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CHAPTER 33

Spaces of Age, Snowbirds and the Gerontology of Mobility: The Elderscapes of Charlotte County, Florida

Stephen Katz

Gerontology is a field befittingly fixed on the problems of aging-in-time and the temporal conditions of growing older. Consequently, researchers focus on *when* people retire and the social roles, economic challenges and cohort experiences associated with such a momentous life course passage. At the same time the place of retirement has become an increasingly vital dimension of later life because, as more people retire, issues of mobility, residence and community are linked to gerontologic ideals of independence and successful aging. Thus, this chapter is oriented to the questions of *where* people retire and how they create cultural spaces for retirement. Specifically, the research examines several sites or *elderscapes* unique to Charlotte County in the Gulf coastal area of southwestern Florida as evidence of the growth of new retirement and aging communities. My objective is not to produce a conventional ethnographic analysis but to sketch a social topography of spaces of age. As such, the data combine documents, photographs, personal reflections and interviews collected during a field research project conducted in Florida during 1998–99. The resulting experimental methodological weave is an attempt to represent the complexity of migrational retirement culture and the spatial dynamics that shape its regions, flows and environments.

In this chapter I use photographic materials and diary entries as the personal means by which I can include my identity and journey as a researcher within the montage of places I visited. In addition, the photographic and visual materials enrich the depiction of physical and built spaces and their relevance to cultural gerontology. Indeed, visual gerontology is a highly valuable yet surprisingly underdeveloped resource within the field. Where it has been central to the research, as in Dena Shenk and Ronald M. Schmid's work (2002) on the *Rural Older Women's Project in Minnesota* in the 1980s and 1990s, the results are innovative and edifying. As these authors note about their gerontology, "the

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benefits of using photography as a research tool include providing evidence that is difficult to put into words. Photography can also be viewed as a way to portray the context within which other kinds of data can be analyzed and understood" (p. 260). In another fascinating study, British cultural sociologist Andrew Blaikie demonstrates the historical influence of photographic imagery on cultural constructions of retirement, aging and old age in the United Kingdom (Blaikie 1999). In these cases visual gerontology has an inherent reflexive dimension because it not only looks to images as valuable sources of data, but it also considers the conditions under which images are used to create data. As visual ethnographer Sarah Pink reminds us, the import of photographic representations is contingent upon how they are situated and interpreted; hence, photographic research is also a reflexive exercise whereby the researchers, in part, construct the cultural environments they analyze (Pink 2001:19–21). This means that multiple narratives, ambiguous meanings and the researcher's subjective experiences can coexist in photographic imagery along with the objective goals of the research itself (p. 126). This is certainly the case with photographic research on aging, challenged as it is by our society's dominant negative images of aging and old age and the restriction of their meanings to demeaning stereotypes that prefigure other kinds of reception and interpretation.

With these methodological considerations in view, the first part of this chapter surveys gerontology's spatial inquiries and postmodern critiques of commercial retirement communities, drawing upon recent cultural theories of global processes whereby technologies, networks, and populations are identified by their movements across geo-social spaces rather than by their locations within them. The second part of the essay portrays the selected *elderscapes* of Charlotte County, Florida, with a concentration on *snowbird culture*, a migrational intercultural world where northern Americans and Canadians spend their winter months living in warm southern states.

TOWARDS A GERONTOLOGY OF MOBILITY

The Inquiries of Spatial Gerontology

If one could summarize gerontology's primary professional goal, it would be to determine the conditions and contexts in which an individual's adaptation to aging is either facilitated or limited. These include spatial and residential arrangements as key adaptational resources, which academic gerontologists investigate at three levels of inquiry: (1) institutional ethnographies, (2) "aging-in-place" debates and (3) community networks. In their combination, as the survey below indicates, these inquiries have constituted a significant literature on elder environments and their impact on an individual's health care, quality of life, independent living and functional capabilities.

Institutional ethnographies are produced by sociological researchers who have been inspired by Erving Goffman's *Asylums* and related social interactionist and ethnomethodological frameworks to tackle the internal environmental relationships

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and subjective conditions within institutional, residential and community-care spaces (e.g., Diamond 1992). Jaber F. Gubrium's social constructivist research is the most well-known for building this level of inquiry into a leading contribution to social gerontology (1997 [1975], 1993). For Gubrium and his associates a nursing home is not simply a building or residence; rather, it is a micro-complex of architectural, administrative, financial, clinical, familial, symbolic and emotional interactions and power relations.[1] Institutional ethnographers show how everyday existence is organized both formally, according to the structured roles, statuses and authorities of nursing home administrators, staff, residents and visitors, and informally, according to the residents' subjective experiences with meals, toileting, sleeping, bathing, activities, family visits and medical treatment. Everyday existence, as Gubrium notes, is a whole "social world" whereby "worlds are the operating frameworks that make what participants do immediately reasonable in their everyday lives" (Gubrium and Holstein 1999:295). In such worlds, within and outside institutions, even the most mundane and routine activities in the most microcosmic of spaces, such as residents meeting in the lobby of an old-age home or friends meeting in a fast-food restaurant, take on special social meaning and shape age-identities in elaborate ways (Gamliel 2000; Cheang 2002). In *Facing the Mirror* (1997), author Frida Furman discovers an entire social world of older women and their wider community of self-care and sisterhood within the confines of their local hair salon.

The second type of inquiry within spatial gerontology revolves around "aging-in-place" debates. These tend to concentrate on two issues: first, the benefits and disadvantages of people living at home or in familiar surroundings as they age; and second, the transformation of homes or familiar surroundings as people suffer physical disabilities and/or cognitive limitations. Obviously a powerful component of a person's aging is their attachment over time to their homes, neighbourhoods, parks, shopping areas, schools, religious centers, restaurants, and local points of community history. Personal identity is constantly spatialized because people narrate the things and places around them as part of their biographical development. A walk through a neighbourhood or a room-to-room tour of a house and its cherished objects are also poignant narrative experiences full of memories and stories. Therefore, the possibility of not being able to live (or die) at home can be one of the most terrifying aspects of growing older, even where home life creates its own disadvantages. Most aging-in-place research addresses this problem by measuring an individual or family's level of subjective well-being at home against the physical, accidental and financial risks home residence can generate (*Generations* 1992; Heumann and Boldy 1993). As Graham Rowles, a pioneer in spatial gerontology points out, aging-in-place thinking must neither romanticize nor exaggerate "familiarity and emotional affiliation with place" nor "overstate the negative consequences of relocation for the elderly" (Rowles 1994:122). Rather we must take into account all the pragmatic, intergenerational, income-related, situational and technical realities that go into residential decision-making (see also Rowles 1978; Rowles and Ravdal 2002; Heywood, Oldman and Means 2002).

