

JESSICA C. ROBBINS-RUSZKOWSKI  
Institute of Gerontology and Department of Anthropology  
Wayne State University  
Detroit  
USA

## EXPLORING THE “SHADOW SIDE” OF ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH ON AGING IN POLAND

As a sociocultural and medical anthropologist, my research focuses on understanding aging across comparative ethnographic and historical perspectives. My dissertation research focused on aging in the sociocultural and political-economic context of Poland. I sought to understand how experiences of aging are connected to the political-economic and sociocultural transformations that have occurred during the lifetimes of the oldest generations in Poland. I conducted 22 months of ethnographic fieldwork between 2006 and 2014, with the longest period occurring between 2008 and 2010, in a range of institutional and non-institutional sites for older people in Wrocław and Poznań. I am currently working on a book manuscript based on this research, in which I argue that similar practices of relatedness exist across diverse contexts. By drawing on theoretical perspectives from studies of kinship, postsocialism, and memory, the book shows that contemporary desires for “active aging” in Poland exceed standard postsocialist narratives and instead are rooted in particular national understandings of the links between person and place.

In a related project, I examine how the production of knowledge about aging relates to contemporary and historical forms of sociality. I am studying the (pre)/ (post) socialist histories of the sciences of aging in Poland through an investigation of the connections between contemporary educational institutions for older persons and the historical development of disciplinary knowledge about aging, education, and social change. In ethnographic projects that I am currently developing, I also explore questions of age, personhood, kinship, and politics in diverse post-industrial settings where life is fostered in the face of decline. This includes a comparative study of urban gardens in Detroit and *działki* in Poland, and a study of older adults’ experiences and understandings of the water crisis in Flint, Michigan. A common thread running throughout all these projects is my enduring

concern with how the life courses of persons both intersect with and are shaped by the trajectories of broader polities, at the levels of experience, structure, and imagination.

In this reflective essay, I describe my own research trajectory as a set of movements between experiences and aspirations that have been both professional and personal, both pragmatic and serendipitous. In so doing, I show how my anthropological interest in aging, care, and social relations has been shaped by experiences that have transformed my own life course, revealing some of the “shadow side” (McLean and Leibing, eds., 2007) of anthropological fieldwork. Indeed, these categories of professional and personal, work and life, often refuse separation (Behar 1991; Goslinga and Frank 2007). As categories that have become naturalized through the historical conditions of modernity, professional and personal lives have come to be separated in both experiences and ideologies of academic life. Yet feminist scholarship (Narayan 2012) has long demonstrated the constructed nature of such boundaries by showing how one’s personal experience shapes the conditions and possibilities of knowledge, and how the structures of professional life exist in such a way that reinforce existing gendered, racialized, and classed hierarchies. Moreover, I show how the particularities of Polish life, and my interactions with research participants, have transformed my research questions and my understanding of the stakes of my work. Although I sought out Poland as a field site in part because it felt distant, I show that the nature of both ethnographic fieldwork and serendipitous aspects of life itself erased this distance such that it has also become a place where the personal and professional have become mutually inextricable.

### **From the personal to the professional**

Although I did not know it at the time, my path to becoming an anthropologist of Poland began when I was in high school over twenty years ago, sitting with my family in the living room of my childhood home in suburban Connecticut. The evening when I learned that my mother had been diagnosed with breast cancer was the first of several transformative moments in my adolescence and young adulthood that allowed me to conceive of health and illness as sociocultural and political-economic processes. Biological, of course, but also gut-wrenchingly emotional – I felt fear and sadness in my abdomen, blurring my unquestioned boundaries between mind and body. As my mother went through treatment, we leaned on friends to sustain us through the exigencies of daily life with cancer, thus refashioning our domestic social relations, both within our family and outside of it. The world as I knew it was never the same.

Over the next several years, other medical experiences similarly challenged taken-for-granted categories through which I knew the world. I was diagnosed

with a chronic illness, my paternal grandmother developed Alzheimer’s disease, and a chronically ill friend committed suicide. Each of these experiences was characterized by its own distinctive horror, sadness, and pain; taken together they taught me about the limits of biomedical categories to explain the experience of life made fragile by illness. Although I still looked to doctors as the source of authoritative knowledge, I did so without the surety that they would provide answers or cures.

