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BECOMING AN ANCESTOR. AGING AND MEMORY IN POSTSOCIALIST EASTERN EUROPE

*To confuse someone is to Buffalo
To seek favor thru flattery is to fawn
To betray is to rat
To struggle clumsily is to flounder
To treat as an object of importance is [to] lionize*

Found writings on a scrap of paper on a dresser top, in my paternal grandmother's hand, while helping my grandparents in their move to a nursing home in May 2005. Undated. My grandmother has had Alzheimer's disease for over ten years.

1. Introduction¹

I found the above text scribbled in pencil on a scrap of paper in my grandparents' apartment². As I picked up the pile of expired coupons and materials for arts-and-crafts projects that were never to be in which it lay, this piece of paper fluttered to the ground. Once I had deciphered the handwriting and was able to read the words on the small page, I was taken aback. These words were clearly written by my father's mother, who has had Alzheimer's disease for the last ten years or so, and were more coherent than anything we have heard her say in quite some time. These definitions, clearly written with a good deal of labor as there are erasure marks and blanks on the paper, seemed to me a struggle to create a tangible reality, something to grasp. As I have contemplated these words over the last several months, I have wondered what made these words meaningful to her. At first I noticed the list of animals-as-verbs. Then I recog-

¹ This essay was prepared for a seminar in kinship studies taught by Professors Gillian Feeley-Harnik and Thomas Trautmann in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, during the fall of 2005. It should be read keeping this in mind; in other words, this essay is more an exploratory literature review than a conclusive analysis of data. Any misguided data or analysis I hope will be looked upon kindly. Please contact the author at jessro@umich.edu with any questions.

² For fear of writing a sort of confessional or psychological family analysis, it is with considerable hesitation that I write about my own grandparents. Lawrence Cohen, however, points out that it seems „fair play to invoke one's grandmother if one is in the business of writing about everyone else's" (L. Cohen, *No Aging in India: Alzheimer's, the Bad Family, and Other Modern Things*, Berkeley 1998, p. 296-297). I hope that this personal example will frame my more distanced analysis that will constitute the bulk of this paper.

nized the effort evident in „seeking favor”, „struggling clumsily”, „treating as an object of importance”, and „to flounder”. And now, in the writing of this paper, it has become clear to me that all these definitions, particularly „to flounder”, are words which require significant engagement with another person. This feels important to me since I have long understood the illness of my grandmother as a failure to relate meaningfully to others; perhaps these words constitute her own recognition of this failure. While I do not want to read too much into these scrawls on a scrap of paper, they do seem indicative of larger issues at stake in the experiences of those with Alzheimer’s.

Experiences of those with Alzheimer’s are central to my broad concerns with the anthropology of aging, of which this essay is a part. This paper is an attempt to put together literatures on aging, personhood, and kinship in the context of postsocialist Eastern Europe. These considerations are part of my larger project to consider how problematic memory loss and Alzheimer’s disease in particular come to matter in kinship relations in Poland, which I will address at the end of this paper. To get at the kinship aspect of aging, I will consider aging as the process of becoming an ancestor. I will look for this in ethnographic literature on grandparenthood, focusing throughout on substance and materiality as an analytical framework. I will then consider ethnographic examples in which becoming an ancestor is disrupted and compare these examples to experiences of Alzheimer’s and memory loss in old age. Running through my argument will be a concern for what sort of personhood is constructed and lived through various processes of becoming an ancestor. I will pay particular attention to personhood as it relates to political, economic, and social conditions, as this will provide me with a way to engage literature on personhood in the context of postsocialism in Eastern Europe.

Before getting in to the particularities of my argument, I would like to give a small background to my approach to studying personhood and kinship. My focus on personhood here is largely centered around a binary concept of persons as either independent, bounded, and autonomous, or dependent, fluid, and relational. I am not particularly wedded to this dichotomous concept, which has roots in the South Asian literature³. Indeed, I do not much care for the debates surrounding this construction because it seems clear to me that neither is a pure category which is actually lived in contexts of either „the West” or „the rest”, but it is necessary to engage it for several reasons. First, this binary is present in a great deal of literature on aging as well as personhood, so it is impossible to avoid. Second, and perhaps more importantly, these dichotomous categories could be ideals towards which people strive or compare themselves, so inasmuch as they are „out there”, circulating as discourse, it is necessary to examine the ways in which they come to matter in particular lives.

³ E.V. Daniel, *Fluid Signs: Being a Person the Tamil Way*, Berkeley 1984; L. Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and Its Implication*. Revised English edition. Marc Sainsbury, Louis Dumont, and Basia Gulati, trans., Chicago 1980.

Throughout this paper, I will try to use an analytic framework suggested by Janet Carsten⁴ which views relatedness as a process that occurs through substances. These substances could be blood, genes, milk, land, food, furniture, or talk; what is crucial about them for my purposes here is that there is a shared aspect to them, material or not, through which kinship is experienced. Often, I will use the material to ground my analysis. This is not to say that the immaterial aspects of relations do not matter, or that the material is what matters most; rather, I use the material as a grounding device for myself to think about relatedness. I will highlight throughout the paper the type of substance involved in particular examples of relatedness and look for ways in which changes in substance can affect changes in relatedness.

2. Grandparents: Substance and personhood

Here I will focus on part of the anthropological literature on grandparenthood. Studying grandparents as such forces me to analyze the process of becoming an ancestor in a context where kinship is paramount. Because intergenerational relations are implicit in discussions of ancestors, studying grandparenthood, another inherently intergenerational category, is a useful point of entry for this study. I will consider, then, several ethnographic studies that examine relatedness between grandparents and their descendants.

