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# Guest Editors' introduction to the group submission: "Silver Linings"

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Jean-Marie Guyau (1854-88), once a lecturer in philosophy at the Lycée Condorcet in Paris, spent the better part of his short career writing a book on the theory of time. In it he notes the impatience of youth, their lives lived bulging at the seams, while old age "by contrast, is more like the unchanging scenery of the classical theatre, a simple place, sometimes a true unity of time, place and action that concentrates everything round one dominant activity and expunges the rest" (cf Draaisma 2004: 207). Guyau was illustrating the narrowing of life in the autumn years; the dispensing with, perhaps, things one has come to realize are unnecessary, but also the resignation that ones brightest, beautiful and bold years have long since passed.

One comes, then, to expect very little in old age, or from the elderly. The collection of papers here highlights an alternative stage in which people are not only exhibiting powerful and colorful agency in their later years, but also are doing so with little regard for the diminutive expectations the world holds for them. What is it that inspires seniors to challenge the standard tropes of senior citizenship?

These papers aspire to focus our attention on the ways in which older people depart from the socially defined roles of later life. We expect youth to cross boundaries, take risks, challenge themselves and the cultural institutions around them, not the aged. Certainly the public eye is drawn more to youth movements and actions. However, with the world poised, in the next two decades, to experience its largest increase in the elderly population, how we treat aging and the decisions and actions of the elderly will be critical. Aging is framed by a common terrain of shifting physical health (itself a very individual experience) while marked by class, gender, race

and place. Still, many seniors creatively navigate the 'third age.' Some find that their time, no longer tied so strictly to work and family, becomes truly their own and they turn to rejuvenating old interests or forging new ones. Others resist being moved, literally and figuratively, to the margins of society and strive to make their voices and opinions heard. As seniors see their social and political influence diminish in youth-obsessed cultures some find new strength and meaning in lives that include activism, migration, a new physicality, renegotiating their identity and carving out a new cultural and physical presence in their communities. Such analyses demand attention to the gendered dimensions of later life and we consider them here.

This group of articles looks at these issues in a variety of contemporary contexts. Robbins-Ruszkowski examines Universities of the Third Age as sites which offer alternatives to dominant discourses about aging in contemporary Poland. The Argentine elders DuBois describes engage in political activism in attempts to alter policies with respect to retirees, but also as an end in itself. Gambold's study of older women who retire abroad to Mexico and France shows how these women use international retirement as a way to live old age differently. The articles thus describe older people actively engaged in redefining what it means to be old.

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# Challenging Marginalization at the Universities of the Third Age in Poland

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## Abstract

Older people in Poland often describe and experience old age as a time in the life course marked by discrimination and marginalization. In this postsocialist context, a still-dominant Cold-War logic links older people to the devalued socialist past and younger people to the present and future of the Polish nation-state. Contemporary media portray old age as defined by physical and mental decline and social isolation. The most visible challenge to such temporal, bodily, and social exclusion occurs through Universities of the Third Age, where older people learn new skills, cultivate hobbies, and explicitly theorize growing old as a positive phase of life. Drawing on twenty months of ethnographic research, this article traces key sociocultural, political-economic, and historical factors that contribute to discrimination against and empowerment of older people in Poland. By analyzing national politics and media representations of old age together with ethnographic data from Universities of the Third Age, this article highlights the practices through which older Poles feel themselves to be transformed in old age—and asks who may be excluded from such practices—thus contributing to gerontological discussions of “active aging” and anthropological understandings of sociality in late life.

Keywords: *active aging, postsocialism, Universities of the Third Age, Poland.*

## MARGINALIZATION THROUGH NATIONAL HISTORICAL POLITICS

In contemporary Poland, older people often describe and experience old age as a time in the life course marked by discrimination and marginalization. In the public sphere, older people speak of rudeness on city buses and trams (“no one gives up their seat for us”), and of feeling “transparent” (“przeroczysty”) on the street. In the private sphere, older people describe feeling lonely after they retire as their network of social contacts shrinks, losing a sense of purpose outside their family. Some older people go so far as to describe growing old as losing one’s personhood. In the media, old age is often portrayed in negative terms, defined by physical and mental decline and social isolation,

and often couched in the language of demographic fear (Wilińska and Cedersund 2010, Zierkiewicz and Łysak 2005). This cultural devaluation and marginalization of older people is associated with national political-economic shifts that have occurred during the lifetimes of the oldest generations in Poland, in which older people have become socioeconomically disadvantaged (Calasanti and Zajicek 1997, Synak 2003, Trafiałek 2003). Moreover, contemporary interpretations of the past that link the lifetimes of older people, and especially older women, to a nationalist Catholic understanding of the Polish nation can further exclude older Poles from full inclusion in society.

The most visible challenge to such temporal, bodily, and social exclusion occurs through Universities of the

Third Age, where older people learn new skills, cultivate hobbies, and explicitly theorize growing old as a positive phase of life. Universities of the Third Age are currently experiencing a “boom” in Poland, with half of the almost 400 Universities of the Third Age nation-wide having been founded in the last ten years.<sup>1</sup> This increase in Universities of the Third Age is occurring at the same time as European governments are focusing on policies promoting “active aging” as a response to demographic changes (see Perek-Biała et al. 2006 for a discussion of active aging policies in Poland and the Czech Republic; see Boudiny 2013 for a critical analysis of the multiple meanings and uses of active aging).

Universities of the Third Age have a deep history in Poland: the first Polish University of the Third Age was founded in 1975 in Warsaw, only two years after the first-ever University of the Third Age was founded in Toulouse.<sup>2</sup> Although the specific activities and pedagogical styles vary greatly in Universities of the Third Age worldwide (see Formosa 2012 for a recent global history of Universities of the Third Age), they all share a focus on providing education for older adults in the so-called “third age,” or “the span of years between retirement age and the advent of age-imposed limitations” (Weiss and Bass 2002:29; see Laslett 1996 for a canonical explication of the “third age”). In Poland, there are varying models of institutions—some are associated with universities, while others are free-standing organizations—that have varying models of payment and participation, ranging from the nearly free (e.g., 30 USD per year) to the more expensive (e.g., 30 USD for each class). Some people organize their whole lives around the institutions, attending a class or workshop nearly every day, while others attend only one class. Nationwide, over 80 percent of attendees are women, which, in addition to the greater number of older women in the population, can be explained by gendered patterns of sociality and ideologies of the life course, in which women are thought to be most deeply connected to other people from childhood to late life, while men are understood to be more strongly connected to the world of things and nature.<sup>3</sup>

Worldwide, Universities of the Third Age aim to improve the lives of older people through a range of educational activities. As has been well-established by research that demonstrates improvements in a variety of physical, social, and psychological measures of older people who participate in these programs, these efforts are often quite successful (e.g., Formosa 2012; Koziel and Trafialek 2007; Moody 2004; Swindell 1993, 2012; Swindell and Thompson 1995; Zielińska-Więczkowska and Kędzióra-Kornatowska 2009; Zielińska-Więczkowska et al. 2011). Despite these improvements in the wellness of participants, however, there is other evidence that critiques these institutions for

their age-segregation (Formosa 2012) and their tendency to attract elite members of society (e.g., Formosa 2006, Moody 2004, Wilińska 2012). In the scholarly literature on education in later life, however, Universities of the Third Age are recognized as important institutions through which many older people around the world can work to eliminate the marginalization and exclusion that they face as older persons.

In Poland, these transformative goals are explicitly part of Universities of the Third Age (Ziębińska 2007); these institutions thus pose a productive site in which to investigate how older people in Poland can overcome stereotypes in old age. Moreover, the high prevalence of women at Polish Universities of the Third Age provides a direct contrast to the stereotype of the *babcia*, or grandmother, in which older women are primarily associated with the family (Wilińska 2010, Wilińska and Cedersund 2010). Polish women who attend Universities of the Third Age thus seem to be overcoming stereotypes that are both general to older people and particular to older women.

In this article, I draw on data from twenty months of ethnographic fieldwork that I conducted in educational and medical institutions in Wrocław and Poznań, two cities in western Poland, from 2006 to 2012, with the longest fieldwork period occurring between 2008 and 2010. The primary educational sites of study were Universities of the Third Age in Wrocław and Poznań, where I attended classes and weekly lectures, interviewed participants and staff, taught conversational English classes, and reviewed institutional archival material. I also conducted interviews with participants in an NGO-run educational program in Wrocław called @ktywny Senior (@ctive Senior). This article draws on the 39 interviews and many hours of observations that I conducted at educational institutions, as well as interviews and observations from my time at the medical institutions where I conducted my fieldwork.<sup>4</sup> The interviews were open-ended and I tried, as much as possible, to let the interviewee guide the conversation (Briggs 1986). In addition to interviews, I also had more informal unstructured conversations with participants and staff.

I interpret this ethnographic data in the context of national politics and media discussions of aging in an attempt to merge micro- and macro-level perspectives on aging in Poland. By tracing key sociocultural, political-economic, and historical factors that contribute to discrimination against and empowerment of older people in Poland, this article aims to create a holistic discussion of aging in Poland. First, I will analyze two political events of the last decade to demonstrate how popular discourse on the Polish nation links the figure of the old woman with

that of the Polish nation. Next, I will analyze an influential newspaper series on aging in Poland in which a prominent social psychologist criticized Universities of the Third Age. Then, I will use ethnographic and textual evidence from the University of the Third Age in Wrocław to show how older women perceive their participation in this institution as a response to contemporary discrimination and a lifetime of labor for others. By combining an analysis of popular media with ethnographic observations and interview data, this article both elucidates the national-political aspects of stereotypes of older people in Poland and describes popular attempts to overcome these stereotypes.

Understanding the discursive links between older people and the Polish nation demonstrates the moral stakes of older people's participation in Universities of the Third Age in Poland. My theoretical perspective is grounded in anthropological studies on personhood, and especially those of Marcel Mauss ([1925]1990, [1935]1985) and T. O. Beidelman ([1986]1993), in which personhood is formed through social relations and cosmological imagination, and is thus inherently moral. Therefore I see the moral personhood of older people in Poland as intimately tied both to discursive imaginations of the Polish nation and to everyday practices of aging. This article highlights the practices through which older Poles feel themselves to be transformed in old age—and asks who may be excluded from such practices—thus contributing to gerontological discussions of “active aging” and anthropological understandings of sociality in late life.

#### MOHAIR BERETS AND DEFENDERS OF THE CROSS

Two moments during the last decade demonstrate particularly well the connection between older people and the nation in Poland. Talk about older people in both the media and daily life can become evaluative conversations about the state of the Polish nation. These are often deeply gendered discourses (Graff 2009; McClintock 1996; Mosse 1988). In other words, older women become figures of the nation (see Cohen 1998 for related connections between old women and the nation in India). These two historical moments demonstrate the degree to which the figure of the old woman is associated with a particular nationalist Catholic understanding of the Polish nation.

The first example relates to Polish national elections, which in recent years have shown the extent to which age and generation can index political worldviews. As has been well-documented across eastern Europe, political opposition to the former socialist state sometimes brought about the rise of right-wing nationalism (e.g., Verdery 1993). In postsocialist Poland, denouncing the socialist past is still a common move among far-right politicians,

who draw on the historical legacy of partitioned Poland and Soviet rule to champion an independent Polish nation that is ethnically Polish, Catholic, and ardently anti-communist. The strength of this ideology perhaps reached its zenith in Poland in 2005 when the Law and Justice party (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, or PiS), led by the identical twin brothers Lech and Jarosław Kaczyński, won both presidential and parliamentary elections. PiS came to power on an anti-corruption, anti-communist, and strongly Catholic platform. For PiS, to be a proper Polish citizen is to uphold “traditional” family values, epitomized in the performance of clearly demarcated patriarchal gender roles (Graff 2009). Because PiS did not win a large enough percentage on their own, they had to form a governing coalition; their coalition partners were the League of Polish Families (Liga Polskich Rodzin, or LPR) party, an extremist nationalist religious party, and Self-Defense (Samoobrona, or SO), the so-called peasants' party. Support for these parties among older people was extremely high, especially among those from more rural, eastern regions of Poland.<sup>5</sup> This coalition government ultimately proved unstable, and PiS lost parliamentary elections in 2007 to the more center-right pro-business Civic Platform (Platforma Obywatelska, or PO) party.

This political instability manifested in generational terms in the months leading up to the 2007 parliamentary elections. The link between older women and the conservative nationalism of PiS took the figure of the *moherowe berety* (mohair berets). This term refers to the wool caps that many older Polish women wear, and has come to stand for groups of older rural women who support PiS and listen to the conservative nationalist Catholic radio station Radio Maryja, the flagship member of a media conglomerate run by the controversial, conservative priest Father Tadeusz Rydzyk.<sup>6</sup> A widely circulated image from the months before the 2007 parliamentary election depicts a large group of older women wearing these hats attending what is presumably a mass, with the added caption “VOTE, or else they'll do it for you!”<sup>7</sup> Intended as a get-out-the-vote campaign targeting younger voters, this image demonized elderly women en masse because of their politico-religious views. Another ad urged, “take your grandmother's identity card!” (thereby making it impossible for her to vote).<sup>8</sup> In both these images, it is not merely older people who are seen as threatening here, but specifically older women. In other words, in the popular imagination in Poland it is particularly older women who are associated with the conservative nationalist views of PiS and Radio Maryja. Significantly, it is when these older women come together as part of a voting bloc that they become dangerous; one older woman who listens to Radio Maryja is harmless, but hundreds of such women are dangerous.



More recently, the controversies over the placement of a cross following the tragic plane crash in April 2010 that killed 96 people near Smoleńsk, Russia, can also be understood in generational terms. This tragic accident occurred as the president, Lech Kaczyński, and many top governmental officials were traveling to Smoleńsk to mark the 70th anniversary of the massacre of Polish officers in the Katyń forest. It soon became clear that the party of the late president and his supporters understood this as the latest event in Polish national martyrdom. People spoke of a second Katyń and conspiracy theories ran rampant, blaming PO or Russia for the crash (Lech Kaczyński was running for re-election at the time of the crash). The event became cemented as part of the national mythology of suffering when the president and his wife were buried in the crypts of Wawel Cathedral in Kraków, alongside Polish kings. After the crash, public spaces throughout the country were filled with memorials of flowers, candles, pictures, and messages. Outside the presidential palace in Warsaw, girl and boy scouts erected a large wooden cross as a memorial. When the newly elected president (Bronisław Komorowski, from PO) tried to move the cross to a nearby church, people refused to let it be moved. Even though this move had the approval of the Church, people guarded the cross and refused to let it be moved; the deceased president's twin brother, Jarosław Kaczyński, who had just lost the election for president to Komorowski, also supported leaving the cross in the current position. These protests sparked a counter-protest by people who wanted the cross moved.<sup>9</sup> Media coverage of the events, which lasted for months, depicts those protesting the removal of the cross as older, and those demonstrating for its removal as younger. In August, after a failed attempt at moving the cross to the church, explicit conflict broke out between the two protest groups. The Polish political philosopher Leszek Koczanowicz describes the groups in generational terms:

One crowd consisted of young people who organized a kind of carnival playing popular songs and performing short scenes that in eyes of the second crowd were on the verge of blasphemy, for instance, making a cross out of beer cans. The second crowd consisted largely of older people praying, listening to priests and speakers, and singing religious songs. [2012:822-823]

Although Koczanowicz (2012:823) finds these groups united in their individualist-based rejection of various authorities, I would highlight the generational differences of these groups. Certainly not all who wanted the cross to stay were old, or all who wanted to remove it were young, but given the broader political context of Poland, it is clear that important national ideological differences have generational fault lines.

In both events, older Poles, and especially older women, were central figures in public discourse about the future of the country. This popular dismissal of older Poles as out-of-touch was echoed in conversations I had with Poles of roughly my own age (in their late twenties to thirties), who would explain anti-Semitic, racist, or conservative religious comments made by an older person by saying things like, "these older people just need to die off." "Our society won't move forward until the older generations are gone." However, such comments about anonymous older Poles contrast with the same person's warm feelings towards his or her own grandparents. That is, the animosity towards the anonymous or unknown older person, or the elderly en masse, contrasts with the warmth that people feel for specific older people that they know. In these conversations with Poles of my own age, exactly which part of the past made older people problematic for the national future was not always clear. It was often their association with the nationalist far-right and its exclusionary policies and visions, as described above, but sometimes it was the very fact of their having come of age and worked during the socialist era, leading them to have a socialist-era *mentalność*, or mentality. Regardless, it was their association with the past that made their future inclusion suspect.

This link between older people and the socialist past, and younger people and the capitalist, democratic, and globalized present and future, I argue, is a key way that older people, exemplified by older women, are made marginal to the present and imagined future of the Polish nation-state. Yet this marginalization of older people exists in other domains besides the explicitly political. In the next section, I will focus on one interview with a prominent Polish psychologist that motivated a series of articles about aging in a leading Polish newspaper. Analyzing this interview serves to demonstrate in more detail the moral stakes of negative perceptions of old age in Poland, which attendees of the Universities of the Third Age attempt to overcome.

#### "NO COUNTRY FOR OLD PEOPLE"

The series "Polska to nie jest kraj dla starych ludzi," or "Poland is no country for old people," ran for ten days in *Gazeta Wyborcza* (Electoral Gazette), Poland's largest-circulating non-tabloid daily newspaper, in November 2008.<sup>10</sup> The paper of record in Poland since 1989, *Gazeta Wyborcza* emerged out of the Solidarity movement in the 1980s as the major independent daily newspaper. This series emerged out of a provocative interview with a well-known psychologist, Wiesław Łukaszewski, on the topic of aging and is one of many such occasional topical reports that *Gazeta Wyborcza* publishes.<sup>11</sup> The series consisted

of 17 articles and 33 letters from readers, published on weekdays for two consecutive weeks. Beginning with a survey on perceptions of old people and an extended interview with Łukaszewski (Wodecka 2008), the articles in the first week focused on the discrimination common to many Poles' experiences of aging, taken to the extreme in a terrifying story about an abandoned old woman, Władysława Baranowska, left to die alone in her apartment (Kasperska 2008). Also including articles about upcoming changes in the social security system, discrimination in the media, an economic comparison of old age today and in the 1970s, recommendations for being healthy in old age, and a manifesto called "Old age is beautiful," the first week presented aging as a largely negative experience, and made clear the newspaper's attempts to change this.

The second week, which included fewer articles and more letters from readers, reported on dire demographic changes and the state of medical care for the elderly in Poland, and described the relationship between elderly people and new technology (e.g., computers, cell phones). Ending with two stories about older people's experiences of discrimination in the workplace, the series seemed to conclude in the same place it started: namely, discrimination. The series seemed to emphatically confirm its title, that indeed, Poland is not a country for old people. By covering such a wide range of topics and encouraging readers to share their experiences (many articles end with the provocation, "Is Poland a country for old people? Write in about your own old age"), the newspaper attempted to create a national dialogue on old age in Poland.<sup>12</sup>

Throughout the articles on aging in *Gazeta Wyborcza*, a vivid vocabulary emerges to describe aging. For example, a scholar lists some of the negative words used to refer to older women, including "megiera," a word for a nasty, ill-tempered old woman derived from *Magaera*, one of the Greek Furies, and "mother-in-law" (Zawadzka 2008), which one Polish friend equated with *megiera*. The use of the word "still" (*jeszcze*) in survey questions (e.g., "Do I still earn money?" or "What do you still want to do in your life?") signals an expected end to a particular activity or dream (Klimowicz and Sokólska 2008); in other words, asking if one is "still" doing something in old age reveals an expectation that activity might have ceased.<sup>13</sup> Taken together, these words evoke painful histories, problematic everyday social encounters, and difficult positions within families, all shaded by expectations of decline in old age. This vocabulary is overwhelmingly negative and depressing.

*Gazeta Wyborcza* presents aging persons in two morally distinct categories. Who was responsible for creating such good, bad, or non-persons, however, remains ambiguous throughout the series. The major difference between these

moral categories was determined by levels of activity or social engagement; the many older people portrayed as isolated, lonely, depressed, poor, and ill, are the typical negative examples of growing old, while the few people who are described as active, sporty, and socially engaged are the positive examples of growing old.<sup>14</sup> The primary distinguishing characteristic between negatively- and positively-presented old persons is whether one is the same or different person than when one was younger; what counts as sameness and difference in personhood is imagined on the basis of activity. If one has the same degree and quality of (mental, physical, and social) activity as when one was younger, one can maintain a continuous personhood. If, however, one's engagement with the world diminishes, shrinking and dwindling until the end of life, then one becomes a different sort of person in old age. This different sort of personhood is a lesser sort of personhood; that is, being less active makes one less fully human than one's more active and younger peers.

But the experiences of Łukaszewski suggest that activity in old age is not enough to stave off such discrimination. As a professional older man who is still working, according to the ideals of active aging, he should have been satisfied and fulfilled. Nevertheless, he experiences intense discrimination. How can independent ideals of self-fulfillment, self-reliance, and flexibility explain his situation?

In an article entitled "When I go rollerblading, the brats yell: to the grave, grandpa!" (Wodecka 2008), Łukaszewski describes various instances in which he has experienced discrimination as an older person. For example, he feels "przezroczysty" ("transparent") on the street, where younger people look through him as if he were not there, and in other public spaces (clubs, stores, parks), ads, and on internet forums. He attributes this to a contemporary culture that privileges a quick pace over a slow one, and in particular, blames Poland's "monopolistic" culture for encouraging discrimination.

Besides, Polish culture is monopolistic, meaning that we have one language, one faith, one system of values. Such cultures are very dogmatic and prone to discrimination. Even in the Polish village there is no respect for the old. In the past, they were the main source of knowledge, but now the television has taken the role of wise old people. The elderly have lost their basic function as carriers of culture. They've become second-class citizens. They've become *Untermenschen* (sub-human). It seems to me that in the opinion of many young people, an old person belongs to a completely different species. Neither *homo* nor *sapiens*.<sup>15</sup>

Łukaszewski's use of the word *Untermenschen* is striking; meaning 'sub-human' in German, the term is associated with Nazi race science and was used to label

Slavs (including Poles) and Jews as inferior types of persons, appropriate for extermination. As an older Pole, he was certainly aware of this word's history, and was most likely using it consciously and deliberately. It is hard to imagine a stronger or more damning word for a Pole to use to describe experiences of discrimination, making Łukaszewski's characterization of old age emphatically and unequivocally negative.

The interviewer's response is to suggest not consenting to practices of discrimination, to which the professor says that he himself does not, but that as a group, "old people are socially and economically poor" and therefore afraid.<sup>16</sup> Łukaszewski attributes this fear to Poles' lack of trust in others, reflected in the lack of trust that dominates the whole of Polish social life. Because older people are afraid, he says, they want to remain anonymous, which is why so many older people are active within the church and in Universities of the Third Age. Neither the church nor Universities of the Third Age expect "acts of personalization" from its participants, Łukaszewski claims.<sup>17</sup> "Instead the opposite, [they] expect anonymity, depersonalization. That's an excellent niche for old frightened people."<sup>18</sup> He describes Universities of the Third Age as places that aim to fill up the endless empty hours of "unfortunate old folks," having nothing to do with actual universities or learning.<sup>19</sup> He instead suggests that the government fund the education of a few old people at undergraduate universities, where they could study alongside their younger peers, rather than spending their time at so-called universities making pots or tapestries, just so they can feel needed.