Looking back on these moments now, I see them as the first instances in which I came to see how the world could be otherwise, a task that I now tell my students in introductory anthropology is one of the central contributions of our field. None of the authoritative frames that I had known thus far (medical, religious) could fully address the range of problems posed by cancer, Alzheimer’s disease, or chronic illness – and neither could any of the alternate authorities that I sought (“alternative” medical therapies, spiritual searching). Yet the very fact of these alternate authorities sparked in me an interest in how differently power, knowledge, and comfort can be configured. It is this personal interest in multiple worlds, ontologies, and epistemologies – and their constructed nature – that spurred me to pursue a career in anthropology.

The topical and geographical foci of my research (aging and Poland) were motivated by seemingly divergent impulses, simultaneously centripetal and centrifugal, to better understand my own experience in the context of the broader world. I was deeply affected by the transformations in my family brought about by my grandmother’s Alzheimer’s disease; with time, I realized that my unease stemmed not only from changes in my grandmother herself but also from how her position within our family shifted. Before the diagnosis, she was the authoritative source of knowledge and morality within our family, the person to whom my parents suggested I turn for advice on making difficult decisions, the person who composed meticulous schedules of activities for my sister and me (e.g., visits to the Smithsonian museums, which were not far from their house in northern Virginia; elaborate arts and crafts projects in a specially designated room in their house). Following the diagnosis, these qualities and stories faded into the background of our family’s attention; instead we interacted with her from an evaluative stance, looking for the veracity of her comments on the mundane facts of daily life. Her possible world shrank from the expansive one of museums in the nation’s capital to one bounded by the diagnostic criteria and expected trajectory of a disease. I came to learn that this form of diminished personhood is common among contemporary experiences of Alzheimer’s in the contemporary US (Cohen 1998). I was desperate to know how the grandmother whom I loved and trusted had suddenly become a person whose words and actions had to be interpreted in a radically different manner. Personally, I wanted to understand how such diagnoses could transform and even destroy personhood – and as an anthropologist, I wanted to understand the sociocultural, poli-

tical-economic, and historical conditions that made such radical transformations possible.

Inspired by Lawrence Cohen's work on aging and Alzheimer's disease in India (Cohen 1998), and by his critique of the gero-anthropological enterprise (Cohen 1994), I sought to design a doctoral research project that did not presuppose the meaningful dimensions or categories of aging. For professional and personal reasons I wanted to do fieldwork internationally. As an American student attending an American university for graduate school, there were more opportunities for external funding for research abroad than at home. As the granddaughter of an American woman with Alzheimer's, and never having lived abroad, the unfamiliarity of a different country and language offered the hope of an escape from witnessing an experience that felt painfully close to home. These pragmatic and emotional desires shaped my desires for an international field site.

As I was beginning graduate school in 2004, I was paying attention to the expansion of the European Union to include countries in so-called eastern Europe that had been under the influence of the Soviet Union. As a child of Reagan-era America, the Cold-War binary division between East and West structured my imagination (cf. Verdery 1996) such that I felt instinctively drawn to wanting to understand that particular geographic region. Also, memory and age seemed potentially culturally salient frames for understanding the changes in eastern Europe at that time, since older people there have lived through such dramatic political-economic and sociocultural transformations. Although I had no academic, professional, or personal connections to any countries in the region, I quickly learned about the resources of the Copernicus Program and what was then called the Center for Russian and East European Studies (now the Center for Russian, East European, and Eurasian Studies) at the University of Michigan. At that time, in addition to offering four years of language training, the university faculty included scholars in many disciplines (sociology, history, political science, literature and film studies) who studied Poland. I was thrilled to learn from such wonderful scholars and to be surrounded by such terrific institutional resources.

These pragmatic reasons for choosing a field site co-existed with what I now see as a remarkable hubris: the confidence that I could gain the skills necessary to show up in a completely unknown place, gain access to intimate places, and build the trust required for ethnographic fieldwork. These choices were more fortunate than I knew, since I quickly realized how locally and anthropologically meaningful were the topics of age and memory. Although I thought I had successfully created an etic perspective that would allow for the personal distance that I thought necessary for professional work, I learned during my long-term research that it was impossible to leave behind the personal dimensions from which I was trying to escape. In fact, the more enmeshed I became in the fieldwork and the better I understood local contexts, the less able I was to maintain distance.

