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## Graduate Student Commentary

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## Graduate Student Commentary

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The editors of *Anthropology & Aging* approached me some time ago to see if I might be interested in developing a section within the journal for graduate research. I immediately agreed. Rarely do journals create focused space for graduate work, and it seemed to me advantageous to do so on primarily two accounts: first, to investigate trending themes and issues in current aging research to see if and how new fieldwork might tell us something about this socio-political time; and second, to capture works and ideas still in progress, and thus to reveal educational trajectories, ever messy and knotty, in a publishing world that values polished products.

It occurred to me later that this section might be an interesting space for a third reason, too: to discuss the methodological issues and queries that arise when studying aging as a graduate student. How do anthropology graduate students study aging, and how does their place within the life course impact their research methods and theory-building? Additionally, fieldwork shapes the anthropologist, and the graduate's first field particularly so. Anthropology certainly impacts our approach to aging, but how does studying aging impact our approach to anthropology? I offer myself as a first case study for reflection.

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I remember reading Renato Rosaldo's (1993) 'Grief and a Headhunter's Rage: On the Cultural Force of Emotions' for the first time and feeling, quite sharply, how inadequate my fieldwork would inevitably be as a young anthropologist. The reflexive turn in Anthropology saddled me with the impression that all fieldwork knowledge is partial in its relational production (Clifford and Marcus 1986), but Rosaldo's analysis suggested that ethnography was also a craft that can be honed and refined through lived experience. His article showcases the transformations in his perceptions of Ilongot headhunting throughout his life course. At first, he distrusted the Ilongot when they said they headhunted to 'carry' and 'throw away' anger after a loss, and instead sought out a 'deeper' explanation for their actions through exchange theory. But when Rosaldo's wife died in a tragic accident, he felt the rage in grief firsthand. He could newly see that the Ilongot's explanation did not need a 'deeper' theoretical container; grief was grief and anger was anger, and these emotions, Rosaldo now believed, could propel one to act in ways previously unthinkable. He concludes that it is crucial to have experienced the brute pain of bereavement personally before studying it in others. He also warns against the impulse to explain away confusion through grand, poetic theory.

I was twenty-four when I embarked on my fieldwork to study the political economy of aging and dying in Los Angeles. I situated my research in a continuing care retirement community where I lived and worked for a year and half. 'This all feels a bit... precocious,' I wrote in the first line of my fieldwork journal. Though my youth was marked both by my grandfather's slow death from Parkinson's and my first job in my teens working at a nursing home, I still felt that my experience with death, and life in general, made me unfit for the journey I was about to undergo. And in many ways, I was.

I recall the first time in fieldwork I was slapped out of a wrong interpretation I had made. A resident, Susan, had just lost her best friend after having endured three deaths that week within the retirement community. I went to her room to check on her. We sat down over tea and first discussed how salty the Chicken Kiev was that day in the dining room, and then we launched into how she was doing after all her losses. I kept saying how sorry I was and how difficult this must have been for her. I knew *I* was grieving painfully for having lost three residents, some of the first deaths I experienced there of people who I had really grown to know. After I continued to project deep sadness onto her, Susan said defiantly, 'You can't know!' She placed down her teacup and leaned towards me with urgency. 'I've seen young people die in my years way before their time. This is hard, these deaths, but it is *not* tragic. They died old – that was a blessing.' Her correction embarrassed me, and made me feel the danger of my presumption about her psychological state of grief. Confused on how to recover, and ruminating over her words, I kept quiet, stained red from blushing. Susan noticed I needed help to find my feet after such a disorienting interaction, and offered, 'You'll know better when you're my age.' It was her attempt to console me, but for the anthropologist trying to understand local concepts of death and grief, it was a troublesome remark. Was Susan suggesting that I would never know what it means to endure everyday deaths at a retirement community until I had a shared experience in a lifetime of differentiated grief?

