Book Review

Review of Walton, Shireen. *Ageing with Smartphones in Urban Italy: Care and community in Milan and Beyond*. London: UCL Press. 2021. pp. 208. Price: $63.7 (Hardcover); $35.4 (Paperback); Open Access (PDF).

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Ageing with Smartphones in Urban Italy by Shireen Walton is a leisurely journey through the 'NoLo' district, an inner-city neighborhood of Milan. The author introduces readers to NoLo's inhabitants, their expectations and practices of aging, and the role of smartphones in their lives. While throughout the book aging is inevitably interwoven with digital space and smartphones, each chapter of the book reveals different angles from which aging is conceptualized and experienced in Italian society. The empirical data for the book were collected during sixteen months of ethnographic fieldwork based on participant observation. However, the digital dimension also matters for the research. Recognizing the limitations of classical neighborhood ethnographies, the author "foregrounds the neighbourhood and its related (and wider) digital environments as a locus of social life and ethnographic enquiry, [... and] investigates the social economic and digital networks that emanated from within NoLo and also traversed spaces of the city of Milan, and which operated transnationally" (15).

In an introductory chapter (Chapter 1) Walton explains why transnational and translocal spaces matter in this research. The author starts with a brief description of demographic changes in modern Italy and Milan – such as the aging population and high rates of both immigration and emigration – and points out that these processes are accompanied by significant developments in digital technologies. The author describes how these processes affect the NoLo district and recalls the term 'super-diversity,' presenting NoLo as a crossroads of different cultures, classes, and architectural styles.

What does aging and 'being old' mean for different social actors in Italy? In Chapter 2, the author traces the crucial transformation of the aging policy in modern Italy from "active aging" to "active welfare" (24). While the former focuses on the aging process as a failure and a source of problems that need to be prevented or overcome, the latter foregrounds how sociality and community emerge through shared activities such as yoga classes or language courses in multigenerational and multiethnic contexts. In the latter, healthy aging matters, but it is just a part of broader narratives of active welfare, which gives people the opportunity not to feel old and to engage in various activities without considering age classification. For example, Adela, one of the research participants, aged 73, says: "I am too busy to be old. I have no time to die" (24).

In Chapter 3, readers are introduced to the range of activities that form the "spirit of togetherness" (58) among NoLo inhabitants. Environmental activism groups, guided walking tours, educational activities in the multicultural center, and choirs are some of the opportunities for sharing time, engaging with the community, getting and giving support, and be emotionally connected. In the chapter, we meet Luca, a 75-year-old volunteer at Italian language courses; Giovanna, who sings in the choir after retirement;

and Dahlia, for whom sewing courses become an opportunity not only to improve Italian but also to find friends. While at first glance, these activities do not necessarily require digital space, Walton points out that

> WhatsApp groups facilitate a certain continuation of the relationships formed in these community spaces, which develop in the online setting in other ways than in the offline one, where some individuals might feel shy or inhibited, for instance about speaking Italian, and may be less sociable than in the online environment, in which they may use the forms and practices they like to express emotion and affection and to build and maintain relationships. (54)

Chapter 4 discusses how traditional perceptions of kinship roles, family life, and the home change in a digital society. Walton suggests the "social availability" (61) framework to analyze how people modulate their publicity and privacy in digitalized urban life. The chapter begins with the metaphor of closed shutters on windows reflecting social unavailability and continues with examples of how social availability is regulated in the digital space and with the help of smartphones. For instance, Giulia, in her early fifties, turned her home from a private family space into a place for public parties and dinners with the use of a recently developed smartphone application that "draws on the social and cultural appeal of the home space, including the sociality surrounding food and eating together, to create an online-facilitated offline social event at someone's home in the urban context" (65).

While all chapters of the book reveal the smartphone as a tool for engaging in social activities, chatting with friends and family, translating unknown words, checking the weather, navigating, listening to music, and finding recipes, Chapter 5, in particular, discusses the smartphone as "constant companion" (84), as well as various discourses of smartphone use. Walton's research participants conceptualize a smartphone as an ambiguous object that is both a blessing, an addiction, and a time and attention thief. The emotions of Anna, one of the research participants, reflect this feeling well. The author reports

> although it is the smartphone that digitally *knits* her family and friends together, it has not, at least as yet, accrued the positive moral connotations of *knitting* as a traditional motherly or grandmotherly craft which she undertakes to create clothing for her children and grandchildren, or for the church, meaning that it remains a somewhat ambiguous object that brings about mixed feelings as a 'companion.' (84, emphasis mine)

In Chapter 6, Walton traces how digital technologies impact various understandings of health, medical, and family care in the national health care system. She finds that some people use health apps mostly to book doctor appointments or hold insurance documents, while others are interested in remote digital health services to prepare for remaining independent in the future. For instance, 68-year-old Enzo sends photos of symptoms to the doctor to monitor his health, while Bernardo, in his sixties, wishes he could have regular video consultations with a doctor to avoid the difficulty of getting to appointments. The story of Bernardo, who welcomes digital health technology because he does not want his son to sacrifice his life by taking care of the father, reflects an important idea of "technology-aided self-sufficiency" (116), which can expand perceptions about filial piety.

Following a multigenerational and multicultural perspective, Chapter 7 focuses on the life experience of young adults whose parent were born abroad and moved to Italy. While it is common that a smartphone becomes a communication tool with relatives living abroad, the author pays more attention to digital flows of culture and identity. For instance, Walton's research participants from the Hazara

community in Milan listen to Persian poetry on YouTube or share book translations in Telegram. Chapter 8 reveals aging as a part of identity process. Walton conceptualizes people's lives as a sequence of journeys through time and space, and "captures how being older was about their individual and collective processes of becoming" (157). From this angle, smartphones play a significant role bringing together different domains of life. For instance, Ugo, aged 77, remembers how his father played with him in childhood, asking for the meaning of different words from a newspaper. Then, Ugo tried to find them in dictionaries and encyclopedias. Nowadays, "the Wikipedia app has become one of Ugo's favourites and each time he opens it, he feels a warm jolt that brings him into proximity with his father" (146).

Like the latter quote, this book is warm and conveys affective atmospheres of aging in a digitalized Italy. Voices and stories of different people sound from every page. Walton allows readers to share joy, fears, and dreams with them. Besides critical issues, each chapter adds a piece to the mosaic of the life of NoLo's residents: readers learn about the history of the district (Chapter 1), weather and seasonal rhythms of life (Chapter 3), *casa di ringhiera,* a particular type of residential apartment (Chapter 4), and a recipe for *cuccia,* typical Sicilian dish (Chapter 5). I would especially like to mention the idea of supplementing the book's text with short films, which can be viewed at the website of the project "Anthropology of Smartphones and Smart Aging" (ASSA), of which the reviewed book is a part. Short interviews with views and sounds of the city, and Italian speech immerses the readers and viewers in the lives of the NoLo district's residents.

This book, written in clear language, will be of great value to a diverse audience interested in the interplay between aging, digitalization, and sociality at the level of practices and discourses in multicultural Italian society.