The professor emphasizes older people's desire to feel needed in his comments regarding relationships with adult children. The interviewer describes older people whom she knows who support their children and grandchildren financially "so that my kids will have it better," but are really afraid that if they stop caring for their offspring, they will cease being necessary.<sup>20</sup> The professor responds that such care provides older people with proof of their importance, but that they provide such care out of a sense of duty, rather than real desire.<sup>21</sup> "It's the language of necessity: I have to be at home because Stefan is coming with the kids and I have to make crepes. They don't say that it's fun or a blessing. The word 'I have to' is the key, it's the testimony to continuous duty, the fulfillment of which is the reason for their usefulness."<sup>22</sup> In other words, Łukaszewski claims that older Poles who care for their kin are doing so to avoid the discrimination and dehumanization that accompanies old age. However, he sees these ties of obligation, evident in the language of necessity, as excluding a genuine desire to care. Given that it is primarily older women who provide care within the family, and that one can simultaneously be obligated

to and desire to care, I read Łukaszewski's statements as possibly denigrating the genuine efforts of older women to help their kin.

Łukaszewski thus gives an authoritative voice, as both a professor and a man, to experiences of discrimination in old age. Not easily dismissed or ignored, as a woman or less-educated person might be, by including his perspective early in the series the newspaper reinforces the strength of such negative understandings of old age. Intentionally provocative, Łukaszewski's words prompted several angry letters of response from those who supported Universities of the Third Age, and people at the University of the Third Age in Wrocław were so outraged that they held a special meeting to discuss the professor's incendiary remarks.

#### THE MORAL PRACTICE OF AKTYWNOŚĆ AT UNIVERSITIES OF THE THIRD AGE

The interview with Łukaszewski in the *Gazeta Wyborcza* series struck a nerve with University of the Third Age *sluchacze* (attendees) in Wrocław.<sup>23</sup> His denunciation of Universities of the Third Age as old-age ghettos deeply upset many *sluchacze*, who felt that they had been misunderstood and misrepresented. On a Thursday afternoon in December 2008, master's-level students studying for their degree in *andragogika* (adult education) moderated a two-hour discussion with *sluchacze* in the main meeting room of the University of the Third Age, at the Institute of Pedagogy at the University of Wrocław. Around 30 people attended, mostly *sluchacze* but also a few students in *andragogika*. I attended the meeting as part of my fieldwork at the University of the Third Age. Throughout the discussion, *sluchacze* and students alike extolled the virtues of Universities of the Third Age for the opportunities it provides to create a good old age.

Both older and younger students spoke passionately about their participation in the University of the Third Age, and said that Łukaszewski did not really understand what went on there, for if he did, he could never have categorized it thus. One *sluchaczka*, who is involved in the administrative work of the University of the Third Age, criticized Łukaszewski for not having a better understanding of what happens at Universities of the Third Age. In her view, *sluchacze* are "crossing certain barriers" that are not expected of older people: the very act of learning itself, walking up the stairs at the university (she said she had only recently come to see this as a barrier), and being artistic.<sup>24</sup>

Through these activities, *sluchacze* are defying expectations of their role as older people in society. Despite this *sluchaczka's* critique of Łukaszewski, he

redeemed himself in her eyes by discussing the importance of spending time with younger people. She has greatly enjoyed her time in classes and workshops with younger people; these gatherings leave her smiling. Moreover, she thinks that *sluchacze* can show younger students how to age. She attributes the rudeness towards older people in public as a result of a lack of contact between older and younger people. Through breaking these boundaries of what is expected of them, *sluchacze* can encourage younger people to think that “this age isn’t so terrible,” and that “one would like to experience this old age and would like to be old.”<sup>25</sup> An older man also saw part of his role in old age as teaching younger people how to grow old, which he did by encouraging the younger people in the room to read Deepak Chopra’s (1993) *Aging Body, Timeless Mind*, and to cultivate a “strategia” (“strategy”) for growing old, in which one should have “aktywność maksymalna” (“maximum activity”) in all spheres of life: intellectual, physical, psychological, and moral.<sup>26</sup> Through such strategies, people can learn to approach old age “with the hope of a life that could be even better and more interesting.”<sup>27</sup> His comments were met with a loud round of applause.

Throughout this discussion, older and younger people alike reiterated the moral aspect of Universities of the Third Age. One student spoke of how inspiring it was for her to see older people participating in such a diverse range of activities; from this she has learned that how one grows old is one’s choice. “I am really glad that you are showing us, especially young people, that everything depends on us. And that it’s really our decision what this phase of our life will be like.”<sup>28</sup> Another student critiqued Łukaszewski for his positive portrayal of the West because that student had spent time as a child in the U.S., where his friends did not even know their grandparent’s first names. He took this as a sign of the weakness of kin ties in the West, and contrasted it to the strength of kin ties in Poland. Here, he said, “these ties exist between the young and old generation – this is also our capital, on which we can work for the future.”<sup>29</sup> This comment was also met with applause.

This discussion crystallized much of what I see as key to how *sluchacze* in both Wrocław and Poznań understand their participation in the University of the Third Age. Through practices of *aktywność* (activity), older people no longer have to be the stigmatized, isolated adults described in *Gazeta Wyborcza*. Rather, through the lectures and classes at the University of the Third Age, people can transform themselves into moral exemplars for the younger generation. Becoming such a moral exemplar occurs through the practice of *aktywność* across domains of life: physical, mental, spiritual, and social. This ideal of setting an example for younger people is accompanied by

the intense determination of *sluchacze* to make aging a positive experience, in ways that contrast with their lives until this time. Mostly well-educated upper-class women who had retired from jobs as teachers, accountants, or medical workers, *sluchacze* described their lives before their participation in the University of the Third Age as busy with work and family. At the University of the Third Age, these women told me that they can finally *robić coś dla siebie*, or do something for oneself.

The practice of *aktywność* is explicitly theorized and promoted by the leaders of Universities of the Third Age and other “active” aging programs. In the words of Walentyna Wnuk, a former director of the University of the Third Age in Wrocław, “we have to learn how to age well” (2009:5).<sup>30</sup> A current adviser to the mayor on seniors’ affairs, she is trained as a “cultural organizer” (“kulturalny animator”) and sees herself as skilled in helping people achieve their potential. She is active in EFOS (European Federation of Older Students at Universities), an international coalition of Universities of the Third Age. This group’s goals, as described on their English-language brochure, are to “activate elderly people, integrate them in the learning society and stimulate the intercultural dialogue as a transfer medium. In this way we will contribute to an active citizenship of the elderly people.” Wnuk aims to foster such “active citizenship” through organized trips to Brussels and Strasbourg in which UTW students meet their European Parliament representative.

According to Wnuk, *sluchacze* described these trips as transformative because they changed the minds of people who had opposed Poland’s EU membership. Older Poles need to learn to be “open,” she said, in contrast to the socialist past, when society, and therefore persons, were “closed.” She sees the University of the Third Age as helping to create a new model of aging and a new type of person—a “Eurosenior”—who better fits with the current world order. A binary Cold War logic underpins this comment, in which a closed, socialist Poland is opposed to an open, capitalist, democratic western Europe. The chance for Polish retirees to meet with their European Parliament representative or travel to Brussels is part of a teleology in which the West remains the ultimate goal.

Although Universities of the Third Age often offer a variety of classes and workshops, ranging from practices often associated with older people (e.g., embroidery, cabaret groups) to those more commonly associated with youth (e.g., learning foreign languages, volleyball), it is the latter sort of activity which carries ideological weight at the Universities of the Third Age, both for the *sluchacze* and the institutions. Currently, English language and computer classes are among the most popular courses of study. These topics fit well with the political economy

and culture of contemporary Poland, where English and computer skills are requirements for many jobs and symbolize the capitalist, globalized present. Older people who speak English (instead of the Russian that they were forced to learn as children during state socialism) and who can use computers thus have access to the symbolic capital associated with these practices. However, both English and computer skills are also useful for the many older Poles who have family living abroad in English-speaking countries. That is, many older Polish people want to learn English to communicate with non-Polish-speaking kin via computer programs such as Skype (the verb "skajpować," or "to Skype" has become common in spoken Polish). This practical use is at least as important as the political economic and cultural significance of these skills, suggesting the need to focus analytic attention on the social dimensions of the Universities of the Third Age.

One retired teacher, Jolanta, who has attended the University of the Third Age for over eight years, in many ways seems to be the ideal example of an older person who has been thus transformed through attending the University of the Third Age. Jolanta began attending the University of the Third Age after she had been retired for ten years and both her children moved away. Widowed, Jolanta became lonely and sought out the University of the Third Age as a way to overcome this loneliness. Her strategy for aging was to fill in what she felt she had missed out on during her life; for example, she learned to swim at age 70. Jolanta describes her experience there as providing her with a "druga rodzina," or "second family." This "family" gives her support, companionship, and above all, she says, advice for coping with health problems. Jolanta's "second family" now takes up her time in a way that prevents her from seeing her kin; she regrets that she can only visit her daughter in England during breaks in the University of the Third Age's school year, and that she does not often visit her husband's or parents' graves because of the time she spends at the University of the Third Age.

Jolanta is typical of many of my research participants at the University of the Third Age. These women found in the University of the Third Age a way to form new social relations to overcome the loneliness accompanying retirement, and often, widowhood (cf. Wilińska 2012). They describe retirement and aging as negative experiences that have been improved through participating in the University of the Third Age, through learning new skills and learning how to cultivate a sense of personhood in old age. Yet, although Jolanta was proud of the new skills she had learned through the University of the Third Age, it was the new social relations that seemed most important to her. In other words, Jolanta's transformation from a lonely older person into an active senior occurred not only through the kinds of skills and

international cultural groups encouraged by institutional leaders, but also, and perhaps even primarily, through the cultivations of new ties of relatedness (Carsten 2000, 2004) that supplanted her previous kin ties. This significance of social relations contrasts both with the language of individual empowerment that was evident in the discussion at the University of the Third Age about Łukaszewski's comments, and with popular discourse that links older people to national frameworks. Rather, the significance of close friendships and new social relations for Jolanta and other women like her suggests that greater anthropological attention should be paid to the social dimensions of "active aging" and empowerment.

#### THE LIMITS OF EMPOWERMENT

Jolanta's experiences highlight social dimensions through which older people in Poland can combat dominant cultural stereotypes of aging. *Słuchacze* find these institutions to be empowering; older women can regain personhood lost through retirement, widowhood, and negative stereotypes. However, these empowering experiences are not equally available to all older people. Health and especially mobility are key factors determining access to the Universities of the Third Age (see Formosa 2012:14 for a critique of Universities of the Third Age for their exclusion of those with disabilities). Poland's urban spaces are difficult, if not impossible, to navigate for those with mobility impairments (see Bujacz et al. 2012 for a study of the city of Poznań according to the needs of older people, and Phillips 2011 for an ethnographic study of mobility and disability in Ukraine), to say nothing of multi-story apartment buildings with no elevators. For people who do not have the bodily capabilities to attend the Universities of the Third Age on their own, or other socioeconomic resources to help them do so, such institutions remain essentially off-limits. Moreover, the rhetorical ideology of "active aging" is not equally available to all, as it relies heavily on 19th-century bourgeois ideals of personhood in which leisure time and the pursuit of certain hobbies become markers of high class status (see Jakubowska 2012 and Robbins 2013 for a further discussion of the legacy of the 19th-century among older people in contemporary Poland). In other words, the moral ideology of "active aging" produces and reflects different classes of persons and bodies. In order to make concrete the socioeconomic aspects of the possibilities for "active aging" in Poland, I will present a final example from the *Gazeta Wyborcza* series on aging.

It is impossible to imagine the retired professors and engineers of the *Gazeta Wyborcza* series, so vibrant, busy, and healthy, in the position of Władysława Baranowska, an older woman whose tragic old age and death is detailed in

a long article in the series. This older woman was brought to the hospital “in a state of extreme emaciation, neglected, with bedsores, with white worms in her wounds.”<sup>31</sup> The admitting doctor remarked, “Only homeless people come to us in such a state.”<sup>32</sup> The article describes a failed network of care that led to this end; despite a daughter living nearby, paid caregivers, and multiple trips to the hospital, nothing prevented Ms. Baranowska from “[coming] to such an end as if she were trash,” in the words of her neighbor.<sup>33</sup> This neighbor blamed Baranowska’s daughter for neglecting her mother, while also recognizing that their shared apartment building was not a suitable environment for an older person living alone. Baranowska’s son-in-law, meanwhile, blamed three different government institutions (the city social aid department, the hospital, and long-term care institutions) for failing his mother-in-law. There was no clear way for Ms. Baranowska to receive adequate care.

This damning article presents a jumbled and confusing maze of institutions and individuals that are supposed to provide care, in which meager personal, familial, institutional, and systemic resources do not add up to a dignified life or death for Władysława Baranowska.<sup>34</sup> As a reader, it is hard to know where responsibility should lie; one sees genuine efforts and missteps made by each actor. Each health-care institution ultimately blames Baranowska’s daughter and family for her condition, while the family blames the institutions. The health-care system appears fragmented and poor, with no one doctor or institution assuming ultimate responsibility for the patient’s care. The diagnosis of “old age” in Ms. Baranowska’s chart suggests that at least some medical personnel consider old age itself a disease, raising the question of how earnest any medical treatment of an older person can be, since they will still have the disease of “old age.” The doctor’s comment that he only sees homeless people arrive at the hospital in such a state suggests the existence of a group of people for whom such a bodily state is expected. How can adequate care be provided when the assumption is that old age is a disease, or that homeless people will have worms crawling in their wounds? What kind of old age is possible for such people?

Indeed, throughout the articles and letters that comprise the *Gazeta Wyborcza* series, persons of different social classes appear, yet class status is rarely explicitly discussed in the moralizing discussions on successful and active aging. That is, those who brag about their own successes or encourage such successes in others do not address the financial or social conditions that play a role in their own successes, and in the “failures” of others. Those who share financial and social hardships rarely voice concerns about active aging. While these disjunctions are less overtly dramatic than the shocking details of Ms. Baranowska’s

life and death, they all skirt the same issues: namely, the ideals of a successful, active, old age are incompatible with the everyday lives of many older Poles, who, for reasons having to do with finances, social relations, and bodies cannot live according to the ideals of active aging. These older people can be ignored as objects of care, as indicated by the surgeon’s comment about the homeless, fall through the cracks of a broken system of relations, as in the case of Władysława Baranowska, or be discriminated against by their peers, families, and society, as in the examples of the many older people who wrote letters expressing sadness and loneliness. All become less fully human in their deviations from the ideals of active aging. Is there any role for Universities of the Third Age in such cases? Might the transformative role of social relations for women such as Jolanta have some relevance for women such as Ms. Baranowska? Seeking commonalities at the level of everyday practices of relatedness (Carsten 2000, 2004) across such diverse class and ideological contexts suggests that there might be even more possibilities for combatting negative stereotypes of old age in Poland. Such attention to relatedness could shift the focus of debate from individuals to collectives, as some scholars have suggested (e.g., Katz and Laliberte-Rudman 2004). That is, sidestepping conversations about “Euroseniors” and their implicit class hierarchies could provide ways for older Poles to forge new forms of personhood that are not so closely aligned with entrenched socioeconomic and national modes of belonging.

In this article, I have tried to frame Polish Universities of the Third Age in the context of national historical politics and public conversations about old age. From this macro-perspective, women who attend Universities of the Third Age can be understood as challenging dominant stereotypes of old age in general, and of old women in particular, through their practices of *aktywność*. Institutional focus on Poland’s membership in the EU can be understood as an attempt to overcome negative associations of older people with the socialist past, while learning new hobbies and skills can be understood as an attempt to overcome negative stereotypes of old age as a time of decay. However, the example of Ms. Baranowska suggests that the bourgeois ideals implicit in the activities and rhetoric of Universities of the Third Age, as well as the bodily health required to attend, can exclude many older people from access to a culturally-sanctioned good old age. Yet the new social relations that many *stuchacze* form at Universities of the Third Age suggest that ties of relatedness may be as helpful in combatting negative stereotypes of old age as are the practices or ideals of the Universities of the Third Age themselves. A renewed focus on the sociality of old age, then, may help to show links across socioeconomic divisions and help to expand the

possibilities for personhood among the most marginal in society.

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### NOTES

1. (accessed 6 June 2013). See the recent study "Zoom [http://zoomnautw.pl/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/Informacja-prasowa\\_ZOOM\\_na\\_UTW.pdf](http://zoomnautw.pl/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/Informacja-prasowa_ZOOM_na_UTW.pdf)na UTW" for a comprehensive overview of the activities of the Universities of the Third Age in Poland.
2. International Association of Universities of the Third Age, <http://www.aiu3a.com/origins.html> (accessed 1 April 2013).
3. This information on gendered ideas of the life course comes from the author's long-term ethnographic fieldwork in Poland, and is also supported by the research conducted as part of the project "Zoom na UTW" (Towarzystwo Inicjatyw Twórczych" 2012:46). Other possible explanations for the predominance of women at Polish Universities of the Third Age are the better health of older women as compared to older men, the later retirement of men, the predominance of retired teachers at Universities of the Third Age and the feminization of the teaching profession in Poland (Towarzystwo Inicjatyw Twórczych" 2012:46-50), and cultural understandings of men's importance solely in the domain of paid labor and of old men as weak (Wilińska 2012:299-300). Additionally, it should be noted that the feminization of Universities of the Third Age is not limited to Poland (see Williamson 2000 for a discussion of women's participation in an Australian University of the Third Age, and Wilińska 2012 for a comparison of this case with Poland).
4. The medical institutions included a small Catholic-run rehabilitation center, a larger state-run home for the chronically physically disabled, and a day center for people with Alzheimer's disease.
5. See RMF24 2005 for a Polish-language summary of exit polling.
6. Other media outlets include Telewizja Trwam (I Persist Television) and Nasz Dziennik (Our Daily).
7. „GŁOSUJ, albo one zrobią to dla Ciebie!” “One” is the feminine third-person plural form, indicating that this is specifically directed towards women.
8. See [http://www.nytimes.com/2007/10/21/world/europe/21poland.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2007/10/21/world/europe/21poland.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0) for an English-language discussion of this generational conflict and to see a video clip of the ad. The rock band Big Cyc also had a song entitled “Moherowe berety”; see [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YjI\\_uNiGwDQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YjI_uNiGwDQ) (accessed 13 May 2013) for a video of the song, which features many images of “moherowe berety” and the conservative politicians that they are thought to support.
9. See Porter-Szücs 2011:201-202 for a discussion of these events in terms of the relationship between PiS and the Church. See the 16 December 2011 edition of “This American Life” (<http://www.thisamericanlife.org/radio-archives/episode/453/transcript>, accessed 25 August 2012) for an English-language popular media description of the controversies after the plane crash in April 2010. See Zubrzycki 2006 for an analysis of a past controversy at Auschwitz about the placement of crosses
10. <http://www.zkdp.pl/>, accessed 14 October 2011. The tabloid Fakt has been outselling Gazeta Wyborcza since at least January 2010.
11. June 2011, Marzena Kasperska, personal communication.
12. “Czy Polska to jest kraj dla starych ludzi? Napisz o swojej starości”
13. “Czy jeszcze dorabiam?” “Co chce pani/pan jeszcze w życiu zrobić?” (Klimowicz and Sokólska 2008). See also Janelle Taylor's 2008 article in which she discusses the common use of “still” to describe the abilities of people with Alzheimer's disease. The usage of “still” in Gazeta Wyborcza to describe older people without dementia is an example of the fuzzy boundaries between “normal” and “pathological” aging.
14. See Katz and Laliberte-Rudman 2004 for a discussion of exemplars of old age and retirement in the Canadian press.
15. “Poza tym polska kultura jest monopolistyczna, to znaczy, że mamy jeden język, jedno wyznanie, jeden system wartości. Takie kultury są bardzo dogmatyczne i skłonne do dyskryminacji. Nawet na wsi polskiej nie ma szacunku dla starych. W przeszłości to oni byli głównym źródłem wiedzy, ale teraz rolę mądrych starsów przejął telewizor. Starzy utracili podstawową funkcję nosicieli kultury. Stali się drugorzędnymi obywatelami. Stali się Untermenschen. Mam wrażenie, że zdaniem wielu młodych ludzi człowiek stary należy do zupełnie innego gatunku. Ani homo, ani sapiens” (Wodecka 2008).
16. “są to ludzie biedni ekonomicznie i społecznie”
17. “aktów personalizacji”
18. “Wręcz przeciwnie, oczekuje anonimowości, depersonalizacji. To jest doskonała nisza dla starych przestraszonych ludzi.”
19. “nieszczęśni starcy”
20. “by dzieci miały lepiej”
21. “Ta troska to dokumentowanie swojej ważności.”
22. “To jest język konieczności: ja muszę być w domu, bo przyjdzie Stefan z dziećmi i ja muszę zrobić naleśniki. Nie mówią, że to frajda, że szczęście. Słowo ‘muszę’ jest kluczem, jest świadectwem nieustannej powinności, których spełnianie jest dowodem użyteczności.”
23. Following local usage, I use *słuchacze* throughout this article to refer to participants of the University of the Third Age. Its English translation would be “auditors,” which shares the connotation of listening (the Polish term could also be translated as “listeners”) but the Polish term does not share the English meaning of inspection.
24. “przekraczamy pewne bariery.”
25. “ten wiek nie jest taki straszny, i chciałoby się przeżywać ta starość, i chciałoby się być starą.”
26. The Polish edition of *Aging Body, Timeless Mind* was published in 1995 as *Życie bez starości*, which, back-translated into English, would be *A Life Without Old Age*.
27. “...z taką nadzieją na może jeszcze ciekawsze lepsze życie.”
28. “Bardzo cieszę się, że państwo pokazują nam, szczególnie osobom młodym, że wszystko zależy od nas. I tak na prawdę jest naszą decyzją jaki będzie ten etap w naszym życiu.”
29. “Istnieją te więzi, między młodym i starym pokoleniem – to też jest jakiś nasz kapitał, na którym możemy pracować na przyszłość.”
30. “dobrego starzenia musimy się uczyć,” Wnuk, Walentyna. 2009. „Późna dorosłość to czas pomyślny.” *Kurier UTW: nieregularnik Uniwersytetu Trzeciego Wieku*. Wrocław: Uniwersytet Trzeciego Wieku. 16:5.
31. “Przywieziona w stanie skrajnego wyniszczenia, zaniedbana, z odleżynami, w ranach białe robaki” (Kasperska 2008).
32. “W takim stanie trafiali do nas tylko ludzie bezdomni.”
33. “Koniec miała, jakby śmieciem była.”
34. See Cohen 1998:81-82 on the trope of abandonment of older people.

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# Activist Pensioners, a Contradiction in Terms? Argentina's Jubilados

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## Abstract

Why does it seem unlikely that retirees should be political activists? What does that reaction say about our understandings of retirement and of activism? This article examines the experience of a group of older activists who, among other things, rally weekly in front of the National Congress in Buenos Aires, Argentina, and have done so for more than two decades. Regardless of advanced age and infirmity, these men and women, some in their eighties and nineties, refuse to be defined as passive by their roles as retirees and grandparents. After examining some of the tensions embodied in the idea of activist pensioners, this article proceeds to look at the pensioners' own understandings of where their activism comes from and what sustains it. Situating the pensioners' struggle in broader historical processes in Argentina illuminates their motives and strategies. The article thus also demonstrates that a historical approach provides a productive strategy for analysing elder social movements.