I have waffled back and forth wondering whether aging is a process of knowing better or knowing differently. I have also thought about this in the realm of anthropology: does an anthropologist throughout their career, after multiple sites of fieldwork and their own personal experience in the world, develop more precise disciplinary tools? In one way, life and fieldwork throw up unexpectedly new horizons throughout the life course. The world's unending difference and change can destabilize and induce dizzying wonder in anyone at any point, and therefore, MacClancy (1988) notes, even previous experience in the field does not make you more fit for another field. Nevertheless, to Rosaldo's argument, sensibilities can be sharpened, and a life course only expands the context in which to situate ideas and to notice patterns. De Certeau (1984: 82) likens this sensitized navigation to the Greek concept of *mētis*, a skilled knowledge born out of historical memory, a product of the 'experience of the old man' as opposed to the 'thoughtlessness of youth'. Without *mētis*, what can young anthropologists contribute?

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As a graduate student now writing up, I think constantly about what I have come to know about aging and dying through fieldwork and what still, and may always, evade me. I feel my youth acutely: not only in the immense gaps in understanding aging and dying (what *is* it like to live in frail skin and to encounter last breaths?), but also in how limited my anthropological sensibility is at such an early moment in the academy (it is at once disheartening and encouraging to remember just how many books I have yet to read). This makes the doctoral journey all the more painful. Even though graduate student's stint in the field positions, legitimizes, and demands them to write about the people they studied, Pollard (2009) notes that many of them reported feeling 'ashamed', 'regretful', 'embarrassed', and 'unprepared' while doing so. These feelings overwhelmed me during the transition from field to home. In the field, I was the novice asking nurses how they could tell when an elder was about to die and questioning elders about their constant loss of friends. At home, I was the one being asked questions about aging and dying, about elders, and about caregiving. I have often wondered: who am I, a young twenty-something, to say anything about aging and dying, and to receive an advanced degree for having done so?

I have noticed as I have emerged from the field that people frequently mistake my own partial fieldwork education for expertise. Upon hearing about my fieldwork, people of all ages launch into their own stories

of their grandparents or their parents, sick or aging, dealing with Alzheimer's, dementia, bladder problems, sleeplessness, and hospice. I have learned a lot in these waterfall confessions, but have been worried about the kind of self-story I tell that begets them: is simply pronouncing 'aging and dying' in everyday conversation enough to launch such intimate discourse, or are there politics to saying '*I study aging and dying*' that lend a veneer of expertise to a realm that, by its nature, narrows the possibility of deep knowing?

Amongst my generational peers, I function as an explorer and witness to an aging and dying realm unfamiliar, largely unknown, and seemingly faraway to them. I seem to them to have unusually pierced the generational enclaves by inserting myself as a young person in a world created for the old. Few of my friends have ever set foot in a retirement community or a nursing home. If they did, it was only to see grandma at Christmas or right before she was about to die. 'What's it really like in there?' friends have asked with great intrigue. Mostly the curiosity is comparative. 'This place (Oxford University) must seem... besides the point to you, having lived there (the retirement community), you know?' I never know how to handle these sorts of questions, imagining, as I do, that they see me having a kind of metric for judgment about what really counts and what is really meaningful. I have come to realize that people think that the end of life is real-er than any other point, and that it provokes a kind of acute existential grappling so rarely incited.

I have also been mistaken by peers as having expert insight into the realm of grief. A robust percentage of the people I met during fieldwork have since died. I have received more calls to funerals than I have wedding invitations, an unlikely inversion for someone in their late twenties. Since, for many of my young friends, death still remains largely an anomalous event, they seek me out to understand what being around death regularly does to you, asking questions of me as one would to a religious teacher or a counselor. 'What does it mean that we're mortal?' and 'When a friend's loved one dies, what are you supposed to say and to do for them?' I've been asked to interpret dreams about graves and to calm fears about potential terminal illnesses. Friends wonder if I believe in ghosts, what the appropriate amount of tears looks like for 'good grief', and if I would personally take advantage of a law like Death with Dignity. Sometimes I wonder if all those deathbeds left a mark on me that people can now pick up on.

