

Breaking the Silence: A Participatory Ethnography Defrosting Aging Through Shared Creative Moments of Perplexity

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In partnership with **Sharon Nelson, President** — Jamaica Association of Montréal (JAM)

Introduction

- **Social isolation and loneliness** are recognized **mental health risk factors** for older adults, compounded in racialized and ethnocultural communities (NIA, 2020)
- **Culture, migration history, and structural inequities** shape lived experience of well-being (Kirmayer et al., 2011)
- **First-person perspectives** of Black older adults remain underrepresented in research and clinical practice (Auguste et al., 2023)

Participatory ethnographic center community expertise and attending to the embodied dimensions of experience.

Project Objectives

- **Document first-person, lived experience of aging** among Black older adults in Montréal.
- To examine how **creative practices** (dance, pinhole photography) and immersive interview methods can expand access to embodied experience in transcultural research
- To surface researcher **reflexivity** as a methodological and ethical necessity in participatory work across cultural differences

Originality

What's new: introduces **immersive interview methodology:** participants' binaural audio recordings of everyday activities and creative practices place researcher and participant in the same sonic environment unlocking embodied memories inaccessible through verbal interview alone (Park, 2008, 2012; Grond & Devos, 2016)

Methodology

Conceptual framework: Narrative and critical phenomenology (Mattingly, 2010; 2019)

Setting & Partnership:

Jamaica Association of Montréal (JAM), in partnership with President Sharon Nelson.

Methods / Engagement approaches:

Preparatory and ongoing work to establish a trust-based relationship with JAM

Mixed-method ethnography to build trust and understand the local context including:

- 12 months of participant observation
- Narrative immersive interviews centered on participants' own accounts and binaural recordings
- Ethnographic fieldnotes throughout
- Pre/post SNA and SIL measures (Social Isolation, Loneliness, Social Network Analysis)

Why these methods: These approaches prioritize flexibility and context-sensitivity, allowing methodology to follow participants rather than imposing predetermined instruments. Best suited to capturing the felt, embodied, and relational dimensions of aging experience that standardized tools structurally miss.

Analysis:

Narrative analysis of fieldnotes, interviews, and audio recordings, guided by critical phenomenological theory. Iterative, reflexive, and attuned to moments of perplexity — instances that unsettled taken-for-granted assumptions about age and aging.

Results

- **Age emerged as experiential and relational:** shaped by activity, company, and felt environment, not biological condition
- Creative practices and binaural documentation **unlocked embodied sensations unreachable through verbal interview alone**
- The researcher's own **ageist assumptions were repeatedly unsettled**, reflexivity became a key finding in itself

Discussion & Limitations

- The relational texture of age, as felt in dance and shared sound, exceeded prior literature
- Limitations: Single site; researcher positionality (non-Black, non-Caribbean) required ongoing negotiation; method is resource-intensive
- Next steps: Extension to other racialized communities; clinician training resources; collaborative knowledge translation with JAM

Practice Implications

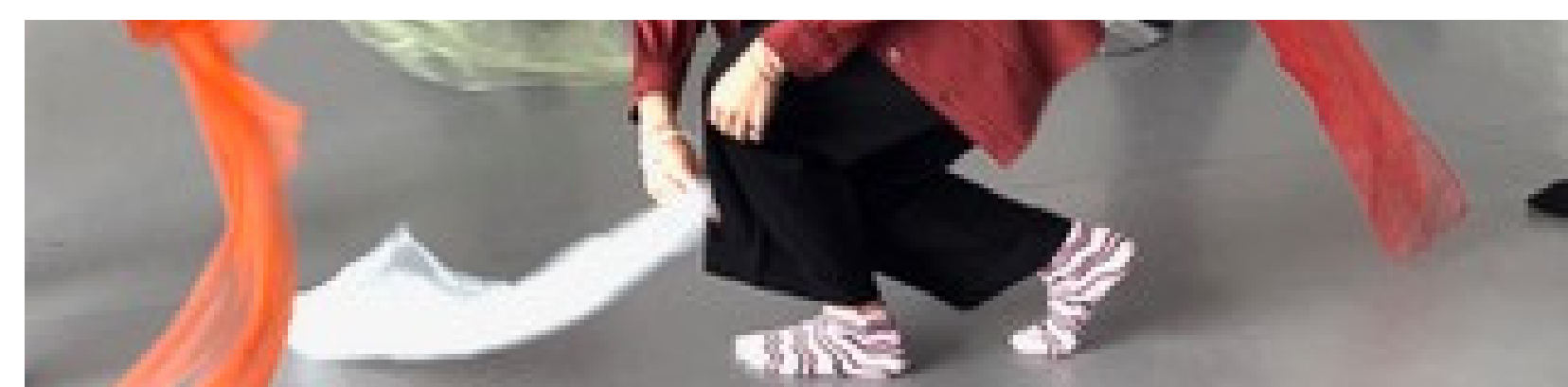
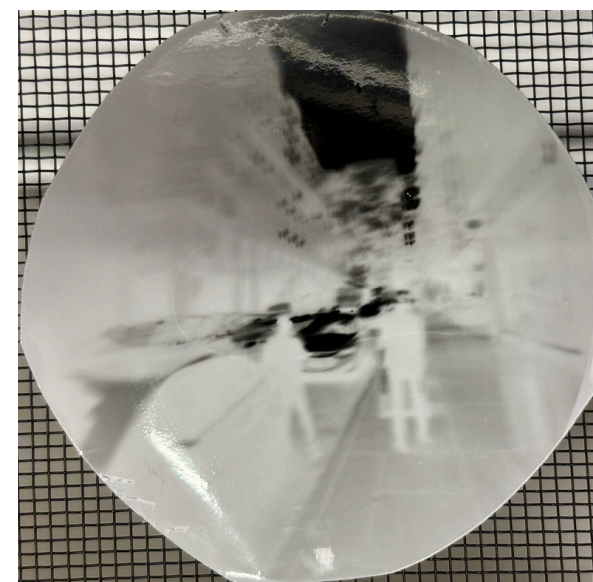
- Immersive methods surface what standardized tools structurally miss
- Advance culturally responsive assessment for Black older adult populations
- Inform community mental health programming grounded in first-person experience
- Support clinician training across cultural differences

Conclusion

- Participatory ethnography and immersive methods yield clinically relevant insights into **first-person aging experiences** that standardized tools cannot capture
- Building credible community relationships demands **sustained commitment** and flexibility from researchers
- Sharing ongoing participatory work promotes mutual reflection toward meaningful, **inclusive community partnerships**



"Scan to Listen the "Què serà, serà" piece



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Funding

This work is supported by a Partnership Engage Grant through the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC).

SSHRC / CRSH · Canada

Acknowledgements

Thank you to the members and staff of the Jamaica Association of Montréal, and to Sharon Nelson for her leadership, generosity, and commitment for this project guidance