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Book Review

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In her debut book, *Aging Nationally in Contemporary Poland: Memory, Kinship and Personhood*, gerontological anthropologist Jessica Robbins imparts a vital and insightful examination of aging and the meaning and production of moral personhood in post-communist Poland. Through extensive and long ranging ethnographic fieldwork in the Polish cities of Wroclaw and Poznań, Robbins provides new insight into the ways that meaning and moral personhood is created and maintained by older adults in the fluid and changing political world of modern Poland.

Robbins first introduces the reader to the historical and physical realities that have shaped the contemporary socio-political situation of the country, as well as the lives of her aged ethnographic subjects, who lived through the massive political changes experienced by Poland in the past decades. The author not only recounts the histories of the ethnographic field sites of Wroclaw and Poznań, but also includes older Poles' perceptions of those spaces and their histories amidst migrations and occupations. Ethnographic research for this book was conducted in three types of sites within these two locations: firstly, NGOs that promote active aging, specifically, Universities of the Third Age (UTA) and the group @ctive seniors; secondly, institutions focused on medical purposes, including both rehabilitation centers, and a center for long-term care, and finally places where older Poles congregate, such as allotment gardens, senior clubs, and parish clubs.

The author examines how individual moral and relational personhood is created and maintained by older adults in these settings. Moral personhood is here defined as an "analytical category that encompasses what it means to be a social person. . . . to feel valued and included" (4). She also highlights the distinction between the cultural category of "third age" as "a time in the life course when one has left the formal labor market, remains healthy and can thus contribute to society through activities" (3) and the socio-cultural subsequent "fourth age," "characterized by decline, illness, dependency, isolation" (4).

Chapter 1, "Histories of Active Aging: *Aktywność* across Eras," foregrounds the historical, political and economic factors that have shaped governmental policy and social perspectives about aging in Poland. Particularly, the categorizing of independent versus dependent older people in the 1970s, together with Poland's political shifts from communism to a capitalist democracy, and the ways these shifts have

impacted the way UTAs today represent both active (*aktywny*) and independent (*aktywność*) aging. In Chapter 2, “Aspiring to Activity: Transforming Aging through Education,” the focus shifts to cultural perceptions of old age in Poland, starting with the acknowledgment of the globality of negative stereotypes. Robbins offers an insider’s perspective from the UTA and @ctive senior programs, where participants refute these stereotypes by fostering lifelong learning for older people in a multigenerational setting. The ideas of sociality and moral personhood among the UTA participants are also important, as they are reflected in the ways that these UTAs are distinctive, not only in Poland, but regionally within Poland as well. The book recognizes that the benefits of UTA participation are not accessible to all older Poles, noting the impact of socioeconomic class and disability in later life has on access to these services. The author demonstrates, through ethnographic examples, the ways in which the history of communism and post-communism in Poland impacted the lives of seniors and the ways these lived histories and these new ways of learning in later life are inexorably linked, in the lives of these Polish elders participating in UTAs and @ctive senior programs.

Chapter 3, “Beyond Activities: Sustaining Relations in Institutional Care,” contrasts sharply with the earlier exploration of features of active aging. The focus here is on how personhood is fostered and maintained in two centers of institutional care, namely a Catholic Rehabilitation Center located in the city center that offers mostly short-term stays and a Social Welfare Home, located outside the city and both geographically and socially more isolated, for long-term residence. These ethnographic accounts offer the reader insight into the ways that moral personhood is maintained, despite challenges in older age such as a lack of financial resources and health decline, by giving the reader insight into the social relationships and daily cycle of the practices of everyday care that contribute to maintaining moral personhood.

In Chapter 4, “Remembering the Polish Nation: Connections across the Third and Fourth Ages,” the author combines ethnographic elements of the two previous chapters to examine older Poles’ self-perceptions in relation to the dramatically changing history of Poland. Here she expands on the book’s earlier exploration of Poland’s history, and integrates ethnographic accounts to include the lived history of change, and the evolving ideas of Polish national pride many older Polish people have experienced during their lifetimes. The author explores national memory as both a historical narrative, a lived past, and a relational practice that informs the formulation and maintenance of personhood as older adults aim for an envisioned future.

Chapter 5, “Rethinking Memory: Everyday Rhythms of Dementia,” explores the ideas of maintaining personhood and life histories from the perspective of older adults who suffer from memory loss. Here Robbins gives us keen insight into the sociality of a day center. Through interviews with the caregivers of those who attend the center, the author notes that relationships may become more tense with family members who suffer from dementia, and that the social relationships that are newly forged, in the day center, are of vital importance to maintain moral personhood for those with memory loss.

Chapter 6, “Gardens of Memory: Reimagining Home and Nation,” considers ways that sociality and moral personhood are maintained by older Poles, outside the constraints of the formal structures of the third and fourth age dichotomies. The chapter documents the ways some seniors in Poland maintain their sociality through participating in activities outside the home, such as allotment gardens, parish clubs, and other volunteer groups. Robbins here demonstrates that the ideas of home, family, and remembrances of the Polish nation are an overarching framework through which older Poles across all of the ethnographic sites in the book reproduce ideas of national belonging and maintain their sense of moral personhood.

The conclusion links the ethnographic findings to the larger field of aging studies and reminds us that aging is not a being, but a doing: a verb; aging is a generative enactment of the lived experience of time and place for individuals as social beings. These lived experiences include the broader political and social changes encountered throughout the life course, such as the transition from communism to a market economy in the case of older Polish citizens. Robbins foregrounds a dynamic, social, and narrative approach to aging as a valuable alternative for the dichotomies of third and fourth age and 'good' and 'bad' aging.

This book skillfully conveys the difficult and complicated history of Poland over the last century as it relates to the memories of aging Poles. The rich and profound ethnographic interviews of Robbins with her participants enable the reader to envision the settings of the interviews vividly, and the strong connection with her subjects is obvious. Robbins' theoretical engagement with modern aging research, particularly with ideas around active aging, memory, and moral personhood, offers new insight into these growing areas. Overall, this book is an outstanding example of multilayered scholarship in the field of anthropology of aging and gerontology. It would be an excellent resource for those interested in the topics of personhood, the lived experiences of aging, and the sociality of memory work, particularly in the context of Poland in the post-communist era. In general, this book would be useful as a teaching resource for upper level undergraduates, graduate students, and anyone working in the field of aging research, medical anthropology, and gerontology.