Wright 2016), especially in understanding older people's experiences and the impact of digitalization on the formation of later-life identities. In doing so, such work also pushes us to understand some emerging maps of later adulthood that critically examine a narrative of decline, such as in anthropologist Catherine Bateson's construct of "Adulthood 2.0" (2011) or in explorations of the "digital life course" in post-industrial societies (Li 2021; Prendergast 2020; Prendergast and Garattini 2015).

The study of image management through older citizens' own production of social media demonstrates how powerful and transformative such efforts can be. As part of the ASSA project in Sao Paulo, Brazil, anthropologist Marília Duque (2021) shows how older adults themselves are managing a post-work life presentation of the self in an industrial urban context where the worth of adults is very much tied to physical actions related to labor and productivity. Here, she finds that older citizens try to reduce any perception of decline, with the elders themselves digitally performing 'healthy aging' on their social-media posts in an urban cultural context (see Figure 1). Duque asserts that:

> …smartphones and social media empower participants to manipulate the mechanism of social comparison used to decide who is healthy, and who is old. On one hand, participants can comply with the new representations of ageing by endorsing, engaging with, producing and circulating positive images of ageing ('upward identification'). On the other hand, they can also hide the negative aspects of ageing by confining their performance to online interactions. By doing that, they keep their embodied self (the one that can be associated with decline) in the backstage while they bring their inner ageless self to the stage (2021, 321).

In this context, the public endorsement of social norms related to 'good' aging may have a re-sorting effect on older adults' subjectivity. The embodied signs – now under even more individual control due to the smartphone-enabled circulation of images – become socially-informing symbols mobilized in the social drama of everyday interactions (Goffman 1962).

Figure 1: Ethnographic material from Marília Duque's project in urban Brazil (2021): a Facebook post shared by a retired couple preparing for a motorcycle trip. In this cultural context, managing public appearance in social media has become one of the ways of confirming moral status in post-retirement life. © @lilianacenturine

This issue of impression management is also taken up by epidemiologist Anupam Sharma and sociologist Tannistha Samanta (2020) in their study of how older homosexual men in India use the online dating app, Grindr. In their analysis of qualitative interviews with interlocutors and narratives posted on social-media platforms, the authors explore how middle-aged and older men employ certain aesthetics of self-presentation in the management of men's bodies as "erotic capital." In another context, in her studies of the "dancing grannies" of China, anthropologist Claudia Huang (2021) finds that their dynamic performative presentation on social media and in public spaces is creating a new gender construct – "Dama" (see Figure 2). These retired women are "demonstrating that what they choose to wear, do, and spend time with has broad implications for how old age is perceived and experienced in Chinese society" (2021, 7).

Figure 2: In the photo, the interlocutors of Claudia Huang's project performing Dama dance (dama wu) in one of the public parks. These public performances are part of particular gendered aesthetic and lifestyle choices through which individuals in post-reform China enact new cultural scripts for older womanhood (Huang 2021). © Claudia Huang.

In their part of the ASSA project based in China and Japan, Xinyuan Wang and Laura Haapio-Kirk (2021) describe how smartphone-enabled digital visual communication (WeChat in China and LINE in Japan) enables older adults to perform emotions and care following local cultural scripts. As they argue, it is not the expression of "authentic" emotions at stake in the careful curation of digital images, but rather the establishment of "a digital public façade" (2021, 1) in accordance with the local social norms. In the next section, we examine how this approach has broadened toward what has come to be called "graphic ethnography."

Graphic Ethnographies of the Life Course

Graphic ethnography is one of the most recent multimodal approaches which aptly demonstrates the type of ethnographic insights that can be gained by foregrounding visuality in the anthropological research into aging and the life course. Anthropologist Dimitrios Theodossopoulos describes graphic ethnography as "…creative combinations of image and text—inspired by comics, political cartooning, graphic novels, and multimodal representational arrangements (which embed combinations of sound, video, or photography on a frame drawn digitally or by hand)" (2022a). While the formats and definitions of graphic ethnography vary, users of this approach commonly acknowledge the centrality of drawing (analogue or digital) as a mode of analysis and representation (e.g., Dix, Kaur, and Pollock 2019; Ingold 2011; Taussig 2011; Theodossopoulos 2022b). Central here is the corporality of the practice of drawing and its capacity to generate not only unique intimacy between the drawer and the drawn subject, but also a visual language that allows for intersubjective sense-making. As several authors have argued (e.g., Dix and Kaur 2019; Rumsby 2020; Taussig 2011), multiple narrative layers of an image are particularly helpful in conveying the complexity of lived realities, including a polyphony of voices and ambivalent or conflicting emotions.