*Key words:* activism, ageism, Argentina, pensioners, social movements

## INTRODUCTION

I found just the place for me...even though one doesn't accomplish great things. But we know what we want. We chose this...We aren't going to give in to power, staying home. It's good for us to be out in the street, doing something, awakening the recognition of folks. It's tied to the solidarity of others with you... It comes from my father and sharing a plate of food, and the neighbours...You are shouting for all that you've lived, all that. It's not disconnected from that. Others say that we don't accomplish anything.... It's about feeling good doing something. I'm proud to be President of a senior center where today, when it was 3 degrees below zero [Celsius], there were seven *compañeros* collecting signatures... And it's more than the cold numbers; that's 450 people [who signed] expressing solidarity. It's a commitment to solidarity, despite this trashy society we live in. Solidarity is the only thing that is going to save us... This morning we were cold, we were standing there... but it's

comforting. We aren't too humble to recognize that we have done excellent work. It's still possible to rebuild solidarity. That's what we're hoping. We know we are fighting for human dignity.

– *Hector Anzorena, retired waiter, activist pensioner*

Hector Anzorena spoke these words in an interview in Buenos Aires in 2002 by way of explanation. He was trying to convey how and why he came to be so engaged in the work of the activist pensioners (called the *jubilados*) who are the focus of this article. The surprising thing is that he was not talking about a group of twenty-somethings standing on the street corner collecting signatures, but of older people, in their sixties, seventies and eighties. Hector, for example, was born in 1930, so he would have been 72 as he stood in the cold cajoling passers-by to acts of solidarity.

Old age is supposed to be a life stage in which the passions of youth have been tempered by time and experience. Yet the women and men who are the subjects of this article continue to protest in the street, rallying weekly in front of the Argentine Congress in downtown Buenos Aires. This article considers the sense of the unexpected that the phrase “activist pensioners” evokes. Why does it have the air of the oxymoron? What does this tension between “activist” and “pensioner” say about the social position of the aged? Notwithstanding the particularities of the Argentine case, examining the tensions entailed in the idea of activist pensioners illuminates not only the situation of activists but also the place of pensioners and older people more generally in similar societies. The article goes on to consider the pensioners’ own explanations of their activism and its sources. Throughout I take a historical approach, reading the personal experiences of particular activists in the context of larger political historical processes.

Judging by the literature, one might imagine that old age and activism are indeed contradictory states. General searches under these and related key terms turn up very little.<sup>1</sup> Among the notable exceptions are Roger Sanjek’s *Gray Panthers* (2009) which describes the history of the American activist organization by that name. The Gray Panthers and Sanjek’s treatment of them provide an interesting point of comparison for the activists I discuss here. They are similarly contentious. They do not see theirs as a service organization, but rather enter political debate from a generational perspective, dealing with senior’s issues – such as nursing homes, mandatory retirement, and health care – but by no means limiting themselves to them.<sup>2</sup> Another well-known North American group is the Raging Grannies. The Grannies (organized into local gaggles) deploy their age and their gender in critical political street theatre, mainly as peace activists, but they do not take the issues of the elderly as their focus (Sawchuk 2013).

The scanty literature raises the question of whether older people are in fact rarely engaged in activism or, alternatively, whether their activism is underappreciated.

Both phenomena are probably at play. In most times and places activists are surely in the minority. Perhaps this is reason enough that studies of activist elders seem to be few and far between. Yet the jubilados felt themselves to be not just unusual amongst their peers, but also overlooked. They struggled with the problem of recognition (see Fraser 2000). Ideas about how older people should (and do) behave shape both what people are likely to do and how their behaviour is understood and reported. A thoughtful reflection by Meredith Minkler and Martha Holstein (2008) notes the political impact of the type of engagement deemed suitable for older people. Minkler and Holstein discuss dominant paradigms about the place of older people in the US, Canada and the UK, decrying the shift from “civil rights” to “civic engagement.” Interestingly, they describe themselves as having entered the field of gerontology partly because they were drawn by people like Gray Panthers founder Maggie Kuhn.

As we see it... the vision of civic engagement that proponents put forward is essentially a de-politicized strategy to encourage, facilitate, and normalize community participation in old age. It does not call for analysis, critique, or change in the social and political assumptions and consequent political agendas that now prevail in much of the industrialized west, which have the potential to harm the less advantaged members of this and subsequent cohorts. What then is the resemblance to the heady – and highly politicized – early days of the Gray Panthers, let alone the Townsend Movement, Civil Rights and the Women’s Movement



Photo Credit: Mary Gaudet

to which it is sometimes compared? (Minkler and Hosltstein 2008:197)

In other words, the narrowly conceived civic engagement model fits neatly with the agendas of nation-states seeking to reduce their social welfare roles, placing responsibility on individuals to pick up the slack. The emphasis is on activity, but not activism in its overtly political sense. The political projects of groups like the Gray Panthers and the Jubilados are not what those touting “active aging” have in mind.

### THE RESEARCH

The research discussed here was conducted in Buenos Aires primarily between September 2001 and June 2002, with supplementary bouts of fieldwork in 2003 and 2006, (and occasional subsequent conversations). The timing is significant. The main fieldwork began at the close of a decade of increasing economic hardship in Argentina. The economic crash of 2001 led to a dramatic upsurge in popular mobilization, especially in Buenos Aires, where pensioners joined crowds of people banging on pots in protest. This context often strongly shaped discussions, interactions and how the pensioners understood their struggle.

Conceived as an oral history project, the research centered on life history interviews and a history workshop conducted in one the movement’s allied senior centers. It also involved participation in the weekly pensioner’s protest marches, attendance at talks, and study of the various official statements made by the pensioners’ organization—press releases, flyers, occasional newspapers, and (later) blogs. The life history interviews were conducted with thirty-one people who participated actively in the jubilados’ movement or its allied center.<sup>3</sup> These interviews were usually conducted in one or two sessions. They ranged from twenty minutes on a street corner, to seven hours over three meetings. Interviews took place in locations preferred by the pensioners, often cafes, but also in people’s apartments, the offices of the retirees’ organization with which I worked, or a senior’s center.

My central concern in these interviews was the question of where activism comes from. Yet this question was framed as broadly as possible and placed in the context of life history. For example, interviews usually began with the question, “when and where were you born?” Many people answered this question by describing their parents, often noting where their parents came from if they were first generation Argentines (as many were).



Photo Credit: Mary Gaudet

Descriptions of childhood often followed. I was interested in how different jubilados framed their lives, noting the ways in which these accounts were structured. I read these differences as saying something about people’s public personas, or perhaps the personas they wanted to present to me in particular. Women were more likely than men, for example, to discuss their family obligations, and to structure their accounts around domestic events like marriage and the birth of children. By contrast, for some men, I had to pointedly ask if they had ever been married before I learned anything about their domestic lives. Some told their life stories through an account of the different labour unions they had belonged to. Luciano,<sup>4</sup> for one, portrayed himself as a scrapper by focusing on the different labour conflicts of which he had been a part, with particular emphasis on moments when physical violence was involved, either within unions or between workers and police or military.

Whereas the life histories were narrated to and for the interviewer, the history workshop saw jubilados speaking to each other; different kinds of conversations resulted. When I began this research, I asked people at the main group organizing the seniors, the Coordinating Committee of Argentine Retirees and Pensioners (the Mesa Coordinadora de Jubilados y Pensionados de la República Argentina, known as the Mesa), if they knew of a senior's center which might host a history workshop. Someone pointed me in Hector Anzorena's direction. He invited me to meet people at the Abasto-Once Senior's Center (Centro de Jubilados y Pensionados Abasto-Once, known simply as Abasto-Once, after the neighbourhoods near which it is located) where he was then President.<sup>5</sup> As the quote from Hector at the beginning of this article attests, members of this center tried to engage people in political discussion about the pensioners' plight. Over three months, a small group of between three and seven jubilados met late Friday afternoons to drink tea and mate cocido (an Argentine beverage, prepared like tea), nibble on cookies, and discuss the past, present and future. Some workshop meetings were discussion based; some focused on a life stage such as childhood, others considered the broad historical sweep of the the history through which the jubilados had lived, still others addressed the history of the jubilados' movement. The workshop attempted to make a video about the jubilados' struggle. Although the video never happened for financial and logistical reasons, the planning process focused the group's discussion on questions of how the political struggle should be portrayed and to what ends.

Before proceeding to describe the jubilados, a note on terminology is in order. I call the elder activists who are the focus of this work "jubilados" using the Spanish term for retiree. This is the term most of the people I spoke to used to describe themselves. Coming from *júbilo* meaning joy, the word has a positive connotation noted with a heavy dose of irony by many jubilados. The Mesa, as noted above, is formally called the Mesa Coordinadora de Jubilados y Pensionados de la República Argentina, to cover both the class of people that we think of as "pensioners" in English (that is people who have retirement benefits resulting from their work) and those receiving other kinds of state payments. For example, war veterans and the disabled are two groups of Argentines receiving pensions. Several individuals I met in the course of this research pointed out that they were not properly jubilados, because they had not retired from a job that paid pension benefits. Nonetheless, the common term for the group was the Jubilados which was also the title of their semi-regular newspaper. Thus I use this term in Spanish to refer to the activist pensioners

in this article using upper case to refer to the group and lower case to refer to members. Note also that "jubilada" is the feminine form.

#### THE JUBILADOS AND THEIR HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The elders who are our focus are by no means typical pensioners. For more than 1100 consecutive Wednesdays they have protested at 3 p.m. in front of the Argentine National Congress in downtown Buenos Aires. These weekly rallies began in 1990, moving to their current location in 1992 and continuing to the time of writing. At the rallies, a series of speakers, mostly from the Mesa but including visitors, address the crowd from the back of a small truck. They speak to the issues of central concern to the elderly, especially pensions and health care, but also take up many other questions about which they have strong views, including both national and international political debates. Over the last decade the rallies have tended to be relatively small, involving as few as forty jubilados and supporters. At their peak in the 1990s, however, they sometimes included thousands. Photographs from that period show aged protesters confronting police in riot gear.

Although a social movements approach to the jubilados might focus on their common identity and their common plight in the present and leave it at that, it is instructive to approach the group historically. As the jubilados themselves often argue (and as discussed below), their struggle needs to be understood as a consequence of historical processes. It is very much shaped by the history of Argentina in the 20th century. In a chapter on how we should think about individuals, Philip Abrams (1982) argues that the concept of generation for historical sociology differs from that of common sense. Rather than depending on biological reproduction, generation has to do with the historical conditions, especially social-structural ones, that characterize everyday life.<sup>6</sup> Thus, just as in certain periods with little social change a generation could last one hundred years or more, in others, where social change is more rapid, generations describe much shorter intervals. The jubilados constitute a generation in this sense, marked by crucial socio-historical processes and arrangements in Argentina. Most of those I spoke with were working-class people born before 1930, so their historical experience positions them as observers of the rather dizzying Argentine political scene stretching from childhoods before the advent of Peronism, through the Peronist decade, dictatorship, democracy, industrialization and deindustrialization, as well as boom and bust several times over. As one jubilada in the history workshop put it, "It's a very rich and contradictory history." Jubilados

note that these political and economic changes have been accompanied by social and cultural ones.

The generation under discussion is the first to have entered the workforce with a reasonable expectation of receiving a pension. Before Juan Domingo Perón came to power in 1946 a small number of workers received pensions, but it was Peronism, harnessing Argentina's post-war economic boom, that built its modern welfare state.<sup>7</sup> Perón's government was also the architect of the peculiar Argentine healthcare system, described further below. Perón was removed from office in a 1955 coup. Much of the rest of the century, one might argue, saw leaders – both military and elected – trying to undo the kind of state which Perón had made. This unmaking process was most violent in the last dictatorship (1976-1982), but it was also very much a project of the government of Carlos Menem (1989-1999) (Grugel and Riggirozzi 2007). For example, President Menem earned special recognition from the World Bank and International Monetary Fund for the effectiveness of structural adjustment policies he was implementing (also widely described as neoliberal policies). Menem oversaw the widespread privatization of state enterprises and institutions, cut back state spending, and further opened the country to foreign investment. It was Menem who tried to privatize all state pensions. Meeting with considerable resistance, this plan was altered to an optional one designed to encourage people to move out of the state pension system.

The dire situation of the pensioners became a public issue in the early 1990s, illustrating the human cost of the economic model. The press reported a wave of suicides, apparently a consequence of the despair seniors felt at the prospect of trying to survive on meagre pensions which had fallen far behind inflation. At that time in the early 1990s, pensions covered about 12% of the cost of living (Lloyd-Sherlock 1997:65). Pensioners could not feed themselves, much less pay for rent or medication. If you mention the jubilados to people old enough to remember the early 1990s, the image that comes to mind is an incident which dramatized the Jubilados' struggle. Ailing pensioner Norma Pla confronted the architect of the neoliberal economic model, Minister of the Economy Domingo Cavallo. The cameras were rolling when she brought Cavallo to tears by berating him about the plight of the country's seniors (Zommer 1996).<sup>8</sup>

In addition to the level and timeliness of pension payments, healthcare is the jubilados' other key issue. In order to understand the particular institutional importance of healthcare to the pensioners, the peculiar structure of the Argentine healthcare system – a material legacy of Peronism – warrants some explanation. One of the ways

Perón expanded working class rights, on one hand, and consolidated working class support and control on the other, was through the obras sociales [literally “social works”, actually benefits and services]. A broad range of social services and benefits, including health care, were distributed through the massive labour unions via obras sociales. Peronist Argentina used unions to organize Argentine society by including virtually all workers in unions organized by profession (for example, as a waiter Hector was unionized) (Rock 1987: 263). The system, though, was designed to incorporate people via their work, including dependent children, but leaving retirees uncovered. PAMI<sup>9</sup> was created to fill the gap, providing health care and other benefits to pensioners and other seniors. PAMI covers millions of Argentines, primarily jubilados, and is the largest health plan in Latin America. Like the pension funds, PAMI's enormous budget which the national government administers presents an attractive way to adjust public accounts in economic hard times.

PAMI then, although ostensibly available to all pensioners, has not always provided the health care it promises. Particularly during the 1990s and the early 2000s, there were periods when PAMI was in arrears in its payments to doctors, hospitals or pharmacies. As a consequence, health services to seniors were often dramatically reduced or curtailed altogether, sometime for months at a time. Likewise, medicines were sometimes available free of charge, while at other times unavailable. A third problem which seniors experience with PAMI is the elaborate bureaucratic complexity which, to an outsider, almost appears designed to discourage potential users. In order to renew a prescription, for example, a senior often had to go to her general practitioner, to the PAMI offices and then to the pharmacy, sometimes waiting for hours at one or more of these locations. It was quite common for people to go to hospital clinics at six in the morning in order to be in the queue when staff arrived at 8:30 in order to get an appointment to see a doctor later in the day. One then had to line up again to actually see the doctor. People sometimes joked that you needed to be retired to have the time necessary to receive PAMI health services. The overall experience was of a health care system that was uneven, unreliable and demanding.

Considerable public support led to some material progress for pensioners by 2001, when I began to work with them. However, this was a moment in which the Argentine economy was moving towards its spectacular crash. The events of December 2001 included the largest national default in history (up to that time). This, in turn, led to an upsurge in popular mobilization. Pensioners joined large protests of people banging pots, and attacking bank offices

and automatic tellers. There were also widely publicized looting in December, and massive mobilizations of the unemployed which often blocked major highways (Vilas 2006). Five interim presidents and two years later, Nestor Kirchner, a Peronist, was elected in 2003. He and Cristina Fernández de Kirchner who succeeded him (she was his political partner and wife) reoriented social and economic policy. Since the change in economic models, the state has considerably expanded its welfare functions, extending pensions to large segments of the population. ANSES, the newly nationalized pension agency, extended pension coverage to an additional 2.3 million Argentines bringing the total number of pensioners to 5.6 million in 2010, expanding coverage from 57% of seniors in 2003 to 88% by 2010 (Cufre 2010; Bossio & Boudo 2010). The government has also indexed pensions to inflation. This is another boon to jubilados who have often found gains won through struggle evaporate again as the peso lost value. Anecdotal evidence suggests that health care has also improved, although this is harder to measure.

#### THE JUBILADOS TODAY

Although the jubilados say they are pleased with these gains, they also eschew *asistencialismo*, (welfare-type social assistance) which they believe undermines their rights as former workers. Instead, the Mesa has insisted that the original terms and conditions of their pension plans be honoured. The organization continues to focus on increasing the pay level of pensions, and specifically on a longstanding demand to set pension scales at 82% of current salaries of the same job and rank, as specified by law. The jubilados contend that they have historically and unfairly been “a variable in structural adjustment” equations [*una variable del ajuste*] (de la Sota 2008) since both their pension plan and their state-administered health care plan are large funds that the state can dip into for other purposes (and scholars agree, see Dantz 2012).

A 2008 letter to the editor of *La Nación*, the most elite of the national newspapers, captures the sense of grievance:

After all this time I have realized that the pensioners' problems are only of interest to pensioners, and often not even to them, because they are already defeated, full of suffering; it seems as if they just wait for the only thing that is certain in this life: moving on to eternity. Today, as always, they are mistreated, even by their own families. So why should we imagine that journalists would pay attention to us? That the government should help us?

We have always been the variable in [structural] adjustment and we never realized that we were pensioners; we always wanted to avoid talking about it. Why talk about my pension if I'm still young? And the years pass and those who make it have to suffer the

consequences of being “old”. Who will pay attention to us? If we are not productive [working], we are only an expense in their budget line.

To understand all this you only have to look at our daily lives. Who gives a seat to an older person (now very few)? Have you seen how they are treated in the lines at the bank? Have you seen how they are treated in hospitals? The only moment in which we are more or less important is at election time, where the politicians tear their clothing to fight for our rights.

It is very difficult for a country to have a future if it doesn't respect its elders. Is that why we are in the state we're in? God willing, today's young people at some point will really think about the future and not forget that then they too will be older people. [de la Sota 2008]

This writer calls out not just the government and the press, but also Argentines in general. For him, the policy problems are an effect of the larger invisibility of the aged. Like this letter writer, the Jubilados see ageism as one of the underlying causes of their economic plight.

The Jubilados are socially positioned so as to make their activism appear unlikely in at least three ways. First, they are not workers. Second, and related to the first, they are thought to be passive. Third, ageism means they are thought to be different from, even less than, those who are not old. The first of these, that pensioners are not workers, is especially important in the Argentine context. As the explanation of *obras sociales* above suggests, one effect of Peronism was to make work a powerful organizing principle for the society as a whole (Karush & Chamosa 2010). This is partly because Peronism mobilized labor, making labor unions key players on the political scene. In addition, the *obras sociales* further enlarged the role of unions in the everyday lives of working-class people. In Argentina, retirees are defined as part of the “passive class” (*la clase pasiva*), and are explicitly contrasted to those currently working who are described as “*en actividad*.” In other words, work is closely tied to activity.

In a complex and nuanced analysis of the changing connotations of “dependency” as a key word in political culture in United States, Nancy Fraser and Linda Gordon (1994) show how the idea of dependency shifts to become more negative, and to be increasingly read in the “moral/psychological register” (1994:332) as an individual failing. They connect this process to the stigmatization of welfare recipients, and especially the emblematic recipient of social assistance, the welfare mom. Likewise in Argentina, receiving social assistance marks one as needy and dependant, which is understood to be negative.<sup>10</sup> Within this larger constellation of ideas, children and old people are quite often seen as “the deserving poor” (Will 1993);



that is, as legitimately needy. That legitimacy is tied to an understanding that children and the elderly should be protected and cannot be expected to fend for themselves. Fraser and Gordon note that the problem with this sort of reasoning is not so much that some groups are seen as dependent, but rather, that independence is assumed to be an unmitigated good, a virtue. Seeing senior citizens as the deserving poor often goes hand in hand with seeing them as less capable, as recipients rather than agents.

It is this view of senior poverty that Norma Pla's exchange with Minister Cavallo (described above) evoked. It is a view of neediness that presumes passivity.<sup>11</sup> Given that Norma Pla was something of a folk hero, I was a bit surprised by the degree to which leaders of the Jubilados movement were uncomfortable in talking about Norma Pla and hesitant to celebrate her. On reflection, it seems their reaction was partly a response to the way her message played up the pathos of pensioner's situations, pulling on the heart strings, rather than calling for the recognition of rights and entitlements.

It is worth noting that children and the aged have been the focus of the dramatic poverty reduction policies advanced by the Kirchners in Argentina since the crash. The state's strategy has effectively reduced extreme poverty in the country. Yet the jubilados are not satisfied. The increased spending has focused on incorporating many more people and raising minimum pension payments in the context of inflation. This strategy has the effect of converting the pension system into a form of social assistance. When jubilados criticize *asistencialismo*, they are making precisely this distinction. The activist jubilados see their pensions as deferred wages. They do not seek hand-outs; they want their due as workers.<sup>12</sup> Ageism aligns with these notions of neediness and passivity. Older people are supposed to lack the energy and imagination for activism.<sup>13</sup> They are also thought to be rigid and isolated, except perhaps for family.

### ORGANIZING ARGENTINE PENSIONERS

As the jubilados I worked with often noted, only a tiny proportion of pensioners participated in their movement, raising questions about the degree to which older Argentines are organized and in what forms<sup>14</sup>. A helpful study (Fassio & Golpe 1999) surveyed formal seniors' organizations in Buenos Aires in 1998. The study underlines the diverse ways in which older people were in fact creating spaces of solidarity and social interaction, notwithstanding "the dense proliferation of contemporary ageism" (1999:73) and alienation which the authors observed in Argentine society. For Fassio and Golpe, the

variety of elders' organizations offer up spaces, "with identity, with history and the possibility of social relations" (1999:73). Furthermore such spaces "not only optimize the objective living conditions of the aged, but invigorate their self-organizing capacity in the fight for rights for one of the most vulnerable social groups" (1999:73-4).

Of particular interest is their analysis of the type of organizations in which older people are involved (see table 1).

<i>TYPE OF GROUP</i>	<i>NUMBER</i>	<i>%</i>
Recreational	723	84.6
Religious	39	4.6
Political	36	4.2
Work related	32	3.8
Representative Associations	8	0.9
Programs	7	0.8
Ethnic groups	4	0.5
Rights groups	3	0.4
Mutual Benefit Society	1	0.1
Unclear	1	0.1
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>854</b>	<b>100.0</b>

**Table 1:** Distribution of Older People's Organizations in the city of Buenos Aires by number and percentage (Fassio & Golpe 1999: 81).

Of 854 organizations in the city of Buenos Aires<sup>15</sup> which were registered with either the city or the national governments, the vast majority (84.6%, or 723) were recreational. Most of the others were evenly divided between religious (4.6% or 39), political (4.2% or 36) and work related (3.8% or 32)<sup>16</sup> (Fassio & Golpe 1999:81). Only eight organizations fall under the category "representative associations." This would include the Mesa as one of the groups which organize and represent local groups such as seniors' centers.

The Mesa was founded in 1968, partly around the health care problem outlined above: the system was organized around labour unions such that workers and their families lost their coverage upon retirement of the unionized worker. The Wednesday rallies organized by the Mesa have been the public face of the pensioners' movement since the 1990s. Their other activities include: lobbying,



Photo Credit: Mary Gaudet

producing flyers, organizing talks and conferences, and publishing an occasional newspaper (now replaced by a blog), participating in other demonstrations, and working in coalitions. The visibility of the pensioners and their issues has also varied widely across the years, at times making the front pages of the national press, as in the Norma Pla incident, at others disappearing from public view.