## **From the professional back to the personal**

I have experienced doing fieldwork in Poland as a series of kindnesses upon kindnesses. As I asked family friends and professional colleagues to reach out to their networks, I was repeatedly overwhelmed by the warm, welcoming responses I received. I am overcome with gratitude to these friends and colleagues, and their friends and colleagues, who opened the doors that made my fieldwork possible. At my field sites, I was encouraged to feel at home, to feel *u siebie*, rather than the interloper, the ethnographer, that I was. Most often, I was greeted with a sense of surprise, but not distrust, that a young American woman would be interested in the experiences of older people in Poland. I attribute this not only to the warmth and kindness of particular individuals, but also to the relative cultural marginalization of older people in Poland, such that people were surprised that a younger woman would be interested in spending time with older people. Additionally, the relatively positive feelings that many Poles have towards the US facilitated my work.

This warmth extended to the academic sphere as well, as I felt welcomed into Polish academia from my first trip to Poland in 2006. In the discipline of anthropology, I am particularly grateful to the Institute of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań for an official affiliation in 2008-2010. I appreciated that the anthropology faculty and students there, and at the University of Lower Silesia in Wrocław, included me in both the academic and social life of the institution. Through the EASA conference in Poznań in 2009, I came to know many more participants in the vibrant, energetic intellectual community that constitutes the field of anthropology in Poland. I am grateful for the intellectual, practical, and emotional support of my Polish anthropology colleagues, who continue to inspire me to read widely and engage creatively with the world around me. Outside anthropology, I appreciated the intellectual stimulation from my colleagues in the Institute of Pedagogy at the University of Wrocław, who helped me to see anthropology in a new light. From all these colleagues and friends, some of whom I would surely omit by trying to name them all, I was inspired by the genuine collegiality, intellectual curiosity, and energetic mode of being that pervaded their work and lives.

As I was searching for locations in which to conduct fieldwork, my primary goal was to achieve a diverse range of field sites. Because experiences of illness in old age can often take on a primary role in determining other aspects of life (e.g., place of residence, relationships with kin), I sought out field sites that would allow me access to populations with a wide range of health statuses. Specifically, my primary field sites were a rehabilitation hospital (ZOL) run by an order of Catholic nuns, a state-run home for the chronically physically ill (DPS), a day center for people with early stages of Alzheimer’s disease, and Universities of the

Third Age. This assortment of field sites meant that I got to know research participants who lived at home and in institutions, and whose life histories were diverse in terms of class background, region of origin, and kin relations. Such a range of experiences also created access to people who were in both the so-called “third” and “fourth” ages, life stages sometimes used in gerontology to describe the supposed differences between the relatively healthier, younger, “productive” old, and the relatively sicker, older, and “decrepit” elderly (Laslett 1996). Such diversity of research participants provides a strong basis for one of the primary findings of this research: namely, that despite a polarized moral context in which a positive old age becomes associated with health and a negative old age becomes associated with illness, there exists a striking similarity in the morality of the texture of everyday life. Across these diverse sites, I was struck by the similarities in daily practices of relatedness (Carsten 2000), and particularly in practices of commensality, storytelling, and remembering. Notably, in all contexts, older people told stories in which they weaved together details of their own lives with the stories of the Polish nation (Robbins 2013). I have come to understand moral personhood, for older Poles, as intensely national, in such a way that people create meaningful understandings of their own lives through placing themselves in the historical, romantic Polish nation (Robbins-Ruszkowski 2014).

I divided my time between Wrocław and Poznań. My own personal and professional connections were strongest in these cities, so there was a practical dimension to these choices. Intellectually, I was intrigued by the differing roles each city has played in the nation’s history. How might the symbolism of Wrocław as a city in the *Ziemie Odzyskane* compare to the symbolism of Poznań as the seat of the first Polish royalty, and how might this matter in everyday life? How might the histories of migration of older *wrocławianie* as compared to the relative multi-generational geographic stability of older *poznaniaczy* shape experiences of old age? However, these questions remain one of the more difficult aspects of my fieldwork to parse, since I cannot isolate out such a variable in the way that I had hoped. That is, regional aspects of life histories become difficult to separate from the complexities of kin relations, labor histories, and other messy intricacies of ethnographic data. Although I did not find a pattern that allows me claim that “old age in Wrocław is like x; old age in Poznań is like y,” I came to appreciate the distinctive regional identities that residents of these cities claim. Were I to design the project knowing what I know now, however, I would have chosen a rural location for my fieldwork, as significant differences exist in the rhythms of daily life, the structure of kin relations, and access to institutions.

