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Embodied tales of older women and their relationship with movement and their younger, present and future selves

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ABSTRACT

Ageing has been often seen as negative in Western cultures. Older bodies are frequently associated with decline, loss, dependency, illness and increasing incompetence. Significantly, this 'decline model' of ageing tends to ignore the diverse lived experiences of older adults. This paper draws on the theoretical concepts of embodiment and affect to explore the embodied experiences of a group of 17 older women, focussing on their relationship with movement and with their younger, present and future selves. We used a narrative analysis approach and creative nonfiction to represent the data. The findings are presented in composite narratives in the form of three letters: 1. A letter to my younger self, 2. A letter to my present self, and 3. A letter to the future self. Analysis of the data generated through sensory interviews reveals the forces, capacities, intensities and assemblages the participants have expressed, along with the nuances and complexities of their embodied experiences and how these circulate in relationships. Participants allowed themselves to imagine potential futures, new lines of flight and physical possibilities for their lives.

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Narratives; bodies; capacities; forces; affect; new lines of flight

Introduction

In Western cultures, the dominant discourse of ageing has been largely negative and based on a 'decline' model (Dionigi et al., 2013). Older bodies have been associated with decline, loss, dependency, illness and increasing incompetence (Blaikie, 1999; Wearing, 1995). In so doing, ageing has been framed primarily as a process of deterioration. The medicalisation of ageing emphasises the 'problems of ageing' and has been criticised for reducing older people¹ to a mere set of physiological processes (Blaikie, 1999). This perspective, however, tends to ignore the varied 'lived experiences' of older individuals (Dionigi et al., 2013).

In more recent times, there has been a significant 'bodily turn' in the social sciences and humanities which has opened up new possibilities for interpreting and understanding ageing. Work on progressive and neoliberal aspects of embodied 'positive' ageing for older adults in the context of physical activity which move away from the 'decline' model have become more popular in the literature. The work of Cassandra Phoenix is exemplary in this regard. For example, Phoenix and Orr (2014) explored pleasure for physical activity in older age, which is often a forgotten dimension of physical activity. Using debates around embodiment, affect, and narratives of ageing, the authors developed

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an original typology of pleasure for physical activity in older age: sensual pleasure; documented pleasure; the pleasure of habitual action; and the pleasure of immersion. Additionally, participation in walking sport programmes were also found to enable a positive ageing discourse for middle-aged and older adults (Sivaramakrishnan et al., 2023). Phoenix (2017) also demonstrated how studies on the ageing body can contribute towards physical cultural studies influencing critical scholarship on (in)active embodiment and power relations.

In so doing, embodiment has emerged as an increasingly important lens through which to critically examine knowledge and practices in health and social care influencing how we might theorise and conceptualise ageing in general and for conditions such as dementia (Martin et al., 2013). For example, a special issue on 'Embodiment and dementia' investigated the various ways in which the body and embodied experiences are central to the experience of dementia. This approach emphasises the role of the body as well as an individual's embodied experiences in shaping how we understand the worlds and realities of those with dementia (Martin et al., 2013).

Importantly, there is also a gendered experience of an ageing body (Carter, 2016; Clarke & Griffin, 2007). For women in particular, who have played central caring roles for others such as children, parents, and pets, time poverty over a number of years has led to the neglect of their own bodies. In this regard, older women have been found to experience embodied intersectional discrimination at the nexus of ageism and sexism (Westwood, 2023). Older women often attempt to mask the signs of ageing and experience nonrecognition and misrecognition (Westwood, 2023). In this sense, Finlay (2021) employed a geographical lens to spatialise feminist thought on old age to improve understandings of factors regarding expectations and practices of what particular bodies can and should do in particular spaces. The results of this study demonstrate how bodies and places are intertwined, as the women who participated in the research walked back and forth in the water and performed exercises in other spaces. In so doing, the intensity of the place-events (Pink, 2011) transformed some of the participants' lives. Furthermore, Arroyo et al. (2022) explored feminist embodiment as a protective factor that may simultaneously promote more positive body talk and body image outcomes among mothers and their young adult daughters. Motherhood also influences the embodied experiences of women. For example, Zaides et al. (2021) found that bodily sensations have powerful and surprising meanings on first-time mothers, and that there were conflicting bodily experiences that stimulate difficulty and joy simultaneously. Their findings deepen the understanding of the way bodily experiences shape the satisfaction from being a parent. Older mothers in particular, have been classified as risk-producing subjects, unnatural mothers, and as irresponsible reproductive citizens, which confirms that dominant discourses of older motherhood are influenced by both ageism and ableism (Scala & Orsini, 2022). Motherhood also has a relationship with sport, and McGannon and McMahon (2024) explored how mother runners negotiate training and competing. The authors created letters of advice to other potential mother runners, where they outlined strategies related to the physical self, a flexible mindset and social support. In so doing and aligning with this study, the empowering aspects of sport participation in mothers' lives were highlighted.