Within the field of anthropology of aging and the life course, José Sherwood González (2022a and b) uses a comic format to better represent polyvocal complexities of difficult migration histories and intergenerational tensions that were created within his own family during ancestral storytelling. Drawing his characters, who were simultaneously his interlocutors and family members, as skeletons allowed him not only to anonymize research participants but also to evoke the vulnerability and uncertainty of stories within a specific style of Mexican visuality (see Figure 3).
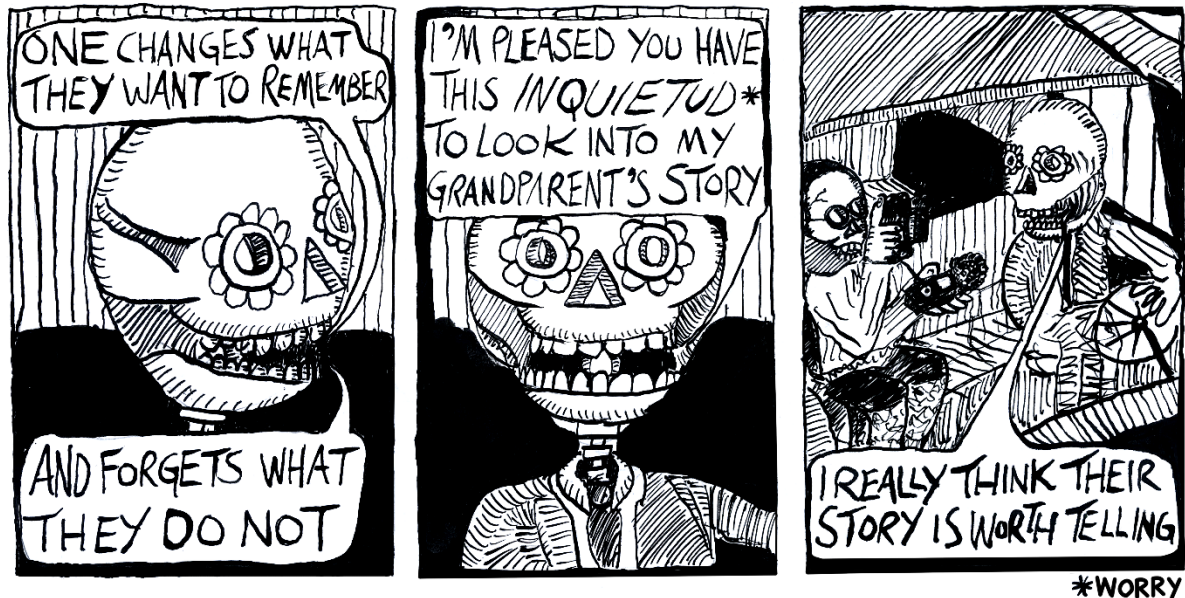

Figure 3: A panel in the comic by José Sherwood González (2019). Here, the ethnographer-illustrator explores the vulnerabilities and tensions related to the local ways of remembering and negotiating family histories. © José Sherwood González.

While the ethnographer was also the drawer in Sherwood González' project, during her fieldwork in Japan, Laura Haapio-Kirk invited her aging interlocutors to do the drawings themselves – specifically, to produce an image that would illuminate their relation to the local concept of *ikigai*, Japanese life purpose (Haapio-Kirk 2022; see Figure 4). The material produced was then used to elicit narratives that, as Haapio-Kirk argues, better convey the participants' complex feelings in late life. In another context, Haapio-Kirk and anthropologist Shireen Walton used both their own drawings and those produced in collaboration with visual artists to tell stories from their fieldwork with older adults in Japan and Italy (Walton and Haapio-Kirk, forthcoming). These drawings were often "anchored [in] words" (Sousanis 2015, 53), as was the case with Haapio-Kirk's drawings, which were inspired by a phrase that one of the aged interlocutors used during an interview to describe his communication habits.

