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Book Review

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Review of Rehak, Jana Kopelant. *We Live In The Water: Climate, Aging, and Socioecology On Smith Island*. 2024. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press. pp. 234. Price: \$34.95 (Paperback & eBook).

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Anthropologist, filmmaker, and photographer Jana Rehak's ethnography *We Live in the Water* is a poignant account of how aging members of the Smith Island coastal community in Chesapeake Bay, Maryland, U.S., navigate transformations in the ecological landscape alongside the physiological and social challenges of later life. With this, the publication invites scholars and practitioners concerned with aging and climate change alike to pay attention to this relational and resilient orientation to life—one that does not resist change but learns to live meaningfully within it. Conducting intermittent fieldwork between 2014 and 2022, with regular visits for up to several weeks at times, Rehak employs phenomenological and multisensory ethnographic methods, including interviews, participant observation (particularly in cultural and religious communal events at the church and various homes and neighborhoods), and archival research within a life course framework. Accessible yet layered, Rehak's prose and her inclusion of photographs of elder storytellers in each chapter honors the humanity of the island's residents and conveys a deep reverence for their rich history and for the land.

Rehak's work resists framing aging as a problem, foregrounding instead, the creativity and vitality that later life and a changing environment can motivate. Here, Rehak, like her collaborators, tells a story of navigating continuity and change framed within the "weather-world" (Ingold 2010) of Smith Island, a landscape continuously reconfigured by flooding and land erosion, one that is evolving, living, changing and alongside which aging takes place. Seeking to understand how Smith Islanders "go [sic] with the flow" (191), as they put it, Rehak's project examines what it takes to, in the words of Jennings, a Smith Island elder, live "in the water" (35).

Family albums serve as critical ethnographic material in Rehak's work, which she uses to analyze both personal and place-based engagements on Smith Island and, in collaboration with island residents, as the basis for an ethnographic film: *Family Frames* (2019). Initially utilizing photographs to elicit family and childhood stories, Rehak soon realized that islanders instead narrated stories that were deeply rooted in the land, sea, and soundscape. This shift in focus led her to emphasize that, while photographs help preserve and transmit family histories, the personal stories of Smith Islanders are intrinsically tied to the local environment. Recognizing "the island itself as a character in the residents' narratives" (191) and drawing on an ecological phenomenological perspective (11), Rehak conceptualizes aging in relation to personhood, bodiliness, and social processes.

Each of the seven thematic chapters presents fragments of life histories, which Rehak weaves throughout the chapter to illustrate key aspects of Smith Islanders' experiences and to highlight issues

significant across the life course. Giving the reader a textured impression of rural coastal life, Rehak brings together stories from island residents who call themselves “old-timers” (families that have been on the island for multiple generations) and newcomers (newly arrived residents to the island). Central themes include the intergenerational transmission of gendered knowledge and labor—such as watermen’s practices passed from father to son (Chapter Two), women’s intimate relationship with the land through land management, domestic work and caregiving (Chapter Six), and the sense of individual and collective grief over the social and environmental loss of residents and the environment (Chapter Four).

Observing how Christianity and ecological knowledge shape Smith Islanders’ responses to change and loss, Rehak focuses on everyday practices that sustain both self and community, i.e., labor, craftwork, communal storytelling, faith-based gatherings, and the curation of family photographs. One example is the annual Ladies Dinner, which rotates among villages and features traditional dishes, gift-giving, prayer, theological reflection, and comic skits that parody aging and local quirks. This ethic of care is equally present in funeral rites, where communal prayer, song, collective gift-giving, and especially storytelling blend memories of loved ones with the island’s history and landscape. As Chris, a former resident, observes, “I will be going to my Uncle Ralph Ed’s funeral next week, and it is going to be sad, unbearably so. I have no memories of Smith Island without him being there” (107). Care also appears in the curation of family photographs—Rehak describes how their display and the narratives surrounding them “represent a family’s pictorial lineage” (20), a form of belonging especially salient with so many children and grandchildren now living on the mainland. These practices show how care, creativity, and personhood emerge as inseparable from ecology, expressed in a shared Christian and ecological understanding as Smith Islanders navigate change and loss together. By attending to these practices, Rehak illustrates how Smith Islanders’ deep familiarity is rooted in ties to the island, generational knowledge, and experiences of aging. She thus analyzes aging not as individual decline or a collective problem, but as a social *process* shaped by history, ecology, and community.

