Received: 18 March 2024 | Accepted: 13 December 2024

DOI: 10.1111/etho.12449

ETHOS

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Images of spectral relatedness: How couples anchor life together in a nursing home in Denmark

Mikka Nielsen[1] | **Anne Toft Ramsbøl**[1,2]

[1]The Danish Center for Social Science Research, VIVE, Kobenhavn, Denmark

[2]Department of Anthropology, Aarhus University, Aarhus, Denmark

Correspondence
Mikka Nielsen, The Danish Center for Social Science Research, VIVE, Kobenhavn, Denmark.
Email: mikn@vive.dk

Abstract

When one partner in a couple moves into a nursing home, the sense of shared everyday life and home is disturbed. In this article, we examine how couples respond to radical ruptures in their shared everyday lives, homes, and imagined futures when one partner moves into a nursing home due to severe illness. We draw on the field of imagistic anthropology that attends to the uncertain, ambiguous, and imaginative dimensions of life to capture the often overlooked, albeit important, dimensions of peoples' lives in situations of uncertainty, rupture, and loss. Inspired by the concept of spectral kinship, we delve into experiences of transgressing space and time, the material and the immaterial, the "real," the dreamed of and imagined as they are anchored in a play of imagination, a book, and a dream. We call these *anchors of belonging*. We suggest the concept *spectral relatedness* to highlight both mundane and spectral dimensions of homemaking and being together. We argue that attending to imagistic qualities in fraught life situations can help bring forth nuances and complexities of how couples face severe illness and the relational and practical changes such life situations entails in the context of homemaking in institutional settings.

KEYWORDS

homemaking, imagistic, nursing home, relatedness, spectrality

INTRODUCTION

"We often have the idea that our opportunity space dwindles as we get older, but maybe it is just a different kind of opportunity space that opens up? Perhaps it is an awareness that what could have been, as well as

what is and was, defines who one is? Perhaps the importance of the possible in human life is emphasized precisely where the possibilities remain spectral?" (Louw, 2022, 109).

"She did not move right away. It takes time to move things from your head to your hands. To actually take a chair [and put it into the car] and drive out here [to the nursing home] and say: 'now this is where you have to be.' We still consider our house as our home and still go there together. But it's tough to leave the house again, so we try to make this place [the nursing home] more into our place."

We meet Simon for an interview in a nursing home in a rural part of Denmark as part of an ethnographic fieldwork about experiences of homemaking in nursing homes. Simon comes to the nursing home to visit his partner, Kirsten, who has recently moved there due to severe illness. He generously and heart-wrenchingly describes the process of Kirsten's decline, her moving into the nursing home, and them trying to make a life and a home together despite living apart. For Simon and Kirsten, coming to terms with the gap between what is and what could have been or what almost is manifests as salient questions.

Originally, this article aimed to explore how couples deal with homemaking when one partner moves into a nursing home, and how decorating the walls, interacting with the other residents, and participating in daily life in the unit all contribute to a feeling of being at home. However, it has evolved into a piece that deals equally with phenomena that lie beyond the "apparently real" (Desjarlais, 2019), thus acknowledging the importance of "inner, imagery-driven worlds" (Gammeltoft, 2021). We refer to spectral and imagined elements of life that, as porous and fragile as these elements might be, anchor relationships and senses of home and belonging in challenging life situations. We call these elements *anchors of belonging*. In particular, we dwell on the imagistic qualities of a book, a dream, and a small, imaginative game as they come to affect the ways in which the couples respond to their altered life situation when one partner is living with severe illness and moves into a nursing home.

Drawing on the emerging field of imagistic anthropology (Grøn & Mattingly, 2022), we examine how two couples from our fieldwork respond to changing circumstances in terms of both physical and cognitive decline that, even though such changes are only located within one of the two bodies of a couple, permeate the present and the future of the couple in profound ways. Inspired by the concept spectral kinship coined by Tine Gammeltoft (Gammeltoft, 2021), we attend to experiences that transgress space and time, the material and the immaterial, and suggest the concept *spectral relatedness* to highlight both the spectral dimensions of homemaking and being together otherwise while also attending to the mundane and practical aspects of anchoring senses of togetherness and home—the practices of moving "things from your head to your hands," as Simon says in the interview excerpt above. As Janet Carsten suggests, "relatedness" involves continuous processes of becoming connected that often take place through seemingly trivial or taken-for-granted acts and practices in everyday life and domestic settings (Carsten, 2000).

By examining the spectral dimensions as well as the mundane dimensions of homemaking and togetherness, we wish to spotlight the despair and suffering these couples express while at the same time explore how they imagine and enact what is and what might be "the good" (Robbins, 2013) in the life situations they face—at least when the good manifests itself momentarily.

The analysis builds on a research project on experiences and practices of homemaking in nursing homes (Nielsen et al., 2023). Over a period of 4 months, we did ethnographic fieldwork in eight different nursing homes in Denmark. Both authors visited each of the eight nursing homes together for 2 full days and participated in everyday life as it unfolded during the day. We participated in dinners, daily activities such as singing, listening to the radio, walking around the unit, watching the staff clean the kitchen, and sitting, waiting, relaxing, and napping. During our visits, together and individually, we visited residents in their apartments and interviewed residents, relatives, and professional care staff. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. We saw how residents make themselves at home by, for example, engaging in hobbies such as knitting or listening to music, and we learned that relatives try to balance how to participate in everyday life at the nursing home while at the same time finding ways of leading a life outside the unit.