If the first issue elucidated by aging-in-place debates is the relation between residence and the continuity of successful aging, the second issue has to do with home environment design modifications and social services that allow people to live in their homes (Lanspery and Hyde 1997; Taira and Carlson 1999). For example, simple yet effective home aids such as the installation of hand rails, non-slip floors, easy-to-reach cupboards, or volume-enhanced telephones and doorbells can make home life so much easier for older individuals who experience physical decline. In homes where stairs are a major impediment to a resident's mobility, sleeping, bathroom and kitchen areas can be relocated on the same floor. More complicated, however, are those cases where residents, despite their lifelong competencies around cleaning, gardening, cooking, travel and personal care, require professional home visits or special assisted living services in order to remain at home. Such interventions can upset the delicate domestic balance between private and public spaces, as Julia Twigg (2000) outlines in her research on home residents and visiting care-workers in Britain. In addition to cases of theft and elder-abuse (p. 85), Twigg observes that, "care, in coming into this territory [home], brings its own rationalities, and these are in many ways in conflict within those of home and domestic life" (p. 105). Another disturbing issue is that homes can become very isolating places for older residents who live alone or in secluded areas, and thus residents become house-bound and suffer further physical and psychological problems. Hence, aging-in-place debates correlate the personal circumstances surrounding privacy, identity, bodily and subjective well-being with the social, spatial and residential features of homes, homecare and home-like environments in public settings (Kontos 1998). The idea of home as a place and a resource, with its own set of risks and rewards, is also an important element of community network research, the third general inquiry within spatial gerontology.

Community network research is a more technical level of inquiry than ethnographic or aging-in-place investigations because here researchers set out to map the gerontological networks by which homes, community facilities, senior centers, geriatric clinics, hospitals and related areas are linked to the movements, visits and stays of the older individuals, caregivers, friends and families who travel between them. Of primary importance is the question of how people cope with spatial transitions, uprooting, displacement and relocations. Journals such as *Journal of Housing for the Elderly* (Haworth Press) and the social environmental research inspired by M. Powell Lawton and others (Lawton, Windley and Byerts 1982; Altman, Lawton and Wohlwill 1984; Newcomer, Lawton and Byerts 1986) examine the constant interaction between competency, adaptation, context and environment in the lives of older persons. Such interaction has also been termed the "person-environment fit" whereby "competence does not reside solely in the individual nor in the environment" but occurs "when the capabilities of the individual match the environmental demands and resources" (Schaie and Willis 1999:183). The information generated by community network and person-environment studies is vital to future

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health care policy because it helps to determine the conditions under which people can live *autonomously*, that is, in ways by which they negotiate control over both dependent and independent features of their aging. For example, Susan Garrett's report on poor rural communities in Virginia, *Miles to Go* (1998), illustrates how location, identity and spatial relations configure the experience of aging and determine the efficacy of professional intervention. There is still much research to do in this area, however, as Laura Strain demonstrates in her survey of Manitoba senior centers (2001). Strain found that senior center rates of participation are unpredictable, often low, or variable with very little information available as to why this is the case. This situation led her to conclude that "our research knowledge regarding senior centers, their participants, and their activities must be considered in its infancy" (p. 488).

Contemporary social policy has also contributed a different set of political meanings to "community" that profoundly affect person-environment relations. Today the institutional supports that had been built into modern Western welfare states are eroding in favour of greater political reliance upon, and often burdening of, local and community resources. One result is that social program policies coalesce around the transfer of financial state responsibilities to non-state and community social spaces and services (Aronson 2002; Broad and Antony 1999; Rose 1999; Schofield 2002). Where such spaces and services become enfolded within privatized and community-state partnerships, significant consequences for aging groups have arisen because of the fiscal limitations such partnerships entail and because their articulation within public discourses takes on a crisis-oriented tone, such as those that attempt to "oversell" the problems of population aging (Gee and Gutman 2000). Community living for aging groups is a neoliberal dilemma. On the one hand, the enhancement of familiar, local and community spaces which support older persons is desirable, especially given the largely negative and "medicalized" connotations associated with care institutions, nursing and retirement homes and other specialized environments. Good examples are where local community banks and businesses offer senior homeowners helpful reverse mortgage arrangements, tax incentives, home-sharing options, mixed-age co-op housing, reduced transportation expenses or low-cost landscaping services. There is also evidence that "naturally occurring retirement communities" (NORCs) are on the rise, whereby sizable groups of retired senior residents happen to find themselves living in a selected area by chance. As such they independently and inventively initiate community mutual aid and other supportive networks, which, in turn, evolve into new community assets (Callahan and Lansperry 1997; Pine and Pine 2002). On the other hand, the idealized sense of the "local community" and its assumed beneficence for older persons is promoted in Canada and elsewhere as a political and economic panacea to problems of dependency with little regard to the gender, ethnic, class and regional inequalities that exist in communities. In other words, as we learn from gerontological community and network research about the *local* as a genuinely creative and

resourceful gerontological system of support, we must also consider its increasing role in being made to subsidize governmental fiscal policy, consumer-based health care models and market-driven retirement planning. Thus, a key challenge of this kind of research is to advance a critical analysis of both the ideals and the practices that make up gerontological communities and spatial networks.

The three areas of inquiry within spatial gerontology outlined here—institutional ethnographies, aging-in-place debates and community network mapping—create a fascinating subfield that underscores the point that any social space can be the inspiration for important commentary on the state of contemporary later life and gerontological research itself. There are many other examples than the ones offered above. However, one of the most interesting and unique spatial developments has been retirement communities. Unlike other elder spaces and networks, retirement communities call for a somewhat different kind of analysis because lifestyle and leisure values, rather than historical community and social relationships, frame their spatial characteristics and affiliated retiree identities. In particular the American "Sunbelt" or "Sun City" type of community exemplifies the new cultural connection between lifestyle and residence in retirement. As such, these communities have been accused of promoting an overly commercialized and idealized image of successful aging to the disregard of the disadvantaged living conditions faced by many older persons and their families who require sustainable support. Taking this criticism into account, the next section discusses how Sun City retirement communities, lifestyles and identities might offer spatial gerontology a fresh approach, beyond traditional and local analyses, to the larger cultural forces at work redefining age in an anti-aging culture.