Of course, my experience fascinates and resonates more deeply amongst the young than it does the old. The first conference I went to at the end of my fieldwork joined aging professionals together to discuss how to solve some of the globe's 'most pressing concerns' around the increasing elder demographic. I was put into a group with many professionals, all thirty years my senior, who believed that the only way to 'control the aging tide' was to make individuals 'advance plan' for their aging and dying trajectories. When I protested that this was neoliberal code to shift the responsibility for health from the state to the individual, and that this induced more precarity instead of abetting it, one of the older group members said, 'When you're our age, and you've been in this profession for as long as we have, you'll see why you're wrong.' I was stuck in a difficult position: my political and anthropological analysis was just unusual enough to their professional ethos to seem irrelevant and biting enough to seem presumptuous. As many of them were older men, I had a feeling that my youth and gender contributed to their easy dismissal of me, too. It is always a difficult tight-rope to walk when disrupting popular ideas, even more so when you are, as a young person, disrupting an older person's ideas about aging that you have yet to personally undergo.

It was in this context that I could see that claiming privileged insight because of elderhood is also a claim to a particular kind of authority, a way in which to legitimate a particular methodology for the production of knowledge. Such insight is not simply hard-won knowledge born from lived experience, but often involves

political, economic and social beliefs hardened, by will, into 'facts'. While my young peers have inappropriately slotted me as expert, elders have also undermined me because of my youth. Both approaches, in my estimation, are wrong. The interesting question for me is not who knows better about the world, but how different perspectives illuminate the world newly and richly to us.

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If fieldwork is a rite of passage, then writing up is the time you spend discovering how the rite of passage transformed you. I began to lose sight of what I had learned in the field near the end of it, and much of what initially disturbed me about the retirement community had, by that point, left its mark on me enough that I could no longer remember how I had started out so differently. It took leaving the field and returning back home to help me identify my learning arc.

My clarity was aided by a significant displacement: in the span of thirty days, I transitioned out of one generational enclave into another, moving out of a Los Angeles Continuing Care retirement community and into an Oxford college. At the beginning of March 2016, my next-door neighbors were 92 and 87 years old. The sounds outside of my room then were of walkers creaking by, nurses pounding on doors to deliver medicines, and neighbors gossiping about a resident falling, cracking a hip and landing himself in the hospital. But by the end of the month, my neighbors were 18 and 20 years old. The noises in the halls had radically changed: they were of Lady Gaga songs, whispers of who was 'trying it on' with whom at the 'bop', and of free-form running of young legs, late for class.

The comparisons between the two worlds helped me draw conclusions I was unable to in the field: after dining with undergraduates who slurped up their food in a quiet hurry, I learned that part of the reason meals at the retirement community were foundational to its community-formation was because they joined people together ritually over long durations. In part due to slow chewing, the extended cadence of meals at the retirement community also had to do with how meals were understood in the context of daily routines. For undergraduates, meals were what fueled them to attend to activities throughout the day and were, in large part, a utilitarian consumption; for the elders, the daily meals were themselves activities and were, for many residents, the main structure of their day. Undergraduates could quickly take care of their needs and almost forget about them, but elders were asked to labor over the maintenance of their bodies. Indeed, many of the elders I lived with saw the maintenance of life itself as their central project. One resident's regular retort when asked what he was going to do that day was, 'Just keep myself alive!'

The sharp juxtaposition between my time in the retirement community and then in the Oxford generated an embodied form of knowing. For months I pushed wheelchairs in the retirement community, balanced leaning elders on my elbows, and learned how to be affected by the dying. My fieldwork, tactile and emotional, called me into being as a caregiver. I learned how to respond quickly to a falling elder. I understood the sensation of a touch that told me feverish or not. I appreciated my legs' will to speed amidst an ocean of walkers and wheelchairs. I learned how my gut, and my shoulders, and the ligaments in my knee carry my grief. I understood how anxiety means constant attentiveness, how it can spread like contagion. I perceived how a soft but present touch on the shoulder could ease my presence into a blind woman's realm. I calculated the right pitch and tone and volume for each of the hard of hearing.