Some jubilados argue that media attention was not the main reason for their popularity; there were more concrete and specific reasons for the popular support in the days of the massive mobilizations. For example Luís Cortadi, a retired railwayman and long one of the central figures in the movement, insisted that there had been more specific and practical actions which explained why people started to show up for the weekly marches. The jubilados' organization had helped people sue pension funds, lobbied for exemption of property taxes for seniors, and convinced the city to let seniors ride the subways for free, among other things. Furthermore, when the government made a move to privatize the pensions in 1994, the Mesa mobilized 40,000 protesters and collected one million signatures in opposition.<sup>17</sup>

At present, amidst a political climate which accepts the legitimacy of pensioners' claims to a decent living, they seek a minimum equal to the national minimum wage

as well as pensions payments which reflect current wage levels for similar jobs as already discussed. They also seek control of PAMI, for which they argue pensioners pay. The pensioners' situation, therefore, goes directly to the question of the state and its responsibilities. Furthermore, as Roger Sanjek notes for the American Gray Panthers, their situation makes the state the obvious target for their activism. With respect to the United States, Sanjek argues, "as 'the key determinants of the standard of living enjoyed or endured by the aged' became 'national and economic policies,' older Americans organized to confront the state at their point of exclusion – chronological age – from the working class and its struggles" (quoting Estes in Sanjek 2009:4). Similarly, the jubilados might be seen as a counter-hegemonic group; their struggle is in many ways a direct response to the conditions of their exclusion and subordination. Likewise, their overall strategy is an effect of their situation. On one hand, their efforts are directed at making themselves seen and heard through their public demonstrations. On the other, they attempt to shape government policy and legislation. Ideally, in their view, congress-people might stop in at their demonstrations on the way to the legislature. Although this very rarely happens these days, they hope at least to be noticed as politicians enter the Congress. Representatives of the Jubilados do also lobby congress-people on their issues. In 2010 opposition groups took up some of the Jubilados' demands, incorporating them into proposed new legislation that would have dramatically increased pension payments for many. This legislation did not pass.

#### WHY ACTIVISM?

In light of the way elder activism is thought to be unlikely and appears to be quite uncommon, one wonders how these elders came to be participating in the jubilados movement in their various forms and to their different degrees. In this section of the article, I turn more fully to jubilados' explanations of why and how they do the unexpected. These explanations point to the importance of generation in the Abrams sense (as discussed above).

One striking characteristic of the activist pensioners was that the vast majority had some kind of history in "the old left" – as communists, socialists and anarchists (Tortti 2009). Their political experience was quite diverse. Some were current members of the Communist Party or one of the various socialist parties, others had broken with their parties, still others spoke of an identification or sympathy with the old left. This identification was often described as emerging from concrete experiences in some of the institutions the parties sponsored, especially before the advent of Peronism. One must recall that Argentina is a

country in which the intervention of Peronism from 1943 challenged, to a degree incorporated, and eventually all but eliminated leftist traditions from working class life. Most working-class people in the interim have been Peronist. The non-Peronism of these jubilados is therefore striking, in part attributable to their age since they mostly came of age before Peronism, but by no means reducible to it.



Photo Credit: Mary Gaudet

This connection to the “old left,” though extremely varied, is suggestive. In trying to unpack the link between the activist jubilados and the old left, I have identified several threads. One is institutional: the Peronist and Radical parties have historically run a plethora of senior’s centers which draw members of those parties. These mainstream party-affiliated centers, although mostly recreational, do sometimes mobilize people on behalf of their parties, but not against the state. It is likely that many of the groups characterized as “recreational” by Fassio and Golpe (1999) would be of this type. The other threads connecting the jubilados to their left history was articulated clearly by the jubilados in the interviews and the history workshop. One has to do with values and commitments. Another is tied to the longer arc of their life stories.

### VALUES

Ramón Sanchez, 72 when I interviewed him, was retired from skilled-labour in a refrigerator factory, although he still did a little work on the side. Ramón is not a leader of the Jubilados movement. Nevertheless I met him week after week at the demonstrations in front of the Congress.

Occasionally we went for coffee afterwards; Burger King had a cheap coffee and pastry combo preferred by Ramón and his older anarchist-Spaniard friend José. As in all the interviews I conducted, I asked Ramón about his political life and how he came to be protesting at the Congress. He told me he had been a socialist in his youth, in large part because of the library the socialists ran in his neighborhood, but did not really consider himself very involved in the party. As he put it: “I voted. I went [to the socialists] because they had a nice library; I spent hours reading in the library. I wasn’t an activist. I wasn’t a hero, not an activist, not a fighter, none of that. I always liked the books.” Ramón also described himself as a person with a penchant for lost causes.

Like Ramón, many of the jubilados point to what I have come to think of as an urban left-working-class milieu as a source of their progressive values. Most participated in, or were influenced by socialist, communist and anarchist messages which characterized urban working-class communities in Argentina before the advent of Peronism in 1943. For Ramón this was the socialists and their library. For Hector, with whose words I began this article, the values of justice, solidarity and integrity were learned from his anarchist baker father and articulated in the anarchist newspapers read at home. Ramón’s friend José was a veteran of the Spanish Civil War and continued to be fiercely anarchist. Others identified with the Communist Party. Regardless of their particular origins, most jubilados see their engagement as a consequence of values like solidarity, justice, and nationalism. This may be counterintuitive (or even sound self-congratulatory) for a movement expressly built around specific concrete demands like improved pensions and healthcare, but most of the jubilados noted that there were millions of Argentine pensioners who might have been involved but were not. They explained the differences between themselves and the many others whose interests they represent in terms of these values.

In addition to these more abstract principles, the jubilados also saw their struggle to defend the rights of the elderly as calling Argentine society to task. They worried that elderly people were pushed aside and not taken into account. From my vantage point in middle age, I was often struck by the way these evidently feisty people in their 70s and 80s lamented the poor treatment of people who were truly old and vulnerable – not placing themselves in that category.

## TRAJECTORIES

Most jubilados asserted that values and commitments alone did not explain why people participated. The values which underwrote participation were accompanied for many by concrete experiences over the span of their long lives. These questions were addressed directly by participants in the history workshop.

As already mentioned, the group dedicated quite a lot of attention to the larger political project of the Jubilados. The workshop participants had planned to make a video based on their deliberations; for a variety of reasons that video never came to fruition, nonetheless the discussion and debates about how and why it should be made were illuminating. With respect to this question of their trajectories, participants in the workshop commented, “we have come from a history of struggle. We were born fighters.” They saw themselves as paving the way for the political mobilizations happening all around us as we met in March 2002; they called themselves “pioneers of resistance” and compared themselves to the international human rights heroines the Madres de Plaza de Mayo.<sup>18</sup>

For example, when I pressed Ramón about why he went to weekly protests in front of the Congress, he replied: “Truthfully, I don’t know... But there is something which people carry until they die. I know I have to be present now because I have to keep fighting. Behind every jubilado, you see something. Behind each jubilado there is a militancy.” He went on to elaborate: “behind every jubilado there is one who wrote, one who was a shop steward, another [who was] a different sort of union man.

We have life stor[ies].” Ramón continued by pointing out that his participation and experience is modest compared to some, speaking with respect bordering on awe of fellow jubilados who took big risks, were detained during military regimes, and so on.

Certainly the evidence supports Ramón’s argument. Sanjek notes a strikingly similar process among the Gray Panthers. “[I]t was not involvement with senior citizen issues that brought most people to the Gray Panthers. It was rather lifetimes of engagement with labor struggles, civil and human rights, economic justice, health care and peace – from the 1930s onward for the older Panthers and during the 1960s and early 1970s for younger members” (2009:5).

A number of the jubilados had long histories in political parties and in organized labour, but as Ramón might note, these are often on the losing side of national and local struggles. The left parties have only ever had a small number of elected seats. Union politics in Argentina are tied quite directly to party politics, meaning that the groups within unions to which most jubilados involved in labour belonged were also usually in the minority. The life experience engaged within unions and labour struggles more generally were formative for many of the men and some of the women with whom I spoke. This connection is unsurprising given the important place of union politics historically in Argentina. One of the effects of this, though, was that many felt doubly adrift upon retirement. Not only did they leave their working lives behind, but the unions to which they had often devoted much of their political energies, were likewise closed to them. Nostalgia for past days fighting the good fight was apparent in many of the life history interviews. These jubilados described joining the activist pensioners as a solution to this problem. The Jubilados’ movement offered an opportunity to put their skills and experience to work in a meaningful way. For a few, the connections were more direct. The late Antonio Fortes, a former shoe-maker born in 1914, and President of the Mesa when I interviewed him, built his life within the Argentine Communist Party, meeting his wife there, and joining the Jubilados at the Party’s request.

Although labour union participation was a common precursor to involvement with the jubilados, there were others. Ramón, for example, was quite clear that his participation in the jubilados’ protests represented a new, heightened degree of



Photo Credit: Mary Gaudet

political involvement. He had never been involved in union activity. Women in general were less likely to have held important roles in unions, both because they were less likely to have engaged in unionized work, and because of the sexism of most of the unions at the time. Women jubiladas were also more likely to bear the brunt of family reproductive labour, obligations which held their energies and attentions in their middle years. Although many of the women I spoke with still had domestic obligations looking after grandchildren part time, the lessening of these responsibilities permitted their participation with the Jubilados. Interestingly, quite a few of the women were widows, perhaps with greater autonomy than those with husbands to care for. Dora García, for one, dated her entry into the jubilados' movement from the marriage of her children. Notwithstanding a period of heightened domestic responsibilities, most women could point to an earlier moment in their lives where they had been involved in political activities. The differing trajectories also help to explain why men occupied virtually all of the leadership roles within the Mesa, even though women outnumber men in the elderly population.

Struggling to explain how people came to the Jubilados, Ramón told me: "People are like wine. If the wine is good, with the years it will get better. If it's bad, it's poison." He thus underlined the continuities, especially of character, which he felt explained why some people chose to take up the quixotic task which the jubilados embraced. Elegantly aged wine is certainly a nice metaphor, but it is interesting that Ramón's explanation also takes up the question of the less-than-virtuous.

#### BEING OLD AND AN ACTIVIST

Finally, it is important to acknowledge some of the ways the jubilados' age shapes their social movement. Spending time with the jubilados one can forget their chronological age partly because they resist being defined by it. Yet there are moments when it comes to the fore. Yolanda, a workshop participant, described a debate that arose at one of the community assemblies [asambleas barriales] that sprung up in the wake of the 2001 economic crash. In a discussion about the video we hoped to make about the jubilados, Yolanda told the other workshop participants:

Last Monday I was at the community assembly and the inter-community assembly was there. And I stayed, and people were speaking and the problem of the pensioners came up, and I was allowed to speak. Two or three people, a man who was quite old, said to me, "You are focussing [too much on] this topic..." (He was very parochial, this guy) "Because the Jubilados, you are just another group that protests, you need to

ask [more broadly] for justice." And I said "Look, we are one sector, but we are four million and some, who are reclaiming PAMI, which is pretty representative." There are people who don't give the issue priority... But we have a shorter life expectancy... With luck I will be able to live to eighty. I have nine years left. How am I not going to worry about this problem? [Mutters of agreement from all.] We don't have thirty years. There are still people who see us Jubilados as a little thing... I don't disagree with having [the video] present people's histories, and with giving it a more political tone, but we also have to bring ourselves closer to these sectors, that don't do anything, but who for ten years have been collecting \$220 or \$150 pesos [in monthly pension payments].

Yolanda's commentary brought together several themes. She raised the relationship of the pensioners' issues to a larger set of political demands. She asked the other workshop participants to think strategically about how much to frame the Jubilados' agenda in the language of the old left. Yolanda also reminded her audience at the community assembly of the material significance of their age: time is limited.

This last point certainly came to the fore on the occasions when speeches made at the weekly marches paused to note the passing of yet another jubilado, as it was in the concern expressed when a Wednesday regular missed a couple of weeks in a row. The fact of the jubilados advanced age was articulated most explicitly in two arguments made repeatedly. It was often noted that pensioners cannot be expected to wait indefinitely for real change if they are to get to see it in their lifetime. Sometimes, as for Yolanda, this argument was made in the face of competing claims for scarce resources. Alternatively, some of the more pessimistic noted that they were not fighting for their own gain – they did not expect to see the fruits of their political labour – but for future retirees.

Being activists also protected the jubilados from being subsumed into one of the only roles available to the elderly. As proud as they were of their grandchildren, the jubilados resisted being defined by their grandparenthood. In a conversation at the senior's center, Matilde let loose her outrage at the way Argentines refer to older people as "abuela" or "abuelo" (grandmother or grandfather). It is quite common for people to refer to unknown elders in this way, for example, someone on a bus might say, "would you like a seat, abuela?" I had always imagined this as a kind of affectionate respect, but Matilde certainly did not. "You don't know me! I am not your grandmother!" she declared.

For many, there was doubtless a social side to

participating in the Jubilados' movement. Small gatherings of jubilados could be found in coffee shops (or, as with Ramón and José, fast food joints) near the Congress every Wednesday after the protests. Matilde, for one, emphasized how much she enjoyed the company of people her own age. Yet company was not reason enough; like many others, she expressed her disdain for seniors who went to centers only to play cards and gossip. She was one of those gathering signatures as described by Hector in the opening quote. Political debate, weekly protests, flu shot drives and collecting signatures were all more meaningful ways for her to spend her time.

## CONCLUSIONS

The Jubilados are extraordinary. The mere fact that they have managed to sustain weekly protests for not just months or years but decades is in itself a remarkable feat. Add to this the advanced age of most members, and they truly defy expectations. The Jubilados struggle to practice a different kind of old age. They refuse to be defined as passive by their roles as retirees and grandparents, and they refuse to retire from political life. The jubilados' movement might be seen as a struggle for recognition in the broadest sense (Fraser 2000). Indeed, in the quotation at the beginning of this article Hector describes them as trying "to awaken the recognition of folks." They strive to express their points of view and to be heard. They want people to understand the plight of seniors in Argentina and to change how they think about and treat the elderly. As history workshop participants asserted: "we want to make our own contributions to the country."

It may be precisely because older people are apparently unlikely activists that the jubilados have much to teach us. Their example demonstrates how activism is more than just an effect of youthful discontent, as sometimes asserted, but comes from somewhere. With the benefit of hindsight, the jubilados are able to articulate some of the ways that they see their life experiences as having led them to their activism with the Mesa.<sup>19</sup> Their example has the potential to act as an important corrective to some of the literature on social movements. This literature has made important advances to thinking about how and why groups win political spaces. Yet by focusing on group dynamics and resources, thinking about social movements risks overlooking historical continuities which can be traced through the life-stories of participants. Many formulations draw distinctions between 'old' and 'new' social movements, the former referring to traditional class politics (via parties and labour unions) and new ones, drawn around 'identities'. Yet the jubilados show how people move around among different kinds of

political engagements throughout their lives. In a way that resonates with the jubilados' own views of their particular contributions to the fight for social justice in Argentina, we can see how the longer view helps us better understand where activists and their activism come from. They are clearly both the product of their collective and individual histories and makers of history.

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## Notes

1. There is work on voting, which is a qualitatively different form of political participation than that under examination here. See for example, Campbell (2003).
2. One distinctive characteristic of the gray panthers is their commitment to building intergenerational solidarity, including young people in their movement and employing the slogan "age and youth in action" (Sanjek 2009).
3. People were recruited at the weekly marches, where introductions often led to other interviews. Some people who did not participate in the marches were also recruited. Most of this group were participants at the Abasto-Once senior's center (described below). Some of this second group did also attend the marches. For reflection on some of the particular strengths and weaknesses of this methodology see DuBois (in press).
4. Throughout I use the actual names of jubilados by their choice, following common practice for oral history. Luciano asked that I use his "nom de guerre" (as he put it) instead.
5. Mary Guadet was a Master's student who worked with me on the project. Her work focused on the senior's center Abasto Once, of which Hector Anzorena was president, and which was affiliated with the Mesa Coordinadora the main group organizing the pensions, see below (see Guadet 2003).
6. For a discussion which compares life-course and generational approaches to politics see Braungart & Braungart (1986).
7. The evaluation of Perón's motives and practices is still widely and passionately debated and cannot be addressed here. That said, there is little question that many state institutions were either made or dramatically remade in Perón's first two presidencies. His third presidency was short-lived, from 1973 to his death in 1974 (Rock 1987).
8. It should be noted that Pla was not a member of the Mesa, the group whose members I worked with.

9. Although everyone refers to the obra social as PAMI, its official name is INSSJP for "Instituto Nacional de Servicios Sociales para Jubilados y Pensionados."
10. A rich feminist literature analyses how women get positioned as recipients of aid, see for example Gordon's edited collection featuring a number of the key authors (1990).
11. Linda Gordon evokes this notion in the title of her book about welfare in the U.S.: *Pitied but not entitled* (1994).
12. Of course, the jubilados also prize social and economic justice and in this sense would never object to the expansion of the social safety net.
13. Scholars have noted the peculiar and paradoxical nature of ageism: that it is a prejudice against one's future self (Jönson 2013). Jönson makes the interesting observation that this quite often is maintained through a temporal construction in which the non-old imagine old people as qualitatively different from themselves because they are from a different generation (2012).
14. Approximately 650,000 people 60 or older lived in the capital of Buenos Aires in 1998 (Encuesta Permanente de Hogares in Fassio and Golpe 1999:75).
15. Buenos Aires is a megacity including Gran Buenos Aires and the city of Buenos Aires. The latter, also known as la Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires is a capital district, analogous to Washington D.C. The 2010 census places the population of the capital at 2.89 million. The total population of Gran Buenos Aires, including the capital, was 13.53 million (INDEC).
16. "Work-related" is defined as "connected to the work past of its members" through unions or professional associations (Fassio & Golpe 1999:80).
17. Given that street protests are part of the Argentine repertoire, 40,000 is not a huge number, but a respectable one which would have helped get the jubilados' issues on the table.
18. The Madres are a group of mothers of the disappeared who publicly demanded the return of their missing children during the dictatorship, and when almost no one else dared criticize the military regime (Bouvard 1994).
19. This is not accidental. People tell their life stories with a purpose, and these activists tended to narrate their lives in such a way as to explain their current priorities (see DuBois n.d.).

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## Retirement Abroad as Women's Aging Strategy

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### Abstract

Understanding the culture and lifestyle choices of retirees has never been so crucial. The aging baby boom population bubble means that by 2030 eighteen percent of the U.S. will be 65 or over. The lifestyle decisions of these individuals will have far-reaching implications culturally, politically and economically. Since more women are living their post-retirement lives alone and in economically challenging situations, this paper examines the mobility of older women in the form of international retirement migration as a strategy to ameliorate levels of economic and general well-being. Historically people have retired abroad for various reasons, but current practices suggest that retiring permanently in a foreign country has become an increasingly popular aging strategy. Retiring abroad does not come without serious challenges, however, as the strains of navigating the aging process are interwoven with living in a foreign culture. Based on research done in Mexico, and southern France, this paper highlights the efforts put forth by aging women to avoid the well-trodden path of retirement before them and to forge a new path, choose a new homeland, and perhaps, reinvent themselves a bit along the way.

Key words: *gender, aging, retirement, migration*

This paper further explores international retirement migration (IRM) as a calculative alternative to aging 'at home'. Specifically, the research examines why single women are retiring internationally, leaving behind their culture, friends and family. The focus here is on single women for three reasons. First, while much of the literature on IRM includes demographic data on gender (King, Warnes & Williams 2000; Warnes 2009; O'Reilly 2002) there is very little focusing specifically on women.<sup>1</sup> Frances Carp (1972), in her comprehensive look at retirement as a transitional life stage, wrote that social anthropologists could benefit from studying "sex differences in reactions to retirement" (129). Oliver (2008) notes in her comprehensive study of British retirees in Spain, most of the interviewees were married couples but among those who were not

married, women outnumbered men. Examining single women's experiences as international retirement migrants will shed light on how and why this might continue to develop as a single woman's retirement strategy.

Second, I was genuinely surprised at the number of single female retirees I encountered during my research and argue that these kinds of serendipitous findings offer researchers an opportunity to discover the rare, the outliers, that might end up becoming the most relevant and important finding. Research is both planned and serendipitous. While I did not, in my research protocol, set out to focus on unmarried female retirees participating in IRM, the data I collected is relevant and offers an occasion to examine with more care some of the gendered aspects

of international retirement migration. In both Mexico and France I came across many women who had chosen to relocate alone in their retirement. The literature (Mutschler 1992; Cuba 1992; Savishinsky 2000) and common sense both led me to believe that retired, single women were unlikely to move to a foreign country alone. Despite the fact that most of the people I interviewed were part of a couple, the stories of the single women I met drew me in and begged further examination. Understanding why single men retire in Thailand doesn't take much of a stretch of the imagination (Warnes 2009; Howard 2008),<sup>2</sup> but trying to understand why a divorced woman from Ohio moved to Central Mexico did, at least for this researcher. With serendipity what researchers do not know has the potential to become more significant than what they do know. One must pay attention to unexpected findings and assess the importance of this observation in relation to a particular research question, and to interpret what was discovered. The relevance of serendipitous findings can easily be overestimated, underestimated, denied or fabricated. I think that in the case of IRM, the data presented here suggests that the salient features in these women's decision-making processes will continue to impact more women in the near future, therefore making IRM a calculative option for many.

Third, single women outnumber single men in terms of current aging and retirement statistics, thus, due to their sheer number and the potential far-reaching impacts of their decisions, researchers and policy-makers alike ought to pay close attention to the context of women's later life choices. There are more aging women than men in the United States, Canada and the European Union (U.S. Census Bureau; Statistics Canada; European Commission) and more of these women live alone than men in the same age range. For example, in Canada, 2011 Census data showed that the share of the population that lived alone was fairly low and stable until about the age of 50 for women, and until approximately age 70 for men. After these ages, the prevalence of living alone increases for both sexes, but more sharply for women. Among seniors aged 65 and over, women were nearly twice as likely to live alone—31.5% compared to 16.0% of men.<sup>3</sup> Older women are more likely to live alone in the United States as well. In 2012, only 45 percent of women aged 65 and older were married compared to 75 percent of men which impacts their living arrangements accordingly with 37.3% of women and 19.1% of men were living alone.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, according to the European Union labour force survey for 2005, there are many more women than men aged 65–74 living alone, some 30 % in the EU as a whole (or rather in those countries for which data are available — i.e. excluding Denmark, Ireland and Sweden) as opposed to

just 13 % of men.<sup>5</sup> The mobility of these individuals can have far-reaching impacts.

Like tourism, international retirement migration streams can affect the economies and communities of favored retirement destinations, sometimes profoundly so, acting as a powerful form of direct foreign investment. Retirees buy or rent homes, provide employment for local workers, consume goods and services, and may attract greater investments and more foreign visitors to retirement areas. For example, in Costa Rica foreign retirees contribute significantly to the \$1.4 billion a year in direct spending by Americans.<sup>6</sup> As the baby boom generation ages, this stream is increasing in size. In 1979 Dumont et al. wrote that "Europe has a cancer" (14). That terrible invading killer was the aging of the French population, "la France ridée", but far worse was the denial of the potential impacts that aging populations would have on Europe (ibid.). There is no denying the aging of most of the nations in the Western hemisphere.

The rapidly aging population has been seen as a potential disaster waiting to happen, too many too quickly which will overwhelm service systems and government funded care providers. In fact, some argue that the United States—and other nations struggling to provide adequate care for the rapidly aging populations—should negotiate agreements with willing partners to provide increasingly favorable opportunities to citizens willing to retire to the south (Mead 2007; Oppenheimer 2006). The impact of aging northern populations is being felt in multiple global sites as the historic south-north migration is partially being recast as a north-south trajectory of non-working seniors. Ironically, this new pattern is characterized by many of the same elements which have inspired countless nationals from the south to move north, including the potential for greater economic well-being and stability, having access to healthcare, and the possibility of an overall better quality of life. The primary difference, of course, is that south-north migration patterns are motivated first and foremost by employment-seeking. In the latest reverse trend, retirees are seeking an accommodating place to not work, and some of these retirees are single women.