Research has highlighted the existence of learnt patterns of embodied movement, which are stored in the body as 'muscle memory' rather than in the mind (Friedman, 2002; Iani, 2019). In this vein, the body can be viewed as a repository of memories (Leuzinger-Bohleber, 2018), where deep affective memories can be drawn out/triggered by stimuli such as music, sound and smell. These triggers help to connect older people with their younger selves by, for instance, music eliciting memories (Belfi et al., 2016; Jakubowski & Ghosh, 2021) or specific smells/scents can be closely linked to memories of the past (de Brujin & Bender, 2018; Verbeek & van Campen, 2013). Against this backdrop, the aim of this paper is to explore the embodied experiences of older women and their relationship with movement in connection to their younger, present and future selves. While we are aware that 'movement' is a broad term that refers to the physical act of moving from one place to another, or just moving one part of the body, we will use 'movement' throughout this paper to refer to forms of physical activity that often have the aim to improve general wellbeing.

Embodiment and affect

Recent literature has increasingly focussed on the concept of embodiment, particularly in the field of physical education and sport pedagogy (for a summary, see Aartun et al., 2022; Lambert et al., 2024). The concept of embodiment extends understandings of the body beyond simply natural and scientific perspectives (Cheville, 2005), by integrating the body and mind. Rather than being solely an individual expressive phenomenon, embodiment is viewed as an interactive resource (Hydén, 2013) that encompasses cognitive, physical, social and emotional dimensions. Thus, the concept of embodiment highlights the complex interplay of body, self and thought (Garrett, 2004) and is used in this paper to explore the embodied experiences of a group of older women and their relationship with movement. In so doing, we will be moving away from traditional deficit approaches related to ageing that are commonly found in countries like Spain, where this study was conducted.

Embodiment is closely connected to affect where the body's power to feel, sense, and imagine helps to construct meaning, knowing and the capacity to act. Affect is a broad term, encompassing the various senses, sensations, feelings and emotions that register our experience and communicate through non-verbal modalities (Kinnunen & Kolehainen, 2019). It allows us to articulate the energies, sensations and intensities (Massumi, 2002) that guide actions and thoughts. In this sense, affect serves as both a capacity and a force (Deleuze, 1992). It acknowledges the diverse and embodied ways in which meanings are made, and power is felt, imagined, negotiated, or contested.

Embodiment is characterised by affect, manifested through feelings, sensations and attentiveness (Lambert et al., 2024). Learning and memories evolve from the body's power to feel, sense, respond and imagine (Hickey-Moody, 2009), and an experience of embodiment is characterised by the merging of body and mind (Lambert et al., 2024). Bodies naturally feel, sense and communicate (Garrett, 2024). They are inextricably entangled with other bodies (Dernikos et al., 2020) and possess the capacity to affect or be affected (Deleuze, 1992). Rather than being defined by their physical attributes, bodies are characterised by their capacities and the forces they can create (Massumi, 2015b).