The first weekend back in Oxford I stepped out of my room to the main streets to find breakfast. I saw an older couple inching their way slowly on the sidewalk to the bus stop, both balancing on skinny canes that were precariously meeting a rainy ground. My impulses lunged towards them, to stand near in case of a

fall, but a big, double-decker bus whirled by and slapped me out of the task. These were not elders under my care and this was a street with different rules, I realized. As the steeple's bells clang loudly and hints of British accents resounded all around me, I remember feeling how far away I was from the palm-treed Californian retirement community I had for two years called home.

In my first months back at Oxford from the field, I mourned the touch in care. Months of computer typing, singularly in my room or amidst dusty books, placed me squarely within the world of objects. The people I had known were now memories, unlocked through mental acts of recall. Instead of responding to them in real time, I had the stories of them react to theories and ideas. The world I was sunk into was now in mp3 clips and .jpps. A professor once joked to me that the only reason academics have bodies is to get them from one library, meeting, and laboratory to another. I was quickly sensing what he meant.

Though this shift in embodied existence was painful, it was also illuminating. Nurses at the retirement community would often lament the fact that I had not yet had my own children. 'You learn about how to care by being responsible for another,' one nurse told me as she was teaching me how to feed a resident. But it was because I did not have any dependents while writing up in University that I could feel the loss of my fieldwork embodiment so intensely. When I was caregiving in the retirement community, my body calibrated with the needs of others; writing up, my body seems only to respond to its own needs. It was the absence my body felt because of its new isolation that clarified for me how caregiving intimately connects bodies together.

Though Rosaldo thinks resonance leads to deeper understanding, I have learned about how gaps and differences can sharpen our ability to perceive, too. As a young person, my capacity to resonate with elders is highly limited, but anthropology argues that it is not sameness, but difference that drives the field forward. Different seers produce different insights, and because of this, all eyes have something valuable and worthwhile to say.

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On my last day of fieldwork, when the retirement community threw a party for me, a resident whispered in my ear, 'go and do what you've learned here.' She had said in a short dictum what several of my teachers – nurses, residents, death midwives and death workers – had been trying to tell me throughout my research: that what I was seeing and learning on an everyday basis during fieldwork should not be content to file, but rather catalysts to transform my being in the world. 'It is sad, but it is also good you have learned about dying so young,' a resident once said to me. 'You will live your life differently now.'

It has been a bewildering project discerning what it is I actually learned in the retirement community and how, then, I should now live. Bewildering because I discover each day what it was I learned there as my memories get refracted, sharpened, and illuminated anew by the fresh contexts I bring them into. Bewildering also because, though moveable, these boundaries also highlight how much I do not know still, and how limited my knowledge will always be. Elders in the retirement community would, like Susan, confess that experience made their reflections about aging and dying intricate, but would also testify to the extent to which aging and dying continued to disorient and mystify them. Though I often attribute my own ignorance around aging and dying issues to my youth, the elders I lived with encouraged me to see that claiming any expertise around aging and dying would be obtuse. These are processes not to be known fully, but to be partially apprehended, and particularly so.

Writing up has been a process of transforming inadequate knowledge into partial knowledge, of figuring out how my own experience can be made into a time worth saying something about. It is an artful dance that must be learned, trying to find integrity throughout this process. I cannot ever fully know what it means to be old, but the curiosity and desire to attune and to attend are fed by my confusion. Studying aging and dying leaves me thirsty to draw near and, to ask questions. Anthropology has helped me navigate being young while studying old age and death, but studying old age and death as a young person has also helped me generate an anthropological sensibility I can be proud of.

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