Our initial research focused on experiences of feeling at home at nursing homes more generally but as the fieldwork progressed, we became increasingly interested in how couples while living apart find ways of being together otherwise in altering circumstances. When one partner in a couple moves into a nursing home due to severe illness or age-related issues, everyday life as a couple is suddenly spread across two

homes. Even if illness has already changed and challenged everyday life, moving to a nursing home is often a radical shift in the couple's life together. During the fieldwork, we saw many different ways of organizing and experiencing life together as a couple. Drinking coffee, watching TV, taking small walks, or looking at old pictures together were common everyday activities. Some couples would arrange to celebrate family events in the home they used to share, some chose to eat together at the nursing home a few times a week, and others loved to sleep beside each other when possible.

In this article, we draw attention to two couples. In both cases, the female partner lives in a nursing home due to a chronic, progressive disease that, besides physical decline, also entails altered cognition manifested in memory loss. In different ways, the stories we were told about how these couples make a life together left us in an affected, yet uncertain mood, puzzled about what it means to share a home and a sense of everyday life in the face of such changes.

In the following sections, we first give a brief outline of existing literature on homemaking and relatedness in an institutional setting. Secondly, we present the emergent field of imagistic anthropology that takes seriously the uncertain, ambiguous, and perplexing imaginative dimensions of everyday life as ways to exceed normative ideals or taken-for-granted conceptualizations of people's experiences and different ways of life (Grøn & Mattingly, 2022). Inspired by the concept of spectral kinship (Gammeltoft, 2021), we seek to combine ideas of homemaking and relatedness with an imagistic framework. Thinking with imagistic anthropology, we thus present an ethnography of how the couples respond to the different kinds of ruptures they face as we describe the potentialities for being together otherwise that might emerge in such uncertain life conditions. We conclude the article by arguing that attending to imagistic qualities, including uncertain and ambiguous aspects of lived experience in fraught life situations, brings forth crucial nuances and complexities of living together that otherwise might remain uninvestigated in research on homemaking in institutionalized settings.

HOMEMAKING AND RELATEDNESS IN NURSING HOMES

In Denmark, the landscape of nursing homes is changing. We see fewer but bigger nursing homes (Hesselberg Lauritzen et al., 2023), and we see that residents in nursing homes represent an increasingly frail population compared with the general older population. Nursing home residents experience greater comorbidity and disease complexity, the rate of hospitalization increases substantially before admission to the nursing home, and median survival after admission is about 2 years (Reilev et al., 2020). Therefore, nursing homes have become what health professionals at the nursing homes during our fieldwork often called "little hospitals." According to the Danish government, however, "a nursing home must be more of a home than an institution again," as stated in the current government policy (The Danish Government, 2022). So, what is a home under these circumstances?

Literature on homemaking and marital life in nursing homes as well as theories from new kinship studies point out a number of relevant findings for the present study. Firstly, home is described as not only a noun but also a verb (Pasveer et al., 2020). Home is a practice (Mallett, 2004) as people make homes. We decorate and move around in the home and thereby form part of what a home is. The home has special rules, and everyday activities take place at special times with which the home's residents, to varying degrees, share a rhythm (Douglas, 1991; Samanani & Lenhard, 2019; Winther, 2006). In nursing homes, in particular, which are characterized by being in-between a private and a public sphere (Dekker & Pols, 2020; Hauge & Kristin, 2008), meals and activities are scheduled. This means that such activities take place and thereby organize the individual resident's home according to the nursing home's particular institutional rhythms (Nielsen et al., 2023). Secondly, home is tightly connected to relations such as family or other close relationships. Home is about belonging and about the individuals to whom we are connected and with whom we share our lives (Mallett, 2004). A review of how couples where one partner is diagnosed with dementia experience home, for example, indicates that maintaining routine domestic and household work, and thereby keeping a certain degree of normalcy in everyday life, enables a sense of continuity of identity and relationships (Gopinath et al., 2018). Home, therefore, is not only a

place but also a shared social life and practices that are made by the people living it and envisioning the home.

New kinship studies similarly emphasize the connection between social relations and home. Introducing relatedness as a concept, anthropologist Janet Carsten attends to the ways people enact, conceptualize, and experience social relations as she investigates how people become complete persons and kin through practices of sharing food and working and living together in domestic settings (Carsten, 1995). In Langkawi, Malaysia, Carsten argues, "Both houses and food share many qualities with the people they contain or nourish; the boundaries between the container and the contained are at some levels unclear (Carsten, 1995, 225). While we do not specifically replicate Carsten's approach and examine the importance of nourishment as part of what constitutes relatedness, we are inspired by Carsten and wish to forefront how everyday practices in the domestic sphere constitute relatedness.

When turning to the literature on marital life in nursing homes, most studies focus on the transfer of care responsibility from spouse to care workers. This change in responsibility often leaves the spouse with ambivalent feelings of both grief and guilt alongside feelings of relief and freedom (Gopinath et al., 2022; Høgsnes et al., 2014). Previous research has also tended to focus on the experiences of the partner who has not moved (Gopinath et al., 2022), while only a few studies examine the couple's life together when living in two separate homes with different rhythms and routines. Even though couples often continue their commitment to and engagement with one another even when living in two separate homes (M. Gopinath et al., 2022), institutional settings and procedures do not always support life together as a couple (Førsund et al., 2015). One study, for example, critiques a so-called person-centered approach in policy work for not adequately addressing the needs of couples and their opportunities for continuing their relationship (Rahn, 2018). Other studies highlight how spouses describe experiences of alienation when visiting the nursing home and of struggles of living in different worlds: that of the nursing home and that of society in general (Hennings et al., 2013).