Several recent studies of grandparenthood in Africa raise relevant and interesting issues for my purposes here. It is clear from this work that there is no one experience of grandparenthood, and neither is this status automatic or purely biological. In work by Catrien Notermans⁵ in Cameroon, we find that women can choose to become grandmothers. Through ending her own reproductive and sexual life and encouraging her daughter's to begin, Marie-Lucie assumes the role of grandmother, once her child bears children⁶. The distinction between motherhood and grandmotherhood is not just the change in Marie-Lucie's sexual life, but also in the substances she shares with her grandchildren. While in motherhood, mothers share breast milk with their children, in grandmotherhood, grandmothers share home, food, and bed with their grandchildren. More than mere descriptive differences, however, these substances are constitutive of the grandmother-grandchild relationship: „[g]randchildren who live far away do not make a woman a grandmother, but grandchildren who share home, food, and bed with her undoubtedly do”⁷. Through sharing these particular substances, new relations are formed.

⁴ J. Carsten, *The Substance of Kinship and the Heat of the Hearth: Feeding, Personhood and Relatedness among Malays in Pulau Langkawi*, „American Ethnologist” 1955, No 22; *Introduction: Cultures of Relatedness*, [w:] *Cultures of Relatedness: New Approaches to the Study of Kinship*, New York-Combridge 2000.

⁵ C. Notermans, *Sharing Home, Food, and Bed: Paths of Grandmotherhood in East Cameroon*, „Africa” 2004, No 74(1), 6-27.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 6.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 14.

It is noteworthy that Notermans uses the idiom of sharing rather than reciprocity to describe the relations and movements of substances between grandparents and grandchildren. This sharing which constitutes grandmotherly relations in East Cameroon is similar in important ways to the sharing among the Luo as described by P. Wenzel Geissler and Ruth J. Prince (2004). Arguing that the term „reciprocity”, with its economic and individualizing connotations, is too limited for the variety of practices of relatedness among the Luo, they instead propose the use of „sharing” as an analytic term⁸. Thinking about sharing allows them to focus on the processual and immaterial aspects of kinship practices.

Also crucial to Geissler and Prince’s rejection of „reciprocity” in favor of „sharing” is their refusal to work within the binary model of individual versus relational personhood. At the beginning of their analysis of the construction of the personhood of Luo grandmothers and grandchildren, they argue that „some practices emphasise the creation of relations”, while „other practices aim (often explicitly) at furthering the child’s development into a supposedly autonomous subject”, thereby providing hope for a means to escape this dualistic model⁹. Yet in dismissing reciprocity as a frame for understanding Luo exchange, Geissler and Prince also eschew the relevance in the Luo context of the Western concept of bounded rational individuals who form their selves through economic exchanges of material objects¹⁰. This emphasis on the relational nature of Luo persons does construct the Luo as distinct types of persons from Western persons in a way that serves to reinforce this binary of „the West” and „the rest”. Indeed, despite their claim that both autonomous and relational selves are emphasized and constructed in Luo personhood, Geissler and Prince give examples supporting only relational personhood¹¹.

Perhaps, however, their analysis is skewed because it is the relational aspects of personhood which matter more in the context of Luo grandparenthood. The case of Maria is particularly interesting here. A Luo grandmother, Maria depends on her many grandchildren for support and care. This dependence should not be understood

⁸ P. Geissler, W. and R.J. Prince, *Shared Lives: Exploring Practice of Amity between Grandmothers and Grandchildren in Western Kenya*, „Africa” 2004, No 74(1), p. 112.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 96.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 113.

¹¹ This unintended reinforcement of this problematic binary reappears in the work of Martine Segalen, whose ethnography demonstrates the flexibility of grandparent/grandchild relations in the context of ruptures in kinship related to a high divorce-rate in contemporary France. Yet at the end of her article she argues that in Western societies, „the individual is valued first and foremost” and that children are produced solely to „embody the continuation of the love of the couple”. This is contrasted with non-Western societies where children are „valued future producers” and „belong more to a line than to their individual parents” (M. Segalen, *The Shift in Kinship Studies in France: The Case of Grandparenting*, [in:] *Relative Values: Reconfiguring Kinship Studies*, Durham 2001, 246-273). This analysis fails to recognize the complexity inherent in the practices of the contemporary French grandparents and grandchildren as described in her ethnography. Segalen raises other interesting, if problematic, ways to view the anthropology of aging which fall outside the scope of this paper.

as a loss of capabilities, however, but rather as a way of „extend[ing]” them „through her grandchildren”¹². Maria’s grandchildren carry out tasks for her, and in so doing, „shar[e] their hands and feet” with their grandmother¹³. Completing stories when Maria „loses the thread or forgets details”¹⁴ is a similar sharing—but of immaterial memories rather than material bodies—between grandmother and grandchildren that is part of a process of extending Maria’s personhood to encompass those with whom she lives. Maria and her grandchildren are here engaged in practices of sharing, rather than practices of exchange, which involve reciprocity and reduce human interactions to economic encounters¹⁵. Maria’s desire not to be an autonomous old woman is evident in these practices. Because her personhood is constituted through her dependent actions on others, to renounce this is tantamount to renouncing her personhood.

It is significant here that Maria constructs her personhood through allowing her children to care for her, as the trope of in/dependence in old age is quite prevalent. There is a common Western assumption that autonomy is desirable through all ages, yet Geissler and Prince’s work contradicts this. Julie Livingston’s¹⁶ work in Botswana provides further support for the non-universality of ideals of autonomy. She describes old women in Botswana who want to become old and noticeably disabled, whether through using a cane, being blind, or having a different visible infirmity. In the particular context of Botswana, where so many older women have children who died of AIDS and are taking care of their grandchildren, to be an old debilitated woman is to have survived, and to depend on others is a privilege in this context of providing for others. To be taken care of is a luxury, a privilege, a status—even though in practice, old, blind, disabled women are not always well cared-for. Although Livingston does not directly address personhood as an analytical topic, we might infer from her data that ideal personhood in Botswana is not that of the autonomous individual. More precisely, we can talk about care and dependency here. Rather than wanting to escape relations of dependency in which they are the ones depended on, old women in Botswana want to reverse the situation and become dependents. This is also borne out in the work of Benedictine Ingstad in Botswana, who notes a similar refusal of complete independence¹⁷.

