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DEBATE

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Who Wants to Have an Aged Self If to Age Is So Bad? Ageless and Aged Selves as Cultural Constructs

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I agree in part with Sharon Kaufman's insightful finding, based on her ethnographic research in the late 1970s, that many older Americans identify as having an "ageless self" that operates as a positive source of meaning in older age. I, too, found in my own fieldwork forty years after Kaufman published *The Ageless Self* that older Americans often convey a sense of an ageless self, an aspirational identity I have sometimes termed "permanent personhood" (Lamb 2014). I would like to argue, however, that Sharon Kaufman's compelling book *The Ageless Self*, and her later essay "Reflections on 'The Ageless Self'" (1993), do not make fully transparent the cultural embeddedness of the prevailing U.S. "the ageless self" ideal. Underlying the U.S. ageless self model is a confluence of factors—including particular cultural ideologies of personhood and the life course, and a deep stigmatization of oldness—quite unique to North America. In sum: I see "the ageless self" as an emic category useful for understanding U.S. ideals and experiences. To enhance the productiveness of the concept, however, we must denaturalize it, to more fully recognize "the ageless self" as a particular, even peculiar, cultural-historical construct.

Although Kaufman does not foreground the ageless-self idea as an American cultural construct, she does acknowledge that the sixty participants in her study—white middle-class Californians over age 70—"share some cultural characteristics" and "certain dominant American goals, values, and expectations" (1986: 21). In particular, Kaufman finds that self-esteem for her interlocutors is intimately tied to finding ways to maintain American values deemed essential to social worth – including activity, productivity, and "keeping busy," and individualism, independence, and self-reliance (1986, Chapter 4, "Values as Sources of Meaning").

Much of Kaufman's prose, however, suggests a universal ageless self, as an experience and analytic category useful to gerontology and aging studies in general, without highlighting the cultural embeddedness of the ageless-self ideal. For instance, in her "Reflections" essay, Kaufman writes in general terms about how when "old people talk about themselves, they express a sense of self that is ageless," and of how "old people do not perceive meaning in aging itself" (1993, 14). She emphasizes the positive and cheerful consequences of agelessness as a cultural ideal: how nice it is that older people can draw on a positive ageless-self ideal to bring meaning to their lives and uphold a sense of an ongoing, continuous, stable self that does not need to change radically in old age. In such dialogue, Kaufman rarely specifies or reflects upon the fact that her research focused on older *Americans*. Perhaps for this reason Kaufman does not puzzle over *why* North Americans might be so particularly inclined to posit a self as ageless.

But to this anthropologist, who came to U.S. research after years of studying aging in India, the ageless-self idea is very particularly American. My own research with older Americans has focused on probing the “successful aging” paradigm that has become so popular over the past few decades that it has become a naturalized cultural obsession (Lamb 2017). Successful aging envisions postponing or even eliminating the changes of old age, through individual effort (lifestyle choices, healthy diets, exercise, positive attitudes), as a project of the self. The popular premise that ‘you don’t have to act or feel old’ conveys a vision of the ideal person as not really aging in later life, but rather maintaining the self of one’s earlier years. In such perspectives, to be “old” — as in different from a younger self and specifically to experience decline — is not a natural or meaningful part of the life course, but rather an outrage that can and should be eliminated. The end result, if all goes well according to this paradigm, is the elimination of oldness from the life course itself, as one goes straight from vibrant, good health — a stable self — to a swift and painless end. Anthropologists and cultural historians have surmised that those who prize individual independence, central to North American visions of the self, may be especially preoccupied with the self’s putatively stable, enduring qualities (e.g., Clark 1972; Cole 1992; Lamb 2014; McIntosh 2009). We certainly find such a preoccupation with a stable, enduring self in the anti-aging, anti-decline aspirations of successful aging.

Because Sharon Kaufman pursued all of her own anthropological research in her own home setting of the United States, it may have been difficult for her to recognize the peculiar cultural qualities of the ageless-self ideal. Kaufman’s interlocutors’ sense of maintaining an ageless self may have felt very natural and familiar to her, resonating with how she herself envisioned the unfolding of her own life course. But one of anthropology’s core aims is to make visible that which can seem so ordinary and taken for granted that it can be hard to recognize, to defamiliarize the familiar. One core issue that I find Sharon Kaufman does not explicitly recognize and critique is how the idea of an ageless self resonates so strongly for so many Americans because of how deeply stigmatizing and terrifying it is to be ‘old’ in U.S. society and culture. Who wants to be or have an ‘aged self’ if being old is culturally regarded as terribly bad? In North America, to show signs of being truly ‘old’ — as in different from one’s younger adult self — is culturally regarded as so embarrassing, stigmatizing, and devoid of positive meaning, that it is for many much more terrifying and destructive of a sense of an ongoing, valued self than even death itself (Lamb 2018). Because of this, old age is the one phase of the life course that Americans have wished to erase.