While the studies mentioned above are concerned with the difficulties of leading a life together when living apart, we focus on how couples respond to these difficulties and how they attempt to find alternative ways to share life while living apart and facing physical and mental impairment. Our concern, therefore, covers not only couplehood in terms of commitment as studied by other scholars (Gopinath et al., 2018) but also how practices of homemaking become central in being together as a couple. Using literature on homemaking and relatedness as a launch pad for our analysis, we ask the following questions: *If home and relatedness are constituted by the rhythms of everyday life and the practices of sharing food and inhabiting a shared home, then how do couples anchor life together when severe illness moves their everyday life and alters their possibilities for living together not only in the present but also in the future? What is a home when it is no longer a shared dwelling, and which forms of relatedness are cultivated?*

Using anchor as a metaphor highlights both the aspect of groundedness, of something connected, and the aspect of something floating, of something that is only temporarily maintained. In her study of young asylum seekers in Denmark, Verdasco describes how these young people, even under temporary conditions while waiting for a decision on their asylum, develop social relations in certain places and thereby establish particular places of belonging, or what Verdasco coins as "anchoring points" (Verdasco, 2019). These anchoring points allow the young asylum seekers to create a sense of belonging and a certain stability. Our interlocutors, just like Verdasco's, experiment with ways of belonging in situations that are uncertain. While Verdasco's "anchoring points," however, emphasize the entanglement of places and relations in the asylum seekers' mobile and complex ways of belonging, we, in our analysis, also want to highlight a material element, a practice element, and an element of spectrality to how the people in our fieldwork establish a sense of belonging.

SPECTRALITY OF THE EVERYDAY

In our exploration of how couples share a life across different spaces while facing severe diseases, we draw inspiration from an emerging field within anthropology recently framed as imagistic anthropology

(Grøn & Mattingly, 2022). Scholars working within this line of research draw attention to the uncertain (Stevenson, 2014), ambiguous and perplexing (Mattingly, 2019), phantasmal (Desjarlais, 2019), imaginative, (Crapanzano, 2003), and spectral (Gammeltoft, 2021; Good, 2019; Louw, 2022) dimensions of everyday life. These are dimensions of peoples' lives that scholars of anthropology have often studied with little or no direction, and, as a consequence, they have been undertheorized in favor of the commonsense reality of everyday life that we take for granted (Crapanzano, 2006, 389). In his recent book, Desjarlais argues for the need to attend to other dimensions than the "apparently real" since "so much in life is imagined, not concretely real" (Desjarlais, 2019, IX). Nor can one contend, he argues, a strict divide between what is taken as the perceived and the imagined, or the actual and the virtual, as these forces are deeply intertwined (Desjarlais, 2019). Grøn and Mattingly argue that attending to the imagistic qualities of experiences and relations can be particularly valuable in the context of old age and care. In aging worlds marked by increasingly frail bodies and minds, solitude, loneliness, impermanence, and the proximity of death, imagistic and spectral dimensions of experience might hold a particular salience—or even be all there is. Thus, paying attention to the imagistic might open vistas that expand particular assumptions of the everyday, of care and relationality, and of what the good life might be (Grøn & Mattingly, 2022).

Informed by this line of research, we are inspired by Lisa Stevenson's work with images as an anthropological mode of "listening" (Stevenson, 2014, 2). Working imagistically entails "being attentive to—even opening oneself to—those moments when facts falter and when things (and selves) become, even just slightly unhinged… [when] life is beside itself" (Stevenson, 2009, 2). With the image of a raven that keeps appearing behind her interlocutors' house that might or might not be a diseased uncle, Stevenson illustrates and insists on staying within the modes of uncertainty and not-knowing that form Inuit communities, lives, and deaths (Stevenson, 2009, 2). For Stevenson, the potential of images—understood in a much broader sense than just mere representations and as something through which we think and live—lies exactly in their ability to capture uncertainty and contraction but without necessarily having to resolve it or explain it through facts (Stevenson, 2014). "Is the raven still really the dead uncle? It doesn't matter. The raven is still there," Stevenson remarks (Stevenson, 2014, 10).

Lastly, we draw on Tine Gammeltoft's concept of spectral kinship (Gammeltoft, 2021). Gammeltoft notes how anthropologists within kinship studies often highlight the significance of temporality and spatiality in how people relate to one another. During her study of how Vietnamese women endure domestic distress, she discovers, however, how enactments of relatedness and kinship also work through imagination and "aspects of social existence that are neither 'real' nor 'delusional' yet socially powerful" (Gammeltoft, 2021, 22). Imaginations of expected and desired futures fold into here-and-now kin relationships as part of the women's everyday endurance (Gammeltoft, 2021, 31), as well as into intensely felt presences of intimate kin that, in spatial terms, are either absent or appear as ghostly presences (Gammeltoft, 2021, 33–4). With the concept of spectral kinship, Gammeltoft demonstrates how kinship is enacted through temporal and spatial collapses unfolding in imaginal spheres between the empirically observable and fantasized and draws attention to "the socially invisible work that produces and maintains relatedness" (Gammeltoft, 2021, 23).

By engaging with imagistic anthropology and drawing on the concept spectral kinship, we wish to explore the ways in which imagination and spectral dimensions are part of how the couples relate to one another and their shared life as it undergoes dramatic changes. The two couples we will present in the following sections both explore and enact a kind of spectral relatedness through what we call anchors of belonging.