Sun Cities and the Mobility of Retirement

In previous chapters I have discussed how contemporary images of timeless, ageless and "positive" cultures of aging feed into the postindustrial and postmodern blurring of conventional life course roles and transitions. Within these cultures, and despite current and popular expectations that older people will devise active, independent, self-caring and mobile lifestyles, those who lack the middle-class financial and cultural capital to do so face an even greater struggle to gain social support and recognition. In the midst of these contradictions Sun City retirement communities, built mostly in Florida, Arizona, Texas and California since the 1960s, are spatial expressions of the new social aging and its idealistic imagery. In reality, their "gated" exclusivity and predominantly white and owner-resident features tend to isolate aging groups and potentially mask the aging process itself by naturalizing retirement living as continuously active and problem-free (Kastenbaum 1993; Laws 1995b, 1996; McHugh 2000). Hence, new retirement developments that celebrate active, healthy aging can also separate it from how aging is experienced in real communities. As McHugh comments, "Sun Belt retirement communities are defined as much by the absent image—old poor folks in deteriorating neighbourhoods in cold, grey northern

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cities and towns—as by the image presented: handsome, healthy, comfortably middle-class 'seniors,' busily filling sunfilled days" (2000:113). From this critical perspective Sun Cities can appear as simulated lifestyle enclaves, marketed as the just rewards for a life of hard work, and where even the harsh Arizona desert can become a retirement-friendly *elderscape*. In this sense Sun Cities are little more than massive real estate ventures beckoning to well-to-do mid-lifers who are already anxious about their retirement-fit futures.

However, Sun Cities and associated retirement communities also encompass wider and non-commercial issues significant to spatial and cultural gerontological inquiries, such as mobility, migration and *transculturality*. Indeed, for those sociologists who study spatial processes at the global level the concept of *society* itself is no longer an adequate theoretical base from which to understand the contemporary movements of peoples and cultures.[2] In this regard British sociologist John Urry provides a new set of ideas stemming from his instructive examination of "mobilities for the twenty-first century" (2000). For Urry, social relations and forces now operate beyond societies due to the impact of global, social and populational *flows* (including diasporas), transcultural lifestyles, transnational economic networks, virtual connectivity webs and borderless transportation systems. Within these mobile forms, "*Scapes* are the networks of machines, technologies, organisations, texts, and actors that constitute various interconnected nodes along which the flows can be relayed" (p. 35). For example, local rapid transportation systems, informational channels, and communication satellites all compete to become connected or plugged into dominant scapes via their own "nodes." Some scapes create incredible power and prestige while others are globally ignored or bypassed altogether. "By contrast with the structured scapes, the *flows* consist of peoples, images, information, money and waste that move within, and especially across national borders and which individual societies are often unable or unwilling to control directly or indirectly" (p. 36). Inequalities in "flows" are based on the degree of their accessibility and the extent to which flows create health or environmental risks in some areas but not in others. Flows can also facilitate mobility and new nomadic lifestyles because of inexpensive travel, cheapened global consumer goods and electronic connectivity. According to Urry, therefore, places are "a set of spaces where ranges of relational networks and flows coalesce, interconnect and fragment" across distances (p. 140).

Taken together, global *scapes*, flows and places create the conditions under which global citizenries can emerge, whereby people can "migrate from one society to another," "stay at least temporarily with comparable rights as the indigenous population," and "return not as stateless and with no significant loss of rights" (Urry 2000:174). Global citizens can also expect to encounter hybrid cultures that contain some of the elements of their own culture. Most importantly, such citizens are

> able to inhabit environments which are relatively free of risks to health and safety produced by both local and distant causes; to sense the quality of each environment

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directly rather than to have to rely on expert systems which are often untrustworthy; and to be provided with the means by which to know about those environments through multi-media sources of information, understanding and reflection. (Urry 2000:174)

The overall cultural effect of these historic global processes, as Welsch (1999) reminds us, is that cultural differences "no longer come about through a juxtaposition of clearly delineated cultures (like in a mosaic), but result between transcultural networks, which have some things in common while differing in others, showing overlaps and distinctions at the same time" (p. 201). If typical theories of globalization assume that cultures around the world are becoming homogenized or the "same," transculturality combines local and global cultures anew by merging particular cultural details with universalistic processes. In short, "transcultural identities comprehend a cosmopolitan side, but also a side of local affiliation. Transcultural people combine both" (p. 205).

Unfortunately Urry, Welsch, and other global theorists neglect to include retirement as a key contemporary "mobility" whose migrational patterns are set to become even more extensive in the years ahead. Nevertheless, their characterizations of global citizenry are appropriate to the inhabitants of retirement areas and communities framed by Sunbelt and Snowbird cultures. If we extend their ideas about social spaces (scapes, flows, places) and global transcultural citizens to migrational and mobile retirement cultures, then these, along with related spatial gerontological inquiries and postmodern Sun City critiques, can be considered part of a larger subfield we can call the *gerontology of mobility*. The gerontology of mobility would include the transculturality of both people and places as they age and change while adding a dynamic sense of retirement "flow" to the more static tradition of retirement "time." In line with these proposed defining features of the gerontology of mobility, the second part of this chapter offers a medley of sociological, visual, spatial and reflexive materials based on three elderscapes in Charlotte County, Florida: Warm Mineral Springs, the Port Charlotte Cultural Center, and Maple Leaf Estates. At the same time the study considers Canadian snowbird culture as an exemplary case of life course "flow" from which to explore the opportunities and contradictions of global life in an era of unprecedented population aging.

SPACES OF AGE IN CHARLOTTE COUNTY, FLORIDA

Diary, December 12, 1998: 9 A.M. Pearson International Airport, Toronto, waiting to depart on Canadian Airways Flight 242 to Miami. Filling the large waiting area are mostly middle-aged and older people, couples, some already with a pre-tanned skin, putting their feet up on matching "his" and "hers" luggage, migrational souls relaxed, travel-tuned and waiting for takeoff. The pre-boarding announcement for people with small children immediately inspires the elder crowd to ready themselves. Once on the plane, among the seats behind me I see a sprouting of books, bottles of water, crossword puzzles and headphones; hear the quick snapping of seat-belts, closing of overhead hand luggage doors, zipping up of seat tables and the stripping off of parkas, sweaters and other wintry wear to reveal sensible summer wear, polo shirts and short-sleeved cotton

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blouses. Rockport shoelaces are everywhere loosened and cell phones tucked away, grey heads that line the rows of seats lay back and smile. These folks know what they're doing. Once airborne, an elderly male cabin attendant makes his way forward with a trolley for drinks. As we descend towards the Miami Airport, I wonder if aircraft passenger cabins have become micro elderscapes and how they might change in the future accordingly.