Retirees in North America (Sullivan 1985; Otero 1997) and Western Europe (King, Warnes & Williams 2000; Oliver 2008) have a long history of migration. While the most common trend has been temporary, seasonal moves, fleeing cold and damp winter weather in search of southern sun and warmth, historically there have always been a few outliers who chose to relocate permanently, leaving friends, family and familiarity behind. These retirement migrants were most often affluent (Cooper 1996) or had formerly worked in some form of government (Warnes &

Patterson 1998) or military service (Karnow 2010) abroad and decided to stay or return upon retiring. While these kinds of migrations have happened in diverse areas of the world, due to proximity, and more recently the ease and low cost of air travel, permanent international retirement migration has always been and remains more popular in Europe than in North America or other regions (Zeltzer 2008). Despite the complexity and variability of retirement migration routes, for the most part mobility patterns have been “channelized”, very predictable and limited to a few well-trodden destinations (Longino 1998: 62). Baby boomers have recently been stretching the parameters of potential retirement locations (Zeltzer 2008; Peddicord 2010). They are increasingly unable to afford, or uninterested in, the retirement scenarios of previous generations which resulted in enclaves of the aged in places like Cannes and Nice in France, and Florida and Arizona in the United States. These ‘amenity-seeking’ forms of retirement migration have closely resembled one another, wherein wealthy seniors moved to both maintain their high status lifestyle and also to enjoy the possibility of having a private swimming pool, playing golf year-round, hiring more domestic help, and crafting a life that closely resembled a permanent vacation.<sup>7</sup> Today, however, for seniors in disparate areas of the world and in varied states of economic well-being, experiences of affordable tourism, unbridled access to electronic banking and social media internet sites have contributed to a growing number of ex-pat retirement communities cropping up in places like Malaysia (Abdul-Aziz et al. 2014; Ono 2008; Toyota 2006), Costa Rica (Van Noorloos 2011; Zeltzer 2008), Panama (Wilson & Crowder-Taraborrelli 2013; Golson 2008), Thailand (Howard 2008), Dominican Republic (Zeltzer 2008) and Nicaragua (Egan 2011). In addition, Russell (1993) argues that there are greater values for independence, the entrepreneurial spirit, and personal empowerment among middle-class baby boomers further facilitating a shifting international retirement scenario. Despite the increasing possibilities for IRM, however, transnational relocation is still not the norm.

Significant, deliberate life changes such as international moves are typically not associated with the lifestyle of seniors. In fact, Dr. Robert Butler, former head of the National Institute on Aging, has been quoted as saying, “The best place to retire is in the neighborhood where you spent your life” (cf Boyer & Savageau 1987:vii). Even short distance moves are usually precipitated by a crisis of some kind; a developmental model of later-life migrations suggests that migrations of less than ten kilometers are usually motivated by the onset of frailty or ill-health, or the inability to live independently (Litwak & Longino 1987). The common western image of an aging person is one that reflects a general narrowing of scope. As people age,

certainly their social roles and relationships change. After having raised their children and without daily contacts with coworkers, many argue that older people may lose a critical context for social integration (Cruikshank 2009). Therefore, maintaining long-standing social contacts with friends and family are arguably critical for a retiree’s health and well-being (Berkman 2000; Lubben & Girona 2003). This could explain why long-distance migrations are mainly undertaken by married couples in order to ensure that one has at least one point of emotional support and contact (King, Warnes & Williams 2000; Savishinsky 2000). In fact, in a review of the databases of six surveys carried out between 1995-2003, all studies agreed that retirement migration from north to south “is undertaken predominantly by couples” (Casado-Diaz, Kaiser & Warnes 2004:360). Despite these cultural and historic conceptions of the aged and transnational mobility, as the world’s population grows older every day, retirees are motivated, and some might argue, forced, to forge new lifestyle pathways.

We are moving ever closer to the first time in history when the number of people over the age of fifty will be greater than those under the age of seventeen. By 2030 one billion people worldwide will be sixty-five or older. Currently there are 506 million people over sixty-five worldwide. In light of such demographic shifts, one can only imagine that the expectations and experiences of aging, retirement and the “third age” are being rapidly transformed. It is not merely the size of the population that is recasting old age, but also the meanings given to it. This transformation of what it means to age is the result of intersecting contemporary realities such as the economic downturn of 2008? being experienced in many countries, neoliberal policies (Polivka 2011), and the transformative effect the baby boom generation has had previously on each stage of the life course (Gilleard & Higgs 2002; Jönson 2012; Williams et al. 2007). However, while the generation as a whole will be entering and negotiating their retirement in ways unlike previous generations, women do face gender-specific aging challenges (Barer 1994; Dailey 1998), and consequently may be inclined to make unique retirement decisions. Since the longevity of women results in them being dependent for longer periods of time on retirement income, the uncertainty of their economic and overall well-being is a real burden. The subtle shift from amenity-seeking to economic retirement migration is fueled by seniors seeking an affordable full-time retirement, many of them women.

Women face unique economic issues in their retirement years (Meyer 1990). Income from pensions is the major source of income for women in old age (Cruikshank 2009), but the pensions women receive are lower than those of

men. The main causes for the pension gender gap are that women earn less than men on average, work more often in part-time jobs and hold atypical contracts (Tyson 1998; Harrington Meyer & Herd 2007; Cruikshank 2009). They are also more likely to work in the informal labour market, have interrupted working careers and retire earlier. Women's involvement in caregiving contributes to their disadvantaged economic position as they age. For example, current estimates suggest that 85 percent of eldercare in the United States is provided for free, by family members, usually women (Eaton 2005). These conditions have an impact on women's lifetime earnings, influencing the duration and level of contributions to their pension and the type of pension schemes to which they have access. As a consequence, income levels for older women in most countries are significantly lower than for men, especially single women. Despite the long-term improvement in contribution-based pensions and the existing old-age allowances, aging women continue to experience higher poverty risks than their male counterparts, especially when over the age of 75. In the U.S., for example, older women were more likely than older men to live in poverty in 2010—11% compared to 7% respectively—(Federal Interagency Forum on Aging-Related Statistics 2012).

Another recent trend impacting women's retirement is the increase in divorce among those 55 and over. In the United States these so-called "gray divorces" have more than doubled over the past two decades (Clift 2005; Brown & Lin 2012) while the overall divorce rate has decreased. More than 600,000 Americans ages 50 and older divorced in 2009 (Brown & Lin 2012). Thus, baby boomers increasingly are facing their retirement years alone, whether by choice or not, and these divorced senior women are more likely to be in a compromised economic position, and to remain living alone (Savishinsky 2000).

Aging and retirement affect men and women but also their family, the community and the state (Conway & Houtenville 1998; Walters 2002). Understanding the motivations and outcomes of single women choosing to retire abroad is critical, especially as more could be convinced that this is the best way they can live comfortably and fully retire. Their webs of social contact both local and those left behind can be greatly impacted by their decisions as well as those making and managing aging and health policies. The channels of retirement migration can lead to similar channels of elder-care workers, thus impacting employment opportunities. It is difficult, however, to get a sense of the true scale of IRM because the data available is partial and does not offer a reliable comparative of retiree experiences cross-culturally. For example, according to the Social Security Administration's 2012 annual statistical supplement over 450,000 retired Americans have their

Social Security checks mailed to them at an address outside of the U.S.<sup>9</sup> but as of 2011 anyone who applies for Social Security benefits must receive these benefits electronically therefore tracking the numbers of retirees living outside of the country is now all the more challenging. In addition, due to security issues in identifying its citizens, the U.S. State Department ceased publishing demographic information on U.S. citizens living abroad as of 1999 (Croucher 2012: 6; Dixon et al. 2006: 23). Depending on the source, estimates vary from 358,000 (using Mexican census data, Warner 2007) to at least 1,000,000 American citizens living in Mexico (U.S. State Department 2010). In 1997, the number of English citizens receiving their pensions overseas was 763,000 (King, Warnes & Williams 2000). By comparison, the number of French retirees receiving a pension outside of France was 63,396 in 2002 (Attias-Donfut 2004). European Commission researchers estimate that 5-6% of all EU pensioners leave their home country to retire elsewhere, but, similarly, they admit to having scant data on the actual numbers of retirement migrants and their final destinations. This is largely due to the issue of non-registration since the Treaty of Rome and the Treaty on European Union guarantee the legal right of EU citizens to reside in any member state. Also troubling is the fact that in migration studies, the mobility of seniors has been both underestimated and under researched.

In addition to the economic difficulties women face as they retire and age, many are influenced by the drive for sustained independence that accompanies the neoliberal model for self-care. Thus older women become coerced into self-reliance by government policies and societal expectations, a problem whose magnitude is inadequately evaluated by both feminists and gerontologists (Cruikshank 2009). I deliberately frame this relationship in a somewhat contradictory manner to highlight its' complexity. On one hand, women are cognisant of trying to maintaining their economic independence and agency as they age. On the other, they have little choice since the support offered by current state systems can easily be seen as insufficient. In fact, the failings of the neoliberal model and the erosion of the U.S. system of retirement security begs for a comprehensive overhaul of not only the infrastructural supports for retirees but also a recasting of the collective ideology around aging and seniors (Polivka 2011). Since any efforts to implement progressive economic and retirement security policies have encountered vigorous resistance, it appears likely that as baby boomer women age, they will be left to come up with creative ways to manage their retirement years (Dailey 1998). In spite of the challenges faced with gathering reliable data on the rates of IRM, most argue that it is increasing (Attias-Donfut 2004; Warnes 2009; Ono 2008; Zeltzer 2008; Oppenheimer 2006; Croucher 2009, 2012) and I would argue that logically



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we will see increasing numbers of single women choosing IRM in the future.

## METHODS

Qualitative data for this paper were collected in several ways. Methods hinged on using an interpretive research approach to explore and describe the range of plans, experiences and expectations for retirees who moved permanently to a foreign country. I started preliminary research in Mexico for two weeks in 2009 and continued in France over seven months while on sabbatical in 2010. During this time many observations of international retirement migrants were made and 68 individuals were interviewed. Participants were recruited through a convenience sample. First, retirees were recruited through websites and blogs aimed at providing information and support for current or potential international retirement migrants in Mexico and France.<sup>10</sup> Second, an announcement was posted in the monthly publication, 'Blablalablah,' published by expat retirees and geared towards the Anglophone population—retirees or tourists—in the Languedoc-Roussillon area of France. I interviewed a total of 68 individuals (53 in France, 15 in Mexico), 39 women and 29 men. Forty-two of the participants were married or with long-term partners, 8 of the men were single compared to 18 of the women (7 in France, 11 in Mexico). All of the interviewees were white and came from a range of income brackets but were mostly middle to upper-middle class. Participants ranged in age from 55 to 93.<sup>8</sup> For the purposes of this paper, data analysis and description focuses only on the interviews with the 18 single women. Closer examination of the comprehensive parent study data will be completed at a later date.

While research was conducted for only two weeks in San Miguel d'Allende, Mexico, 5-6 hours per day were spent with various international retirement migrants outside of the time I spent interviewing research participants. I accompanied them on shopping trips, at their formal and informal gatherings with other foreign retirees, to the library, in their many volunteer activities, to religious services, and to the doctor.

In France, I lived in Mèze, a small coastal village in the Languedoc-Roussillon region 25 minutes from Montpellier. There were a few foreign retirees living in Mèze but most were living in other small villages scattered in the inland areas where owning a property was more affordable. I spent most of my time with retirement migrants in and around the town of Pézenas, 30 minutes inland from Mèze, and known locally for the large population of British and other foreign retirees. Once a week I attended the Tuesday Club in Pézenas, a gathering open to anyone but developed and organized by British retirees. Someone typically gave a short talk in English on that week's topic, and then there were followed by refreshments and time for informal discussion. Weekly topics included: "How to Buy a Car in France"; "Property Ownership in France"; "Wines of the Region"; "Making Stained Glass"; "Creating Your Last Will and Testament in France"; and, "French Phrases and Idioms".<sup>11</sup> There were also fieldtrips organized in place of some regular Tuesday gatherings to visit local sites of interest. I met most of my research participants at the Tuesday Club but others contacted me through my posting in 'Blablalablah' or through snowball sampling.

Since purposive sampling was used, the only requirement for participation was that the individual was a foreign retiree whose permanent home (at least 10 months out of the year) was in Mexico or France. Purposive sampling was justified because the goal of the project was to examine and understand the characteristics and experiences of retirees who had decided to move permanently to a foreign country. Individuals who met that criteria and contacted me were generally invited to participate in an interview. My methodological goal was to take a processual approach to understanding these retirees' histories. Therefore, I opted at this phase of the research to look at the unfolding of the retirement abroad experience and "how [retirees] through their collective and separate activities reproduce and modify the realities of their past and present lives, elaborating features or losing them, enhancing their coherence or dismantling it" (Barth 1993:8).

As Longino et al. (2002) and Savishinsky (2000) pointed out, one of the challenges of studying the migration decision is the fact that it is a process. For these women, IRM was a process that they ultimately undertook alone. Lamb argues that anthropology explores in-depth “particular people’s answers—within any cultural and historical setting—to abiding human questions” (2000: xiii) which supports the somewhat more biographical approach I took to understanding this particular facet of IRM. One of the outcomes of the parent project was the collection of rich qualitative data creating a baseline from which future follow-up research will be done among these same participants. It is only through longitudinal research and analysis that we will improve our understanding of the international retirement process as it continues to unfold. Some have argued that what has been missing from much of the debate about the aging population is a deeper appreciation of the values, aspirations and attitudes of the aged themselves (Bishop 2005: 2). While attending to these areas, the research goals were also forward-thinking, creating an opportunity to examine the pragmatic and personal shifts that occurred in aging abroad. Such an approach warranted lengthy interviews combined with descriptive demographic data (age, gender, marital status, former living situation, basic work history, family structure).

Semistructured interviews were conducted in person, which led to descriptive interpretations of the decision-making process and subsequent experiences of women who have retired internationally. Topics included prior retirement strategies that might have been abandoned; feelings of being alone in their retirement; major influences in their decision to leave their home country; how they decided upon their current retirement location; the reaction of family and friends; barriers and benefits to international retirement migration; and their degree of integration with the local native population.

The interviews ranged from 0.5 to 2.5 hours in length. Four of the interviews in France were conducted in French since the interviewees were of German and Belgian descent and not as comfortable in English, while the remaining 14 interviews were in English. Interviews were tape recorded with simultaneous written notes taken of key words and phrases to highlight and reinforce particular issues of importance. Interview transcripts were reviewed and analyzed to identify key themes and observations which were then developed into categories. Transcript-based thematic analysis using unabridged transcripts was undertaken and themes and subthemes were coded in an instrumental way to interpret the data for the final analysis. The primary investigator alone completed all stages of the analysis.

## FINDINGS

While the idea of retirement migration might still seem exotic and appealing, the question remains; why would an older, single woman take the risks involved in leaving everything behind to move abroad? Several themes emerged in this study, but here I focus on two factors that were particularly salient to the women I interviewed: (a) economic solvency, and, (b) what I am calling, “fear of the known”.

### *Economic Factors*

People didn’t believe what I was going to do. But then, they didn’t understand either. I earned a decent living, but I couldn’t save very much and social security wasn’t going to support me. I had a sort of panic, and then I thought I just better do something. I had a friend whose sister moved to Mexico so I thought I’d write to her and ask her about it. We sent some emails back and forth and I decided to visit about five months later. My daughters were older then. I just felt such relief when I saw what her life was like. I didn’t have the ability to rent a place as nice as hers, but I got my little two bedroom apartment, I can afford for Maria to come twice a week to cook and clean for me, and I don’t worry about prices going up too much. I just felt this dread back home. Life’s not perfect here, but I have never regretted my decision.

This is how Sandy, a 67 year old woman from Michigan, explained to me how her decision to move to San Miguel de Allende came about eight years ago. In her small but quaint kitchen, she told me of her 17 year marriage and her eventual divorce when she was in her early forties. As a then single mother, Sandy tried to provide the best possible life for her two daughters, then 17 and ten years old. This meant budgeting wisely since her salary as an accountant for a small business just barely covered the basics. She had visited Mexico only once with her ex-husband and while she enjoyed it, she could not say she really knew Mexico. She did not speak Spanish and “was not fond of spicy food, not one bit!” So Sandy surprised herself when she found herself wanting to know more about her friend’s sister who had retired and moved to San Miguel with her husband.

I just saw myself daydreaming about it, ya know. When you don’t even realize you’re thinking something and then, well, there ya go again, thinking about the same thing over and over again. I guess I was starting to worry. About money and retirement and I just felt tired and worried. Even though my daughters were gone, they were everything to me. And my sister and I are close, but she lived 6 hours from me and I don’t like driving that far anymore, especially in the snow! So I guess I thought I could just let myself think about it a

little. No harm in that, right? Well, be careful what you think!

When Sandy decided to see for herself what life in San Miguel was like, despite the fact that she felt relief when she recognized that she could have a different life, perhaps a better life, it was not an entirely easy decision. Sandy had never considered IRM and when she was married it was never discussed with her husband as a retirement possibility; “We didn’t really talk much about it. We were far off from retirement, but I imagine we figured we would just stay put. Maybe some time in Arizona during the winters if we could manage that.” Living in a one-bedroom apartment in San Miguel, Sandy cannot afford to go back to the U.S. very often to visit—she’s made only two trips in eight years—but one of her daughters and two friends have visited. Contrary to the argument that “[t]he retirees who are most likely to relocate are those who have the fewest moorings” (Longino, Perzynski and Stoller 2002: 45), Sandy described her friendships at home as “deep and supportive” and showed me a small photo album filled with pictures from various social events with her friends at home. She was also an active member of her local church. Despite having no complaints about her social support system back in Michigan, upon retirement, Sandy felt uncertain and worried.

Retired women are more adversely affected by the current economic climate. According to the Census Bureau, two million women over the age of 65 hold assets, not including their homes, averaging just \$7,754 (Boak 2013). European and national studies point to the recent trends in pension reforms, and especially the tightening of linkages between benefits and lifetime contributions and the shift to diversified multi-pillar schemes which have slowed down the narrowing of gender gaps in pension benefits. On average, in the EU27, the gender differences in the at-risk-of-poverty rates in old age are even greater, reaching in 2008, 20.1% for women and 14.9% for men, due to women’s lower pension entitlements and expected longevity relative to men.<sup>12</sup>

Longino (1998) suggested that we would see increases in retirement migration primarily among the upper-class baby boomers, but this prediction—a reasonable one before the unforeseen economic crisis—did not meet with the reality uncovered in this research. For single women, their decision to migrate was an economic strategy based on their already weakened financial situation, and they were retiring independently more than men were. In the Lake Chapala region in Mexico a survey indicated that it was no longer the quality of amenities like golf courses and beachfront access luring retirees from north to south, but the lower over-all cost of living, namely affordable health care and housing (Sunil et al. 2007). Indeed, economic concerns

were a strong factor among seventy-seven percent of the single women I interviewed, and especially those living in Mexico. Most cited their low fixed retirement income as being a major motivating factor in considering migration.

Dorothy, a 59 year old woman from Idaho, said that she never saved for retirement.

Never really gave it much thought. I knew I had social security but no significant savings account or anything. My parents never talked about saving much money. They couldn’t because they had to feed the kids and anything my Dad earned went into his business. He had a garage. He was a mechanic. So I worked all my life, as a school teacher, and suddenly, I was nearing retirement age and knew things would be tight. I lived ok before and took trips with a few friends. We liked to go to Maine in the fall to see the colors. I went to Vegas a few times. I did have a little house, but it wasn’t worth much and not many people were moving to such a rural area in Idaho! I figure I had about \$900 a month to live on and that just didn’t sound like much, especially if something bad came up medically. I never married. Not lucky in love I guess...So I read a newspaper article about a couple who lived in Mexico and I thought about it. I had never even been out of the United States, and here I am. I didn’t know I had it in me...But here my money seems like more than enough...I still live carefully, but I never worry about money. That’s a great gift at my age.

Dorothy found a few people online who were living in San Miguel and arranged a visit in the winter of 2004. A retired couple offered to rent her their spare room for two weeks. She described how nervous she was at first because of the language and the cultural differences. But after her hosts introduced her to other American retirees she began to see how they had made their new lives work and very quickly the far-fetched idea of moving by herself to Mexico seemed more of a distinct possibility. In the late fall of 2004, Dorothy shipped some of her belongings to San Miguel and flew down a week later for good.

I had a place to rent for a month and during that time I looked for my own place. Oh, I had a lot of people to help me. Everywhere you turn there’s someone who’s retired there from the States. They were so helpful. I didn’t venture out very far...I wanted to be close to the city center because I felt safer. I found my little apartment, two bedrooms, and knew it would be perfect for me. No more snow! I had to pinch myself. Couldn’t believe I was doing this. But I pay \$550 in rent and food is next to nothing here so I feel like for the first time in my life I have some money. I don’t do much with it. Sometimes I go on little trips with some of the other women, and I even have some in savings. I almost wish I’d done it earlier, but I hadn’t really thought about it.

Some women in San Miguel had experienced divorce later in life leaving them suddenly more vulnerable and fearful as they faced their retirement years while others simply felt that their finances would go further if they downsized. For a few, the prospect of leaving their homes and moving into a condominium or apartment “at home” caused greater stress than the idea of completely uprooting themselves and making a fresh start.<sup>13</sup> Janice, 68 and widowed for 19 years, explained:

I knew I couldn't stay in my home. I was alone, my kids all moved away and the house was getting harder for me to care for, especially the yard. There were some nice apartments around but I sort of figured, if I am going to move into an apartment, I won't have much space to entertain the way I liked to and it just made me feel strange. I'd have the same friends and sort of be expected to do the same things, ya know, like potlucks and bridge club. None of my other friends were having to downsize and I just didn't want to have to do all that and I was too young to move into a nursing home! Better just to make a big move. Well, a big move to make a small move!

Only three of the women I interviewed said that they had thought of international relocation as a retirement option well before they retired and they were all British. While Marjory, a 68 year old American in Mexico, was somewhat adventurous in life, she never imagined permanently leaving her friends and family in Oregon. She was single when she retired as a librarian six years ago. Her son wanted her to move into a trailer on his property since she had very little in savings, and while she seriously considered this option, in the end she felt her life would begin to close down little by little if she did so.

I knew that I would probably end up struggling once I retired but I also didn't want to work until I was 70. I wanted to enjoy my golden years. I mean, you never know how much longer you have and even though I love books, I didn't want to die in the library! I was married twice, but never married for money, so I never got rich in marriage or divorce. One day at work I saw a book called 'Retire in Mexico on \$700 a Month', and I thought, 'I can swing that!' So I planned a two week trip to San Miguel and had rented an apartment before I left. My son thought I was going crazy, but all I knew is I would have sunshine and extra money at the end of the month.

Marjory went back to Oregon, packed her things and drove to San Miguel de Allende where she has lived ever since. She said the peace of mind she felt financially far offset the problems of assimilation. Having no Spanish language skills, Marjory said she worried about getting settled and taking care of things like activating the utilities in her apartment, changing her car registration, finding a



Photo credit Liesl Gambold

doctor and setting up banking. In the end, none of these worries came to fruition since there was already a vibrant and visible population of American retirees in San Miguel. The real estate agent who helped her find her apartment and made the arrangements for her utilities, she met other single retired ex-pat women very quickly who walked her through the rest of the necessary pragmatic adjustments, and she had extra money “to treat [myself] to a dinner out or something new for my apartment, which made [me] very happy. I felt free and independent!”