BETWEEN AN ALMOST HOME AND AN ALMOST HOTEL EXPERIENCE: A CRACK INTO WHAT COULD HAVE BEEN

Simon and Kirsten, whom we introduced at the beginning of this article, were in their 50s when they met and fell in love. At this stage of life, they are looking forward to experiencing "the third age," as Simon terms it—to having lots of years together in good health, imagining how they will enjoy life with

children and grandchildren coming to visit them, how they will go traveling and exploring the world, and slowly grow old together. However, not many years after they met, Kirsten develops a severe chronic and degenerative condition that affects both her physical and cognitive abilities. Within a very short period, the disease disables Kirsten to such a degree that she needs help with everyday practices, and the couple decides that Kirsten needs to move into a nursing home. Due to Kirsten's progressive disease, the couple's dream of aging together changes dramatically, and they realize they are suddenly facing old age much earlier than anticipated. Both of their mothers have recently lived in the nursing home where Kirsten now lives; however, they were in their 90s when they moved in. "But we are at a different stage in life," Simon says when comparing how their mothers' life courses followed an expected trajectory while his and Kirsten's life together has moved forward too fast.

When we meet Simon for an interview in the nursing home, the couple is in the process of figuring out how to continue life together while living in two different places and with the progressive limitations that Kirsten's disease entails. Simon tells us that they still consider their house, where he now lives alone, as their shared home. Simon often picks up Kirsten from the nursing home and drives her to their house. She loves to be there and feel the earth between her fingers in the garden, to have dinner with Simon, or simply to rest. Homemaking practices, we learn, are in many ways still connected to the house and the surrounding garden. "As long as we can [go to the house], we will]," he says and explains that they take one day at a time as they know that, in the long run, they will not be able to take care of Kirsten's needs in the house. "Even worse challenges await us in the future compared to what we're facing now," he remarks.

Leaving the house to return to the nursing home is not easy. Kirsten mourns for their evenings together and for sleeping in the same bed. "Kirsten is aware that she needs to stay here [the nursing home], but she would rather be at home." Being separated is one of the saddest consequences of the turn life has taken, Simon says. "We try to make this new place our place—or at least even more Kirsten's place." Making the nursing home a shared home, however, is filled with ambivalent feelings for Simon. On the one hand, he, like Kirsten, wishes they could be together all the time, and he too longs for the days when they lived together. On the other hand, Simon emphasizes that leaving the nursing home to go back to their house is increasingly difficult. Every time he takes Kirsten back to their house, things get increasingly challenging as Kirsten needs more help for every visit, and they do not have the assistive devices they need at home. Moreover, Simon needs time to rest after he has visited Kirsten. He comes by every day but leaves the nursing home feeling burned out. "Our situation is new to us. It is sad and difficult. Kirsten wants me to stay with her, and at the same time, I have to explain to her that I need to leave. And I want to be with her, but we do not both live here," Simon explains. Notwithstanding the ambivalence of being with Kirsten at the nursing home, the wish to lead a shared life while also needing time to rest outside the nursing home, Simon is determined to try to make the nursing home if not a shared home then a *kind* of home in which they can have a life together.

When Simon comes to visit Kirsten, he does his best to hold on to some of the practices they used to do together at home. Watch TV, eat dinner, and drink coffee. They practice home, one might say. They try to continue life as they know it, but the circumstances at the nursing home sometimes challenge the two and disturb their attempts to maintain a sense of familiarity in small everyday affairs. "Kirsten likes her coffee," Simon proclaims. "But on an evening like yesterday, the staff brought us sugar cubes. And neither of us uses sugar cubes. And then this small cup. Kirsten is used to drinking coffee from a mug." Simon looks at us as if to say, "You know what I mean." The cups are the kind of cups that the older generations use, the kind of cups that their mothers preferred to drink from when they were living in the nursing home just a few years earlier. Having to drink coffee from small cups that do not weigh the same as a large mug and cannot contain the amount of milk that Kirsten prefers comes to represent both the experience of being too young to live at a nursing home and the lack of control over even small everyday practices. The illness has outpaced their course in life, leaving them dependent on routines, cups, activities, etc., intended for an older generation. If the staff knew or could remember what each of the nursing home residents prefers and is used to, or what Simon denotes "the detailed care," it would be easier to feel at home, Simon tells us. He appreciates being served coffee by the kind staff, but the situation also comes to display the nonhomeliness of their life at the nursing home. Something is a little odd, not as it used to be at home. It is

only almost a home. And then again, maybe not even that. Simon goes on to explain: "It's not easy to find moments in everyday life when you can say: 'this is almost like home.' But there are times when you get a small sense of: 'well this is quite nice.' When we sit next to each other, watch TV and someone knocks on the door. We kind of pretend that we're at a hotel, and then we get a little cake—even if we know that it is quite sad." When sitting there, watching TV, Kirsten and Simon are together, enjoying themselves and doing something very familiar. In that sense, life at the nursing home is almost like life at home. But the knock on the door and the size of the cups disturb the experience of being at home, and the two need to somehow play along, and imagine their situation to be something else. Kirsten and Simon turn what reminds them of their sad situation into something different: an almost hotel experience. Something that is not, but could have been. Their little play with place and time opens a small crack into something wished for but never fully experienced.