Charlotte County, Florida was established in 1921. The story behind the county's name is that it is an Anglicized corruption of the Spanish "Carlos" which came from the original native Calusa word "Calos." What the Spanish called Carlos Bay in 1565 the English called Charlotte Harbour in 1775 in honour of Queen Charlotte Sophia, wife of King George III (*Charlotte County Statistical Prospectus* 1998–99:1). The lovely waterfront and semi-tropical area lies 50 miles south of Sarasota, 24 miles north of Fort Myers, and 160 miles northwest of Miami. The county includes the towns of Englewood, Punta Gorda and Port Charlotte. Port Charlotte, located north of the Peace River along US Highway 41, is one of the country's fastest growing areas. However, most of the growth in the county is tied to the fact that the median age of the residents is 52.1 with 32.9 percent of them aged 65 and older (*Florida Statistical Abstract* 1998). Future projections are for increased immigration and a rising median age. Put another way, 40 percent of Charlotte County is 55 or older, and in some areas 50 percent or more are 65 years or older.[3] A recent ten-year health study of Charlotte County's senior residents, according to the local newspaper, found that "they are healthier and happier than their peers across the nation" (*Charlotte Sun Herald* 1999). The Senior Community Service and Employment Program affiliated with the regional AARP (American Association of Retired Persons) Foundation office in Port Charlotte reported a 73 percent job placement success rate in 1998, making the office's success rate second in the country and winning it a bronze award. Charlotte County also hosts the popular weeklong Senior Fit for Life Games.

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Hence, it is little wonder that the social landscape of the county is dominated by a large number of resident-owned retirement communities, financial and recreational organizations and health care facilities and volunteer societies. In brief, there is a five-fold grid of residential options, depending on income level, health status and individual autonomy: Home Health Care, Retirement communities, Continuing Care Retirement Communities (CCRCs), Assisted Living Facilities (ALFs) and Nursing Homes (*Senior Living Guide of South Florida* 1998:27–28). Home Health Care provides visiting professional services for residents who live at home. Retirement communities are mostly private and available to those who live independently but desire a range of leisure activities and resident conveniences. CCRCs are self-contained resident communities that also offer nursing and other care services such as housekeeping and personal assistance in one location, depending on the contractual or purchasing arrangement set out by the resident. ALFs are catered, personal care homes that range in size where recreational activities, meals, bathing and routine daily

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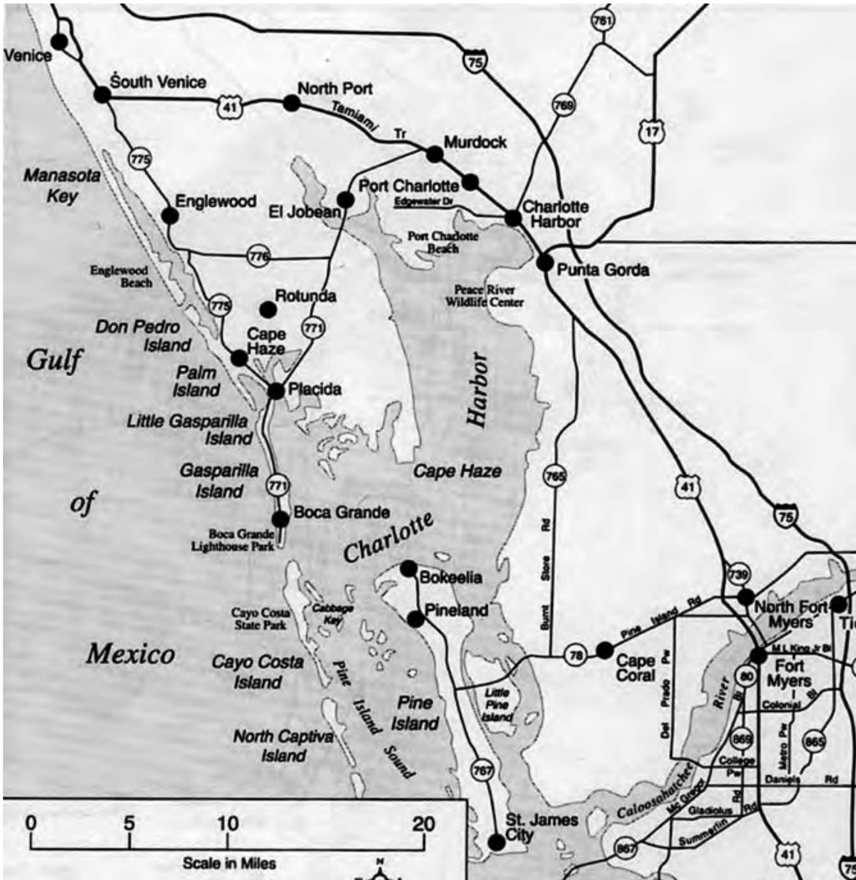
Figure 33.1
Gulf Coast Map Showing Charlotte County



Source: The Gulf Coast of Florida: A Complete Guide. Chelle Koster Walton. Stockbridge, MA: Berkshire House Publishers, 1993, p. 42.

needs are provided. ALFs are more of a care environment than CCRCs and often include residents with Alzheimer's disease. Nursing homes are designed for those who require full-time nursing care and facilities for a complete spectrum of assistance. All these options are costly or require the resident to meet strict physical and income admission standards in order to qualify for financial assistance (where it exists). Given the size of Florida's elderly population, it is not surprising that the state's nursing home industry has recently experienced insurance, financial and labor crises which have combined to create what some critics call "a long-term-care storm" (Polivka-West et al. 2001). Meanwhile, researchers have also found that affordable government-subsidized housing for

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low-income residents is unequally distributed in Florida, with many people living in underserved counties (Golant 2002).

However, Charlotte County, as an area heavily populated by senior residents in Florida, is also an experimental zone where the aging demographic forces of North American populations converge to create new spatial, mobile and transcultural ways of life. This is particularly true in the case of Canadian snowbirds, semi-migrational retirees who spend their winters in Florida while maintaining their homes in Canada. It is estimated that 500,000 Canadians spend three months or more in Florida each year with another 350,000 people heading to other states such as Arizona, California and Texas. Snowbirds who come to the Gulf coastal areas of southwestern Florida are mostly Anglo-Canadians and live in a variety of residences, the most notable being retirement communities or parks.[4]

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While snowbird culture is elaborated later in the essay, the point stressed here is that Charlotte County's elderscapes illustrate something of how retirement and later life are shaped both by the material struggles over health and security and by the innovative networks and flows of a unique social topography.