Although not a requirement for the genre of graphic ethnography, both Sherwood González' and Haapio-Kirk's work builds on the visual culture of their respective fieldwork locations: Sherwood González on the imagery evoked by local family myths from Mexico, and Haapio-Kirk on the visual tropes of the Japanese comics *manga*. Moreover, the work of these scholars demonstrates how anthropologists can move beyond the mode of representational drawing (i.e., to treat images not as mirrors of reality but as a way of creating it).

Figure 4: A painting made by one of Haapio-Kirk's interlocutors, Megumi Ito, depicting her life course. The painting was used by the anthropologist to elicit the participant's perception on her life as well as the concept of ikigai. For the interview extracts embedded as audio files in this artwork, see Haapio-Kirk (2022). © Megumi Ito.

Multimedia Exhibitions and Media-Enabled Ethnographic Texts

Figure 5: The interface of the interactive website, https://www.ageingandmobility.com/, illustrating the research findings of the Max Planck Research Group "Ageing in a Time of Mobility." The clickable icons lead to an online infographic presenting individual projects. The illustrations were made by anthropologist and visual artist Álvaro G. Martinez. The website has been conceived as a living document to be updated with materials from future projects. To read more about the website, visit https://www.alvaro-martinez.com/ageing-in-a-time-of-mobility/ © Álvaro G. Martinez.

In recent years, anthropologists have sought to integrate an array of multimedia resources to create immersive modes of presenting research materials. Examples include "The Transmedia Elderscape" focusing on urban India and Nepal; "The Resemblage Project," a digital humanities/anthropology project set in Toronto; and the "Ageing and Mobility" online exhibition prepared by researchers at the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity (see Figure 5). These stand-alone projects offer a variety of graphic, visual, or audio resources that explore the life course and aging, and do not integrate them directly into substantial ethnographic texts.

In contrast, one of the first examples of accomplishing this kind of multimodal resource integration in a full ethnographic text was *Indigenous Mexico Engages the 20th Century: A Multimedia Enabled Text* (Sokolovsky 2015, https://indigenousmexicobook.com/). Here, five different media types were cohesively set into the e-book version. The print book includes distinct icons for the weblinks, which can be accessed via the web page listed above. Links to these media allow readers, for example, to do a Google Maps walk around the community; view a video of elders assisting in a *quinceañera* (a girl's 15th birthday) celebration; listen to sonic collaborations between older traditional musicians and youthful garage bands; as well as view PowerPoints integrating the ethnographer's photographs with images produced by community members. In the creation of the book, a serious effort was made to edit the ethnographic text and the multimodal forms in relation to each other. The aim was to reinforce their connection, rather than the multimedia items serving as separate adjuncts to the anthropological discussion of cultural issues. While not exclusively focused on later life, this volume explores how globalization has transformed the life course, especially creating new constructions of late life itself.
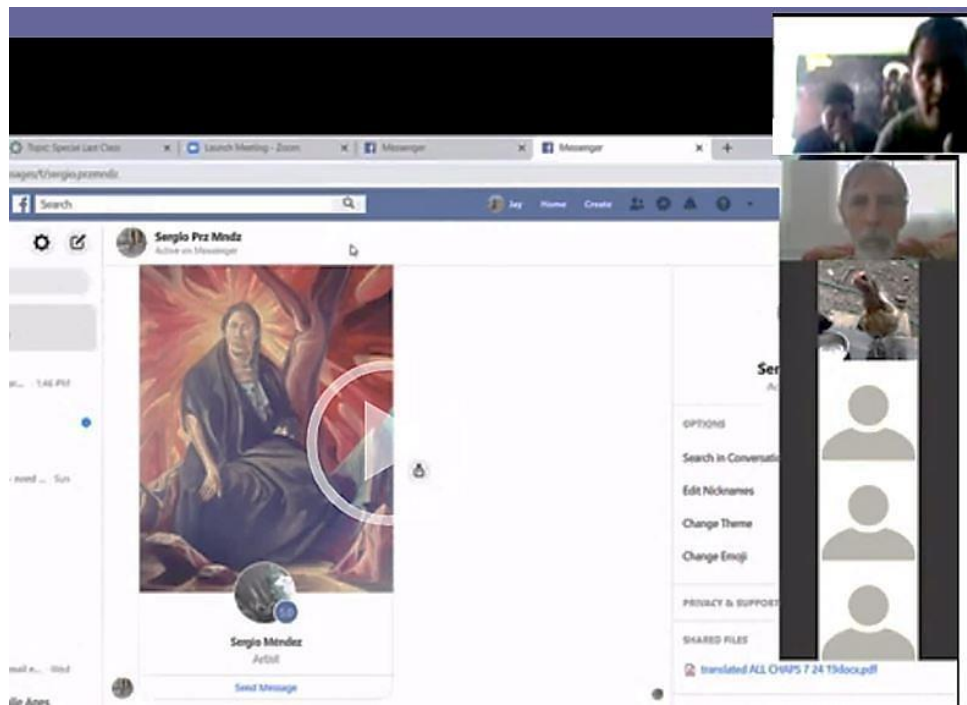