In her fieldwork among women in Vietnam, Tine Gammeltoft links the women's ability to endure social and moral hardships in marital life with spectral presences and support from lost kin and far-away communities in what she calls spatial and temporal collapses. At a time in anthropology when possibilities and potentialities are foregrounded as essential to human life, that we are always oriented toward the future, it is even more important, as pointed out by Louw, not only to attend to how we orient ourselves toward the future but also to how future, past, and present intermingle in unforeseen ways (Louw, 2022). To study "what could have been" as something that might never be realized but which might be central to the individual's moral orientation (Louw, 2022). Scholars have demonstrated how experiences of time rarely follow clock time (Nielsen, 2020); people creatively perform time-work strategies (Flaherty, 2020) and narrate life stories while moving in and out of past, present, and future (Christensen & Sandvik, 2020; Frederiksen, 2020). In several ways, Kirsten and Simon's case is characterized by a series of temporal collapses where the present and future take both unexpected and uncertain forms. Drinking coffee from the small porcelain cups in the nursing home carries along an uncanny experience of suddenly living their mothers' lives in the nursing home. The life paths of the generations are tied together too closely in time. Due to Kirsten's progressive disease, the two are catapulted into a phase in life that was only thought of as a distant future. This distant future has come too close, and what was thought to be their near future is left as a dream. All the traveling that Kirsten and Simon used to dream of as part of an imagined, shared future will not happen; they will never enjoy the pleasure of sleeping in crisp sheets in a hotel room together. However, the coffee served by the nursing home staff also carries a sense of "what could have been." It becomes part of an imaginative play, a configuration of a space of "almost" that determines but also enables new forms of being together and that renders possible a coexistence of sadness, dreams, and a shared sense of meaning. Though Kirsten and Simon's maneuver of imagination may not be truly convincing for the two, the little play of sitting there, watching TV, and eating cake—as if they were in a hotel—serves as a way of playing along, enduring, and relating to the new, uneasy, and sometimes unbearable situation. Or, one could say it serves as an anchor of belonging in the midst of an uncanny situation. An anchor that, on the one hand, is very materially present while, on the other hand, allows for opacity and uncertainty.

A NOTEBOOK, A DREAM, AND A BOUQUET OF UNCANNY FLOWERS: CONTRADICTIONS AND COLLAPSES

We knock on the door to Ida's apartment. "Come inside," Mark welcomes us from the other side of the door. As we enter the apartment, with a warm gesture, Mark waves us over to the couch where he and Ida are sitting. Though there is plenty of room on the couch, they are sitting so close to one another that their thighs are touching from the point of their hips to their knees. Mark's arm rests on Ida's lap, and she is holding his hand in hers with a gentle yet firm grip. With her other hand, she caresses his arm by moving her slightly bent fingers gently up and down in a continuous flow. During our visit, Mark more or less does all the talking about their life situation. He shifts between talking directly to us about Ida in the third person and talking directly to Ida, using "you" in an attempt to include her in the conversation.

While continuously caressing Mark's arm, Ida shifts between modes of active listening with gestures of nodding, sounds of agreement, and attuned facial expressions, and what appears to be a more absent and daydreaming kind of presence.

Ida and Mark are both in their early 80s and have been together for 17 years. They became a couple shortly after each of their respective previous spouses died. While they have been together for some years now, the way they touch and look at each other leaves the impression of a couple that has only recently begun a journey of love and intimacy. Mark tells us how he sometimes offers Ida a pair of "boyfriend hands" on her buttocks when she is in the shower, which evokes a discrete smile of pleasure on Ida's lips. "Mmmmh," she sighs. Five years ago, she was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease. A few years later, she moved into the nursing home. Mark and Ida have arranged with the staff that when Mark visits Ida, he turns off her alarm. This means that he, while he is there, is the one who takes care of Ida and helps her with meals and her daily routines in the bathroom. "We agreed that when I'm here, then I'm here. When I'm here, it's almost as if we both live here. Then it's a bit like it used to be," Mark says. He tells us how holding on to their old routines means a lot to them when they are together. "For seventeen years, we have had the routine of me playing the piano and singing songs from the same songbook every morning and evening, so it's a continuation of our previous home. It contributes to making this more home-like." Mikka asks Ida if she sings along. She says "no." "But in *here*," Mark remarks while he points with his finger to Ida's head. He gets up and grabs another songbook. This book contains large images. "The images are great because they are big. I imagine that Ida can immerse herself in them while I sing. It also has something to do with the homeliness, because the old song can help activate her memory." Behind the couch, large photos of family members and family gatherings decorate the wall. A laminated piece of paper next to the pictures reads: "If you want to talk to Ida about the photos, you are allowed to take them down and sit on the couch but put them up on the wall again." Mark explains that he has heard of other residents in the nursing home who have photos on the walls to help the staff have something to talk to them about. But he worries about whether they ever actually do that, and he does not dare to ask (and thereby hear the potentially discouraging answer). He, therefore, cherishes the moments when he and Ida enjoy looking at the photos together.

Like Kirsten, Ida finds it difficult to get used to living in the nursing home. Mark tells us that even though she has all of her furniture there, it is not her home yet. "She expects to come home again and live one day," he says. "The easiest way to describe this thing about home is with this book that I have bought." He points to a little, dark notebook that lies in front of us on the coffee table. "It's a logbook. It encourages visitors to write in it. Staff can also write in it." He picks up the book. "Some of the pages have been ripped a bit, probably by accident. I have patched them together again." Mark continues: "The idea is that people who visit Ida write what has taken place and their thoughts about the visit. When I come here, I always look in it, read what it says. Then, I read aloud, so Ida is reminded of who has been here, visited her, and what has happened. She likes this. She listens. And she even asks questions about it. So, Ida's life is a series of now-moments that sink into the 'book of oblivion'." (Translated from the Danish expression *glemmebogen*, meaning "things that are forgotten.") Mark opens the book and carefully starts flicking through the pages. Ida follows his movements with attentive eyes. He asks her if he can read aloud from the book. She nods, still caressing his arm. "I think I will read aloud what Ida's friend and former colleague, Susan, wrote the other day," he says, and starts reading aloud: "'We are sitting at the dining table this evening, Ida. You are so fond of Mark. Grateful that he keeps coming; that he holds on and is still here with you.' Here comes a quote from Ida," Mark says and continues reading, "'I do not know if I have managed to tell him how much I appreciate him. He is loyal and he holds on, even though I am not able to do so much more. I love him'. And then, they have also sung some songs and talked about their previous work place." Mikka asks if she can have a look at the book. Ida and Mark nod, and Mark gives her the book. On one of the pages, there is a note from another friend of Ida, Mikka reads aloud; "'Dear Ida. I brought lilacs from my garden.'" And another note: "'Dear mom. We have spent a cozy birthday celebration together. You and I. Big congrats.'" After a while, Mark points to a big, beautiful bouquet of flowers in a vase on the dining table. "That bouquet came when I was away," he says in a slightly irritated tone. "But it hasn't been recorded in the book, so I can't tell Ida who brought the flowers." Ida turns her

head slowly toward the flowers, gazes at them with a distant look in her eyes. She then turns her head toward Mark again.