Following Haraway (2016), everything in the world is mutually articulated and it is impossible to separate objects, beings, goings and becomings. Bodies (human and more-than-human) are entanglements constituted by concepts and material forces (Murris & Bozalek, 2019). Importantly, intra-actions and diffractions allow agential cuts that do not result in absolute boundaries (Barad, 2014). Affect encompasses the forces, emotions, senses, feelings, intensities, energies or capacities to act or be acted upon (Seigworth, 2020). It shapes our ways of feeling and thinking and provides us with the power to act (Deleuze, 1988). As described by Hickey-Moody (2013) affect is 'what moves us. It's a hunch. A visceral prompt' (p. 79). Importantly, affect arises 'in the midst of in-between-ness' (Seigworth & Gregg, 2010, p. 1), and functions as both a capacity and force or intensity that can enhance or diminish a body's capacity to act (Deleuze, 1992). It contributes to the meanings we derive from our experiences (Massumi, 2015a). Consequently, more recent thinking about embodiment has deepened our understandings of affect as a tangible, embodied dimension that adds complexity, nuance and new ways of thinking about the ageing body. By focussing in this case on how older women understand their relationships with their bodies and movement, and their past, present and future bodies, we want to shed light on embodied ways of understanding movement that move away from traditional health promotion or biological discourses associated with physical activity and the deficit approach of ageing.

Methods

Participants and context

Participants for this study included 17 self-identified women, aged between 65 and 75, who were participating in a programme aimed at the prevention of dementia. The participants attended

weekly group physical activity sessions for ten weeks. The programme, titled 'Cogn-Mover' (in an attempt to integrate the concepts of 'cognition', 'movement' and 'emotion') was conducted in a medium-size city in Spain. The programme was structured around aerobic activities (mainly walking), combined with a variety of tasks and playful exercises designed to enhance attention, coordination, postural control, balance, spatial and temporal awareness, interaction, listening and empathy. The sessions employed a circuit-based format, incorporating exercises targeting joint mobility, balance, coordination and strength. Activities were tailored to individual abilities, including gentle movements to improve flexibility, one-legged balance exercises, lateral movements and tasks requiring reaction speed. The sessions concluded with stretching and relaxation exercises to promote well-being and reduce tension.

The programme was part of a broader project called 'Brain-Gym', funded by the Spanish State Research Agency. The 'Cogn-Mover' sessions included a 10-min period for personal interaction among participants prior the 60-min main session, followed by 10–15 min for further interaction and farewell. These pre- and post-session phases enabled participants to engage with two of the study's researchers, who were also programme facilitators. Beyond physical and cognitive health, the programme was designed to foster community and social connections among older adults. It aligned with broader public health goals by promoting active ageing and addressing the social isolation often experienced in this demographic group. The weekly sessions provided a dynamic, inclusive space where participants could rediscover their capabilities and interact with others. The study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee (No PI 23-3325) safeguarding the requirements of institutional ethics.

All participants were born and raised in Spain. Most were teenagers during the years of the military dictatorship (1939–1975). During this period, women's physical activity was severely restricted by the regime's conservative and sexist views of women's societal roles. The dictatorship promoted an image of women as mothers and wives, confined to the domestic sphere, which translated into restrictions on their access and participation in sporting and physical activities (Pujadas Martí et al., 2012). These limitations were justified under the guise of protecting women's 'femininity' and 'virtues,' thereby perpetuating gender inequality and reinforcing stereotypes that restricted full participation in society (Manrique Arribas, 2003). Moreover, Spain has traditionally been classified as a country with strong 'traditional gender role' expectations (Manrique Arribas, 2018; Pujadas Martí et al., 2012), where, until recent years, women were not encouraged to exercise, and were expected to prioritise care of their families.