Figure 6: Screen shot from a May 29, 2022, Zoom discussion between anthropologist Jay Sokolovsky, anthropology students reading his multimedia book, and several members of the community where the ethnographic fieldwork was conducted, who were reading the book in Spanish. In the center of the image is a section from the Facebook page of a local artist (pictured top right) discussing his new heritage-focused murals. The bilingual discussion was facilitated by Jay Sokolovsky and two Spanish-speaking anthropology students. © Jay Sokolovsky.

Essential for integrating text with multimodal materials, such as in this book, is creating a dynamic, multilingual website. It should follow along with the written text and embedded digital resources but also allow space for adding new materials, particularly those generated by community members themselves. A tricky aspect of any serious 'living' multimedia text is not only dealing with a disruption of those existing media after the initial publication date, but also accommodating a curated selection of an increasing outpouring of social media from the community itself. Such active collaboration eventually requires full translation and open-source access of the ethnography in the community's language, with the local residents creating their own multimedia resources in relation to the book's ethnographic depiction of their lives (Sokolovsky 2022). Typically, through photographs, videos, and several community-based Facebook groups, these digital fora have 'the others' speaking back about their distinct cultural practices and language (see Figure 6). For the participants of Jay Sokolovsky's research project this has become a mechanism for countering the negative image of their indigenous language and culture among nearby non-indigenous villages and in the closest urban area.

With the increasing use of social media by interlocutors in anthropological research, a lively debate has emerged over digital and multimodal methods as ethnographic methods, with some arguing there are pitfalls of privileging online immersion of researchers versus in-person traditions (Bluteau 2021). Perhaps the strongest effort to make the most of both approaches is the ASSA project, mentioned above, which entailed 16 months of simultaneous fieldwork by 10 anthropologists in 11 field sites. As part of its ethnographic protocol, the ASSA researchers regularly created multimedia [blogs](), which could later be incorporated into journal articles and monographs about this endeavor. With the open-access monographs from ASSA being translated into each field site's respective dominant languages, and with continued multimodal interaction with the communities being researched, we believe that the project is a model for creating living documents and promoting accessibility. An important part of this project is taking seriously the implications of the research. In line with applying their research to real-life settings and contexts, the anthropologists have posted a series of ["Discoveries"]() about the relationship between smart phones and smart aging. For example, anthropologist Alfonso Otaegui is developing a project to support "navigator nurses" – the nurses who promote better communication between doctors and patients – in an oncology clinic in Santiago, Chile, and Laura Haapio-Kirk has been piloting a LINE group to discuss food and diet for older people in Japan.

Applying a Multimodal Approach in Aging Research and Eldercare

In terms of such applied contexts, there seems to be great interest in designing media and digital technology to assist in the care of older adults, whether by family members or in a variety of community contexts (Pols 2011; Neves and Vetere 2019). In one of the first projects of this kind, anthropologists took the lead in the culturally comparative Global Aging Project sponsored by Intel Corporation. This work examined how technology, including visual technology, could help older adults maintain autonomy and stay in their homes if they so desired (Plowman, Prendergast, and Roberts 2009). Anthropologist David Prendergast followed this project with other design-focused and peer-based visual storytelling efforts, especially in the recent SHAPES Project. This was set across much of Europe and focused on supporting older adults with various care needs and disabilities (Prendergast 2020; https://shapes2020.eu/shapes-stories/; see Figure 7).