¹² P. Geissler, W. and J. Prince, *op. cit.*, p. 114.

¹³ *Ibidem.*

¹⁴ *Ibidem.*

¹⁵ *Ibidem.*

¹⁶ J. Livingston, *Managing Modern Aging: Elderly Women and Welfare Programs in Botswana*. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association, Washington, D.C. 2005 December 1.

¹⁷ B. Ingstad, *The Value of Grandchildren: Changing Relations between Generation*, „Africa” 2004, No 74(1), p. 74.

3. Becoming an ancestor

So, ideal old age in these contexts does not valorize independence, and personhood in grandparenting seems to be conducted through sharing of particular substances and actions. Yet to be explicitly discussed, however, is the process of becoming an ancestor. What I would like to highlight from Ingstad's data, however, are examples of how the elderly can fail to become ancestors. In order for a paternal grandfather to become an ancestor, he must have children to whom he can pass on his wealth; so doing confirms „his own status as a soon-to-be ancestor"¹⁸. Yet if the paternal grandfather never married the paternal grandmother, the potential to live as a „soon-to-be ancestor" is foreclosed. The biological relationship is not enough to overcome the lack of social ties that come with marriage, and therefore he cannot pass his wealth on to future generations. This has real consequences and he risks losing respect and care in his old age as well as the possibility of not „being considered one of the ancestors (badimo) after his death"¹⁹. These conditions of his existence mark him as a „non-existing person, even while still alive"²⁰. Ingstad writes of an old man who cannot become an ancestor because he is not a socially recognized person²¹. Divorced and isolated from his children and grandchildren, he is poor and has nothing to pass on to his children, were he even to have contact with them. In this context where inheritance is crucial to becoming memorialized as an ancestor, the limits of his present situation foreclose any reconciliation between his past and present with a potential future. Isolation is the only possible path for this man. This parallels the findings of Meyer Fortes among the Tallensi in Ghana²²; „unmarried or childless people, orphans, the very poor, suicides, criminals, and former slaves, people who have died 'bad' deaths, and those who have died from 'bad diseases' such as leprosy or elephantiasis, are unlikely to be remembered as ancestors"²³.

Failure to become an ancestor is also present in the ethnography of Jean-Sebastien Marcoux among the old in Montreal²⁴. Through the 'casser maison' ritual described by Marcoux, the elderly try to establish themselves as ancestors through the process of giving away their belongings. Through these gifts, the elderly can create a new future for themselves that will survive their physical existence. Marcoux, too, focuses on the

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 67.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 73; J. Biehl, *Vita: Life in a Zone of Social Abandonment*, Berkeley 2005.

²¹ B. Ingstad, *op. cit.*, p. 67, 73.

²² M. Fortes, *The Dynamic of Clanship Among the Tallensi: Being the First Part of an Analysis of the Structure of a Trans-Volta Tribe*, London 1945; G. Feeley-Harnik, *Death, Mourning, and Ancestors*, [in:] *Encyclopedia of Africa South of the Sahara*, Vol. 1. John Middleton, New York 1997, p. 410.

²³ G. Feeley-Harnik, *op. cit.*, p. 410.

²⁴ J.S. Marcoux, 'Casser Maison' Ritual: *Constructing the Self by Emptying the Home*, „Journal of Material Culture" 2001, No 6, p. 213-235.

dichotomous analytical understanding of aging as a shift from independence to dependence when he argues that „[t]he move from domesticity to care is a move from a situation and a place where a person is on his or her own to another one where he or she is cared for”²⁵. While this shift in sources of material care—from the individual to those external to the individual—certainly occurs in the move to a nursing home or similar environment, it is worth investigating how immaterial relations change. It is possible that Marcoux ignores possible immaterial aspects of continuity between the home and the institution.

We can see hints of this in his ethnographic examples, particularly in the case of Mme Debray. A model story of a successful ‘*casser maison*’ ritual, Mme Debray has a sense of being validated, of „being desired” when her son requested a particular dish in which she used to make a nourishing soup²⁶. Because the elderly in Montreal live in „a society where people’s identity is weakly defined by inheritance”²⁷, they are not acting from a position of power in the act of donating. Receiving, then, is the generous act, while donating has elements of selfishness. For the old in Montreal, to establish oneself as an ancestor involves intertwining one’s belongings, and therefore one’s self, with another’s belongings and self. This can only be a burden, however, if Marcoux is operating with the assumption that the interweaving of selves is antithetical to the way people experience themselves as persons. And indeed, this is what Marcoux argues, as he explicitly contrasts persons in Montreal to persons in India²⁸.

For Mme Debray, then, her would-be-selfish act of ‘*casser maison*’ has been transformed into an act of generosity. It is significant, however, that this transformation occurred through the request and desire of her son; the immateriality of this process is notable here. In her son’s imaginings of possessing that dish, he presumably remembers a particular history, presumably involving eating his mother’s leek and potato soup and being brought „back to better feelings” by it²⁹. He also presumably imagines and desires a future with this dish, perhaps nourishing his own children with food prepared in it. Or more precisely, perhaps it is Mme Debray herself who imagines these pasts and futures for her son, her dish, and herself. While it is true that the dish constitutes the substance through which their relatedness is here enacted, it is striking that the genesis of this transformation from selfishness to generosity, from rupture to continuity, occurs through desire and imagining—processes which are immaterial.