Narrative inquiry and story telling

This research employed a narrative inquiry approach to allow participants to tell their embodied stories. In narrative research involving older people and individuals with dementia, much of the focus has been on individual storytellers and their narratives (e.g. Alemán & Helfrich, 2010; Angus & Bowen, 2011; Beard et al., 2009; Malthouse, 2011; Phinney, 2002; Stewart, 2009; Surr, 2006; Westius et al., 2009). This research often emphasises the discursive or textual elements of stories like coherence, rather than the deeply embodied sensations experienced through movement including those that are sensed, felt, connected to thought and linked with identity. To better capture participants' affective experiences, a change in focus has been needed – from analysing the textual aspects of narratives (the story as a product), to examining their performative dimensions (paying attention to the affective and embodied aspects of storytelling) (Hubbard et al., 2002; Hydén & Örulv, 2009). Narrative inquiry holds significant potential to advance understanding of previous research on embodiment because it offers a nuanced, human-centered way of exploring how people experience their bodies in lived and contextualised ways. Narrative inquiry enriches research on embodiment by giving voice to the subjective, contextual and complex lived experiences. This study was underpinned by ontological relativism (i.e. reality is multiple, created and mind dependent) and epistemological constructionism (i.e. knowledge is constructed and subjective) (Day et

al., 2023). Thus, stories are not just data but a way of being and knowing in the world, and people make meaning of their lives through stories. By studying a topic such as the lived experiences of embodiment and movement in older women, we will create knowledge that is relational, situated and co-created.

Storytelling is a key component of narrative inquiry, as it is the process of creating those stories which involve drawing on embodied experiences – intensities or forces that erupt beyond conscious awareness (Bolens, 2012; Nelson & Fivush, 2004) – and circulate within relationships. Thought emerges from our embodied interactions and memories are thus modally embodied and enacted physically through the telling (Gibbs, 2006; Kontos, 2004). Affect is communicated through storytelling via tone, volume, movement, body language, response, all of which extend beyond words (Hickey-Moody, 2020). This positions the body as both a knower and keeper of memories. So too personal stories about movement and ageing are socially shaped and expressed physically (Phoenix & Sparkes, 2007, 2009). Affect provides a way to give voice to the body revealing the forces that inhabit both body and mind. By focusing on the stories older people tell about themselves and their bodies, we can come to understand how people make sense of their embodiment as well as the capacities and affects generated by their experiences and interactions.

Data generation

This paper constructs narrative stories that position the body as a speaker, focusing on embodied and sensory experiences (reflecting on senses, feelings, responses and triggers) and questions that elicit body-based stories. That is stories that focus mainly on how the body feels. Semi-structured sensory interviews were conducted with the participants to allow them to share their stories about their life-long relationships with their bodies and physical activity. Sensory interviews focus on eliciting detailed sensory perceptions and experiences from participants, moving beyond just factual accounts. Pink (2008, 2009, 2011) has extensively contributed to the development of sensory methodologies. Sensory ethnography positions embodied experiences as sources of knowledge (Culhane, 2016; Pink, 2009). In so doing, we gathered data that was descriptive, emotional, sensorial, felt and embodied (Lambert, 2020). Some examples of the questions asked include: 'What does your body tell you?', 'How do you express yourself physically/with your body? How does it feel?', 'Can you sense that you are well/not well/fit/healthy etc? What does this feel like?'. The questions were used mainly as prompts to help storytelling.

The guiding questions were used to elicit embodied and affective experiences related to movement throughout participants' lives. We used open-ended questions to invite participants to elaborate and share their sensory movement-related experiences, encouraging them to use vivid imagery and descriptive language to bring their sensory experiences to life. We then explored how affect emerged in these stories and the capacities it created/or hindered. Effort was made to make sense of the embodied energies alive in the talk and stories 'as lived and felt in the flesh' (Chadwick, 2017). Additionally, participants were also asked to reflect on their 'past selves' and to consider what advice they would give to their 20-years old selves.

Data analysis and representation

We analysed the data following the principles of narrative analysis. Riessman (2008) describes narrative inquiry as a family of methods based on analysis of the stories people tell. The stories that the participants shared represent the lenses through which we can come to understand their personal experiences, and narratives can help us understand those experiences within a social world (Jewett et al., 2019). The first stage of analysis involved an early submersion in the data by listening to the interviews and making notes of initial interpretations in a reflexive journal. Gustavo made a start with this step and shared the notes with Valeria.