"The thing with Ida's disease is that she can remember in detail what she experienced as a young woman, but she cannot remember what happened two minutes ago," Mark says later in our conversation. He starts to tell about the nights when he stays with Ida, beside her bed on an air bed on the floor. "During the night when Ida is sleeping, she returns to the past. And I know this, because I'm here, lying next to her on the air bed. She is back with her kids, talking to them, or at work at the hospital, complaining about the new student nurses because they're not doing their work properly. Or, she is standing at a deathbed, comforting the relatives. And there, in the nighttime, Ida's brain retrieves words that are not accessible to her during the day. One night, I witnessed Ida being back at her job. One of the conversations you had [Mark now looks at Ida and continues the story, speaking directly to her, raising his voice slightly and in a more articulated way to capture her attention], it was a situation where you had been treated badly. They had [Ida's colleagues] slandered her [Mark is speaking to us again], and she responded to them by saying: 'I am not going back to work because you have slandered me behind my back. And that's also what my boyfriend, Mark, says, 'And then, awake, I responded from my air bed on the floor 'Yes, you're perfectly right, Ida,' and then she shot back at her colleagues: 'there you have it! My boyfriend agrees with me!' That night," Mark says with puzzlement in his voice, while opening his eyes wide, "I had this great experience of being dragged into a story of the past, which I could not possibly have been in, as we were not yet a couple back then. But Ida experienced me as present in the story."

Just like Kirsten and Simon, Mark and Ida experiment with ways of finding familiarity and homemaking in their new situation in the nursing home. They insist on holding on to the practices they used to do together in their former home where Mark sang to Ida. They decide to turn off Ida's alarm while Mark is visiting, imitating how their life used to be before Ida moved into the nursing home and keeping the institution as far away as possible. At the same time, however, they invite care professionals into their shared lives by encouraging care professionals to (or hoping that they will) write in the notebook. Mark emphasizes that the book is essential for the couple in their attempt to create a sense of a shared home because he uses it as a journal of the moments he and Ida spend together when he visits her. The book not only allows Mark to get insights into Ida's life in his absence, it also allows them to share moments from their time together, moments that have slipped from Ida's memory, and moments that took place during Mark's absence. In this sense, the notebook, as an anchor of belonging, enables the couple to share meaningful moments in both the past and the present, giving both of them access to experiences and situations that otherwise would disappear into "the book of oblivion." However, Mark's attempt to carefully patch up the pages in the book that have been ripped points in a very literal way to the fragility and uncertainty of what the book represents. If the pages are in pieces, so is their sense of a shared life across time and space, their attempt to create a sense of home and belonging. The flower bouquet is illustrative of this fragility with its almost mysterious presence in Ida's apartment. Neither Mark nor Ida knows who brought them or when they arrived. While they most certainly were gifted with caring intentions, there is an uncanniness to their presence in the room. The aspect of not knowing illustrates the uncertain life conditions Mark and Ida face due to Ida's progressive cognitive illness as they attempt to hold on to a sense of a shared life.

SPECTRAL RELATEDNESS

Coffee cups as part of a little play of imagination, a notebook to capture life as it flows, flowers from an unknown giver, and a dream that merges past and present. "Listening" to these moments and objects as images (Stevenson, 2014, 2) provides an opening into life as it unfolds for these couples and the uncertainties it entails to live with degenerative illnesses that make "facts falter," things, selves, and homes, one might say, become "slightly unhinged" (Stevenson, 2014, 2). At first sight, these images are very different in terms of their nature which is either material or immaterial, imagined or real. Ida's dream, for example, where Mark is present in an imagined past, may most vividly surface as an imagistic space, where senses

of belonging appear across dream and waking state, as in collapses between past and present, the factual and the imagined. However, as described in the two cases, the play with the coffee cups, the book of memories, the flowers, and the dream, all in different ways, anchor experiences that transgress time and space. They capture experiences that move in and out of the past, present, and future and that dissolve strict boundaries between "the factual" and "imagined." Experiences that could have been. Experiences that exist in imaginations, emotions, senses of belonging, and of being together. These images invite us to grasp and take seriously the importance of uncertainty and ambiguity in these couples' lives together. How these elements anchor experiences of relatedness. Kirsten and Simon, as well as Ida and Mark, share only limited time and space together as couples due to progressive disease and to the couples living physically apart in different houses. Nevertheless, togetherness, or *spectral relatedness* takes form and is cultivated in imagistic spaces, facilitated by different *anchors of belonging* that allow for, and perhaps are even carried by, modes of uncertainty, contradiction, perplexity, and allow for hope, despair, and longing. Where the reality of the imagined emerges. This illustrates the potential of thinking with images when exploring life situations in radical ruptures where imagistic dimensions of experience might be exactly where life is lived and takes form (Grøn & Mattingly, 2022). What matters is not the nature or quality of these anchors but the experiences of relatedness they render possible for the two couples.