What, though, of the stories of failure in Marcoux’s work? How are people prevented from becoming ancestors? We learn the story of Mlle Bolduc, who has no one to receive her belongings. Rejected by her relatives—and notably, she does not have children—she gives her lifetime’s accumulation of possessions to a charity³⁰. Although

²⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 214.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 220.

²⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 229.

²⁸ L. Dumont, *op. cit.*; J.S. Marcoux, *op. cit.*, p. 229.

²⁹ J.S. Marcoux, *op. cit.*, p. 220.

³⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 222-223.

these belongings arguably will go to some material use, it is the immaterial aspect of them which is lost in the donation to strangers.

Indeed, I saw this in my own family this summer when my parents and I carried out our own '*casser maison*' as we moved my paternal grandparents into a nursing home. After picking out items for various family members or the family as a whole, we sold the rest of their belongings to an antique dealer. As he was waiting for the movers to come, my father picked up a few large conch shells from his old shell collection. The movers arrived and loaded up the remaining goods, leaving my father standing in his parents' empty home. He gave each mover a shell, telling each one that if he went to Polynesia, this shell would buy him a night with ten of the chief's wives. My father reported with delight the puzzled yet excited reactions of each mover upon receiving the shells. In this admittedly Orientalist fantasy we can see an effort to retain and continue the immateriality and unknowable qualities of the particular material objects which constitute my grandparents' and in some sense, my father's, personhood. Our family could not accept all that my grandparents had to offer, so we had to give or sell much of it to strangers. As for Mlle Bolduc, the immaterial futures of these objects were foreclosed by strangers. In passing on the immaterial as well as the material, my father was attempting to bring the movers into relationships of relatedness with our family.

4. Immaterial impossibilities: Ruptures of memory

What, then, might problematic memory loss do in this context of rupture, of immaterial impossibilities? Whether identified as senility, dementia, Alzheimer's disease, or „just old age”, those with problematic memory loss seem to present a problem for the possibility of becoming an ancestor. This may seem obvious, for how can one pass on one's belongings or memories when one no longer knows what one has, or who one is? To be sure, this is a more dramatic example than that of my father and the shells. Indeed, it is much more like the case of the man in Botswana with no possessions and no one to receive them. For the old with memory loss, there may be possessions, and there may be those to receive them, but the subject is lacking, is absent.

This is true, at least, for those with Alzheimer's in the US. Lawrence Cohen³¹ argues in his ethnography of aging and Alzheimer's in the US and India that those with Alzheimer's in the US are denied the possibility of selfhood through the necessity of dependency. In both examples from the American media and ethnographic research among support groups for the caregivers of those with Alzheimer's, Cohen claims that the subjectivity and selfhood of the person with Alzheimer's is erased³². For Frank, the middle-aged son of a woman with Alzheimer's disease, cleaning his

³¹ L. Cohen, *No Aging in India, Alzheimer's, the Bad Family, and Other Modern Things*, Berkeley 1998.

³² *Ibidem*, p. 47-84.

demented mother's bedroom in a pseudo-*'casser maison'* process becomes „the worst torture the twentieth century has to offer”³³. In doing material tasks that his mother should be doing, Frank constructs his mother as a non-person, as socially dead. This occurs in large part because of the strength of the cultural construction of the person as bounded, individual, and with particular memories and knowledge. As Cohen writes, „[m]ind and self come to stand for one another”³⁴, so with the loss of cognitive memory comes the loss of person. It cannot be any other way for Frank.

Yet the strength of this equation of mind and self in Frank's case does not necessarily call forth the opposite situation in non-Western contexts. Criticizing anthropologists such as Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Margaret Lock³⁵ for reifying non-Western understandings of the body in a „Kiplingesque division between aesthetic and holistic East and mechanistic and alienating West”³⁶, Cohen presents ethnographic possibilities for moving beyond Cartesian dualism.

This is particularly evident in his analysis of the text of a radio address in India on aging given by a medical doctor/actor/storyteller³⁷. Dr. Mehta describes a „splitting of self” in old age that does not depend on the mind/body distinction. Rather, the aging body, as evident in changing physical appearance, is bound up with the aging mind, which recognizes the shift from young to old³⁸. Notably, Cohen points out that this shift from young to old, „[t]his transformed but authentic self is expressed in kinship terms, as a shift in one's relational identity from the lover to the 'baba,' the old man or uncle”³⁹. The bodily markers of age—gray hair, in this case—come to indicate aspects of self in a complex way that escapes the structures of Cartesian dualism. Indeed, Cohen argues that anthropologists must avoid the „[t]he frequent but ethnographically crude invocation of Cartesian/non-Cartesian distinctions”⁴⁰ and rather „must be sensitive to the dialogic constitution of the split self, to the dangers of equating mind (rather than body, or both) with identity, and in particular, to the variable possibility of balance and dualistic thought across class”⁴¹. While he is writing here about India in particular, these cautionary words could be useful in many contexts. Cohen writes of the old in India that „individuals experience the relationship of mind, body, and self relative to their own bodily histories, histories rooted in an individual's social position”⁴². Recalling our previous discussion of grandparents in Africa and the ways

³³ *Ibidem*, p. 59.

³⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 50.

³⁵ N. Scheper-Hughes and M. Lock, *The Mindful Body: A Prolegomenon to Future Work in Medical Anthropology*, „Medical Anthropology Quarterly” 1987, No 1(1), p. 6-41.

³⁶ L. Cohen, *op. cit.*, p. 184.

³⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 211-214.

³⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 212.

³⁹ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 213.