Warm Mineral Springs

Diary, December 16, 1998: I had been shopping in Sarasota, where most shops cater to elderly customers looking for good deals, restaurants advertise "early bird" special meals and clothing stores sell the same leisure wear and comfort clothing without extending

Elderly workers in a Port Charlotte grocery store. Photo by Stephen Katz.

Port Charlotte neighborhood. Photo by Stephen Katz.

their imagination to those shoppers who maintain a lifelong interest in fashion, elegance, sexiness and creative expressions of self. Driving back to my place in Englewood, a dark feeling surfaces as I pass identical malls, gated residences and condos, seafood "palaces," video rentals and gigantic drug-marts. The feeling is one of loneliness and desperation, a secret, fearful retirement culture that exposes the real illusion of an American Dream that not only doesn't last but may never have really existed. Along the roads connecting the towns, new buildings and communities seem to have been burned right out of the environment, in asphalted areas that separate the resorts and golf courses from the original residences that have come to appear as "quaint" or "historic" in comparison. Sometimes the alligators make an appearance as a reminder of what once was. This is a largely white world, cared for and serviced by a world of mostly non-white black or Hispanic laborers, cleaners, drivers and landscapers. But then all this is thrown into relief when I came to visit Warm Mineral Springs, Charlotte County's fountain of youth.

Warm Mineral Springs is just south of Venice and near the town of North Port in Florida. The spa opened in 1940 and is famous for its highly mineral and sulphurous 2.5-acre lake, whose waters are maintained at a luxuriously warm 87°F year-round. The lake is believed to have youth-giving and healing powers; the water is also drunk as a curative and mild laxative. The area and buildings that once housed rooms for massage, hydrotherapy, hotpacks, whirlpool and sauna now show their age, and what services are on offer look like they have had better days, although new vacation villas at the Springs are being planned along with a town center (www.warmmineralsprings.com). There are also apartments to rent or resorts nearby to accommodate people who visit the springs. Despite appearances, Warm Mineral Springs is a unique

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Man sunning next to Warm Mineral Springs Lake. Photo by Stephen Katz.

and fascinating facility that joins the world's great international spas and adds to their mythical accounts about the restorative miracles of drinking and bathing in vital waters. At Warm Mineral Springs, stories and testimonials abound of people tossing away canes and walkers, even wheelchairs, after weeks of bathing or sitting on chairs in the rejuvenating lake. At the lake, mostly elderly bathers swim slowly around the perimeter of the swimming area, enjoying the mineral-rich, steamy water, and soothing their aches and pains. There is a large Eastern European clientele, and visitors to Warm Mineral Springs lean towards traditional health-management techniques involving baths, muds, minerals, massages, open air, calming views, stretching and water therapy; they appear wary of the current cultural obsession with anti-aging chemicals, surgery, diets and antioxidants. Appropriately, Warm Mineral Springs was declared a historic site in 1977. When Ponce de Leon colonized Florida in 1513 (at the age of 53), he was intent on finding the legendary Fountain of Youth but unfortunately he never made it to Warm Mineral Springs.

The Port Charlotte Cultural Center

Diary, December 17, 1998: While doing a run to the local grocery store, I discover that many of the part-time workers in drugstores and grocery stores are older and retired, but still working. Indeed older workers are everywhere: behind the counters, the cash registers, carrying out bags and stacking shelves. At the nearby Publix I talk with Joe, a retiree from the American airforce who now flies around the store aisles gathering shopping carts. He tells me how great it is that younger and older people work in the same place, since the young have so much to learn from the old. In other words, sharing a "job niche" is a great opportunity despite the different values that are placed on life at different points of the life course. Joe and the others know about the Port Charlotte Cultural Center, which they consider "their" center not because it is for seniors but because it was built by seniors for everybody in Charlotte County.

When I visited the Port Charlotte Cultural Center on December 24, 1998, I was greeted by volunteers who immediately offered me a cool drink, gave me a tour of the rooms and buildings, and left me with a sense that I had entered a special place: a temple, a micro-world operating on a different basis than the larger society. I was reminded that this was one of the largest, most successful centers of its kind and, as its brochure boasts, "There's nothing like it anywhere else in America." I can believe it. I talked with Judy Ventrella, Director of the Volunteers Office, who showed me several crowded schedules listing the hundreds of hours each month worked by volunteers and the ongoing projects that self-fund the Center. "Miracles happen all the time here," says Judy, because people come in and offer all kinds of skills and talents, creating a volunteer pool that is unrivalled elsewhere. The Center also reaches out to provide for those with special needs, such as a course for older drivers, free eye screening, legal support for those working on wills and power-of-attorney arrangements, support groups for widows and widowers and volunteer opportunities for people with disabilities or who are deaf or blind. There are intergenerational programs being developed to include younger groups so that the Center remains a broadly appealing "cultural" rather than strictly "seniors" facility.

Indeed the Port Charlotte Cultural Center is really a complex of spaces and activities, consisting of meeting and music rooms, clothing boutique, school and classrooms, library, woodworking shop, art gallery, travel agency, President's Room Museum, kitchen and cafeteria, the Trash and Treasure Shop, nurses' station, administrative and volunteer offices and a 418-seat theatre, all housed in four buildings covering five acres of land. Amazingly, along with about 30 paid employees, over 1,000 mostly retired and older volunteers, including its Board of Trustees, run the Center almost entirely. The original buildings were built in 1960 by the General Development Corporation (now called Atlantic Gulf Communities), which constructed housing estates in the area. Retired residents who moved to Port Charlotte organized an adult education school with grants from the county library and school board to build a library, theatre and classrooms. Hence, the group was referred to as PCU or "Port Charlotte University." In the 1960s PCU and the Center grew through

Residents playing cards at Port Charlotte Cultural Center. Photo by Stephen Katz.

Workers and Volunteers at Port Charlotte Cultural Center. Photo by Stephen Katz.

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new additions, vigorous lobbying and sizable donations until it was officially dedicated as the Cultural Center in January 1968. As local histories, such as Jim Robertson's *At the Cultural Center* (1996) demonstrate,[5] it is a case of senior power, senior resources and senior culture. Robertson's book is based on his radio series on the Cultural Center in the 1990s, and he devotes several chapters to volunteer profiles to celebrate and commemorate their ingenuity and hard work. On a deeper level, Robertson and others who write about the Center are sociologically describing a unique elderscape, one that is constantly in transition as it attracts and coordinates an expansive mutual aid society. The number of social recreation and learning opportunities is stunning; the Activities Center and the theatre offer a host of theatrical, musical, travel, health and lifestyle programs, and at The Learning Place over 140 volunteer-taught classes are available across a range of academic, lifestyle, professional and language subjects. The Cultural Center is also a social magnet that attracts regular public and media attention, public and private funding, renovation projects, partnerships and community support to Port Charlotte itself; thus, the Center extends its importance within the vibrant elder network throughout the county.