Similarly, Gina, 64, moved from Ohio to San Miguel de Allende but had not planned to do so. Her husband suddenly left her when she was 53 and since she had never worked outside of the home she had very little in terms of a pension. While married, she and her husband made occasional improvements to their home and had talked about how to further modify it to accommodate them as they aged. They had never discussed leaving when they retired. After the divorce Gina stayed in Ohio, downsized, and tried to begin rebuilding her life. She found comfort in her friends, her children and grandchildren, but she began to worry about her ability to live comfortably as her medical costs continued to slowly rise. She also had a close friend who had to declare bankruptcy after a prolonged illness left her with over \$75,000 in medical bills. In 2005 Gina took a “Culture & Arts” trip with a small group of friends to San Miguel:



I walked into a real estate agency and I'm not even sure why. I just asked about rental prices and suddenly I was looking at properties! They showed me a completely run down bed and breakfast and suddenly, and obsessively, I had to have it. I needed \$30,000 so I borrowed money from my kids and my friends for the down payment then I sold my condo and used that money and savings to fix it up. Even my friends who were on the trip with me and could see how nice San Miguel was couldn't understand why I would do such a thing. I just felt like I could simplify my life and live a good life and not sit at home worrying about whether I was going to die from natural causes or from poverty. Of course my kids would help me but I didn't want to burden them. They have their own families. I guess it was crazy, but I'm so glad I did it. I've never felt more alive!

While Gina has paid for supplemental health insurance in Mexico, she has not had any serious health concerns and said, like all of the others I interviewed in San Miguel, that she receives excellent medical services at a reasonable price. She also said that the care was more personal and she appreciated that. However, all of the women in San Miguel would be pleased if the U.S. and Mexico could agree on a policy to extend Medicare to American citizens in Mexico. The fact that Medicare benefits are not internationally portable, meaning that age-eligible Americans living abroad cannot access the program without returning to the United States, was a complaint shared by retirees. Many emphasized that a policy change providing Medicare coverage abroad would benefit both American retirees and the U.S. government, since treatment in Mexico and other Latin American countries would cost far less than it would in the United States.

These concerns were similar to those of retired foreign women in France. Sara and Fay, (ages 62 and 69) moved from Brighton, England to southern France in 2007 when Fay, an academic, retired and Sara, an artist, decided she could leave the arts community she had been a part of for so long. While these women had the benefit of migrating as a couple, they were faced with relying only on Fay's retirement pension—to which Sara had no legal access should Fay predecease her—and there were no prospects of seeking care or support from children as they had none. For these women, the decision had many complexities, but in the end was easy to make:

We are economic migrants. We could get a lot more here for the little money and pensions we had. It was a simple decision when we looked at it that way. You have to eat. But we wanted to live, and eat. And we weren't as worried once we knew we wouldn't go broke for health services.

This calculative approach is an important feature of

contemporary economic migrants that runs counter to the continued argument that increasing affluence is what has enabled more later-life international migration (Howard 2008; Longino et al. 2002). Fourteen of the women referred specifically to concern over their economic well-being as being the most significant influence in their migration decision. Cindy, a 63 year old retiree from north London, said that it was "all pounds and pence" which led her to France. She rented a small two bedroom apartment in Rougan, not far from Pezénas, where she's lived for 4 years. "I just couldn't think about staying in London and living like a poor person for maybe 25 years!" she explained. "I don't need much—you can see I live very simply—but I never thought I'd work all my life and then have to stop having fun, like going to a restaurant or just being able to relax." Cindy was a former hairdresser, never married, and a single mother of two grown children. One of her clients moved to Pezénas and after a visit, Cindy began to think she could make such a move as well.

Others with a more comfortable economic situation were more concerned with the possible long-term effects high taxation might have on their retirement years. Helen, a 65 year old retiree from Portsmouth, England explained, "In France you can have an income as a pensioner of almost €25,000 and your top rate of income tax would be 14 percent, whereas in the UK it would be 22 percent. So being a pensioner in France is pretty tax efficient for me since I am alone and if I live twenty more years I don't think I'll end up on the streets." European Union retirees benefit from more portability and sharing of healthcare costs. EU member states vary in the extent to which they allow the export of social security benefits but there are numerous bilateral agreements which give the citizens of one country reciprocal rights of access in the other (EU Commission interview). In France, retirees receiving a state pension from another EU country are entitled to the same health benefits as French retirees and British citizens are automatically entitled to free basic healthcare in France as long as they have a European health insurance card. While financial stability weighed heavily on the minds of these and other female retirees, the interviews revealed a more surprising factor—high anxiety over a practically and socially-fixed future with very little individual agency.

#### *Fear of the Known*

The importance of financial security for retirees is predictable, especially among single people, but another more subtle anxiety the women expressed took me by surprise. More than half of them described feeling constrained by both internal and external expectations regarding their imagined trajectory in retirement. The vision of their futures and the dread that accompanied it

was what I call, a 'fear of the known'. As they reflected on the end of their formal employment or years of being a homemaker, many were struck with worry about this next phase primarily because it seemed to unfold along a fixed and pre-arranged path. Retirement, Giddens suggests, ought to be a segment of the life-course in which one is freed from "externalities associated with pre-established ties to other individuals and groups" (1991: 147), but these women foresaw a closing down of potentialities due, in part, to their pre-determined social milieus. Friends who had already retired were anxious for them to join in their regular social activities never imagining that alternative scenarios might be desirable. Denise, 70, from California, said:

Many of my friends were already planning their retirement and I had others who were retired. They were all saying how great it would be when I could play tennis on Tuesday afternoons with them and go for Chinese food on Friday at lunch. I knew I could never say 'no' and I felt it would be better to make a clean break than be there and try to create a new life when there's so much pressure to just do what everyone else is doing.

Freeman describes this kind of fear as "narrative foreclosure" (2011:3) where an aging individual experiences a diminishing of options and a feeling of reduced agency characterized by a sense of, "dead ends, the point of no return, irrevocability, and existential despair" (ibid.). Several of the women interviewed seemed more prone to such fears especially if they had divorced late in life. Having occupied themselves with the needs of their children and husband they felt that their futures as retirees presented yet another role into which they were conscripted without many options; too late for a respectable mid-life crisis, too early for the nursing home. For Denise, she loved her job in finance but retired relatively early. Financially stable and quite independent, she was confused by the feeling of dread she could not escape as her retirement loomed; "I wasn't so worried about not going to my office every day, but I certainly wasn't excited about whatever else I was going to do. I felt like there was absolutely no mystery ahead, really not much to discover. Not very inspiring, is it?"

The women I interviewed who tackled all of the hurdles to an international retirement expressed an appreciation for their new found sense of independence and the possibilities to reinvent themselves that would have been very difficult to achieve had they retired 'in place'. This was particularly salient among women who had strongly identified as wives and mothers throughout their adult years. For example Betse, a 62 year old living in Pezénas, France, said that after her kids were gone and her husband

died of an illness, she asked herself "what do you want to do?" Her friends in York encouraged her to volunteer and engage in other social activities with them, but she visited friends in Pezénas and decided to move. She said, "I didn't come down here for strictly financial reasons. I just felt like I needed to start over and I realized I was free to do that wherever I wanted. But it would have been harder back in England. Too much baggage." Marie, 68, was a dental assistant in Belgium before she retired to France. She divorced when she was 56 and while visiting her son who was at university in Montpellier drove through the region on a short side trip. She said the sunshine and the countryside "lured" her in, but it was the possibility to truly create a "troisième âge" on her own terms that helped her make the move:

I was not interested in spending the rest of my years in the town where I was raised and had worked my entire life. I couldn't see anything new for me, beyond new aches and pains! At least here, I feel a sense of wonder and discovery. I can always go back [to Belgium] if I need to, but I hope I don't have to. I'm learning and meeting new people and I actually feel like it's good for my health...When I do visit my friends, I see what they're doing and I know I made the right decision.

The older woman has, in the past at least, been seen as someone more settled, expressing her commitment to family through a reliable and benign maternalism, even as she ages and requires more support herself (see Gannon 1990; Rosenthal 1990). Increasingly such stereotypes are being dismantled. Spurred on by the burgeoning anti-aging industries, new, successful and active aging are now an aspiration, if not expectation, of millions. While much of this creates an unwelcome suggestion that women ought not age, there is also the hint that one can age in many different ways (see Jönson 2012). Older women with the necessary economic, social, and cultural capital are now more likely to expend it on things like travel and acquiring new knowledge and experiences than on settling for an invisible retirement.<sup>15</sup> The opportunity to delay the "narrative foreclosures" of old age or even reinvent what it means to be elderly is increasingly apparent as growing old no longer holds out the same definitions, or limitations, of gender identity and behavior. While this may facilitate a freedom in thought and action for some women, for others the discourse and cultural expectation of "active aging", "positive aging", and "prescribed busyness" (Cruikshank 2009) feels restrictive (Minkler & Holstein 2008).

IRM might be a response to this "new aging" regime insofar as it helps answer the question, "How do I achieve this in my current circumstances?" International migration certainly suggests a retiree who is reasonably active and an agent in her own aging process, as well

as someone who is challenging the stereotypes of single retired women. However, it might also be seen as fitting quite neatly into 'new aging' "as a form of governmental rationality, a neoliberal geometry that maximizes individual responsibility...minimizing dependency and universal entitlements" (Katz 2005: 146). Outsourcing the elderly, while it would not work as a public health campaign, would work for some retirees and certainly for those government agencies already complaining that they cannot support the care costs of the baby boomers (Oppenheimer 2006; Rasalam 2008).

For Peggy, a 73 year-old British woman who had been living in southern France for three years, these neoliberal discourses had created a subtle internal dread she was literally working hard to ignore. Still employed in real estate, Peggy explained that many of her friends in England said "Oh, you must be looking for an adventure!" when she announced she was selling her house and moving to a small French village after a ten day vacation in the region. In fact, she had already begun to feel constrained in her life in England. One day after the Tuesday club we sat in a café where she tried to untangle the path that lead her all alone from a reasonably comfortable life in England to buying a former post office which she would vow to make her new home. Peggy was older than most international retirees when she arrived in France but she was active and in good health. She wanted to keep working but she also knew that she wanted to slow down a bit, but "once you start 'slowing down', people assume you need help, then you become a liability in a way. I didn't want to be a worry. I didn't really know what I wanted!" One thing she did know was that as soon as she saw a glimpse of the possibility to retire in France, she couldn't imagine any other outcome for herself. While the example might seem insignificant, it signals a deeper sense of the inability Peggy felt to reconstruct her identity as she aged:

I didn't need an adventure. I can make an adventure anywhere I go! I was happy. But I guess I also saw a bit of the end in sight, you know. You see more endings than you do beginnings at some point. It's hard to explain, but I just felt free to experience things more and to experiment more here. For example, if I'd stayed in England I could have never started wearing hats, because amongst my friends and family, I was not a woman who wore hats. But once I got here I decided I wanted to wear hats. And I do. And I look quite smart if I may say so!

Sixty-eight year old Thea, a German woman who retired in France, echoed this sentiment nicely:

There's no one hanging on to your past for you when you retire in a new culture. I would never lie about my

past, but my new friends and neighbors don't worry about it. They are experiencing me, and getting to know me without strings or baggage attached. That's incredibly liberating at my age. It causes terror in some, who are so highly invested in their own past that they can't imagine living without wearing it like a neon sign, but not me. Not those of us who find ourselves here.

## CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that single women will make up a growing number of those choosing IRM as both a calculative and sometimes reactive approach to unforeseen eventualities of retirement. Using qualitative data on single women who have retired abroad, the paper thus contributes a female-focused perspective to the growing IRM literature. While the data used represent only a fragment of data gathered for the larger parent study, the serendipitous discovery of these single women restructuring their retirement years abroad suggested a remarkable facet to the mosaic of the new old age. International retirement migration south is still not the norm for northern retirees, but it is growing and given the demographic reality of elder women in terms of total numbers, longevity and financial (in)stability, the pathways aging women choose to follow require close consideration. The women's experiences presented herein reflect some of the typical concerns of retirees such as financial worries but also shed light on a form of agency rarely attributed to aging single women, that of migration in order to age unencumbered by the past and the expectations others held for them in the future. None of the women interviewed had planned to move abroad when they retired. In attempting to interweave the more 'rational' reasons for relocating (economic) with the sometimes more poorly defined or inconsistent (fear of the known) we are forced to recognize the potential that IRM represents an interruption in the paths of these women as well as in our "tendency to assume explicit rationality on the part of potential migrants" (Walters 2002: 43).

The rational-choice tendencies of many aging and retirement studies too easily lose sight of the suggestion that there has been, and always will be, a 'new old age' (Jönson 2012) and that people can choose to age in unexpected ways. Variations in geographic, political, economic, health policy, and gender schema constructs necessitate an acceptance of understanding that aging, retirement, and migration are all cultural constructs influencing the decisions individuals make. Betty Friedan said, "Aging is not lost youth but a new stage of opportunity and strength." For some of the women in my research, the portability of pensions and access to healthcare was important, but there was also a clear sign that they wanted to view their retirement as a

beginning, not as an end. For others, anxiety about the contracting of their lives, both socially and emotionally, propelled them to leap into the unknown, putting their fears and the judgements of friends and family aside. In doing so it seems they were able to gain a strong sense of independence and freedom and create their own silver lining in aging.

## NOTES

1. Some notable work which engages a robust gender analysis includes Howard 2008.
2. This intends no disrespect to Howard's (2008) work. His principle research method was an online survey aimed at "all Westerners who lived or who had lived in Thailand for at least one year" from which he gained 152 respondents who were retirees and "all but one [of these retired] respondent was male" (ibid.: 153). Thus, his convenience sample was not diverse in terms of gender, but this reflects more the reality of IRM in Thailand than any lack of rigor in the research design.
3. Statistics Canada. Annual Demographic Estimates. 2012. (<http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/91-215-x/2012000/part-partiel-eng.htm>)
4. Bureau of the Census. The Statistical Abstract of the United States. Table 57. Marital Status of the Population by Sex and Age. 2010. (<http://www.census.gov/compendia/statab/2012/tables/12s0057.pdf>)
5. Eurostat, Statistical Book. 2008.
6. The Costa Rican government does not differentiate between retirees and long-stay tourists.
7. In the United States, new 'channels' of economic retirement migration have been developed resulting in tremendous growth rates of older populations in places like Nevada, Alaska, Utah, and New Mexico (Frey 1999).
8. <http://www.ssa.gov/policy/docs/statcomps/supplement/>. 2012
9. See for example: <http://www.mexperience.com/retirement/>; <http://www.fallinginlovewithsanmiguel.com/>; <http://internationalliving.com/where-to-retire/>; <http://www.creme-de-languedoc.com/languedoc-property/relocate-retire-france.php>; [http://www.aplaceinfrance.co.uk/retiring\\_in\\_france.htm](http://www.aplaceinfrance.co.uk/retiring_in_france.htm)
10. Sometimes interviewing older people, especially regarding possible financial or emotional strains, can be emotionally tricky, but I should note that the interviewees were quite open and enthusiastic in talking to me. Follow-up interviews, when necessary, were easy to arrange and many later engaged me in lively email exchanges upon further reflection of their paths to international retirement migration. Furthermore, I have maintained casual email contact with all of the participants.
11. I was also invited to give a talk on Anthropology and my research interests.
12. Eurostat, Statistical Book. 2008
13. This was a sentiment shared by many of the couples I interviewed as well.
14. While I argue that IRM is economically strategic for these women, I recognize that this kind of mobility does require some guaranteed level of retirement income out of the reach of many women.

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# No Peace in the House: Witchcraft Accusations as an “Old Woman’s Problem” in Ghana

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## Abstract

In Ghana, older women may be marginalized, abused, and even killed as witches. Media accounts imply this is common practice, mainly through stories of “witches camps” to which the accused may flee. Anthropological literature on aging and on witchcraft, however, suggests that this focus exaggerates and misinterprets the problem. This article presents a literature review and exploratory data on elder advocacy and rights intervention on behalf of accused witches in Ghana to help answer the question of how witchcraft accusations become an older woman’s problem in the context of aging and elder advocacy work. The ineffectiveness of rights based and formal intervention through sponsored education programs and development projects is contrasted with the benefit of informal conflict resolution by family and staff of advocacy organizations. Data are based on ethnographic research in Ghana on a rights based program addressing witchcraft accusations by a national elder advocacy organization and on rights based intervention in three witches camps.

*Keywords: older women, witchcraft, Ghana, advocacy, human rights, development*

## INTRODUCTION

Witchcraft beliefs are a part of every day life in Ghana and a part of aging in Ghana as well. This is typically not a problem for older adults, in a country where the connotation of the English word “old” is more positive; a colloquial term for translating, “I am old” means “I have grown” (van der Geest 2005). In addition, older adults who are known to have the wisdom that comes with knowing witchcraft are more often feared and respected rather than feared and abused (Awedoba, personal communication 2005, Van der Geest, 2002). On the other hand, older women marginalized within family systems are vulnerable to attack and even abuse. The national and international media have reported on horrific cases in which older women were murdered as suspected witches (e.g. Smith 2010). Follow up reports then focused on “witches’ camps,” to which the accused may flee for protection where they are also effectively imprisoned if family and/or community refuse to let them return. There

are no national statistics on the scope of this problem, and reports counting numbers of “inmates” apparently trapped at shrines and in camps vary from hundreds to thousands. The national government’s Commission on Human Rights and Administrative Justice (CHRAJ) publishes a census of inmates and accompanying children in four of the camps but these reports offer contradictory numbers (e.g. CHRAJ 2009; Quason 2009). A general estimate of 1,000 inmates seems to be the most stable number for the six camps typically used for statistics (e.g. Whitaker 2012). The UNHCR, the United States State Department and the U.K. border control address witchcraft accusations as a human rights problem. Their reports are used in assessment of asylum cases from those either accused of witchcraft or accused of inflicting witchcraft (Schnoebelen 2009; UK Border Agency 2013; U.S. Department of State 2012). Since the 1990s, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have implemented projects to address witchcraft



violations broadly and to “free” or assist camp inmates. The long-term impact, based on research and assessments by reporters and advocacy workers, is unclear at best, and those with sustained involvement have softened from a focus on rights violations to a more culturally sensitive approach of family conflict resolution.

The purpose of this paper is to provide anthropological analysis of witchcraft as an older woman’s problem that has not been well solved using rights-based intervention. Data presented are from a larger ethnographic study of elder advocacy work by a nationally based Ghanaian NGO between 2003-2005. I call this organization Ghanaian Aging Resources (GAR). Specific data on witchcraft accusations and elder advocacy are from GAR’s rights program and field research on intervention work in three of the camps in the villages of Gambaga, Kuku, and Ngnani, which are located in the Northern Region. Updates on rights based intervention are provided through results of an internet search yielding about 100 documents in the form of governmental reports, NGO sources, and news stories published between 1996 and 2013. Findings build from work by Sjaak van der Geest (Bleek 1975; Van der Geest 2002b) on how witchcraft is part of aging in Ghana, and add data on elder advocacy intervention. Rights based intervention work attempting systemic change has not been effective but is becoming a common part of public discourse and life in at least one witches’ camp. As such, I argue it is an evolving form of cultural practice linking global audiences to local contexts that cannot simply replace local moralities and social response. What has been more effective advocacy is to work from within cultural norms through informal conflict mediation among family and community systems.

## BACKGROUND

### *The Anthropology of Aging in Ghana*

Study of aging in Ghana began with the work of Nana Araba Apt in the 1970s (Apt 1996, 1993, 1971; see also van der Geest 1997). Subsequent work has continued to examine what it means to grow older in Ghana in the context of extended family, culture, and socioeconomic contexts (Aboderin 2006; Brown 1992; Stucki 1995; van der Geest 1997; 2006). A common proverb both in the literature and in conversations about aging with people in Ghana identifies the importance of interdependent relationships: “Just as the elder helped you as you cut your first teeth, so must you help them as they lose theirs.” In other words, aging is not characterized as an individual as much as a social experience very much dependent upon reciprocal relationships and demonstrated respect (van der Geest

2002a). The rights of young and old are not stressed as much as the responsibilities accorded to social roles within extended family systems. Older adults who have “done well” over the life course financially and socially have supported younger generations, and then can expect to be supported in return as they reach old age. Even as they may become weaker physically, they are valued for their wisdom accumulated through life experience. As one elder explains, he is happiest when the younger generations seek his advice (van der Geest 1998).

In addition to wisdom through accumulated life experience, older adults are also associated with knowledge of potentially destructive knowledge glossed as “witchcraft” in English. They may be feared for having this power and thus treated with respect. They may use this power to curse another and bring misfortune. This attribution can also be a form of social sanction by accusers for not sufficiently sharing resources when another seems to have acted selfishly or succeeded unfairly. As in other African contexts, these accusations can be analyzed as interpersonal conflicts of jealousy and also as intergenerational power struggles when youth accuse elders of preventing success within families and communities (Auslander 1993; Bleek 1975). In Zambia in the 1980s, for example, youth led by a self-appointed witch finder conducted village “cleansings” in which older adults and especially older women were prime targets. The cleansing temporarily subverted local power dynamics but elders eventually regained power (Auslander 1993). Although both women and men may use witchcraft, the association between women and witchcraft is particularly negative in Ghana and other African contexts (Drucker-Brown 1993; Hoch-Smith 1978). Accused women include those who are unusually successful or unsuccessful. Scholars interpret this as meaning women are sanctioned for any deviance from social expectations, which includes following a cultural norm of subordination to men (Amoah 1987; Drucker-Brown 1993). As in the media accounts of violence, those most vulnerable in witchcraft accusations are late middle aged, post-menopausal women and older women. These accusations are not necessarily serious. As Van der Geest found in a study of witchcraft accusations within an extended family system in the 1970s, accusations among family members not only target the elderly, and rarely become more serious than gossip (van der Geest, personal communication, 2005). In follow up research focused on aging in the mid to late 1990s, a respondent explained the dynamics of witchcraft accusations within family systems, and his regrets as a young man:

If an old woman is in the house and the young in the house don’t prosper, they will regard her as a witch.

But if the young in the house are successful, they won't regard the old woman as a witch. If old women use witchcraft for the success of their children, it is referred to as good witchcraft, *bayi pa*. People seldom mention it even when the term is mentioned. It is said as a joke, but the young in the house constantly insult those with *bayi bone* (bad witchcraft) and on some occasions they even threaten to attack them... Most of the accusations are not true. The young do it because they are desperate. When they face difficulties they tend to accuse the old wrongly. When I was young and struggling in life I used to insult my mother whenever I got drunk and I constantly accused her of witchcraft... it is like when you have lost an item; you think of everyone as a thief. (Kwame Opoku quoted in Atuobi et. al, 26)

As expressed in this quote, the associations between age, gender, and witchcraft may be positive or negative. Implications are found in relation to individual and family functioning rather than on age and gender in isolation.