Another key thread is Rehak’s attention to hope—not as naïve optimism, but as a grounded practice of meaning-making in the face of uncertainty. Smith Islanders contend with a range of uncertainties—the dangers inherent in sea work and the unpredictability of the weather, the changes and vulnerabilities that accompany aging, and the shifting makeup of their community brought on by demographic changes and collective losses. Rehak shows that hope surfaces through the islanders’ integration of Christian faith and intimate ecological knowledge—whether in the acceptance of unpredictable weather, gardening as a spiritual practice, or acts of care such as mortuary beautification and tending to the ill. This interweaving of spiritual and environmental understanding allows community members to face diverse challenges without denying hardship, sustaining community and cultivating resilience in their everyday lives and within a changing socio-ecological landscape.

The themes explored in *We Live in the Water* extend from Rehak’s earlier work on Smith Island, particularly her ethnographic film *Family Frames* (2019), in which islanders narrate histories of kinship and ecological belonging through family photographs. As in the work of anthropologist Barbara Myerhoff (1978, see also Myerhoff, Kaminsky, and Weiss 2007)—which Rehak references throughout the book—the author prioritizes the voices of Smith Island elders, and tunes into their everyday practices of storytelling.

Throughout, Rehak’s writing is pensive and intimate, revealing her close bond with both Smith Island elders and the island itself. In one poignant juncture of the ethnography, she describes the loving relationship of a Smith Islander couple, Iris and Ken, who, in their nineties, had to leave Smith Island when they became ill with pneumonia. Recalling her earlier visits with them, Rehak notes Iris’s care for

her even as she aged: “As her hearing became progressively worse, it became progressively hard to have a conversation during these socials. She would sometimes reach over to me and silently hold my hand. Iris did not let her hearing disability get in the way of her connectivity to me or her community...” (99). These tender yet powerful moments abound in the book, rendering the elders’ lives, memories, and their trust and affection for Rehak, vivid on the page. Notably, Rehak’s book closes with poems that pay tribute to three women elders with whom she grew close during fieldwork. And like Myerhoff, Rehak’s accessible prose and poignant portrayals of Smith Island elders aim to engage both specialists and general readers alike, inviting them into a world where, for the elderly, in Myerhoff’s (1978) words, “every moment matters” (7).

We Live in the Water is an important book—one that not only raises concerns about our shared human experiences, but also demonstrates the understanding and affection that emerge through sustained, attentive connection, especially across intergenerational ties. This connection is not just an interdependence between fieldworker and collaborators, but, as Rehak’s narrative reveals, among Rehak, Smith Islanders, and the land, waters, and elements that shape their lives. In this way, she demonstrates how anthropology can be an act of bearing witness—a practice that, as anthropologist Ruth Behar (1996) notes, values relationships and mutual care beyond academic analysis alone. The stakes of this kind of witnessing are captured by Dwight, a resident, who says plainly, “There is hardly anybody here now to tell the stories to” (51). His words highlight not only the urgency of preserving life histories, but also the importance of crafting ethnographies that make these stories legible and accessible to broader audiences.

Ultimately, Rehak’s work calls us to attend to the everyday practices and ethics of hope—for each other, for the land, and for the spaces through which memory and meaning are kept alive. Her attention to spirituality, social resilience, and sensory storytelling provides critical interventions in anthropological and gerontological research, particularly in a time of global ecological precarity. As such, this book will resonate with a wide range of readers—undergraduate and graduate students, anthropologists of aging and environment, caregivers, climate researchers, and members of faith-based or coastal communities navigating grief and change. The emphasis on interdependence and resilience also speaks to broader anthropological concerns regarding the life course and the continuous negotiation of identity and community in the face of decline, loss, and transformation. I strongly recommend *We Live in the Water* to anyone interested in the intersections of aging, place, and care. It models what anthropology can look like when it is relational, embodied, and guided by listening—not only to people, but to the waters, winds, and silences that shape our lives.

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