Figure 7: Research participant in the SHAPES project at a nursing home in Spain, calling his family abroad using the 'smart mirror.' The smart mirror is a communication tool co-designed to ease the remote communication of older adults. It provides a large screen and appropriate loudspeaker or earphones as well as contactless cards, which – in addition to providing a secure access mechanism – contain a photo of the contact person the user intends to call. For this and other functions of the smart mirror, see Chaparro et al. 2021. © Katja Seidel.

An applied perspective has also been used to understand how people with dementia and their carers respond to different media, and how these can help families to better support their kin with care needs (Grennan et al. 2017; Hodge et al. 2019). For example, computer and design scientists James Hodge, Kyle Montague, and Kellie Morrissey, in collaboration with Sandra Hastings, the founder of a charity

that provides reminiscence activities for older adults, explored how audio recordings, photography, and videos recorded with 360-degree cameras can be used as sensory stimulations that evoke embodied memories of individuals with dementia, potentially improving their well-being (Hodge et al. 2019).

From another perspective, there has been an important interplay between medical anthropology and physicians through the creation of "graphic medicine," positioned at the intersection between the discourse of health care and the medium of comics (Czerwiec 2015; Venkatesan and Kasthuri 2018; https://www.graphicmedicine.org/). Graphic-medicine narratives seek to offer patients, family members, and medical practitioners' ways to negotiate the challenges of difficult medical experiences, such as dementia (Kovan and Soled 2022) or placing a relative into hospice care (Czerwiec and Huang 2017). Such a graphic approach to communicating about care may be widely applicable, and critically important in places where care workers come from a linguistic community that is different than those for whom they are caring. An important ongoing example involves the multidisciplinary work of applied-anthropological linguist Boyd Davis and colleagues who work in eldercare environments in Taiwan and the United States. Their work employs cartoons and comic-style materials to develop multicultural, multilingual guides for eldercare workers from Indonesian, Thai, Vietnamese, and Filipino language communities in order to facilitate the best possible provision of care to elders from different cultural backgrounds (Davis and Maclagan 2022; Boyd, Maclagan, and Troutman-Jordan, n.d.).

Images as Care and Research Method

In the last three decades, several authors have highlighted the role of the medical gaze in exerting disciplinary control over aging bodies (e.g., Heaton 1999; Katz 1996; Libert and Higgs 2022; Nagington, et al 2021). There have also been numerous attempts to move beyond examining the act of seeing (and care) as an instrument of surveillance. Some scholars have challenged the assumption about the distance between the seer and the suffering body by demonstrating how sensory and multimodal research approaches turn our attention to the transformative imagery "from the body" (Farnell 1994, 342; see also MacDougall 2005), often engendered by healing practices (e.g., Belting 2014; Csordas 2002; Esposito and Dziala 2021; Weiss 1999).