### *The Anthropology of Witchcraft in Ghana*

Witchcraft has long been of interest to anthropologists of Africa, and Ghana has hosted some of the disciplines most famous scholars, such as Jack Goody (1967, 1962) and Meyer Fortes (1945, 1940). This is in part because witchcraft is part of spiritual beliefs and practices that permeate much of daily life in Ghana within a multicultural region of many ethnic groups and multiple languages. Quoting from an anthropologist, Anthony Appiah explains spiritual beliefs persist from, "being born into a culture with ready-made patterns of belief which had the weight of tradition on them," and that this tradition includes witchcraft (Appiah 1991, 117). Witchcraft is hard to explain and beliefs vary but it is generally believed in Ghana and across West Africa to be a term to explain how misfortune and loss are caused by one who has inflicted evil as illness, accident or death (Simmons 1980). One may acquire witchcraft intentionally as a "medicine" or may unconsciously receive it from another witch (Drucker-Brown 1993, 533). In other words, not all witches are aware they have this power or how they acquire it. At the same time, there are positive constructions of witchcraft as a power to bring good fortune to oneself, which is mainly criticized if that good fortune is at the expense of others. A common proverb is used to explain that only people close in kinship ties and geographical proximity can cause harm, which is that it is "the insect in your cloth that bites you."

Very generally, one who is accused or fear they have the witchcraft may consult a shrine. A shrine priest holds power to divine who is a witch and to 'dewitch' through medicine and ritual. Typically the shrine priest is an older male who has the same witchcraft powers but uses them

for different purposes (Drucker-Brown 1993, 534). In Gambaga, the village best known internationally having a "witches' camp," there is no shrine but the chief has the power to render witches harmless. He performs the divination and offers the necessary ceremony to "dewitch" if the person is guilty. He does not require the accused to remain in the camp after they pay for the dewitching but in practice lack of "peace in the house" in the home village may mean that the accused cannot return with or without a finding of guilty. Lack of peace refers to unresolved strife within a "house" that is typically several houses clustered within an extended family compound. As argued by Geshiere, witchcraft accusations are part of the "dark side of kinship" (Ciekawy and Geshiere 1998, 4), given that accusations are only among close family members. The camps then become a place of refuge if peace cannot be restored. As described by Karen Palmer, a journalist who studied the camps over several months in the mid 2000s writes, "accused women took their demolished reputations and hid themselves at the witch camps, since they knew no other remedy for the anger and violence that came with the accusation" (Palmer 2010, 216).

Witchcraft beliefs have been studied both as an explanatory theory and as a means of social organization (Stewart and Strathern 2003). In particular, the "witchcraft idiom" (Van der Geest 2002b, 450) is a way to answer existential questions about misfortune and loss. As explained by E. E. Evans Pritchard, it helps explain not necessarily the material aspects of why something happened, such as the underlying illness that caused death, but rather why a particular loved one had to be the victim at that particular time (Evans-Pritchard in Appiah 1991, 117-119). As a means of social organization, Victor Turner famously described the "social drama" (Turner 1972) that may erupt due to underlying tensions of kinship and competition that are then blamed on an outsider. Witchcraft accusations are a way to surface interpersonal conflicts, air grievances, and then restore social relations to a more harmonious whole (Stewart and Strathern 2003, 4). In this process, a moral order is challenged and then affirmed. This structural-functionalist view came under criticism within anthropology as the Durkheimian assumption of social harmony as a norm was replaced by greater attention to how conflicts may not simply serve to stabilize social systems. Moreover the seemingly isolated ethnic groups studied as self contained groups in the typical village study were in fact part of modernity and larger colonial projects of governance and political economy (Comaroff and Comaroff 2003). Social tension underlying witchcraft accusations can be linked to unequal incorporation of villages and regions into capitalist market systems (e.g.

Parker 2006). Contributing factors to accusations against a family member then may require understanding what Paul Farmer refers to as the “structural violence” of poverty and social inequality (Farmer 2003). Anthropologists study witchcraft beliefs and accusations as stabilizing and destabilizing forces within colonial and postcolonial contexts of conflict and socioeconomic change. As Todd Sanders explains, “African notions of witchcraft are neither archaic nor static but are highly flexible and attuned to the conundrums of our contemporary world” (Sanders 2003, 338). Witchcraft is thus a way in which people interpret and construct modernities as well as seek to resolve tensions and misfortune within modern contexts (Sanders 2003, 339-340; Simmons 1980, 447). This is important to consider in asking why the camps are located in northern Ghana, which is a region historically deprived of development investment and yet used to support a southern based economy through colonial and postcolonial government policies (Drucker-Brown 1993).

Witchcraft accusations against older adults have not been a sole focus in these studies. In Ghana as in other parts of sub-Saharan Africa, accusations tend to be among kin but are not exclusively imposed on older adults. For example, Susan Drucker-Brown studied the Mamprusi in Gambaga (Drucker-Brown 1993). The famous Gambaga witches’ camp was formed during precolonial (and pre-written recorded) times. Her fieldwork was in the 1960s with a follow up in 1991. She writes that most of the women inmates had been banished there in late middle age, were widowed, and that most were now older adults. The local term for the camp is pwaanyankura-foango, which translates literally as, “old ladies section” (Drucker-Brown 1993, 535). She noted that most but not all of the women were old. In the 1960s, few of the inmates were Mamprusi, and people in the village were not afraid of the witches who came from the surrounding region. In 1991, however, she found that most of the women were now Mamprusi and people told her that, “witchcraft had become more frequent and more serious” (Drucker-Brown 1993, 539). This parallels research in other parts of sub-Saharan Africa in which anthropologists find that witchcraft concerns rise with rather than recede with benefits and stresses of modernity (Ciekawy and Geshiere 1998, 3). Her analysis of the situation in 1991 and changes since the 1960s focused not on age but on gender. She argued that the basis of the accusations was in gender relations and attempts to restore a patriarchal order in the face of socioeconomic changes that had allowed women to make more gains and for men to lose resources. Some of the accused living in the camps had been unusually successful, and some were vulnerable within family power dynamics and thus easy to attack.

Traveling to Gambaga and interviewing nineteen women in 2006, Yaba Badoe reached a similar conclusion (Badoe 2011). The intersection of gender, age, marital status, and children led her to note that,

...those most vulnerable to witchcraft accusations were widowed women in late-middle age, who were forced to move back to their fathers’ houses after the death of their husbands; successful businesswomen who headed their own households; women without children to provide them with leverage within the extended family; and women without an adult male brother from the same mother to protect their interests in the extended family (Badoe 2011, 42).

Jon Kirby links gender and age with political economy in a 2004 essay in which he describes how NGO work to empower youth and women had been fueling witchcraft accusations by men left out of development projects (Kirby 2004, 1). In these analyses, tensions fueling social drama come from the vulnerability of women without male allies in extended family systems within the stress of inadequate and uneven development interventions.

#### *Rights Discourse on Witchcraft as a Social Problem in Ghana*

In contrast to a small number of academic studies on aging, gender, and witchcraft accusations, there are hundreds of articles printed and reproduced through national and international media on the plight of women, mostly older women, attacked, banished, and murdered as witches. Stories collected for this article were published between 1996 and 2013 but Drucker-Brown suggests media interest was already strong in 1991 (Drucker-Brown 1993, 537). The majority of these articles were written within a rights discourse that also informs much of the advocacy work on this issue around the country. The Gambaga camp serves as the icon for representing witchcraft beliefs as a social problem and rights violation against women, particularly older women (for a dramatic example, see SOSYWEN, n.d.). As icon, the construction of the camp is one reminiscent of colonial era village studies in the 19th century. That is, the camp supposedly exists within an isolated village that seems lost in time. Here, traditional beliefs control people’s lives. Few outsiders have traveled so far to discover surprising insights of how modernization has not yet reached this place. Ignorance is the source of elder women’s marginalization and abuse. The camps are a national disgrace within Ghana and a global human rights violation. Demands are made to disband the camps and return the women to families. Poverty is named as the root of the problem—poverty of education, of resources, and of the ability to rise above

supernatural thinking. Development is then the answer, in the form of education and development assistance. Modernity is not the problem but rather the solution. As such, rights discourse potentially serves the self-interest of government agencies and NGO organizations soliciting development funds. They become the self-appointed sources of "awareness creation" through conferences and the production of educational posters and brochures. They argue that public education will change beliefs in part by enlightening communities of scientific explanations for illness and death. At the same time, the characterization of the discourse for this review has been simplified for the sake of brevity. It is not monolithic and is subject to change through engagement with publics in and outside of the camps as well as intervention projects. The point is that media representations of witchcraft as an older woman's problem omits the more complex power dynamics and socioeconomic contexts in which accusations arise, and isolates the problem as self-evident rather than as subject to interpretation and negotiation. My research indicates far greater ambiguity and complexity in linking age, witchcraft and abuse as a problem demanding formal intervention by the government and NGOs. Research design, methods, and results are next presented.

## METHODS

### *Research Design and Study Sites*

The data used in this paper were collected as part of a larger cross national study of elder advocacy projects piloted by a nongovernmental organization in the U.S. and one in Ghana. I called them American Aging Resources (AAR) and Ghana Aging Resources (GAR). In both projects, the dominant research methods were participant observation, ongoing informal interviews with key informants, semi-structured interviews with program participants, and document examination of materials used as part of the program. In both sites, I was able to literally participate initially as a mediator and mediator trainer due to a request by GAR that I offer skills rather than merely conduct my own research. This entry to research, then, was like that of anthropologists who work as consultants in the organizations they study (see Strathern and Stewart 2004). Mediation training and project development was followed by data collection for research purposes as my role changed from participant to observer. In both sites, this data collection followed the methods of legal anthropology to "follow the ideas" (Starr and Goodale 2002, 64-5) underlying intervention rather than to focus on individual case analysis. These ideas included old age as a social problem, witchcraft accusations as an elder

rights problem, and rights work as a solution. In Ghana, I chose additional sites in which to observe mediations as conducted by Ghanaians who were trained by Americans but not by me. One was a legal aid board that hears cases diverted from court. I also extended my focus to a legal rights program because the mediation project was ideally going to become part of this program. The project was funded from 2004-2006 with a focus on three types of rights violations against older adults; property disputes, disinheritance of older adults, and witchcraft accusations against older adults. The legal rights program generally solicited "legal challenge" cases that could be used to uphold existing laws or challenge those that discriminated against older adults. There were also two urban and two rural sites targeted for community meetings and educational "awareness creation" about rights. I studied the rights program through examining awareness creation documents, such as posters, and traveling to each of the targeted community sites. I lived in village K for three weeks and village M for a month. Data were collected with IRB approval.

Although witchcraft accusations had already been identified as a problem by GAR, it was located by many in conversation and in the press as a problem experienced by others—for example, those in other parts of the country or with less formal education. In addition, the legal challenge program yielded no cases during the study period. The one case in the program between 2004-2006 was a property dispute.

In order to expand data collection on witchcraft and older adults, three witch camps were added as field sites. GAR has never worked in these camps so that my GAR affiliation as a mediation consultant was less relevant than my affiliation with the Institute for African Studies at the University of Ghana as a researcher. I was, however, immediately recognized and assigned a role as curious outsider with questions similar to those of travelers, journalists, NGO professionals, and rights activists. This brought a second problem, which Ann-Elise Riles refers to as the 'inside-out' problem in her study of a women's network (Riles 2004). The problem is when one studies a practice that is already familiar, that comes already analyzed. In her study, the problem was that she was already familiar with networks because this was part of a familiar cultural norm. Her task, then, was how to make the familiar strange by looking at spaces between the more obvious variables for data collection. In this study, the camps have been so often visited that they are new to outsiders but the outsiders are all too familiar to insiders. I therefore focused on understanding the sources of this familiarity and insider perception of outsider visits, particularly in trying to

intervene through NGO work. Data from visiting the camps and interviewing government officials and NGO staff who have been engaged in intervention work was updated by internet searches of reports and intervention work since 2005. Searches were conducted using terms Gambaga, witch, witches, witchcraft, and Ghana in Proquest, LexisNexus databases as well as Google. This document review included ten government reports, a UNHCR analysis (Schnoebelen 2009), an NGO research report (Houde n.d), a research report by a journalist (Badoe 2011), and over seventy-five news articles dated between 1996 and 2013. Karen Palmer's journalistic account of the camps published in 2010 helped verify and add data about the camps and intervention work solutions from the 1990s through 2006.

### *Limitations*

The main research limitation was time for fieldwork. Because witchcraft accusations were not the focus of the larger study, there were only three weeks of data collection in the region hosting the camps. Within two trips to the Northern Region, seven days were spent in direct data collection in the camps within three weeks that included interviews with government officials, pastors, and NGO staff based in the cities of Tamale, Yendi, and Bimbilla. And, while English is the official language of Ghana, there were several local languages used in these field sites that were not mastered. Mediations at the legal aid board were generally in English but sometimes in one, two or three additional languages. Interviews at the camps required a translator.

The more specific focus on witchcraft accusations was difficult to study. This was in part due to stigma attached to admitting one's spiritual beliefs are real when talking to academics (or as academics). In Ghana, many people of all levels of education believe in the supernatural and in witchcraft but hide this from outsiders who might disdain these beliefs as exotic and false. Formal interviews and survey research can lead to unreliable results, as is described in the results section. I therefore relied upon the serendipity of ethnographic research, in which chance encounters and informal, ongoing conversation provides better data. These data were recorded as field notes and then used in subsequent conversations in effort to best achieve "interpretive validity" (Fetterman 1998) of the data.

## RESULTS

### *Lessons from GAR*

I first learned of witchcraft in relation to the potential mediation program. It was in the context of helping me prepare for a mediation training as requested by GAR in 2003 by offering an example of a potential mediation case. The example was a past case in which an adult son had accused his mother of being a witch and kept her "in a structure." GAR staff were unable to convince him to change his mind or take better care of her but they were able to negotiate to provide her with food and clothing on their own. The focus of staff attention was similar to that of professionals who intervene in elder abuse cases in the United States, in which the problem is a neglectful or abusive caregiver who is therefore both the problem and the ideal source of solution.

When I returned in 2004, GAR had secured funding for the rights program previously described from an overseas NGO for a grant period from 2004-2006. There were no witchcraft cases in this program during the study period. The observable parts of witchcraft in the legal rights program were educational materials produced for "awareness creation." For example, one had an old man as a wizard covered by a red circle and slash. The text read, "Old age is not the start of witchcrafting." When attending a community meeting in village M where the posters were distributed, the reception was muted. This reaction is probably related to how members of the village had already told the NGO that they did not need assistance. I was told that they had their own internal system of settling disputes and did not need the intervention of a rights program. At the same time, when asked directly about accusations, a key informant first described how a nephew had accused an aunt within her family and then how she had been accused on occasion. However, she was the head of the extended family, and expressed this more as an annoyance than a serious problem.

Witchcraft accusations also did not seem to be a common preoccupation for older adults requesting GAR services and was not an obvious part of agency activities at the main office or in the communities where they worked. I did collect one more example of witchcraft accusation, which was narrated as follows:

A GAR woman was accused of being a witch- she had donated land on which a church was built and a visiting pastor told the congregation she was a witch and it has ruined her- she has lost friends, people won't buy firewood from her, etc. and the church is trying to say it's

not their fault, it was a visiting pastor but (volunteer) said that the people there must have had some agenda against the woman and used an outsider to come in and condemn her so that people would believe it and believe it coming from a pastor and so GAR has asked to bring the visiting pastor back so he can say it is not true.

In addition, of the dozens of settlement cases observed at the legal aid organization, there was one case involving an older woman and witchcraft. The head of the family explained that the woman who had owned the property was accused of being a witch by a younger family member, and that is why she left that one out of the inheritance of property and room. This statement brought a shocked reaction from the room, and the young family member's lawyer protested that this accusation was not relevant to the case, but one of the legal aid lawyers replied that it was relevant if it was related to the inheritance issue.

These brief examples suggest that witchcraft accusations happen within a context of conflict and contest. They can be quite serious, involving elder abuse and financial loss. They may also remain at the level of family rivalries and gossip. As narrated to me, each case implies a false accusation unfairly used against an older woman. While the formal program did not yield a legal case to submit in court, GAR staff used informal methods of negotiation and conflict resolution to help in cases brought to their attention. Funders of the rights program rejected requests to include this type of mediation into the rights program, which was focused on identifying cases for court rather than conflict resolution.

The lack of information substantiating severity of a problem of course may simply indicate need for more data collection. In order to learn more, I traveled to the one area of Ghana in which one was guaranteed to find problems of witches, age, and gender. This turned out to be a well-worn path in a region of the country historically neglected by development efforts by the colonial and postcolonial government. The extra attention given more recently to Gambaga was welcomed, criticized, and resented. Successful advocacy for the inmates came through more informal and long term efforts to resolve family tensions and negotiate return.

### *Lessons from Camps*

My first trip began with Gambaga. "We get people like you all the time," was the general response I received upon arrival. This was evident from the numerous signs posted to advertise the good work of USAID and NGO projects. Gambaga was hardly an isolated village trapped

in time but was rather the ongoing recipient of outsider beneficiaries and travelers.

I located an NGO guesthouse. The staff first criticized me for bringing a young man as a translator and then introduced me to a replacement. Hawa, a woman who is Mamprusi and has lived in Gambaga, became translator, guide and friend during this trip and my return to the village about one month later.

The first step was to meet David, who ran an NGO sponsored by the Presbyterian church called the Go-Home Project. Although David no longer works there, and the NGO project ended in 2009, the church's ministry had been the only longstanding intervention presence in the camp. This ministry to the accused witches began in the 1960s, and the Go-Home Project was established in 1994. Camp census numbers recorded between 1994 and 2009 ranged from 52 to 128 women (Houde n.d, 29). The project provided charity, such as funds for school fees, and income generating projects but the work stressed to me in 2005 was about family conflict resolution. David acted as a social worker to investigate cases, meet with families, and negotiate return. Investigation included whether the person was married, if any children were grown or not, if family came to visit whether the relationship seemed cordial, and if there was family back home who would care for her. As David explained, he visited the families to find out if people back home were not happy and/or likely to kill her. David also assessed whether they were "wild" or angry. Sometimes he was successful, and reported the project had helped 300 women. He provided a positive image of sending the person back and having a big gathering with the chief in the village. However, when Yaba Badoe filmed two of these returns in 2006, she highlighted how the women seemed to be unwelcome (Badoe 2010). She also noted that all but one of the nineteen women she interviewed had some ongoing contact with family (Badoe 2010, 42).

David complained of how outside groups come from the capital and only stay a short time. He was particularly angry at a national women's legal organization, whom he said only came for one day and used his report. When CNN came a few days later, he refused to give them the report. When I asked about an anti-witchcraft poster David had in his office, he said dismissively, "That's just awareness creation." After we talked and he gave me instructions on how to be sensitive to the chiefs concern about bad press, I had dinner with Hawa. During dinner, she told me of how she was once bewitched by an aunt and then recovered.

The next morning, I followed the next expected step, which was to greet the chief and seek his permission to interview the women. The chief answered my questions curtly, and narrated the common origin story of how he became guardian of the witches. That is, some generations ago, people fled to a local Imam for protection from persecution and in fear of their lives. Because this matter concerned traditional beliefs, the Imam told the Gambaga chief that he should look after them. The current chief, therefore, inherited this responsibility along with the ability to detect and disarm witches of their powers.

Conversation with several women willing to meet me was awkward. My impression was that the women had a short but precise agenda to protect themselves by protecting the chief and the Go Home staff. For example, when asked about growing older, one response was, "It's good to grow old here in the camp because the chief takes care of us." And in response to asking, "Why are you here?" came the response, "Because there is no peace in the house."

The interviews were a repetition of typical responses already published in blogs and news stories. Each woman had been falsely accused through blame for an illness, accident, or death. There was enough ongoing tension in the family that they were advised by a chief or determined on their own that it was better to stay in the camp. In asking Hawa about why published stories are so uniform, she replied that most seemed to get details "from the outside." Outside in this case both refers to people living outside the village as well as people with outside agendas, such as NGOs that are trying to establish themselves through intervention projects.

*"You can not believe and you can not not believe"*

Hawa continued to help bridge the gap between a staged trip and what the realities might be for people living in Gambaga. On this trip and on the second trip, we talk about witchcraft along with her friends and family. One person explained that witchcraft is used to "progress." Sometimes, people are merely jealous and use witchcraft to prevent progress in others. White men, however, have used witchcraft to create things like TV and cell phones. In other words, witchcraft can be positive and negative. Apparently, younger women are more likely to stay in the camps temporarily and then leave. People have more faith in rehabilitation for younger people. Sometimes younger people simply have more strength and willingness to leave the area completely and move to the capital. Whether those accused of witchcraft actually stay has a lot to do with whether they have any other place where they can go. In addition to the witches, others also come to live

in the camps. Sometimes, children are sent to live with the witch and help them out. This continues a common cultural practice of fostering young children among family members. In a different example, a man followed the woman to the camp and tried to help her return with the help of David. She was not accepted but they married and eventually settled outside the camp. The popular image of total banishment and isolation turns out to be more complex in practice. Young children sent to care for the accused also benefit from funds given by the Go-Home project to pay for school fees. The local hospital no longer charges for visits. The banished are then ironically resented for charity received. As one informant cynically commented, "The NGOs are happy they (the women) are there" because they are so popular as a source of donor funds.

Hawa also told her story of bewitchment a few more times. The story begins with an unexplained and persistent illness. She is having panic attacks. She seeks help from the hospital and was given medication for heartburn. When she returns to the hospital, she refuses the medication because it is the same as before. In one version, she was sent to live with the chief for a year. In most versions, she has a dream in which her aunt drives a stake into her chest, exactly where it hurts. Initially, her father resists accusing the aunt but Hawa is not getting better. In one version, the aunt has already been accused of bewitching another family member. Although the woman protests that she is not a witch, her daughters say things that indicate they know she is guilty. Five chickens are killed, and all of them indicate guilt. The woman then confesses that she has taken Hawa's spirit and turned it into a cockroach. The insect is in a jar in the garbage dump. The jar is found, proving the truth of the confession. The aunt stays for a short time in the camp, is "dewitched," and returns home. Hawa sleeps well for the first time the night after the conviction and does not have major health problems after that. As she says of her experience, "You can not believe and you can not not believe."

I also walk around town and talk to more people in the Presbyterian church. In Tamale, I had met a Presbyterian pastor who had served in Gambaga before the camps "gained so much attention." He made a point to say that the women had been among his best parishioners and he also noted that sometimes they believe they are witches. For example, they talk of cooking people and eating them. Arguments sometimes come up about whose turn it is to kill and gather the meat. In Gambaga, the pastor mentions that he offers exorcisms in the church, but the women remain segregated within the church. Although the women can walk freely about town, many keep their

distance from others in public spaces, such as markets and church services. Another common attitude in town seems to be that while there may be some who are wrongfully accused and are innocent, there are also those who are guilty and would be very dangerous if not kept there.

*“Our names have traveled to places we have not been”*

I met with government officials and NGO workers in larger towns and cities of Bimbilla, Yendi, and Tamale. However, the information I learned was not substantially different from that found in the rights discourse of intervention work. I also visited two more camps. The protocol for both Ngnani and Kukuo was similar in that I needed the help of a translator and I also needed to first seek permission to talk to the “inmates.” Kukuo was described as more of a “clinic” for people to be cured of witchcraft and leave. Unlike Gambaga, it was not a camp that had been created for witches but over time so many additional people had come to live there that it was becoming a town that included witches who were not segregated but part of the settlement. A newspaper article in 2011 recorded an NGO census of 130 women and 171 children (Selby 2011).