While Gammeltoft describes how women in Vietnam experience the presence of ancestors across time and space, Kirsten and Simon and Ida and Mark are physically together in space and time. They are able to *do* things together in a material and psychical sense, as we also see in the different practices of attempting to "make" or simulate previous homes that allow for a certain kind of relatedness (Carsten, 1995). Yet, in the shared spaces they cultivate, temporalities collapse, and the real, dreamed of, and imagined interweave in perplexing and ambiguous ways. In that perspective, our analysis differs from Gammeltoft's. It echoes, however, the recognition that "when human lives unfold under conditions of increased vulnerability and contingency […] spectral dimensions of existence may take on heightened social importance" (Gammeltoft, 2021, 34). Returning to the question of how home and togetherness are practiced when couples live apart and when progressive disease alters what was thought to be a shared future, the concept of spectral relatedness helps us understand the possibilities of being related and together in other ways under the conditions of increased vulnerability and uncertainty. Spectral relatedness, as we suggest, emphasizes relatedness as an everyday practice, anchored in both the material and immaterial and which encompasses both mundane endeavors and experiences as well as spectral ones. It points to the complexities of homemaking and being present with each other while taking seriously experiences that exceed the apparently real.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, we have asked how couples navigate altered possibilities for living and being together and for sharing a home and an everyday life in the face of critical, chronic disease, where one partner moves into a nursing home. The context of a nursing home, as a space between a private home and a public space where professionals knock on the door and meals are scheduled, as well as the uncertainty that critical illness and altered cognition entails, challenges the experience of being at home and sharing life for the couples. In each case, the couples long for but struggle to live a shared life across two places of living, while they, at the same time, creatively attempt to find ways to live and be together otherwise. Drawing on the emergent field of imagistic anthropology (Grøn & Mattingly, 2022), and, in particular, the concept of spectral kinship (Gammeltoft, 2021), we have attended to the ways in which these couples move through uncertain landscapes of critical disease, collapsing temporalities, and complex entanglement between dreams, imagination, and reality as part of their life together. Suggesting the concept of *spectral relatedness*, we wish to draw attention to both mundane and spectral qualities of making home and a sense of togetherness in the context of Danish nursing homes. The ethnographic images of Kirsten and Simon, who find themselves in an almost-hotel experience, as well as the black notebook and the nighttime dream experiences of Ida and Mark are examples of how the couples attempt to anchor a sense

of belonging in the midst of profound uncertainty. We call these concrete objects imaginative, playful practices and the dream *anchors of belonging* to express the weight these configurations hold in the couples' yearnings for, enactments of, and experiences of home and togetherness. Attending to imagistic qualities of people's lives and experiences in this way, we argue, can thus serve as a way to bring forth what the "the good" might be in situations of rupture and loss and uncertainty, as it appears in anchors of belonging, somewhere in between the mundane and apparently real, play, imagination and entangled temporalities.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors wish to express their sincere gratitude to all the participants who generously shared their time, stories, and experiences for this study. We are deeply thankful to the nursing homes that supported and facilitated this research, providing an invaluable environment for data collection and meaningful engagement. We also want to thank editor as well as the two reviewers whose insightful feedback and constructive suggestions greatly enhanced the quality of this manuscript.

ORCID

Mikka Nielsen https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0754-2008

REFERENCES

Carsten, Janet. 1995. "The Substance of Kinship and the Heat of the Hearth: Feeding, Personhood, and Relatedness Among Malays in Pulau Langkawi." *American Ethnologist* 22(2): 223–41. https://doi.org/10.1525/ae.1995.22.2.02a00010

Carsten, Janet. 2000. *Cultures of Relatedness: New Approaches to the Study of Kinship*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Christensen Dorthe, R., and Kjetil Sandvik. 2020. "Inventing New Time: Time Work in the Grief Practices of Bereaved Parents." In *Time Work: Studies of Temporal Agency*, edited by Michael G. Flaherty, Lotte Meinert, and Anne L. Dalsgård, 139–57. New York: Berghahn Books.

Crapanzano, Vincent. 2003. "Introduction." In *Imaginative Horizons: An Essay in Literary-Philosophical Anthropology*, edited by Vincent Crapanzano. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Crapanzano, Vincent. 2006. "The Scene Shadowing the Real." *Anthropological Theory* 6(4): 387–405. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv3029hts.8

Dekker, Natashe L. and Jeannette Pols. 2020. "Aspirations of Home Making in the Nursing Home." In *Ways of Home Making in Care for Later Life*, edited by Bernike Pasveer, Oddgeir Synnes, and Ingunn Moser, 183–201. Singapore: Springer Nature.

Demant Frederiksen, Martin. 2020. "Now Is Not: Future Anteriority and a Georgian in Russia." In *Time Work: Studies of Temporal Agency*, edited by Michael G. Flaherty, Lotte Meinert, and Anne L. Dalsgård, 158–72. New York: Berghahn Books.

Desjarlais, Robert. 2019. *The Blind Man A Phantasmography*. New York City: Fordham University Press.

Douglas, Mary. 1991. "Idea of a Home: A Kind of Space." *Social Research* 58(1): 287–307.

Flaherty, Michael G. 2020. "The Lathe of Time: Some Principles of Temporal Agency." In *Time Work: Studies of Temporal Agency*, edited by Michael G. Flaherty, Lotte Meinert, and Anne L. Dalsgård, 13–28. New York: Berghahn Books.