More recently, anthropologist Lisa Stevenson (2014) has directed our attention to the "imagistic" qualities of certain images and their capacity to convey the precarious and uncertain status of care and a life worth living. Stevenson uses the term "imagistic" to refer to a quality of certain images to "express without formulating" (Foucault 1993, 36 as cited in Stevenson 2014, 14). As she argues, if mobilized as a research method (or a mode of attention), the imagistic approach can help anthropologists destabilize generalizing narratives by emphasizing uncertainties intrinsic to the experience of suffering. In their edited volume, *Imagistic Care*, anthropologists Cheryl Mattingly and Lone Grøn (2022) build on Stevenson's work as well as on their global project "Aging as a Human Condition." In this collection, they gathered anthropologists, artists, and philosophers who use images – or rather "imagistic inquiries" (Grøn and Mattingly 2022, 1) – to craft ethnographic stories of older adults in Kirgizstan, Uganda, the United States, Denmark, and India. Here, the images "do not sum up anything or show anything" (Speyer 2022, 239) but rather they are a "trace of a reaching" (Speyer 2022, 230) – a never fully completed act of "coming to see" (Stevenson 2022, x). The contributors to the volume demonstrate that the imagistic may take various forms: it can be a drawing (like the artworks of Maria Speyer that precede every chapter of the book (see Figure 8), words (like the ethnographic vignettes offered by several authors), a song, a sound, a dream, a ghost, or even a gesture.
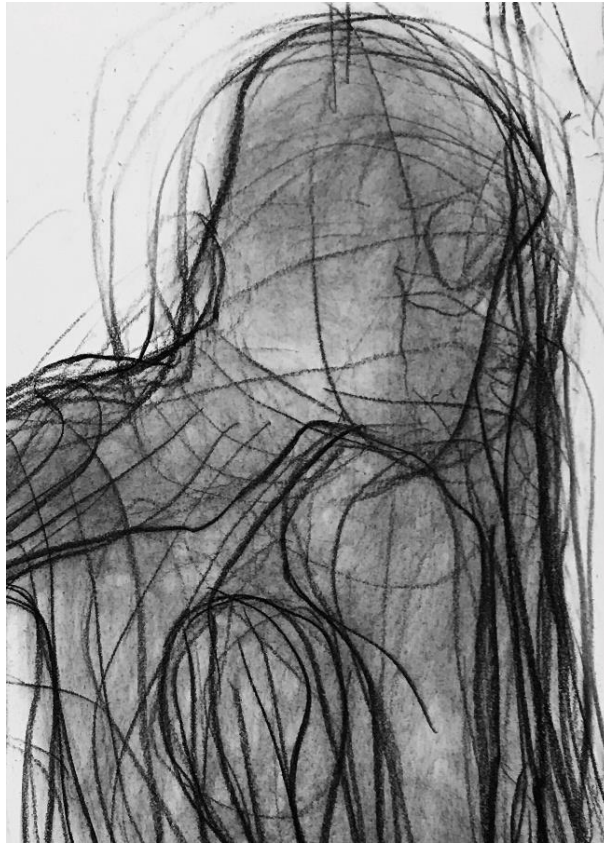
Figure 8: Drawing by the artist Maria Speyer from the edited volume Imagistic Care edited by Cheryl Mattingly and Lone Grøn (2022). Rather than simply illustrations adjacent to particular chapters, the drawings were central to the knowledge-making process, with several of them produced in parallel with – or prior to the completion of – the chapters in the volume. © Maria Speyer.

In a related manner, in an upcoming special issue of the journal *AnthroVision*, anthropologists and other image-makers were invited to consider the diversity of ways in which 'seeing' is part of local care practices and is simultaneously a mode of ethnographic enquiry (Pieta and Sokolovsky, forthcoming). Apart from discussing possible applications of imagistic approaches, these contributions also explore the role of images and visual practices which, rather than upholding uncertainty, tend to fix the meaning of observed phenomena. Indeed, several contributors to the special issue argue that the latter type of images can also be generative of local care relations and crucial in building ethnographic rapport. For example, anthropologist Barbara Pieta demonstrates that training sensory attention (e.g., learning to pick up and decipher local visual cues) can be crucial – both for the process of reproduction or negotiation of cultural care scripts, and in crafting ethnographic relations and stories of care (Pieta, forthcoming [b]). Moreover, some contributors to the special issue highlight the importance of attending to the filmic relations generated during fieldwork through what filmmaker and anthropologist Jean Rouch (2003, 98) termed "film-seeing" (i.e., the strategic use of a camera and its lenses), "film-hearing" (attending to the limits and possibilities of microphones), "film moving" (finding the right angle and exercising the right movement), and "film-editing" (thinking how images fit together). For example, visual anthropologist and documentary filmmaker Jón Bjarki Magnusson demonstrates how such attentive ethnographic filming of his own grandfather has helped to transform epistemological and ethical tensions that accompanied his family's experience of living with a person experiencing dementia (Magnusson, forthcoming; see Figure 9).

Figure 9: Jón Bjarki Magnusson filming in his grandparents' house. The camera has helped the ethnographer-filmmaker to transform kinship relations into filmic ones, thus opening new epistemological avenues for engaging with family tensions and expressions of cognitive decline. Magnusson navigates between imagistic metaphors (dementia as "Half Elf") and biomedical categories in order to allow the polyvocal story to emerge. The final product of this project is a film entitled "Half Elf" (Magnusson 2020). © Jón Bjarki Magnusson.