Ngnani is a much bigger camp and has both men and women. As many as four to ten people arrive each week but many also return within a week. I was told overall numbers are hard to know since some leave “so early... or (stay) forever.” The numbers had increased quite a bit in the wake of ethnic conflict between the Dagombas and Konkombas in 1994. The result was a large number, this time, of Dagombas. An NGO estimate as reported in a 2011 news article was 750 women and 400 children (Selby 2011). As previously mentioned, these census numbers are estimates taken at one point in time. In addition, estimates of age can be difficult given how uncommonly older adults in Ghana know their age by when they were born. Rather than ask for exact ages, my colleague asked for the age of respondents when Ghana became independent from England in 1957 to help with estimation.

There happened to be a divination in progress when we arrived, and we were allowed to observe. The basic activities were those already described in the literature—the focal point is when a bird is pierced and everyone watches as it dies to see which way it falls. If it dies face down, the person is guilty, and if face up, the person is innocent. The first bird indicated guilt, and so the woman protested and the ritual was repeated. Unfortunately, the second one was the same. There followed a sort of pause. Everyone seemed to accept the outcome.

In these conversations with twenty women in Ngnani

and one leader in Kukuo, I’m told that there is more concern about witchcraft than in the past, and more false accusations. I also learn more about family ties, as recorded in my fieldnotes:

The family brings you or you bring yourself. Once you are old, you need protection and seek help from the god at the shrine in Dagbon, when you become old, likely they accuse you, you don’t have to wait and go for protection and some stay and beat them. ...Once they are here, they are under the protection of the shrine. You go here and take medicine at the shrine. If your family is strong, you are sent back to the community. Otherwise, find an old lady for you to stay with and you move in. The family collaborates with community members to put up the house (where you live). The family provides material, the people around help to build it. The family might come with a child and prepare food and help. ... There is still a link (to family). Especially if you came here voluntarily, the family will follow up.

Some of the women were there because they had followed when their mothers were accused of witchcraft. Over time, it was easier for them to stay. As in fieldnotes,

Due to the conflict in 1994, she moved to Yendi but her mother was in camp and so she came to assist her mother. She was with her mother when her mother died, and now she is also old. So, she will stay. If she goes back, she may face problems. She has been here for five years and was a child during independence.

When asked about NGO work, replies were that groups and individuals sometimes come. They usually only come once, donate some things, and then leave. There were no NGOs in particular, but in the past they had received a grinding mill, public latrines, help fixing roofs, doors, food, blankets, clothing, mats, and cotton for spinning. Although most were not aware of media stories, one translated response was, “Some time ago, they came and shot pictures and later those on radio heard stories and voices of colleagues and they were happy, realized their names have gone far—even to where they had not gone.”

The camps are a complicated site for ethnographic work given the range of interlocutors and familiarity with the iconic representation of witches camps as a rights violation. However, even a brief visit revealed how there is more variation in accusations and aftermath than the simple politicized story of an old woman wrongfully accused of loss or misfortune, who is then permanently banished by ignorant family. There is a disproportionate number of older women living in the camps. Gambaga and Kukuo only have women, and Ngnani and Kptinga



have a very small number of men. This does not mean that only old women are accused but rather older women who are unable to resist accusations are also unlikely to have resources to leave if the family will not take them back. The women may first arrive as daughters or grandchildren expected to support the accused relative, and then have to stay.

*"Awareness creation" versus "bringing peace in the house"*

The camps are attractive as a human rights problem to tackle and yet sustained engagement is rare. Awareness creation takes place in conferences held far from the camps, and through sporadic public presentations that are unlikely to change deeply ingrained beliefs that seem to explain otherwise unexplainable loss. Political struggle over resources, whether at the micro level of families or the more macro level of communities are unlikely to be resolved through lectures or brochures. Existential questions of why one person succeeds while another fails or falls ill are not really answered by rational or scientific explanations. The "dark side" of kinship is not simply eradicated by passionate speeches against ageism or sexism. These explanations could be reasons why a women's legal aid organization raised funds to "free" the witches in 1998 but most of the women refused to leave. One who did return had her ear cut off and came back to the Gambaga camp with a warning that the other ear would be cut off if she attempted to return again (Ameyibor 1998). Bringing peace to ensure a safer return requires greater engagement, time, and persistence.

The few examples of successful intervention learned through GAR and through the Go-Home project were examples of informal conflict resolution. This requires direct engagement with perpetrators of accusation and abuse that might result in partial rather than total victory. Similar to the dilemma of working with families in which there is elder abuse in the United States, this requires working with those who caused harm and who may feel they are victims rather than perpetrators. GAR staff, for example, were not able to convince the son that his mother was not a witch but they were able to provide her with food and clothing.

Accepting spiritual beliefs while trying to address dimensions of abuse is also consistent with culturally sensitive gerontological and social work practice. Another culturally sensitive dimension to this intervention is to use mediation. That is, a common response to interpersonal conflict in Ghana is to seek a third party who can fairly

assess the situation and advise but not impose a solution (Lowy 1973). The mediator role is to convene meetings for communication and reconciliation. GAR staff and David became mediators when asked, and also negotiated to play that role in seeking to bring peace in families and communities. Successfully negotiating return may not be the last step in helping to bring security. When Karen Palmer followed up to visit a woman who had returned after decades as a leader in the Gambaga camp, she found a woman whose health and physical functioning had declined considerably during the year of her return. She commented that perhaps the woman was eating less well than in the camps due to sharing scarce food with children and grandchildren (Palmer 2010, 223-4).

*Return from the Camps and Follow up Research in 2013*

After returning from the camps, I realized that belief in the supernatural was far more common than seemed obvious before I left. The reality of witchcraft was taboo in most professional settings, such as academic seminars and in NGO work. The very real beliefs in witchcraft came out indirectly, such as a comment by a staff member that perhaps they could work in the camps since I had demonstrated an ability to go to the camps and not return a witch. GAR staff often narrowed the legal rights program from witchcraft to witchcraft accusations and then to false accusations leveled against older people as easy targets in the midst of personal or family misfortune. This focus is a point of compromise for those who believe and who cannot not believe. And, respect for the elderly in Ghana can be demonstrated through outrage against false accusations by perpetrators of elder abuse without changing general belief in witchcraft. As one professional explained, "They will not accuse an older woman who is successful but accuse the one who is poor when it may be someone else who is the witch."

In 2005, the internet was a way to research some basic information about the camps through U.S. State Department reports and numerous news stories. In 2013, there is far more material. It has developed into a more uniform discussion of human rights abuses and the need to solve the witches problem through intervention in the camps. What were scattered statistics in government files I reviewed in 2005 are now published online in government reports. The reports appear to offer clear, unambiguous numbers that are in reality very hard to verify and always subject to change. These reports include the age, gender, and number of years spent in the camps for each inmate as well as children living with them. Recent crises in the U.K. over children killed as suspected witches (Morrison 2012)

may be a part of this newer focus on child targets.

Without a follow up visit to the camps, it is hard gauge if intervention work has brought greater change than was apparent in 2005. There is nothing in the news media or rights reports indicating significant change. Palmer's more in depth accounting of intervention efforts does not include sustained successes. However, there is one significant change in status of the village inmates. In 2012, a news agency reported that politicians had visited the camps to solicit votes from the witches (Salifu 2012). This is a remarkable example of how the women are not simply subjects of intervention work but also treated as citizens who vote.

## CONCLUSION

There are two social realities explored in this paper. The first is how witchcraft is part of aging in Ghana. Review of past scholarship and data from this study indicate that while the rights-based interpretation of particularly horrific cases is understandable, these cases are not representative of how witchcraft beliefs more commonly shape older people's lives. Witchcraft is used in explaining successes and harsh losses, and can be regarded positively and negatively. Older adults who have this kind of wisdom may be feared and respected for having an ability to curse. At the same time older women are far more likely to be attacked by witchcraft accusations in verbal abuse, as in the man who would get drunk and call his mother a witch. These accusations are not necessarily taken seriously, and may be forgotten over time.

In their intervention work, Ghanaian rights advocates are keen to highlight problems not of witchcraft beliefs but of false accusation. In fact, what seems like rallying against superstition can be interpreted as a means of upholding cultural values that respect older adults. Rather than focus on witchcraft accusations as an older woman's rights problem, a more useful approach may be to address harmful accusations as a form of elder abuse that disproportionately impacts women. One parallel between witchcraft accusations and elder abuse as studied in the US and globally is that elder abuse is not a typical part of aging for most older adults, and neglect by caregivers is a far more common problem than outright physical attack (Statistic Brain 2013). In other words, attention to the camps is important but may miss more commonly experienced marginalization and neglect. Another is that abusers are most commonly family members, and thus elder abuse is another example of "the dark side of kinship" (Anetzberger 2012, Statistic Brain 2013). A third parallel is in risk factors. That is, one identified risk factor

identified in elder abuse is caregiver dependency upon older adults for housing and money (Anetzberger 2012; Phelan 2013, 14-22), which is reminiscent of the man who accused his mother when he was "struggling in life." Another risk factor is marginalized status within family systems. The story of the man who kept his mother in a structure reminds me of a legal case in the U.S. portion of my study. An older woman was dependent on a son who severely neglected her and provided only chips and soda for food. Successful prosecution would have also removed the primary caregiver. If this case were in Ghana, the informal solution of family conflict mediation would be likely.

The second social reality is about elder advocacy as culturally mediated intervention work. Within rights based discourse, the moral boundaries of witchcraft violations appear far more clear than they may to those who genuinely fear witches. Whether one believes or not, the reduction of witchcraft to a problem of violence against women of whatever age misses a larger social context of ambiguity, contingency, and negotiation. More importantly, the solution to simply banish beliefs or force change has been resisted in the camps and does not seem to be taking root in the country as a whole. As in studies offering advice on AIDS and substance abuse intervention, one moral (or scientific) system cannot simply replace another as an explanatory framework or means of resolving social drama (Farmer 1990; Roy et. al. 2011). However, more modest intervention goals seem to have been possible. Although the data presented here relies on anecdotes from NGOs, and journalistic reports, it seems that GAR and the Go-Home Project have achieved some success by working from within cultural systems and negotiating with abusive accusers. Intervention work itself is thus informed by cultural values, such as values of individual rights or social responsibilities, and become subject to change when engaged in local contexts. Further research into intervention as "culture on the make" (Strathern 2002) could more closely trace the mutual impact of dialogue and intervention between rights and elder advocates and the locations where witchcraft accusations escalate to elder abuse. This, in turn, may help identify more sustainable and culturally appropriate solutions in partnership with local communities.

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**Anthropology & Aging Quarterly** is the official publication of the Association for Anthropology & Gerontology (AAGE). It is published quarterly (March, June, September, December) by AAGE. AAGE is a nonprofit organization established in 1978 as a multidisciplinary group dedicated to the exploration and understanding of aging within and across the diversity of human cultures. Our perspective is holistic, comparative, and international. Our members come from a variety of academic and applied fields, including the social and biological sciences, nursing, medicine, policy studies, social work, and service provision. We provide a supportive environment for the professional growth of students and colleagues, contributing to a greater understanding of the aging process and the lives of older persons across the globe.

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# Book Reviews

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*Gonzalez Sanders, Delia J and Fortinsky, Richard H. Dementia Care With Black and Latino Families: A Social Work Problem-Solving Approach. Springer Publishing. 2012 ISBN978-0-8261-0677-3 (Paper) \$55*

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This book is divided into three sections: 1) Setting the Context for Understanding Ethnic Dementia Care; 2) Social Work Process: Tools and Applications for Ethnic Populations and 3) Foundations and Future Care. The majority of the book focuses on section two, "Social Work Process". The primary theoretical orientations, 1) Systems theory and 2) Cognitive Behavioral Theory, are clearly laid out and defined in the Preface.

As the title indicates (Dementia Care with Black and Latino Families: A Social Work Problem Solving Approach) is directed toward Social Workers, though it would also be very useful for nursing, medical, public health, anthropology and sociology students. It gives an introduction to trends in Alzheimer's disease and related dementias (ADRD) among diverse populations in the United States. Many of the chapters open with a vignette narrative of actual clients who are caring for someone with ADRD. These narratives provide a reader with a "human face" to the disease to counter the statistical trends.

The vignettes and case examples present reasons why people in minority groups might choose to care for a loved one with ADRD at home (rather than skilled nursing care) and the myriad of challenges that they can face while providing this care. Issues presented in the case examples are explored throughout the chapters, but it is not until Chapter 7 (Gonzalez Sanders and Fortinsky 2012:207) that the authors

walk the reader through a case example, issue by issue, suggesting problem solving techniques and solutions. In earlier chapters, the reader might be left wondering how to address the presented challenges, without finding answers until much later in the book. This structure, while disconcerting at times, might serve as a useful critical thinking exercise for students.

A glaring concern from an anthropological perspective is that the authors speak extensively about culture, ethnicity, (and to a lesser extent, race) without defining these concepts. A definition of culture is eventually provided in chapter 4 (Gonzalez Sanders and Fortinsky 2012:95). These are contentious issues and it is understandable that the authors would wish to side step the complexity of these definitions, but it is necessary to address and define these concepts from the beginning. Without these definitions, the reader is left to define the terms in any way they choose, complete with the stereotypes presented in popular culture. For example, the authors use the terms "black" and "African Americans" in cultural and ethnic terms, rather than biological, however, this might not be clear to students. This concern could be rectified from an instructional standpoint if the book were augmented by articles that addressed the concept of culture, ethnicity and race in the medical field. In contrast, the authors do problematize the gendered skew of caregiving trends; most caregivers are women.

The book does offer useful problem solving techniques, sample forms, and documentation, which could be useful for social workers, nurses, physicians and researchers alike. Some of the suggested techniques, such as the "Ethnocultural Genogram" in Chapter 6 (Gonzalez Sanders and Fortinsky 2012:181-204) are adaptations of the family tree diagrams that anthropologists have historically

used during ethnographic research. The adoption of the techniques and forms in this book could yield very rich and useful data for individual problem solving and identifying further social trends in Social Work practice and applied medical anthropological research alike.

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*Osage, Patricia and McCall, Mary. Connecting with Socially Isolated Seniors: A Service Provider's Guide. Berkley, CA: Health Professions Press. 2012. ISBN 9781932529739, 360 pp. Price \$32.95 (Paper)*

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Authors Patricia Osage and Mary McCall explore the challenges associated with senior isolation in *Connecting with Socially Isolated Seniors*. Designed as a service provider's guide, this resource is a result of years of experience and expertise at the request of the staff and residents of Satellite Housing, Inc. Satellite Housing, Inc. is a provider of affordable housing to the San Francisco area whose service coordinators and caregivers were in search of a consolidated resource of best practices. The book summarizes the findings from a large survey of older adults living in independent senior housing communities and from focus groups conducted with senior caregivers, service coordinators, and activities directors.

The authors addressed three big questions:

- Do you recognize an association

between certain types of seniors and social isolation?

- What have you tried that was successful in reaching out to the aging?
- How can we prevent isolation and its' impact in our housing communication?

The book is easy to understand and divided into fifteen short chapters; 10 of which identify key risk factors associated with social isolation in the elderly. Besides succinct information, the book has numerous resources, including checklists, a quiz to help quickly identify individuals who are at risk for social isolation, contact information for specific public agencies, and "How to Help" sections that describe how to intervene with specific, actionable-specific items. In addition each chapter includes a detailed case study that reinforces the information within the section and that may potentially help others identify risk factors with their residents, patients, or loved ones.

Several key behavioral and cultural issues are addressed within the book; including hoarding, substance use, intimate relationships, and language and culture. For example:

**Hoarding:** Although unfamiliar to many several years ago, today this phenomenon is common. The term hoarding is associated with the term "messy" but oftentimes the core issue of why a senior becomes a hoarder is overlooked. Hoarding is a result of loneliness and material objects often replace relationships (p. 53). A great take-away from this chapter is the reminder that as a service provider/caregiver the goal is not for the senior to get rid of everything, but to organize things giving them more use of their room. The "eliminate -all" strategy can often do more harm than good. A great suggestion in this chapter is to seek out peer or clinical groups for reducing hoarding; matching seniors

with their peers for support and social connection.

**Intimate Relationships:** Many seniors deal with the loss of a loved one/spouse which can lead to social isolation. Challenges associated with older adults who self-identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgendered (LGBT) are often neglected. Homosexual seniors 65 years and older grew up during a time when they felt they needed to hide their relationships. Living in senior housing they still may perceive the need to hide those same feelings leading to increased isolation and loneliness. Again, networking with support groups, sharing their feelings with others, particularly people they do not live with may help. A great resource, cited in this chapter and can be referenced to any senior is "SAGE" (Services and Advocacy for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Elders) (p. 62).

One might assume that this resource could only be used within the California area due to the origin of the material, but the fact is this evidence-based handy 127-page guidebook can be used universally. Working in medical education myself, I would recommend this book to any medical students who consider getting into Geriatrics or who have grandparents, my peers who have taken on the responsibility of caring for their parents, and/or anyone in the healthcare profession.

In the "notes" section of the book, is a reference-ready listing of agencies, websites, textbooks, journal articles, all current which can be applied to any senior housing or residential/personal care situation. This resource will help identify seniors in any community and in residential care whose health and well-being are in jeopardy. Highly recommended.

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*Lynch, Caitrin. My name is Julius: a film about growing old, staying young, and confronting a lifetime of hearing loss. That's My Film!*

2011. OCLC 785724214

17 min. 36 sec. DVD.

*Lynch, Caitrin. Retirement on the line : age, work, and value in an American factory. ILR Press. 2012.*

ISBN 0801477786, 228 p, \$21.95  
(paperback)

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The current economic crisis has brought the plight of older adults in the United States workforce into sharp focus. Many older adults would like to retire but cannot afford to do so due to uncertainty in the stock market, while currently unemployed older adults face age discrimination in their search for employment. At the same time, many retired older adults face a crisis of meaning in their lives. If identity and worth are defined by what job title and productivity, what is a non-producing older adult worth? And if people stay connected socially through the workplace, how do the retired combat a sense of isolation and a lack of belonging?

My Name is Julius, a seventeen-minute documentary film produced by anthropologist Caitrin Lynch, examines the themes of loneliness, isolation, and connectedness. In this film, Julius Barthoff, pictured at 99 and 100 years of age, speaks movingly about his attempts to stay connected in the world. Having experienced hearing loss at a young age, he has always had to struggle to stay connected due to his disability but more so now with age. As he sits in conversation with other older adults, Julius has trouble following the conversation and knows he is not



hearing everything. He does not isolate himself but strives as much as possible to stay connected, to help others and to still make the rest of his life “happy”. Not interested in material wealth, he does a good deed daily by delivering newspapers to other residents of his senior housing complex.

Watching the film, the parallel between the disabled at any age and the position of older adults in American society become apparent. While those who experience a disability can feel isolated and apart at any age, previously well-connected older adults may start to experience isolation and loneliness as they retire, move into age-segregated housing, and lose contact with younger generations. The film can be useful in demonstrating these concepts to a class in gerontology, cross-cultural gerontology, or aging.

Turning to how older adults may capture that sense of belonging and connectedness in the workplace, Caitrin Lynch’s aptly entitled ethnography, *Retirement on the Line*, is a study of the Vita Needle factory in Needham, Massachusetts. A light manufacturing plant making needles for a variety of purposes, the median age of the workers was 74 and the oldest worker was aged 99 in 2011. Lynch spent five years studying Vita Needle using interviews with workers and management as well as actually working on the factory floor herself for one summer.

The book is divided into two parts. In Part One, Lynch focuses on how the company is structured and how life operates inside the factory. The owners of this company, which has received much media attention, focus on hiring part-time workers, mostly older adults, who will forgo high wages and benefits in exchange for supplemental income, flexible hours, job accommodations, and a no-layoff policy. The owner, Fred Hartman, claims that older adults

are not only reliable, dedicated, and dependable, but also most likely to work part-time to supplement their other income. Older adults also qualify for programs such as Medicare, so they don’t need employer health benefits. The work does not require much physical strength and accommodations are made for those workers who require help lifting and moving, as well as allowing workers to rotate between jobs to avoid boredom and loss of productivity. Further, hiring managers look for those whose motive to work is to escape monotony, inactivity, or loneliness at home and weed out those who want higher wages or only want to do specific kinds of jobs. For Vita Needle, this results in a homogenous (yet economically diverse) workforce of older local, white, mostly non-immigrant, Christian (Catholic or Protestant) workers. Some need the supplemental income to get by on retirement income, while others view it as “mad money”. Yet Lynch finds this to be a “win-win” situation for all. She convincingly documents the sense of family, belonging, productivity, and meaning that the older workers derive from their employment at Vita Needle. They no longer feel “useless”, isolated, disconnected, and non-productive. The flexibility at Vita Needle in hours, work load, and attendance allows the accommodations needed for older workers.

Yet the owners claim that their intention is not just to benefit seniors but assert that this model makes good economic and business sense. Lynch documents how this model allows them to get dedicated workers without paying high wages and benefits, while attracting customers with their “moral high ground” [and getting kudos for the non-diversity of their workforce]. The workers do not appear to resent the idea that their labor makes the company profitable and recognize the

inherent reciprocity, as demonstrated by one of their stock phrases, “making money for Fred”, which also results in a “Christmas” bonus for them. Lynch characterizes these practices as “elder sourcing”, an alternative to outsourcing similar work out of the country and with the benefit of retaining business in the United States economy. While Lynch makes a strong case for the benefits these workers and the owners find in such a “homogenous” and non-diverse work environment, she does not really address the potentially discriminatory and possibly illegal nature of such hiring practices nor other problematic practices, such as the “men’s lunch corner”.

In Part Two, she documents and analyzes the media attention, which includes her own presence, that the company receives and how this affects the workers. Interviews, filming for documentaries, and TV coverage, including a TV discussion where Lynch herself appeared with the owner and one worker, were frequent events. For example, stories about the company became part of political discussions about the meaning of retirement in France. These types of stories were followed by letters and e-mails from people in Europe (posted in the workplace) who reinterpreted their own status as retired adults after seeing the coverage of Vita Needle and wished for a similar chance to work. Lynch felt that the Vita Needle workers learned to interpret the meaning of their own lives by “consuming” media coverage of the company. For example, they expressed appreciation for their situation compared with the situation they imagined in Europe based on the letters. Yet, cooperation with the various media, such as news crews and documentary makers, as well as with Lynch herself, varied. Some felt participation was “part of the job”, while others used fake names

for media photos or altered their identifying information. Some chose never to talk to Lynch or declined to participate in various media events or participated selectively. Lynch attributes this to a need to exhibit “agency” in their own lives, a desire not to be treated as a research subject, and a need for “balance” between work, media, and everyday life. Lynch does point out that the media rarely shows any kind of “conflict” or “debate” at Vita Needle, while noting that she did receive some criticism or complaints about both management practices and co-workers. Yet these are not well-documented compared to the overwhelming positive feedback documented. While Lynch herself used pseudonyms for most of the workers she interviewed or quoted, obviously management and co-workers could probably identify each worker. We are not left with a clear understanding of whether or not Lynch felt free to print criticisms, if workers requested she not print them, or if those with a less than positive viewpoint simply refused to be interviewed. While understandable in view of the location and lack of anonymity of the company, it leaves the book somewhat one-sided in its positive treatment of the workplace.

Lynch never resolves the question of whether or not this workplace model is exploitative of older adults or not and if it should be adopted more broadly. Instead, she asks us to think differently about the meaning of work in people’s lives, especially older adults, while pondering whether or not one group of workers can trade economic for non-economic benefits and how that affects the rights of all workers. This lack of a wider social context makes the book less suitable to discussions about how to get and keep older adults employed in today’s economic circumstances. As ethnography, this book would be suitable for use in a gerontology, cross-

cultural gerontology, or aging studies course to illustrate attitudes about work and meaning for older adults.

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