⁴¹ *Ibidem*, p. 214.

⁴² *Ibidem*, p. 213.

in which particular individuals' experiences depend so much on history, Cohen's remarks here could easily apply to many contexts. In some ways, this caution is relevant to all anthropological study of the body, but is particularly salient in the case of aging.

Cohen's explosion of Cartesian duality connects significantly to the analogous and related distinction between autonomous and relational selves. While he is critical of these distinctions, Cohen ultimately uses a model that is more relational than autonomous, more fluid than bounded. Arriving as he does at the label of the „the familial body” as his object of study through repeated ethnographic encounters, Cohen attempts to give more detail and context to the homogenous non-Western-ness of the relational and fluid self posited in psychological anthropology⁴³.

In particular, he describes one interaction that led him to this category. There was an old woman in Delhi who „frequently shouted and cursed at persons who were never there”⁴⁴. She lived not with her family but with a paid attendant, which was attributed to poor relations with her late son and consequent alienation from her family. Cohen could not arrange a meeting with her and could not even find more information about her, for his inquiries were met by neighbors with a striking silence. Cohen accounts for these repeated silences by attributing them to connections between the old body and the family. „To address the body of the old person is to address that body as embedded in a family and in the transactions that structure and maintain a family”⁴⁵. Were the neighbors to categorize this old woman, they would simultaneously be „address[ing] the state of her family and of families more generally”⁴⁶. Given Cohen's earlier analysis in this ethnography of connections between aging and family ideals, this is a logical analysis⁴⁷. And indeed, even though he explicitly denies the comparative goals of this analytical model, the familial body provides a useful frame for thinking about memory in the elderly. While this is a relational personhood, it is one that is grounded in particular relations—the family—and therefore avoids the homogenizing drive of the non-Western relational self. Kinship is fundamental to this analysis. If we can assume that there is not one but many ways of relational personhood that are particular to local contexts, experiences, and histories, the familial body might be a useful cross-cultural framework in which to consider aging and personhood in the context of radical memory loss.

⁴³ *Ibidem*, p. 177-178.

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 177.

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 87-120.

5. Potentials of the familial body in postsocialist Eastern Europe

What might be at stake in the familial body of the old in the context of postsocialist Eastern Europe, and Poland in particular? First, a discussion of personhood in postsocialism will be useful. Personhood in postsocialist contexts is often discussed through local idioms of horizontal or hierarchical exchange, which have characteristics both general to socialist pasts characterized by shortage economies and particular to local contexts. In Poland, the term is *znajomości*; in Russia, *blat*; in China, *guanxi*; and in all cases, it is a relationally constituted personhood⁴⁸. Elizabeth Dunn's research shows that *znajomości* still exists both ideally and in practice in contemporary Poland, even as it coexists with more atomizing forms of personhood brought about through Western influence; Dunn generalizes that „it is clear that multiple forms of personhood exist in any given locale”⁴⁹. Providing crucial ethnographic support to Cohen's above rejection of homogenous frameworks of relational personhood, the continued prevalence of *znajomości* makes the understanding of relational personhood broadly, and kinship in particular, necessary for this study.

Yet while these relations constitute personhood, they are not kin relations. What, then, can we say about personhood in kin relations in postsocialism? Because studies of postsocialism often deal with labor and other economic issues, there is significant scholarship on both kin and personhood in the workplace. In what is another binary construction, research points to the existence of two kinds of selves: public/private, or work/home. Dunn, Frances Pine⁵⁰, and Katherine Verdery⁵¹ all find that the home is a place where one can be „one's true self” in opposition to the outside world. This is embedded in a larger rhetoric of „us” versus „them” that prevailed in the Soviet period. Dunn traces this to the opposition under state socialism of „us” versus „them”, where the home becomes „us”, the family, and outside becomes „them”, or the state⁵². This dualism is apparent in Dunn's analysis of Polish women who prefer to work in and eat food from their kitchens and *działki*, or private gardens⁵³, than manufactured food. In the story of Katarzyna, we learn much about personhood in the context of kin relations and the home. Katarzyna vehemently opposes feeding her children manufactured products because she claims the food that she grows and cooks is particularly nourishing due to her personal effort, while manufactured food made by „the system” (either capitalist or socialist) is suitable for *szare istoty*, or „generic gray beings”⁵⁴.

⁴⁸ E.C. Dunn, *Privatizing Poland: Baby Food, Big Business, and the Remaking of Labor*, Ithaca 2004, p. 119.

⁴⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 126.

⁵⁰ E.C. Dunn, *op. cit.*, F. Pine, *Naming the House and Naming the Land: Kinship and Social Groups in Highland Poland*, „The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute” 1966, No 2(3), p. 443-459.

⁵¹ K. Verdery, *What Was Socialism, and What Comes Next?*, Princeton: Princeton 1996.

⁵² E.C. Dunn, *op. cit.*, p. 141.

⁵³ *Ibidem*, p. 138-142.

⁵⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 138-141.

Moreover, food that Katarzyna grows and prepares herself becomes an extension of herself and a way to incorporate her children into her personhood⁵⁵.

This is echoed in the work of Frances Pine, who finds that „Górale identity and personhood is inextricably bound to membership in a named house and a kin-based community located in the mountains”⁵⁶. The house is an alternative to the state in both economic and ideological aspects, and can shift in tandem with the state⁵⁷. Opposed to the state in both ideology and practice, the house is much more than an idiom or a metaphor for understanding the state. Indeed, Pine finds this opposition to remain even in the postsocialist context: „as the regulatory role of the state again retracts, the practical importance of the house expands”⁵⁸. Understanding the house, then, is crucial to understanding personhood here.