To help readers recognize a different perspective, I will share just a few quick observations from India. In India, old age is a named, recognized, and meaningful part of human life, with its own positive and negative features like any other life stage (Lamb 1997, 2000, 2014). In the classical Hindu model, two of the four life stages (fully half of the human life cycle) constitute old age. Hindu perspectives in general emphasize transience and change as fundamental to personhood and the human condition, including growth and decay, birth, aging, and death. Indian Hindus and Muslims both also tend to regard needing forms of care in later life as perfectly normal and expected, and even often valued, just as North Americans tend to regard needing and enjoying care as a child as normal and valuable. Although dying one’s hair black has long been popular among older Indian women, and some are taking up globally circulating anti-aging products, such as youth-enhancing face creams, few convey a desire or expectation to remain young or ageless.

Some of my Indian interlocutors, aware of U.S. ‘healthy’ and ‘successful’ and ‘anti’ aging trends, can be a bit puzzled: “Are Americans trying to pretend being old doesn’t happen?” “Is it because people in the West want to live more and don’t want to die?” Amarnath Banerjee, a retired bank official at age 70, remarked, “I don’t mind being called old, because I am old,” and emphasized: “Birth and death lie hand in hand in nature.” Samrat Ghosh, age 80 and a retired industrialist, commented: “I enjoy the company

of the young, going out to eat together, sharing with them, having fun together. But this doesn't mean I'm trying to *be* young. ... You can't stop aging. You may as well enjoy it."

Resistance to the ageless-self model is not absent in the United States either. On all the age-denying talk in everyday U.S. social-cultural life ("Oh, you're not old!" "You're only as old as you think you are!" "You don't look your age!"), author Ursula Le Guin reflects in an essay written at age 83: "To tell me my old age doesn't exist is to tell me that I don't exist. Erase my age, you erase my life—me" (2017, 14). She acknowledges that she's speaking only for herself: "I don't begrudge the fairy tale to those who want to believe in it." But her own advice remains: "Let age be age. Let your old relative or old friend be who they are. Denial serves nothing" (17).

Several of my own U.S. interlocutors—especially those who have experienced serious illness or become quite advanced in years—also critique ageless-self and permanent-personhood paradigms. I mentioned to cancer-survivor Dora Koenig, age 72, the notion of permanent personhood that I had discerned in North American visions of successful aging, a model implying a sense of enduring permanence as a person rather than embracing change through aging. Dora interrupted,

Oh, I believe permanent personhood is an evil idea. Because it is so wrong! It is just not true. And it is like never-never land and princesshood. It just doesn't help you be a person.

She reflected that she is striving to cultivate instead "a very rich relationship with *reality*, namely mortality, and what do you want to make with the time you have now?" Lilian Warner, a Christian minister, age 76, tries to spread the message to her fellow residents in a retirement community about how aging can be an exciting, rewarding phase of life. At the same time, she emphasizes change:

I've been asking, 'What is the new normal for us as we reach our elder years?' If we still want to be what we were at fifty, we are defeated right out of the box. We can't be. I can't be fifty again. Frankly, I don't want to be fifty again if you want the honest truth.

Anthropologists are increasingly conducting fieldwork in their own societies, as Sharon Kaufman accomplished before "anthropology at home" had become popular (Peirano 1998). This is terrific, because anthropology, through its ethnographic fieldwork methods and critical lens, has much to offer its home communities. However, to do anthropology at home makes recognizing doxa or taken-for-granted assumptions more challenging. Comparative ethnographic exploration, through fieldwork and dialogue, can help us see what may otherwise be hiding in plain sight.

The ageless self concept in many ways beautifully captures prevailing U.S. aspirations regarding the life course. The concept encapsulates both the widespread U.S. desire for continuity, permanence, and stability of self as well as commonplace, deep fears about change, old age, and decline. Within a broader tradition of the anthropology of aging and the life course, future anthropologists would wish to investigate whether and in what ways visions of agelessness over the life course resonate—or not—with the experiences of situated interlocutors.

The ageless self is not a universally applicable analytic category but a culturally grounded emic one replete with its own unusual and provocative assumptions. It behooves us to recognize not only its inspirational qualities but also the ways it rests on a deeply American cultural discomfort with oldness and human conditions of frailty and transience in ways that can obscure other paradigms of aging.

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