We conducted a thematic analysis with the data starting with a 'narrative indwelling' (Smith, 2021), that is, reading the transcripts and writing notes related to participants' relationship with movement and their past, present and future selves. For example, some of the themes we constructed from the data include 'lack of movement and regret, and 'prioritising family'. Then, we identified patterns in the data and relationships, where we discussed our multiple interpretations of the data. We then used a creative non-fiction approach to represent the data in composite narratives. Creative nonfiction tells a story which is grounded in research data. Each story is fictional in form yet factual in content. It is grounded in real events and people's lived experiences (Smith et al., 2015). According to Clayton (2010), in creative nonfiction stories, 'empirical evidence is represented within a fictional form of writing' (p. 272). Creative nonfiction writing tells a story using facts, but uses many of the techniques of fiction for its captivating qualities and emotional vibrancy (Cheney, 2001). The stories provide insights into the complex, ambiguous and contingent of human life (Carless et al., 2014), and they offer a deeply embodied, sensorial and relational account of human lives (Smith et al., 2015). Creative nonfiction is now more broadly utilised in sport and exercise research, with peer-reviewed articles and books dedicated to it (e.g. Cavallerio, 2022); this is because it offers researchers a 'language' that allows them to share their findings beyond academia (Smith et al., 2015).

In so doing, different quotes from the participants of this study were used to create composite narratives presented in the form of three letters inspired by Day et al.'s (2023) article of 'A letter to my younger self'. In so doing, we present the results of this study in an evocative way and to demonstrate the usefulness of creative writing (Day et al., 2023). The letters also act as a form of advice, aligning with McGannon and McMahon's (2024) study, to other women to help them reflect (and act) on their relationship with movement. We were also inspired in Charles Dickens' novel *A Christmas Carol* to present our results. In the novel the ghosts of Christmas Past, Present and Future visit the protagonist. Following this framework, we constructed three letters, each representing a collective voice of all 17 participants. That is, we tell a story from a group's point of view, rather than focussing on individual differences. However, we are also aware of the possible limitations of a reductive approach of the analysis to represent all participants' experiences as one story. Nevertheless, we chose to adopt this approach as there were far more similarities than differences in participants' accounts. The three letters constructed from the data are titled: 1. A letter to my younger self, 2. A letter to my present self and 3. A letter to the future self.

Valeria drafted the first version of the letters in English, incorporating the most representative quotes of the narrative themes identified from all participants. A reflexive approach brought separate events into coherent assemblages that reflected important and significant embodied experiences. In the crafting of the letters and in alignment with storytelling, we developed the character (Romina), created conflict and built climax to engage the audience by creating the scene and using tension. The draft was then sent to Gustavo who had conducted the interviews, to ensure that the letters accurately reflected the views, voices, speech and tone of participants. After Gustavo confirmed that the letters captured participant's perspectives, they were sent to Robyne who refined the analysis, followed by a further refinement from Valeria. Finally, the letters were sent back to Alfonso and Gustavo for a final review. The levels of interpretation were refined through the analysis, a practice which is encouraged for progressive discovery of ideas (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). In our collective analysis of these letters our guiding questions were: 'What are the senses, feelings, responses, thoughts and imaginings that emerge?', and 'What capacities or limitations do they produce?'

Results

If I knew this ...

Dear younger self,

If I only had known how important it was to keep myself active during these years! I wish I could have made the time for myself ... time to exercise, time to take care of me, time to reflect, time to love me a little bit more. While I don't regret all the effort and time that I put in my family, I wish I would have known how to balance that with some 'me time'. Maybe trying to work a little bit less too? But at that time, it seemed that no one woman had time for themselves. Cooking, cleaning, taking the kids to school ... arghh ... it felt too much sometimes! How to spend time for yourself 40 years ago without being judged of being selfish? Specially in Spain where women at that time needed to take care of the family.