Personally, as an American, I was drawn to places that were **not** Warsaw or Kraków, where I feared I would blend into the crowd of many foreigners there. Once doing my fieldwork, I realized that this concern was both somewhat futile and unnecessary, since there were sizable ex-pat and foreign student populations in Wrocław and Poznań too, and because I organized my time around my field

sites themselves, where I was the only foreigner. Upon reflection, I wonder if this desire was part of a quest for some “authentic” Poland, in the orientalist tradition of seeking some supposedly pure Other. Of course, this quest was doomed from the outset by its problematic epistemological premise. Indeed, facing my own personal connections to my work became more necessary as time passed. In other words, despite my best efforts at designing a research project that felt sufficiently foreign, the realities of doing fieldwork meant that I could not actually maintain such distance.

This closeness to my work developed in several ways. First, between preliminary fieldwork in the summer of 2006 and when I returned for long-term fieldwork in 2008, I met my husband, who grew up in Poland and whose family still lives there. Thus during my long-term fieldwork, I had family who lived nearby, meaning that I had a place to go for holidays – and, in the eyes of some research participants, a more plausible reason for conducting research in Poland. Second, it turned out that I could not escape memories of my own grandmother, especially during my fieldwork at the Alzheimer’s center. Certain attendees’ facial expressions or manner of interaction evoked her presence. For instance, one woman barely spoke but often judged others’ behavior, evident in the furrowing of her eyebrows and pinching of her lips in response to another attendee’s speaking out of turn. Such expressions recalled times when my own grandmother had not seemed to have been paying attention to the social interactions happening around her, but all of a sudden made a comment, often of disapproval, that revealed that she was in fact aware of social conventions. I interpret such moments as efforts to remain engaged in the social world, despite the disintegration of social relations that otherwise occurred. These were hard moments during fieldwork, as I felt drawn into my memories and away from the interactions happening at hand. Listening and speaking in Polish, however, provided some degree of emotional distance that helped me remain present in the fieldwork interaction. More difficult were moments without language, such as one time I remember when sitting with a patient at the rehab center, a woman in her late 90s whom I had come to know well, after she had dozed off. The silence provided a time for reflection, not only on the events of the day, but also on the sensory elements of sitting with a person in precarious health. The silence offered a time to focus on the sight of a fragile, elderly body in pain, to take in the mingled smells of cleaning supplies and excrement that filled the air. This meditative mode of engagement blurred the boundaries I had tried to construct between the various parts of my life. In those moments, I was simultaneously an ethnographer and a granddaughter, both an observer and part of the context. Somehow the dampening of the linguistic mode allowed the other parts of myself to come forward more fully. Such a sense of my own personhood as integrated, rather than split between a professional and personal self, became ever more the case during my fieldwork and the years that have followed.

## Ethnography and anthropology in fragile times

The longer that I have been studying Poland, the more deeply I have come to feel the stakes of political, social, and cultural struggles there. I felt this most intensely during my fieldwork in the summer of 2014, when a series of public scandals and private fieldwork encounters brought forward my whole self into my fieldwork in a new way. I had returned to Poland to conduct follow-up research with older persons who neither resided in institutional care nor participated in Universities of the Third Age, but instead participated in activities that were less marked, such as allotment gardening or neighborhood senior clubs. I was again overwhelmed by how quickly some people would share intimate details of their life stories with me. One woman was particularly notable in the length and intensity of her narrative style, talking for over six hours without a break. Like many older people I met, she told her life story in a way that was deeply national, weaving together national details and moments of her own life as she demonstrated to me that she had special powers to predict the future. Although she was almost entirely blind, her near-constant companion was Telewizja Trwam, the television station that is part of the conservative nationalist priest Tadeusz Rydzyk's media empire. As evidence of another event that she had predicted, she told me about the tragic plane crash in Smoleńsk in 2010. In her telling, however, it was not merely tragic, but also evidence of a plot by then-prime minister Donald Tusk in collaboration with Vladimir Putin to kill Lech Kaczyński. This was not the first time I had been told this version of the plane crash by a research participant, and I recognized this conspiracy theory as a result of listening to Telewizja Trwam. However, I felt increasingly less able to hear such stories with the sort of distanced ethnographic empathy that had previously come easily to me. When previously I would not have minded the six-hour interview, at that time I felt my patience wearing thin.