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Concluding my visit to the Center I join some of the men playing cards in the club room. As we talk, most of the players tell me that they are from the northeastern part of the country where they spent most of their working lives. And while they came to Florida to retire and escape the grueling winters of the north, they found they still needed to work at something in order to maintain a rich social life and stimulate their intellectual interests. So they are fortunate to be exactly where they want to be. As I leave the Cultural Center and drive around Port Charlotte, I realize the important role the Center plays as a counter space to the commercial sites surrounding it, which announce atop their flashing billboards the seemingly endless places and services catering to eyes, muscles, hearing, rehabilitation, exercise, hair loss and teeth. Because medicine and consumerism are made to meet and mingle so well here, drugstores articulate the many malls and mini-malls around their clinical glow, absorbing into their commercial authority other opportunities for sociality, activity and collective meaning. Invisible or non-existent are computer, hardware, music, book and kitchen shops—places of doing, learning and growing. This is why the Cultural Center's members, volunteers and participants, wise in establishing themselves as an autonomous, enterprising and inclusive community, can walk outside their special elderscape and squint skeptically in the Florida sun at the age-resistant culture around them.

Snowbird Culture

"The Life of the Retired in a Trailer Park" is a short paper written by G. C. Hoyt in the *American Journal of Sociology* in 1954, but it is generally credited as one of the first sociological treatments of migrational or seasonal retirement culture. Hoyt, in his study of the historical Bradenton Trailer Park in Florida,

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founded in 1936, asks why the residents, whose median age is 69, "leave relatives, friends and other associations in the home community?" (p. 361). He reasons that the climate is obviously an important factor, but more so is the idea that a new kind of community is possible and desirable, one built on a sociality dedicated to retirement living and a "different code of conduct" (p. 369). Since Hoyt's study and despite the growth of migrational or snowbird retirees living in Florida during the winter months, there has been relatively little research on these retirees or the communities and spatial relations that have developed around them. In other words, we are still asking Hoyt's questions.

Charles Longino Jr., professor at Wake Forest University in North Carolina, is one of the few gerontologists who has made a career of concentrating on migrational retirement (Longino Jr. 1984, 1989, 1995, 1998 and 2001; Longino Jr., Perzynski and Stoller 2002). During the late 1980s and early 1990s Longino Jr. teamed up with Richard D. Tucker, Larry Mullins and Victor W. Marshall to write an important series of research papers on the first large-scale survey of Canadian snowbirds, whose members today form the largest group of Canadians to be in one place outside the country since the Canadian armed forces were in Europe during World War II (Tucker et al. 1988; Longino Jr. et al. 1991; Tucker et al. 1992; see also Mullins and Tucker 1988; Marshall and Tucker 1990). The team discovered three central socio-spatial components of Canadian snowbird culture. First, the relation between migration and permanence is a matter of degree or gradient rather than a binary distinction between a "here" and a "there," with seasonal migrants forming the "middleground of the continuum" between permanent migrants and vacationers (Longino Jr. and Marshall 1990). Thus, snowbirds are a kind of migrational flow in the sense of the term used by Urry above; their movements give new meaning to traditional definitions of residence, territory, distance and portability of resources. Sometimes this flow works in a reverse or "counterstream" direction whereby snowbirds move back home because of financial decline, health problems or changing family relationships, which leads Stoller and Longino Jr. to question whether in such cases people are "going home" or "leaving home" (2001).[6] Second, since most Canadian snowbirds are middle class and financially independent, they bring to their Florida communities and host economies an intercultural prosperity through their taxes, real estate and consumer purchasing. Despite concerns from American hosts that wealthier snowbirds in central, less urban areas would draw away medical resources from local needs, it has been shown that this is not the case and that snowbird medical demands on Florida geriatric services are minimal (Longino Jr. et al. 1991; Marshall and Tucker 1990). Similar findings have been reported for snowbird groups in Arizona (McHugh and Mings 1994). Third, snowbirds form their own mobile networks that attract other snowbirds. Mullins and Tucker found that Canadian snowbirds "were nomadic in the sense that their social ties were primarily with the same migrants in the communities they shared at both ends of the move. Their ties were not to places but to the migrating community itself" (Longino Jr. and Marshall 1990:234). Such networks are also symbolically fortified through the

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availability of Canadian TV and newspapers such as *Canada News*, *The Sun Times of Canada*, *Le Soleil de la Floride* and *RVTimes*.

This networking component of Canadian snowbird culture has been augmented by the Canadian Snowbird Association, whose clubs, activities and snowbird "extravaganza" trade show and exhibitions in Florida, California, Arizona, Texas and Toronto contribute to the social expression of a migrational citizenry.[7] Specifically, the Canadian Snowbird Association (CSA) is an advocacy organization that lobbies the government on behalf of senior travellers, provides accessible travel and health insurance packages (Medipac), and acts as a travel information service. The CSA began in March 1992 to challenge budget-slashing governmental attacks on out-of-province health care insurance and limits on travellers' prescription pharmaceutical allowances. The CSA has also inspired other businesses and agencies to focus on snowbirds and their cross-national circumstances; for example, American-Canadian banks now offer special "snowbird services" and favourable currency exchange deals. The 100,000 members to whom the CSA caters, with its images of active, healthy, independent, mobile and financially secure lifestyles, are mostly a privileged group. However, the CSA also represents the spatial dimensions of an expansive and accomplished snowbird world, a continent of *Snowbirdia*, ranging across great distances in Canada and the United States and mobilized through extensive transportation, internet, and social networks.