I can almost see myself grabbing that younger me by the shoulders, dragging her off the couch, urging her to move before her bones stiffened and her spine began to ache. But back then, the weight in my eyelids was heavier than any dumbbell, and the fatigue sat on me like a second skin. The neck twinges came early—little whispers I pressed down, convinced I was stronger than they were. The years proved otherwise.

I remember the sharp pull between my shoulder blades when I bent to tie shoelaces, the way my jaw clenched as children darted through the house, clamoring for food, for order, for attention. My body begged me to stretch, to soften, but the rhythm of their needs beat louder than my own pulse. I would tell myself 'tomorrow ... tomorrow I'll carve out a moment'. But tomorrow never came, tomorrow was never real.

Now, sitting before the blank page, I strike the keys and the past stirs. With each keystroke, memories surface dusty, reluctant. A farewell caught in the throat. The faint sweetness of laughter in a kitchen too small for so many bodies. Joy that quickly vanished before I even named them. And as the words spill out, I find myself gathering these scattered shards, fitting them back into the shape of a woman I was once, and perhaps still am. I take a slow breath, letting the words settle inside me. My face softens, just a little, as if some small piece of the weight I've been carrying has slipped free. I tell myself -quietly, almost like a promise- that now, at least, I'm beginning to enjoy the journey into my elder years.

Yours sincerely,
Romina.

Happy with myself and not feeling old

Dear present self,

I know that years have passed really quickly. I know that I'm considered 'old' for many people now. But the truth is that I don't usually feel 'old'. Maybe it helps when some others comment on how much younger I look ... I like that ... I can't deny it! I slip into the flowered skirt that has been with me for twenty years. Its pattern, still bright, lights up the room like a freshly opened bouquet. I've always believed clothes speak, and this one says exactly what I feel: cheerful clothes for cheerful people.

In front of the mirror, I smooth the fabric at my waist and can't help but smile—there's something in it that still makes me move lightly, almost youthfully. Some may think age dulls the desire to look after oneself, but for me it's the opposite. I enjoy the ritual of caring for my skin, brushing my hair, and choosing colors that let me shine. I don't do it for anyone else. I do it because when I walk out in this skirt, I feel the spark of past summers in my steps, as if my body is grateful for the care. At my age, there's still room for freshness. That's what I carry with me: the comfort of being at home in my own skin, and the certainty that I can still dress like someone who feels young.

My daily life is very active ... I still feel strong and energetic. Exercising requires quite an effort from me, but it also gives me plenty of satisfaction. When I move, my body steadies itself: muscles pulling, lungs filling, balance returning with every step. Exercise has become more than a habit; it's the rhythm that keeps me alive! While others of my age slow down, I feel lighter, younger, as if each stretch and stride pulls years away from me. The sweat on my skin, the heartbeat in my chest, all of it brings a clarity I can't find anywhere else. Even the aches and old injuries, once so frustrating, now feel like familiar companions. They're part of me, but they don't hold me back; they remind me that I'm still here, still moving. Every time I exercise, it's as if my body runs a quiet "cleaning cycle." The heaviness lifts, my energy sparks again, and I walk away renewed—recharged, like I've just pressed a hidden reset button inside myself.

Even though sometimes I wish I were skinnier, during menopause it was a real struggle with my weight. I'm not obsessed or anything, but I'd probably like to lose a few kilos. Not for my physical appearance only, but mainly for my knees. My knees would be so much stronger if I lose weight ... of course losing a few wrinkles wouldn't hurt either!

Now I can actually listen to my body. My body talks to me when I'm tired or in pain. I can feel it in my muscles and in my shoulders. My body tells me when to stop and when I had enough. Even though I generally feel young and strong, I also accept my age and the limitations that comes with it. But I still make sure that I enjoy each day and live plentifully, adapting my body to my capabilities. I can enjoy life now! Now that I'm retired, I actually have time for my body ... sometimes I even feel that this is the best stage of my life!