The work of the household was carried out by older women in socialist Romania, we learn from Katherine Verdery⁵⁹. She writes that forced early retirement in socialist Romania created a situation in which many household tasks, such as caring for children and preparing food (which involved standing in food lines), were carried out by older women, given the greater proportion of older women⁶⁰. This important role of the elderly meant that „social reproduction was to a degree ‘geriatrized’”⁶¹ by the socialist state. State control also extended into the self and kin relations; Verdery claims that the Communist party in Romania saw „society not simply as like a family but as itself a family, with the Party as parent”⁶². This patriarchal state exerted control over its citizens in many ways, even explicitly through the reproductive bodies of women⁶³. This increased the degree to which „both men and women realized pride and self-respect” in the „domestic rather than the public sphere”⁶⁴. Location became crucial to the construction of self.

The „etatization” of time which Verdery⁶⁵ describes further exemplifies the role of state control in the construction of personhood. The moving story of the mother who stood in line for three hours in an attempt to procure a few eggs for her growing

⁵⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 139.

⁵⁶ F. Pine, *Naming the House...*, p. 455.

⁵⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 456.

⁵⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁹ K. Verdery, *op. cit.*

⁶⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 65.

⁶¹ *Ibidem*.

⁶² *Ibidem*, p. 64.

⁶³ *Ibidem*, p. 65. According to Feeley-Harnik, analyses such as Verdery's, which take into account the interactions of national with local forces, „derive[e] from scholars' increasing recognition of the power of governments to affect their citizens' most elemental experiences of death and birth, through systemic political-economic inequalities in such areas as housing, schooling, and public health. Thus death and ancestry are as much national as personal issues” (1997, 412). This analytic focus is crucial to gaining more integrated and complex perspectives.

⁶⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 66.

⁶⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 39-57.

teenage son, only to be devastated by the contrast between her significant commitment in the form of time and self and the meager results obtained by this effort further demonstrate the power of the state in constructing selves. „People were prevented from experiencing themselves as efficacious”⁶⁶ and therefore could not understand themselves as anything but passive objects of state control. Personhood in socialist Romania, then, was constructed relationally not only through meaningful interactions with other individuals, but through interactions with the socialist state.

This state influence is apparent in the lives of grandparents in Romania, as Liviu Chelcea observes⁶⁷. In writing about housing nationalization during state socialism in Romania, Chelcea argues that „the new state authority led to the redefinition of the domestic roles of family patriarchs, whose economic significance decreased while their nurturing role as grandparents increased”⁶⁸. Taking on a primarily social rather than material role, as they no longer had property to hand down, grandparents and kinship roles shifted dramatically as a result of state socialism. This recalls our earlier discussion on grandparenting in Africa, where a man in Botswana without descendants or goods could not become an ancestor or a socially recognized person⁶⁹. While the objective circumstances of lacking wealth to pass on are similar, there are crucial distinctions between the Botswanan and Romanian examples. While the Botswanan grandfather with no goods has no possibility of passing along any wealth to anyone and is thereby denied personhood both now and in the future, the Romanian grandparents were still valued as people. Their roles were redefined by the sociopolitical circumstances, although perhaps in a more complicated way than Chelcea allows for. Writing that the „grandparents’ role changed from a material to a social one” Chelcea describes the importance of grandparents in childcare as women entered the workforce⁷⁰. Yet he also observes that grandparents „gained free time that allowed them to seek out consumer products, which became a crucial task with increasingly chronic shortages”⁷¹. This procurement of material goods in the shortage economy which Verdery describes⁷² was essential, so for Chelcea to redefine the role of grandparents as primarily social rather than material seems less than accurate. Perhaps it would be better to discuss a change in materiality and sociality rather than a shift from material to social relations.

Chelcea’s explicit discussion of ancestors⁷³ is striking for the way that people reclaim their lost ancestors through the process of housing restitution. Becoming an an-

⁶⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 56.

⁶⁷ L. Chelcea, *Ancestors, Domestic Groups, and the Socialist State: Housing Nationalization and Restitution in Romania*, „Comparatives Studies in Society and History” 2003, No 45.

⁶⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 728.

⁶⁹ B. Ingstad, *The Value of Grandchildren...*

⁷⁰ L. Chelcea, *op. cit.*, p. 730.

⁷¹ *Ibidem*, p. 731.

⁷² K. Verdery, *op. cit.*, p. 42-43.

⁷³ L. Chelcea, *op. cit.*, p. 733-735.

cestor, then, is something over which the ancestor has no control, unlike Notermans's⁷⁴ example of Marie-Lucie choosing to become a grandmother. Rather, the genesis of ancestorhood here is in the „claim to power, geared to repossessing and managing those things of the ancestor that the stated interfered with“⁷⁵ made by the descendents. In the context of radical sociopolitical change, then, we see that the process of becoming an ancestor is disrupted and reconfigured in dramatic and unpredictable ways. In state socialism in Eastern Europe, the involvement of the state in kin relations and constructions of personhood makes changes in the state deeply relevant to these processes. Studying aging and memory loss in the context of these changes, then, cannot but be crucial to discussions of personhood and kinship. Moreover, the house seems a crucial locus of analysis, as this is where the old are ideally cared for (preliminary fieldwork)⁷⁶. Engaging with the location of the house in particular also opens up possibilities for comparative analysis with the body of literature on house societies.