Outside of Canada the CSA sponsors the organization of regional snowbird clubs and retiree groups that hold special events, dinners, and golf tournaments and act to provide snowbird groups with support and community. In the Port Charlotte area when I did my fieldwork in 1998, Hazan Walters was President of the Canadian Club of Charlotte County and a very active member of the CSA. The club has been meeting since the mid-1960s and has grown in tandem with the migrational population. Like other clubs, the Port Charlotte group is more of a social network than a structured organization requiring a center or an office. When I spoke with Hazan at his condo complex near Port Charlotte on December 18, 1998, he explained that while the area has always been marketed as a kind of "dream land" for retirees, older Canadians are challenged by the fluctuating and often declining Canadian dollar, the escalating out-of-province health insurance, and American inflationary costs in health and other services. "The average Canadian is squeezed from both ends," although Charlotte Club members are mostly homeowners (85–90 percent) and therefore increases in rentals do not greatly affect them. Culturally, Hazan noted that snowbirds are quite comfortable with their bi-national identities and that travelling in both directions feels like "going home." For those who own and live in recreational vehicles, there is even the added sense of being "without an address" and living in the culturally in-between (which can also cause border-crossing problems).[8] When I asked Hazan if his work with the club and many other activities as a snowbird citizen has made him as busy as when he was working full time back in his native Newfoundland, he replied "more so." Organizing the interplay between snowbird elderscapes and migrational flows obviously

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takes ingenuity and work; characteristics not lost on the residents of the last place I visited, Maple Leaf Estates.

Maple Leaf Estates

Diary, December 28, 1998: When I first drove around Maple Leaf Estates, my attention was drawn to the energetic seniors on bikes or golf-carts, wearing crisp polo shirts and sensible sun hats, zooming around residential streets or trotting across the surrealistic greens of the golf course. It really had the feel of an early and eerie 1960s science fiction movie set, an elder-island inhabited by invading senior aliens. It is so interesting to observe the centrality of golf here, not only as an activity but also as a crystallizing force that bonds the social with the environmental into an accessible, international symbol of retirement life. Of course as I stopped to talk with people, I soon heard about their very real lives. These are people who raise money, help each other, mourn losses, develop networks of friendship and trust; they have fought in wars, worked hard throughout their lives and survived the upheavals and challenges of the twentieth century. Now, in the twenty-first century, they want to live well, or as best they can.

Maple Leaf Estates, also called The Maple Leaf Golf and Country Club, is a Port Charlotte resident-owned snowbird community. Sitting on 285 acres of land, the park consists of over 1,000 homes, three clubhouses, four swimming pools, five tennis courts, a library, fitness center, greenhouse, golf course and a lake stocked with fish. There are dozens of amenities, services and activities, including an internal newsletter and a CATV station that broadcasts the park's

Port Charlotte "snowbird community," Maple Leaf Estates. Photo by Stephen Katz.

many events throughout the day. Since at least 60 percent of the residents are Canadian, the eight miles of streets boast Canadian names such as Maple Lane, McKenzie Lane, Iroquois Trail, Huron Crescent and Nanaimo Circle. Canadian newspapers are available, and near the entrance security gates the American and Canadian flags fly side by side, emblematizing how the two nations are also cultural allies in the retirement state of Florida, far from the 49th parallel. Indeed Maple Leaf Estates is a place dedicated to Canadian snowbirds, whose numbers swell the park's population to nearly 2,000 residents during the winter months when the mainly Canadian Board of Directors organizes the main business and managerial meetings. And when the snowbirds pack up to return to Canada during the summer, the park shrinks to 500 or less with about 250 permanent residents. The park was established in the late 1970s, and the residents purchased it in 1990. They have developed their own governance and social management according to the rights and privileges associated with several intersecting layers of rental, leasing, purchasing, membership and ownership arrangements. There are also strict regulations around driving, parking and cycling; use of pools and golf facilities; and treatment of property and design of residences. The most important rule, however, is that the park exists for and is dedicated to people 55 years and older. Children and younger people are allowed to visit, but not to stay. For example, a note in the December 1998 issue of *Accents*, a Maple Leaf Estates Homeowners' newsletter, tries to establish generational guidelines for Christmas visitors:

> We believe that as homeowners and residents of MLE we have an opportunity to deal both creatively and proactively with the projected influx of children into our Park during the coming Christmas Season. We are referring primarily to teenagers who are betwixt and between adults and the young children. Younger children are constantly under the supervision of parents or family members, and their use of Park facilities is largely limited to the kiddie's swimming pool. Our challenge is to develop some creative recreational opportunities for teenagers during their stay in MLE. (*Accents* 1998:10)

On the one hand, Maple Leaf Estates appears to conform to some of the characteristics of Sun City retirement communities described by the postmodern critics above: privileged, leisure-oriented, lifestyle enclaves built by property developers who profit by fostering fantastical and protective age-segregated communities. Dominated by promotional images that embellish healthy aging (and anti-aging) with exhaustive regimes of activity, classes and clubs, such elderscapes create a bond between new aging identities and the consumer environments and products of postmodern capitalism. In this sense Maple Leaf Estates may have an affinity with other Sun Cities as "a landscape to be consumed" (Laws 1997:96), where even the children who visit must submit to sunny retirement activities as elders-in-training. On the other hand and despite its emphasis on security and selectivity, Maple Leaf Estates is also an example of a micro-society of migrational processes where the imagery of leisured landscapes and lifestyles is crosscut by the movements of people across different cultures and various places. The resulting complex of interpersonal, interactional, and intercultural

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Maple Leaf Estates social community. Photo by Stephen Katz.

relations is dense and delicately networked to the wider snowbird topography of Charlotte County. The earthbound features of what appears to be just another modular park of seasonal mobile bungalows built on the health/profit/lifestyle cornerstones of the Floridian economy are transcended by the communal energies and creative strategies of its inhabitants. One resident told me that when a new piano was needed for the choir, it took only a "day or less" to raise the money for it. Another resident explained how lifts were built for people in wheelchairs to get in and out of the swimming pool with money raised, again, virtually "on the spot." Flea markets, bake sales, casino days, and auctions are just the edge of a mutual aid society where volunteer labor is everywhere and part of everything. Akin to the Port Charlotte Cultural Center and other spaces of age in the area, Maple Leaf Estates is an interesting world where artless bingo coincides with the arts of sociality to create meaningful cultural resources, similar to the "definitional ceremonies" described by Barbara Myerhoff in her seminal gerontological ethnographies of aging communities in California (1978; 1986): "Definitional ceremonies deal with problems of invisibility and marginality; they are strategies that provide opportunities for being seen and in one's own terms, garnering witnesses to one's worth, vitality and being" (Myerhoff, cited in Kaminsky 1993:261).