I know I still have so much to learn about my body ... it's an endless journey. I learn alongside my yoga instructor and my acupuncturist. I'm still learning how to breath properly. I also know that it's impossible to be happy with

myself all the time. We all have emotions and things to accept, but exercise is now my best friend. I feel agile and energetic when I exercise. I know I'm a bit lazy to start with it, but once I start it feels SO good! Not just physically, but also to feel that my head goes 'blank' and that I don't think so much in things that concern me. On the days I exercise, the night comes differently. My body sinks into the mattress with a pleasant heaviness, the kind that only movement can bring. For years I fought with restless nights, but now I close my eyes knowing I've given all my energy to the day. There's a quiet satisfaction in that moment: a slow warmth lingers in my arms, a pleasant ache in my limbs, my breath slower, my mind calm. I remind myself I've moved enough, I've cared for myself, and tomorrow I'll get to do it again. That thought carries me gently into sleep, a promise of rest and another day waiting to be lived in motion.

Yours sincerely,
Romina.

The vulnerable me and my concern of being a burden

Dear future self,

I hope you know how much you have done in the last years to avoid being a burden to your family. You probably started a bit too late to exercise and to take care of yourself, but before then, you were fully dedicated to your family. I hope you don't feel like a burden to them now ... you did everything you could, and you dedicated most of your life to them. I know that your ultimate goal for exercising in the last few years was to not become that burden. You have been doing everything by yourself, you have been strong, and you have been very active lately.

I know that you are struggling with your identity at the moment, I know you are not used to receive help from others. Your legs twitch against the chair, eager to move, though your body no longer obeys as quickly as it once did. When someone reaches out a hand to help you stand, your jaw tightens, and the gesture burns more than the ache in your joints. Stillness creeps under your skin like an unwelcome weight, and you crave for the days when motion came as easily as breath.

The pain is there, a low throb that has become a companion, but what unsettles you most is not knowing how far it will go. You imagine waking to find your limbs heavy, your steps uncertain, no pill to silence the fire inside your body. And deeper still lies the fear that grips hardest, the one fear that stands supreme: the mind faltering. Sometimes the word you're reaching for slips away just as your lips part, leaving you staring at the air, tongue heavy, silence pressing in. A memory flashes, then fades before you can hold it. In those moments, you see not only your own confusion, but the faces of your family watching, waiting, fearing the day you vanish into yourself. That thought chills you more than any pain in your bones.

You've noticed how your body has slowed down during the years, you also know that your reflexes are not the same either. You have started to forget a few things. Not the long-time memories ... those ones are with you, very close to your heart. The very first steps of your children, your wedding day ... aww, such nice memories! But the everyday life things ... those are the most difficult to remember. What you did yesterday, or the plans that you committed for the next coming weekend. How many of your close friends are already experiencing dementia or Alzheimer? That's definitely a road that you don't wish to transit. You have yourself taken care of your mother with Alzheimer for ten years, so you know what it's like. Don't remembering your family, your close friends, being confused the whole time ... you don't want that. But how to avoid it? Do I have an option? You are still doing everything 'right' ... you are committed to your daily puzzles and exercises, but is that enough?

Yours sincerely,
Romina.

Concluding discussion

This paper aimed to explore the embodied experiences of older women and their relationship with movement across their younger, present and future selves. Letters constructed from interview data illustrate the varied and embodied responses of the participating women to ageing as well as the affects that they produce.

The three letters demonstrate assemblages which constitute bodies that are in a constant state of becoming throughout the ageing process. The women who participated in this study experienced a number of forces, capacities, intensities and flows that impacted on and affected them as well as those around. Those forces, capacities, intensities and flows are a continuum and change according to their life circumstances. One of the most significant events for change was motherhood and the

responsibilities added towards the family after motherhood. The letters provide evidence of the nuances and complexities that participants embodied as well as how they circulate in relationships.