6. Conclusion: Temporal ruptures and place memory

Finally, I would like to underscore a theme that I have yet to articulate directly, but which is crucial to this analysis: temporality. Problems of becoming an ancestor are in some ways disruptions of time. Following Carsten⁷⁷ in her analysis of adoption reunions in Scotland, I would like to argue that what is at stake in becoming an ancestor is the ordering of time and biographical completeness. In Carsten's work, adopted adults seek out meetings with their birth parents, and in so doing, they seek a restorative biographical completion, a joining of the past with the present, in these encounters⁷⁸. This completion is rarely achieved, however, because the possibilities for future completion are foreclosed through the process of seeking out and having these meetings⁷⁹. This happens most clearly when the birth parent has already died, leaving no space for the bringing of the past into the present⁸⁰. Even when these meetings do occur, however, they impose limits on future possibilities of relatedness. The exchange of Christmas or birthday presents often becomes the only form through which relatedness is expressed, and without the history of previous exchanges to provide meaning to these exchanges, these gifts can feel hollow to the adopted adults⁸¹.

⁷⁴ C. Notermans, *op. cit.*

⁷⁵ L. Chelsea, *op. cit.*, p. 734.

⁷⁶ Whether this ideal of the multigenerational household exists in practice is, of course, another story. I hope that my future fieldwork in Poland will help to clarify this.

⁷⁷ J. Carsten, 'Knowing Where You've Come From: Ruptures and Continuities of Time and Kinship in Narratives of Adoption Reunions,' *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 2000, No 6, p. 687-703.

⁷⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 689.

⁷⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 691.

⁸⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 690.

⁸¹ *Ibidem*, p. 691.

Carsten attributes the limits of these exchanges to the absence of shared memory for the birth parents and adopted adults. Through sharing memory, she argues following Antze and Lambek, the self is constituted⁸². Because this self is based on the sharing of memories, this is a fundamentally relational personhood, giving further credence to the necessity of thinking about kinship and memory through the construct of a relational personhood.

While substance is not made explicit in Carsten's analysis of adoption reunions, I would argue that it is deeply implicated, if we can view memory and time as substances. The failure to bring the past into the present in a coherent way, and the failure to allow for the possibility of a coherent future in the present, is a failure to share memory coherently. Through this sharing, rather than exchange, persons are constructed. In the situation of radical memory loss, there is no possibility for a cohesive temporality that involves the person with memory loss and others. For those others whose personhood is constituted through sharing memories with the person with memory loss, then, a part of their own personhood is at stake.

Yet while ruptures of time are certainly crucial to personhood and kinship in contexts of radical memory loss, this may be only the most obvious point of entry for analysis. In addition to temporality, I have also not made place explicit in my considerations of personhood, kinship, and memory, yet it is present in nearly all the ethnographic examples cited above. In considering memory as embodied, Edward Casey⁸³ argues that a consideration of place is crucial to this analysis. „To be embodied is *ipso facto* to assume a particular perspective and position; it is to have not just a point of view but a *place* in which we are situated"⁸⁴. Place is fundamentally significant to memory, then, and deserves analytic attention.

Arguing that „place is always definite" and that „*place is selective for memories*"⁸⁵, emphasis in original), Casey describes the relationship of place and memory to each other. To attempt to summarize a complex argument, he claims that the lived body and a place fit themselves to each other in our memories and when this fit is „snug", there is a sense of familiarity and true personhood. This happens through processes of habit-taking⁸⁶. Yet it is not just through the body that place comes to matter in memory, however, but in „some of the inherent features of place itself"⁸⁷. He goes on to describe characteristics of landscapes, such as horizons and variegations⁸⁸. When a person stops noticing a place as such, Casey argues that „we feel ourselves merging

⁸² P. Antze, and M. Lambek, *Introduction: Forecasting Memory*, [in:] *Tense Past: Cultural Essays in Trauma and Memory*, London 1996; J. Carsten, 'Knowing Where You've Come...', p. 697-698.

⁸³ E. Casey, *Remembering: A Phenomenological Study*, Bloomington 1987.

⁸⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 182.

⁸⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 189, emphasis in original.

⁸⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 189-196.

⁸⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 197.

⁸⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 197-198.

with a place, which on this very account suddenly becomes *invisible*, dissolved in its own luminosity, disintegrated as a discriminate object"⁸⁹. Following on our above analysis, personhood is understood to relationally encompass place as well as other persons and material things.

Casey argues that memory and place are functionally similar and „accomplish a similar task at a quite basic level. This task is that of *congealing the disparate into a provisional unity*"⁹⁰. Inasmuch as places and memories are both constructions that are necessarily selective, we can understand them both to be unifying processes. This seems to be almost directly analogous to Carsten's⁹¹ analysis of temporality and unity of past, present and future in adoption reunions in Scotland, yet Casey cautions against this comparison of unity of place to unity of time. He argues that time has too long been privileged in philosophical analysis to the exclusion of place⁹² and that this exclusion is indicative of a larger tendency to consider objective realities in which the body lives rather than developing a methodology for thinking about processual and mutual interactions among bodies, selves, places, and times⁹³. So in thinking about the unity inherent in place, memory, and time, Casey suggests that we think of the unity of place as a container with a „capacity to have and hold memories" that synthesize time⁹⁴. He concludes that

[w]hat is contained in place is on its way to being well remembered. What is remembered is well grounded if it is remembered as being in a particular place—a place that may well take precedence over the time of its occurrence... But precisely where memory is at stake, to be fixed in space is to be fixed in place... Being-in-place is a main modalization of being-in-the-world. Having been in places is therefore a natural resource for remembering our own being in the world. It is indispensable for knowing what we are (now) in terms of what we were (then).

(Casey, *op. cit.*, p. 214-215)

Knowledge and experience that are located in place, then, are crucial to memories, and vice versa.

Perhaps this provides us with another perspective for looking at our above examples. The '*casser maison*' ritual described by Marcoux⁹⁵ seems the most relevant here. The genesis for this sharing of material goods in this „auto-ancestralization" is a shift in location from a place of ultimate familiarity to a mere site that has yet to become a place. Giving away these goods is tantamount to giving away part of the familiar place, and therefore giving of one's memories and personhood as constituted through spending time in this place. The tremendous anxiety with which this ritual is undertaken by Marcoux's informants speaks to the significance of this change in place.