Førsund, Linn H., Kirsti Skovdahl, Riina Kiik, and Siri Ytrehus. 2015. "The Loss of a Shared Lifetime: A Qualitative Study Exploring Spouses' Experiences of Losing Couplehood With Their Partner With Dementia Living in Institutional Care." *Journal of Clinical Nursing* 24(1–2): 121–30. https://doi.org/10.1111/jocn.12648

Gammeltoft, Tine M. 2021. "Spectral Kinship: Understanding How Vietnamese Women Endure Domestic Distress." *American Ethnologist* 48(1): 22–36. https://doi.org/10.1111/amet.13002

Good, Byron J. 2019. "Hauntology: Theorizing the Spectral in Psychological Anthropology." *Ethos* 47(4): 411–26. https://doi.org/10.1111/etho.12260

Gopinath, Manik, Caroline Holland, and Sheila Peace. 2022. "Enduring Commitment: Older Couples Living Apart." *Families, Relationships and Societies* 12(2): 201–19. https://doi.org/10.1332/204674321x16383612576634

Gopinath, Manik, Sheila Peace, and Caroline Holland. 2018. "Conserving Habitus Home, Couplehood and Dementia." *Home Cultures* 15(2): 1–41.

Grøn, Lone, and Cheryl Mattingly. 2022. "Introduction. Imagistic Inquiries: Old Age, Intimate Others and Care." In *Imagistic Care—Growing Old in a Precarious World*, edited by Lone Grøn, and Cheryl Mattingly. New York City: Fordham University Press.

Hauge, Solveig, and Heggen Kristin. 2008. "The Nursing Home as a Home: A Field Study of Residents' Daily Life in the Common Living Rooms." *Journal of Clinical Nursing* 17(4): 460–67.

Hennings, Jean, Katherine Froggatt, and Sheila Payne. 2013. "Spouse Caregivers of People With Advanced Dementia in Nursing Homes: A Longitudinal Narrative Study." *Palliative Medicine* 27(7): 683–91. https://doi.org/10.1177/0269216313479685

Høgsnes, Linda, Christina Melin-Johansson, Karl G. Norbergh, and Ella Danielson. 2014. "The Existential Life Situations of Spouses of Persons With Dementia Before and After Relocating to a Nursing Home." *Aging and Mental Health* 18(2): 152–60. https://doi.org/10.1080/13607863.2013.818100

Lauritzen Hesselberg, Heidi, Mads L. Christensen, and Michell Wello S. Andersen. 2023. *Kortlægning af udviklingen på plejehjemsområdet*. New York: VIVE.

Louw, Maria. 2022. "Den, jeg kunne have været: Spektrale ældreliv i Kirgisistan." *Tidsskriftet Antropologi* 86, 109–14.

Mallett, Shelley. 2004. "Understanding Home: A Critical Review of the Literature." *Sociological Review* 52(1): 62–89.

Mattingly, Cheryl. 2019. "Defrosting Concepts, Destabilizing Doxa: Critical Phenomenology and the Perplexing Particular." *Anthropological Theory* 19(4): 415–39. https://doi.org/10.1177/1463499619828568

Nielsen, Mikka. 2020. "ADHD and Temporal Experiences: Struggling for Synchronization." In *Time Work: Studies of Temporal Agency*, edited by Michael G. Flaherty, Lotte Meinert, and Anne L. Dalsgård, 50–64. New York: Berghahn Books.

Nielsen, Mikka, Anne T. Ramsbøl, Lone Grøn, and Stinne Aaløkke Ballegaard. 2023. Et særligt hjem : Oplevelse af hjemlighed på plejehjem. New York: VIVE.

Pasveer, Bernike, Oddgeir Synnes, and Ingunn Moser. 2020. "Doing Home With Care in Ageing Societies." In *Ways of Home Making in Care for Later Life*, edited by Bernike Pasveer, Oddgeir Synnes, and Ingunn Moser, 1–16. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Rahn, Alison A. 2018. "Behind Closed Doors: Exploring Ways to Support Partnered Baby Boomers' Coupledom in Residential Aged Care Settings." Doctoral thesis, Australia: University of New England.

Reilev, Mette, Carina Lundby, John Jensen, Søren P. Larsen, Helene Hoffmann, and Anton Pottegård. 2020. "Morbidity and Mortality Among Older People Admitted to Nursing Home." *Age and Ageing* 49(1): 67–73. https://doi.org/10.1093/ageing/afz136

Robbins, Joel. 2013. "Beyond the Suffering Subject: Toward an Anthropology of the Good." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 19(3): 447–62. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9655.12044

Samanani, Farhan, and Johannes Lenhard. 2019. "House and Home." In *The Open Encyclopedia of Anthropology* edited by Felix Stein. Cambridge: The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Anthropology. http://www.anthroencyclopedia.com/entry/house-and-home

Stevenson, Lisa. 2009. "The Suicidal Wound and Fieldwork Among Canadian Inuit." In *Being There: The Fieldwork Encounter and the Making of Truth*, edited by John Borneman, and Abdellah Hammoudi, 55–76. Oakland, CA: University of California Press. https://doi.org/10.1525/california/9780520257757.003.0003

Stevenson, Lisa. 2014. *Life Beside Itself: Imagining Care in The Canadian Artic*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press.

The Danish Government. 2022. Ansvar for Danmark, Det politiske grundlag for Danmarks regering. Denmark: The Danish Government.

Verdasco, Andrea. 2019. "Communities of Belonging in the Temporariness of the Danish Asylum System: Shalini's Anchoring Points." *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 45(9): 1439–57. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2018.1443393

Winther, Ida W. (2006). *Hjemlighed—kulturfænomenologiske studier*. Danmarks Pædagogiske Universitets Forlag.

How to cite this article: Nielsen, Mikka, and Anne Toft Ramsbøl. 2025. "Images of spectral relatedness: How couples anchor life together in a nursing home in Denmark." *Ethos* 53: e12449. https://doi.org/10.1111/etho.12449