Indeed, since the beginning of my fieldwork with older people in 2006 I had sometimes heard comments that were not just contrary to but anathema to my own worldview: anti-Semitism, conservative Catholic views of abortion and homosexuality. However, something changed in 2014. That summer, the national news was dominated by the *afery podstępowa*, the *deklaracja wiary*, and the firing of medical doctor Bogdan Chazan. In Wrocław, I witnessed a march organized by Obóz Narodowo-Radykalny; in Poznań, the Malta theater festival cancelled a performance of the controversial play *Golgota Picnic*. At the same time, I learned new aspects of friends' and research participants' daily struggles. One friend had recently given birth to a child with severe disabilities, for which the best treatments were not fully covered by NFZ (National Health Fund). The stipend she received to compensate for her full-time care of the child was not enough to subsist on, but neither could she work, thereby further binding her to

an abusive partner. A longtime research participant had developed Alzheimer’s, which had advanced to the point that he could not be left alone for long; his previously calm relationship with his wife became strained such that they were regularly raising their voices at each other. Somehow what felt to me like the increasing radicalism of the national-level political and cultural context shaped how I felt about the daily struggles of people whom I had come to know well, to change the stakes of my feelings and my scholarship.

The intense and sometimes exclusionary national sentiments of the older people with whom I spent time has long felt like one of the defining features of my fieldwork. However, until that summer, I had felt secure in one of the contributions of my work being to humanize people who were otherwise marginalized, discriminated against, and suffering. Indeed, I do think that this is still an important contribution of this work in particular and of anthropology more broadly. Earnestly conveying the views of people with whom we disagree on fundamental political and existential levels is a core contribution of our field. However, in the contemporary context of increasing radicalization, not only in Poland but also across Europe, the US, and other parts of the world, it is easier to see the consequences of the worldview of my research participants. Empathetic understanding feels easier when I feel more removed from such perspectives. Thus, I turn to a more distanced type of questioning to ask: What does it mean that older people find belonging through an exclusionary politics? Given that an exclusionary nationalist narrative is central to the politics of the contemporary ruling party in Poland, what does this mean for the futures of belonging in Poland? Through this rhetorical mode, I am finding a way towards maintaining ethnographic understanding despite the closeness that this work requires. It seems paradoxical that the closeness that often accrues during the course of fieldwork is also the very thing that can make it harder to do the work. Perhaps by tacking back and forth from closeness to distance, and by exploring the “shadow side” of fieldwork through considering how we both shape and are shaped by our research, ethnographic practice can better achieve its ideal of merging etic and emic perspectives.

#### REFERENCES

- Behar R.  
1991 *Death and Memory: From Santa María Del Monte to Miami Beach*, “Cultural Anthropology” 6: 3, pp. 346-384.
- Carsten J.  
2000 *Introduction: Cultures of Relatedness*, in: J. Carsten (ed.), *Cultures of Relatedness: New Approaches to the Study of Kinship*, Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, pp. 1-36.

- Cohen L.  
 1994 *Old Age: Cultural and Critical Perspectives*, "Annual Review of Anthropology" 23, pp.137-158.
- 1998 *No Aging in India: Alzheimer's, the Bad Family, and Other Modern Things*, Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Goslinga G., Frank G.  
 2007 *In the Shadows: Anthropological Encounters with Modernity*, in: A. McLean, A. Leibing (eds.), *The Shadow Side of Fieldwork: Exploring the Blurred Boundaries between Ethnography and Life*, Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, pp. xi-xviii.
- Laslett P.  
 1996 *A Fresh Map of Life: The Emergence of the Third Age*, London: Macmillan Press.
- McLean A., Leibing A. (eds.)  
 2007 *The Shadow Side of Fieldwork: Exploring the Blurred Borders between Ethnography and Life*, Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.
- Narayan K.  
 2012 *Alive in the Writing: Crafting Ethnography in the Company of Chekhov*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Robbins J.  
 2013 *Shifting Moral Ideals of Aging in Poland: Suffering, Self-Actualization, and the Nation*, in: C. Lynch, J. Danely (eds.), *Transitions and Transformations: Cultural Perspectives on the Life Course*, New York: Berghahn Books, pp. 79-91.
- Robbins-Ruszkowski J.C.  
 2014 *Thinking with "Postsocialism" in an Ethnographic Study of Old Age in Poland*, "Cargo: Journal for Social/Cultural Anthropology" 12: 1-2, pp. 35-50.
- Verdery K.  
 1996 *What Was Socialism, and What Comes Next?*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.