On December 28–29, 1998, I interviewed several of the Canadian residents at Maple Leaf Estates, including Joan and Bill Charles (fictional names), both

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in their mid-70s, who have been staying at their park home an average of five to six months since they first bought it in 1982. Indeed, they purchased their property before they retired in 1985. Joan and Bill enjoy their time at MLE because of the social network, the volunteer opportunities for people to help each other and the freedom to feel one's age apart from the expectations of the younger society that exists back in Canada. They are also pleased to let younger members of their family "take charge" and allow the couple the time and space to withdraw on their own. To Joan and Bill their life in Canada is more constrained than it is in Florida. Besides the colder weather, work and family configure their social relations in Canada, while in Florida the mobile sense of a retirement community allows them the freedom to do things they could not do otherwise. They admit that the long-distance travel, international communications and moving between places require careful planning, organizing and fortitude. Upset with the image that snowbirds are a drain on both Canadian and American health care services, the couple is especially keen to see to their health care needs and insurance arrangements in Canada "so that they [insurance providers] will hear from us less." The decline of the Canadian dollar at that time had also required greater attention to financial resources, although since then a rising Canadian dollar has eased snowbird financial pressures somewhat. One of the most poignant realizations for Joan and Bill Charles is that "80 percent of the people that were here when we first came are no longer here," and so "it is always sad when we come back." Given the age and cohort identities of the park's population it is not surprising that the number of people who are dying is growing and the question of their replacements troubling. This issue was also raised by others whom I met, such as Ted Smith, the President at the time of the Maple Leaf Estate Homeowners Corporation. Ted, a Canadian from Ontario, patiently explained to me the economics of the park's management and the complexities of the transcultural real estate market, taxes, and rules of ownership. The park is "in transition" because, as original owners may not be physically able to continue their snowbird lifestyles, approaches to the next "coming-of-age group" are still being worked out. There is no doubt that the Port Charlotte area is experiencing tremendous retirement development, but how this will affect Maple Leaf Estates is not completely clear. Will the park become more Americanized, as was the case with neighbouring Victorian Estates, while it waits for younger cohorts to mature into retirement? Will younger cohorts make new demands on the park, look for alternative activities, and seek different residency arrangements? Will rules disallowing children to live in the park have to change? Will selectivity criteria have to become more flexible and accommodating to a future retirement culture loosened from industrial and patriarchal models of the life course?

As I left Maple Leaf Estates with these questions in mind and trying to reconcile its replication of a restrictive suburban utopia with its lively elder village atmosphere, I too wondered what will happen here. Will the next retiring generation care about such a place or care about getting old at all? Maybe

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retirement communities will become completely different cultural sites and re-network the spaces of age in Port Charlotte and other areas into remarkable new patterns. Future speculations aside, my visit to Maple Leaf Estates and other elderscapes gave me pause to reflect upon how a gerontology of mobility might begin with the proposition that the paradoxes of aging in time might be best understood within the contexts in which they are lived out and journeys through which they flow.

CONCLUSIONS: THE UNCHARTED TERRITORY IN A NATION OF AGE

According to Andrew Blaikie, "much of the sociology of later life remains uncharted territory.... sociology may have clarified how 'being elderly' is a learned social role, but is not particularly good at explaining what it is like to become and be old" (1999:169). Blaikie's criticism that sociologists pay scant attention to the lived experience of older individuals in favour of traditional ideas about social "role" is also relevant to the pervasive sociological portrayals of retirement and life course identities as static and bounded phenomena. Accordingly, the goal of this chapter's reviews of spatial gerontological inquiries, Sun City cultural critiques, and theories of global societies has been to illuminate that part of the "uncharted territory" of the sociology of later life related to socio-spatial dynamics. At the same time the study's excursions into the Charlotte County migrational worlds of snowbirds and other retirees have been directed to the question of lived experience as new experimental and mobile cultures challenge the definitions of what it means to grow older today. Arguably the sites selected here are shaped in part by the privileged and mobile demographic status of their occupants and participants. Nevertheless, such sites have become inventive social spaces where experiential and biographical resources culled from diverse backgrounds are summoned to counter the dominant culture's marginalization of older persons and denigration of late life transitions. Our consumer culture is one that openly subdues human values associated with continuity, memory and tradition and their means of expression despite its rhetorical promotion of "positive aging." This makes identity maintenance in time and place an arduous task of negotiation between postmodern scripts of individualistic choice and structural demands for independent lifestyles, even in the face of suffering, illness and loss. Thus, the collective strategy to redevelop roots in multiple contexts across intercultural spaces is a critical response and an indication of where the future of aging, and social gerontology, might be heading. I certainly sensed this possibility as I left Florida on January 7, 1999, from the Tampa airport where younger people were heading north and older people were arriving in the south. On the ground the terminal seemed to be a teeming traffic node where ages converged and aspirations were exchanged. And from the air, within my own mobility, I looked down at Florida and wondered how it would grow, provide leadership and resolve its contractions as it takes shape as a nation of age.

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NOTES

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1. Although physical design problems of institutional settings invite their own critical scrutiny (see Rule, Milke, and Dobbs 1994).

2. The use of concepts and metaphors of space in sociology, due largely to the influence of Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu, is generally considered a distinguishing mark of contemporary sociological theory (see Silber 1995).

3. While Charlotte County is certainly one of the "oldest" areas in the United States, the entire population of the recently created City of Laguna Woods, Orange County, California, is over 55 and the median age is 78! Dominated by the private retirement community called Leisure World, the city's residents successfully challenged the building of a nearby airport (see Ross and Liebig 2002). The city is a unique opportunity to observe what can happen when a retirement community becomes an independent polity.

4. Francophone Canadians also live in this part of Florida but have their main snowbird and holiday hubs on Florida's east coast, such as Hollywood Beach located between Fort Lauderdale and Miami. Much of this area's commerce, banks, real estate and health care facilities are geared to an estimated 100,000 Canadians that visit each year. Here restaurants offer Québec fare, stores sell Québec newspapers, Québec satellite TV is available and a seasonally transplanted Québec community lacks few of the amenities of home (Stephanie Nolen, *The Globe and Mail*, 15 March 1999).

5. Also see the Center's website for extensive information on programs, volunteers, and facilities, www.theculturalcenter.com.

6. In the United States, retirees who escape southern heat by heading north are called "sunbirds." In a study by Hogan and Steinnes (1996) of Arizona sunbirds, patterns emerged whereby snowbirds became eventual sunbirds, thus migrating in both directions.

7. These three socio-spatial elements also apply to other cases, such as Swedish snowbirds who retire in Spain (Gustafson 2001) and whose trans- and multi-local experiences of mobility and expatriate culture not only invite "further investigation of retirement migration and other forms of later life mobility" but also new knowledge "about globalisation and transnationalism" (p. 392).

8. Dorothy and David Counts capture the fascinating culture of senior recreational vehicle (RV) groups and lifestyles in their book, *Over the Next Hill: An Ethnography of RVing Seniors in North America* (2001).