Navigating the Ethics of Visual/Multimodal Aging Research

In recent years, there have been attempts to facilitate debates about the ethical challenges related to the use of visual methods in anthropology and more broadly in visual research (e.g., Clark 2013; Liebenberg 2018; Pauwels 2006; Perry and Marion 2010; Wiles et al. 2012). Yet, to a large extent, the anthropology of aging still seems to lack resources (e.g., a communal forum or consolidated corpus of literature) that could help ethnographers negotiate the moral complexities of visual and other forms of multimodal research into aging and late life. Certainly, researchers using visual methods to study aging may share several concerns with anthropologists who use visual/multimodal methods in other types of research. For example, who has the authority to interpret the images? Can the cinematic/ethnographic authoritarian gaze truly be dismantled? How do researchers manage conflicting obligations to different (human and nonhuman) stakeholders? What are researchers' ethical responsibilities in managing the issue of consent? How can the unanticipated use of visual material be mitigated, both during production and distribution, as well as within and outside the context of an anthropological research project?

While these questions are an important part of visual-research ethics, we believe that other questions are particularly salient for anthropologists of aging and the life course. For example, how do researchers ethically address potential generational differences, and thus power asymmetries, related to using image-making technologies in ethnographic research? How should older individuals be involved in visual-ethnographic research when their capacity to consent to participation might be limited due to cognitive impairment? Finally, how should researchers manage the relationship between researcher, images, and suffering or dead bodies in an ethical manner? While these questions have been addressed

by several scholars from the visual field and anthropology in general (e.g., Azoulay 2008; Calain 2013; Fassin 2011; Sontag 2003; Ticktin 2011), there have also been attempts to explore these issues from the perspective of anthropology of aging and medical anthropology.

For example, anthropologist and physician Arthur Kleinman and sinologist Joan Kleinman highlighted the need to attend to culturally and politically embedded processes, institutions, and events that shape the way in which suffering is framed in globally circulating imagery (Kleinman and Kleinman 1996). For instance, in global media outlets, poverty, chronic illness, and death are usually depicted either as a horrifying experience left to individual coping or as a pathology that requires social intervention. In other contexts, suffering can be configured into a quantifiable economic measure or rendered completely invisible. Because such framings have derogatory effects on the way human problems are experienced and addressed, the Kleinmans call for an alternative imagery; one that is grounded in local experiences. It is here that ethnography becomes crucial. Also, highlighting the importance of attending to local imagery – and drawing on her own experience of conducting fieldwork (with a camera) among individuals living with dementia in Northeast Italy – anthropologist Barbara Pieta argues that ethnographers' ethical choices regarding what and how to film should be made along with the consideration of the local visual culture. In particular, one must consider the local understandings of what type of gaze constitutes an act of "good care" (Pieta, forthcoming [b]). Also useful for thinking about the ethics involved in crafting ethnographic stories of illness, late life, poverty, or death is the aforementioned concept of "imagistic inquiries" (Mattingly and Grøn 2022; Stevenson 2014) – an interrogatory mode guided by the metaphor of the image which conveys but does not formulate. By allowing the ethnographer to foreground the ambiguity they witness in the field, thinking, writing and, we add, filming imagistically becomes a heuristic tool that may help to navigate certain epistemological and ethical tensions that characterize the fieldwork experience.

Conclusions

This overview is far from exhaustive, and the works presented here could be grouped and discussed in other ways. However, with this commentary, we wanted to highlight the crucial role that visuality and multimodality are beginning to play in anthropological studies of aging and the life course. This may include foregrounding images and visual or multimodal practices as an object of research (e.g., Duque 2021; Huang 2021; Sharma and Samanta 2020), as an epistemological approach (e.g., Esposito and Dziala 2021, Mattingly and Grøn 2022; Pieta and Sokolovsky, forthcoming; Stevenson 2014), or as a way to relate to the ethnographic public (Miller et al. 2021; Sokolovsky 2022). Of course, the works presented here differ in the extent to which they foreground each of these dimensions. Most of the works discussed here mobilize visuality/multimodality as an object of research or dissemination strategy, as to date the subdiscipline has generated only few projects which treat vision (and to lesser extent other senses) as heuristic devices (e.g., Mattingly and Grøn 2022; Pieta and Sokolovsky, forthcoming; Stevenson 2014). Moreover, within the subdiscipline, sight seems to be the most-often foregrounded mode of sensory perception, while multisensorial approaches have only started to receive increased attention (e.g., Esposito and Dziala 2021; Miller et al. 2021; Walton and Haapio-Kirk, forthcoming).