⁸⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 200.

⁹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 202.

⁹¹ J. Carsten, *Knowing Where You've Come...*

⁹² E. Casey, *op. cit.*, p. 202.

⁹³ *Ibidem*, p. 184-187.

⁹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 203.

⁹⁵ J.S. Marcoux, *op. cit.*

In the case of problematic memory loss, as in Alzheimer's disease, this focus on place is strikingly useful. One of the hallmark symptoms of Alzheimer's disease is wandering, in which the person with Alzheimer's leaves home and wanders for hours, often becoming lost. This is understood to be such a problem that many nursing homes have pictures of their residents with Alzheimer's posted at all possible exits to the grounds. If place really is as bound up with memory as Casey suggests, it seems that this would be fundamental to the wandering so present in those with Alzheimer's. If those with Alzheimer's are unable to live in their surroundings in such a way as to make them familiar, or if they can not recall ever having done so, or if they have lost all ability to distinguish one place from another, wandering could be a sort of rational response, an attempt to find the familiar. Yet if it is the case that the person with Alzheimer's has lost the ability to distinguish her familiarity with a place, as is the case with my grandmother, then it seems that this wandering is a hopeless endeavor.

In the context of postsocialist Eastern Europe, this attention to place in memory seems crucial as well. Given our discussion of the importance of the home in constructions of personhood and relatedness in both Poland and Romania, and the significance of the kitchen and garden for Dunn's (2004) informants in Poland, it seems that allowing place to take primary importance in analysis of memory and ancestorhood in postsocialist Poland would be a useful analytical approach. In postsocialist Poland, where personhood is intimately bound up with the home and the state, at stake in the failed temporal and locational coherence of the elderly with radical memory loss could be the limits and possibilities for the future of the self, the family, and the state.

STAWANIE SIĘ PRZODKIEM. STARZENIE SIĘ I PAMIĘĆ W POSTSOCJALISTYCZNEJ EUROPIE WSCHODNIEJ

Streszczenie

Doświadczenia osób dotkniętych chorobą Alzheimera są centralnym elementem badań J.C. Robbins w dziedzinie antropologii starości. Niniejszy artykuł jest ich rezultatem. Jest on próbą uporządkowania literatury przedmiotu dotyczącej starzenia się, podmiotowości (*personhood*) i pokrewieństwa (*kinship*) w postsocjalistycznej Europie Wschodniej. Niniejsze rozważania dotyczą stosunku do osób dotkniętych utratą pamięci, a szczególnie chorobą Alzheimera w relacjach rodzinnych w Polsce. Analizując proces starzenia się w środowisku grupy rodzinnej/krewniaczej, autorka traktuje go jako proces stawania się przodkiem. Inspiracji teoretycznych dostarczyła jej literatura etnograficzna dotycząca społecznej roli babci/dziadka (*grandparenthood*), posługująca się analitycznymi kategoriami „materialności” i „substancji”. W artykule analizuje przykłady etnograficzne, w których procesy stawania się przodkiem zostają zakłócone, a następnie porównuje te przykłady do doświadczeń choroby Alzheimera i utraty pamięci w starszym wieku.

Główne pytanie badawcze brzmi: jakie rodzaje podmiotowości są konstruowane i przeżywane w różnych typach procesów stawania się przodkiem? Autorka zwraca szczególną uwagę na to, jak podmiotowość koresponduje z warunkami politycznymi, ekonomicznymi i społecznymi. Ta perspektywa badawcza pozwoliła jej odnieść się do literatury przedmiotu dotyczącej podmiotowości w postsocjalistycznej Europie Wschodniej.

W tekście do analizowania podmiotowości wykorzystuje schemat binarny, w którym osoby przedstawia się albo jako niezależne i autonomiczne, albo jako zależne, płynne i pozostające w relacjach z innymi. Chociaż nie wyjaśnia dokładnie owej dychotomicznej konstrukcji podmiotu, to odwołuje się do niej z dwóch istotnych powodów. Po pierwsze, ta dualność jest obecna w większości opracowań dotyczących starzenia się, a także podmiotowości; więc niemożliwe jest uniknięcie jej. Po drugie, i być może ważniejsze, te dychotomiczne kategorie mogłyby być ideałami, do których ludzie dążyliby lub z którymi porównywaliby siebie, jako że są one „gdzieś tam”, krążąc jako dyskursy. Konieczne jest więc sprawdzenie, w jaki sposób stają się one ważne w życiu poszczególnych ludzi.

W tym tekście Robbins korzysta ze schematu analitycznego Janet Carsten, która spostrzega bycie w relacji z innymi (*relatedness*) jako proces objawiający się poprzez substancje. Tymi substancjami mogłyby być: krew, geny, mleko, kraj, jedzenie, meble czy rozmowa. To, co jest tu szczególnie ważne w odniesieniu do celów tych rozważań, to fakt, iż posiadają one wspólny (bez względu na to, czy są one materialne czy nie) aspekt, poprzez który doświadczane jest pokrewieństwo. Autorka często odwołuje się do tego, co materialne, by ugruntować swoje analizy. Nie chodzi o to, by stwierdzić, że niematerialne aspekty relacji nic nie znaczą, czy że to, co materialne jest najważniejsze, ale o to, by niejako „ugruntować” myślenie o byciu w relacji z innymi. W całym tekście za każdym razem bywa nazywany rodzaj substancji istotnej dla danego przykładu etnograficznego i są szukane sposoby, w jakich zmiany substancji mogą wpływać na zmiany w tych relacjach.