While participants demonstrated awareness of the 'decline model' of ageing (Dionigi et al., 2013), their stories also showed variation in responses and patterns of learnt embodied movement indicative of how their bodies were keepers of memories stored deeply in the body. The letters demonstrate how cognitive, physical, social and emotional dimensions of embodiment come together and assemble through a complex interplay of body, self and thought (Garrett, 2004). Furthermore, participants' power to feel, sense and capacity to act were revealed and uncovered, by demonstrating sensations and emotions communicated through non-linguistic modalities (Kinnunen & Kolehainen, 2019). The participants articulated the energies, feelings, impressions and intensities (Massumi, 2002) that guided their actions and thoughts around movement throughout their embodied lives. In so doing, they made meaning of their multiple and embodied ways as well as their capacity to act and be acted upon.

Participants' bodies felt pain, judgement, fears, weakness, energy, strength, joy and satisfaction. There was also sense of struggle and regret. Motherhood changed the assemblage of their bodies, as it included compromises in terms of their involvement in movement. As literature has shown, there are complex processes for mothers to (re)negotiate their subjectivity in ways that resist constraining good mother ideals and expand strategies to enhance their well-being (McGannon & McMahon, 2024). Participants' work on motherhood has impacted their younger selves, as they were advocated to traditional discourses of 'good motherhood' which remain prevalent (McGannon & McMahon, 2022). Participants' bodies could not help but feel, sense and communicate (Garrett, 2024) and be endlessly entangled with other bodies (Dernikos et al., 2020). The participating women have accepted that their capacities will be less with ageing, but they are variously still learning and becoming. Their bodies are constantly redefined by what they can do and the forces they can create (Massumi, 2015b). Women's embodied experiences were thus not only shaped by sociomaterial conditions but also participated in shaping them, foregrounding the mutual constitution of bodies, time and environments.

Working with embodied stories has shown to be useful when exploring the deeply felt sensations of movement and ageing to capture the affective responses held within. Participants' embodied experiences are understood as intensities and forces that surface beyond conscious awareness. In this work 'affect' has provided a meaningful way to give a voice to participants' bodies, revealing the forces that inhabit and shape their bodies and mind.

Affect circulates as a capacity for the participants who sense the assemblage of regret, care and (lack of) movement constituting a becoming-body that has been neglected. The contradictory forces and energies work on their becoming bodies, and affect limits their sense of potential in their now becoming-older bodies (Hickey-Moody, 2020). Guilt arises from the in-between-ness of self and family and their materiality of change to their capacities is sensed as decay and is felt, imagined and lamented (Hickey-Moody, 2020).

Affect as a force inhabits their bodies and movement (Ivinson & Renold, 2021), influencing their continuous becoming bodies. Their human bodies interact with other human and non-human bodies creating on-going assemblages in which there is still so much more to do, feel and learn (Anderson, 2006). Simultaneously, affect as a non-stable entity and constantly in flux (Saffron, 2020), circulates relationally to feel young, to feel strong, to feel hopeful. Participants' thinking and feeling come together to unify their embodied selves, such that they can live with limitations and movement can bring both pleasure and pain (Lambert et al., 2024).

Ageing plugs in with tiredness and pain as a constant reminder of the becoming-body through the passage of time. However, the present self is not trapped in deficit discourses (Garrett, 2024) and new lines of flights (Robinson & Kutner, 2019) are imagined. Forces continue to operate on the embodied experiences reinforcing not only how it *feels* but also what is *capable of being felt* (Zembylas, 2025). Affect circulates in the future self as preoccupation with the burden that might be becoming, and the assemblage of burden is constructed through the interactions with other

material and non-material bodies (Mulcahy, 2012). This reservoir of affective capacity (Airton, 2020) creates pain both at physical and emotional level that plugs in with the fear of possible burden to come.

As the assemblage of this paper comes to an end, we recognise the impact of participants' stories on our own affective registers as well as consciousness of our ageing bodies. In the process, the researchers' affect and backgrounds have plugged in with participants' stories to produce the becoming of this manuscript. In so doing, both participants and researchers have embodied sensations and feelings about ageing and movement.

Note

1. While we are aware that defining 'older' is controversial and the meaning associated with it changes according to time and context, we have used this term to refer to women aged 65 years old or more, taking into account the specific cultural setting of the study, as this is the average retirement age in Spain.

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