As much as one can predict the future path of anthropology, we expect that there will be a significant increase in visual and multimodal articulations of anthropological research into late life and care. However, this does not mean that all we can do is wait as it happens, although waiting is an important factor: it does take time for a novice to develop the skills, motivation, and courage to create a multimodal project and publicize it. Nevertheless, while we as a community of scholars are waiting, there are a few things we can do. Not all anthropologists – and even fewer graduate students – have access to sufficient training in multimodal epistemologies, methods, and techniques. Although this is a craft that can be

improved through individual practice, organizing public forums (e.g., webinars, workshops, websites, online classes) where relevant resources and peer-coaching opportunities are available is an area where the anthropological community could help. Thus, we call for more ground-level learning opportunities, and we direct this call especially to professional anthropological associations. Second, and of more specific relevance to those studying aging and the life course, we believe there is a need for a dedicated publishing space for the visual/multimodal anthropology of aging. Surveying the literature for this commentary has led us to all types of anthropological journals and interfaces. The fact that a visual/multimodal interest in anthropology of aging and care is becoming more widespread is certainly great news, but creating a specific forum for age- and care-related anthropological multimedia engagements could help to bring together scholars who might not even be aware of each other.

Of course, journals such as *Anthropology & Aging* or the websites of professional associations like AAGE or EASA's AgeNet seem to be ideal potential hosts for such an endeavor. But our call for a distinct publishing space is more far-reaching. As others have already noted, curating and eventually publishing multimodal/visual works requires an adequate infrastructure (Criado, Farías, and Schröder 2022). This not only entails the publisher's readiness to embrace a variety of media formats in order to facilitate the projects' interactive and collaborative ambitions. It also requires creating appropriate review procedures for more-than-textual submissions. Moreover, it also requires a push towards recognizing – within academia as a whole – the value of multimodal/visual research outputs, not as an afterthought or an add-on, but as existing at the very core of anthropological inquiry.

Notes

1. This is not to suggest that what is sometimes termed "visual products" involve exclusively sight. Rather, in using this term we want to highlight that in certain projects, vision has been epistemologically and methodologically framed as central to the research endeavor.

2. As we note in the next section, the recent increased interest in multimodal approaches is usually linked with the arrival of more easily accessible digital multisensory technologies (smartphones and other digital audio/video recording devices, including, portable 360° cameras and multisensory apps), the proliferation of social media platforms as well as the failure of visual anthropology to push more decisively beyond the film and text-based publishing formats (Nolas and Varvantakis 2018; Westmoreland 2022). However, the multimodal approach should not be mistaken with mere incorporation of ever new technologies into research and dissemination (Wilson and Leighton 2002). Rather, both visual and multimodal anthropology are epistemological projects which constantly experiment with sensory modalities and mediating devices as ways of knowing about the world. For a more detailed history of visual and multimodal approaches see: Banks and Morphy 1997; Hockings 1995; Pink 2013; Westmoreland 2022).

3. For a detailed discussion of these groups, see Kazubowski-Houston and Auslander (2021, 19).

4. The journal was founded in 2018 as a voluntary project and despite its significant popularity was closed in 2022 due to technological and financial constraints.

5. Information about the winning entry is on the AVA 2021 Official Selection page: https://ageneteasa.org/2021/12/02/ava-2021-award-winners-and-commendations/. The AVA winners for film were *are you with me/ben jij mij mij* by Sophia van Ghesel Grothe and Mark Lindenberg (van Ghesel Grothe and Lindenberg 2021), which subsequently won EASA's Mantas Kvedaravičius film prize at the EASA 2022 Biennial Conference, and *Half Elf* by Jon Bjarki Magnusson (Magnusson 2020), which received an AVA Commendation as part of the EASA 2022 Conference Film Programme Selection.

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