



Anthropology & Aging

Journal of the Association for Anthropology & Gerontology

Aging in Place

Changing Socio-ecology and the Power of Kinship on Smith Island, Maryland

Jana Kopelent Rehak

University of Maryland, Baltimore County and College Park

Author contact: jrehak@umbc.edu

Abstract

This article examines how the people known as Smith Islanders interact with their environment over the life-course. The purpose of the study is to contribute to a better understanding of aging in a small, rural, coastal community which changes are environmentally driven. To address the aging process in changing environments in this essay, I explore the relationship between the place, sense of self, and knowledge. Because the majority of people on the island today are in late life, the main threads in the fabric of this ethnographic narrative weave themselves into stories about aging experiences. I focus on males' experiences, their traditional knowledge, and the role of kinship over their life-courses. The life history narratives of a Smith Island waterman known as Eddie Boy, discusses two elements present in both his childhood narratives and his late adulthood: work and kinship. I show how changing socio-ecology has altered the potential for intergenerational relations, which older islanders cherish, and how such changes in late life pose a new aging dilemma for current Smith Islanders.

Keywords: *aging and changing socioecology; kinship; lifecours; heritage*

Anthropology & Aging, Vol 40, No 1 (2019), pp. 48-62

ISSN 2374-2267 (online) DOI 10.5195/aa.2019.181



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

This journal is published by the [University Library System](#) of the [University of Pittsburgh](#) as part of its [D-Scribe Digital Publishing Program](#), and is cosponsored by the [University of Pittsburgh Press](#).

Aging in Place

Changing Socio-ecology and the Power of Kinship on Smith Island, Maryland

Jana Kopelent Rehak

University of Maryland, Baltimore County and College Park

Author contact: jrehak@umbc.edu

“We are, in a sense, the place-worlds we imagine.”

Wisdom Sits in Places (Basso 1996)



Photo 1. Smith Island Maryland (Photo by Jana Kopelent Rehak)

This research examines how the people known as Smith Islanders interact with their environment over the life-course. The purpose of the study is to contribute to a better understanding of aging in a small, rural, coastal community which changes are environmentally driven. To address the aging process in changing environments in this essay, I explore the relationship between the place, sense of self, and knowledge. I combine two analytical models, the socio-ecological framework (Berkes 2015) and the life-course perspective (Lynch and Danely 2013). I bring together these two approaches to show how people on Smith Island have traditionally moved through their life-courses in a culture that is historically informed and specific to a geographically unique place. My focus is on the way they integrate traditional knowledge into changing socio-ecological systems. Because the majority of people on the island today are in late life, the main threads in the fabric of this ethnographic narrative weave themselves into stories about aging experiences. This article is part of a larger ethnographic study aiming to capture people's sense of self and their attachment to a place embodied in the aging process.

I focus on males' experiences, their traditional knowledge, and the role of kinship over their life-courses. The life history narratives of a Smith Island waterman known as Eddie Boy, discusses two elements present in both his childhood narratives and his late adulthood: work and kinship. In the first section I explore how, in his view, experiential learning about work on the water and reliance on kinship have contributed to his development of a sense of self and place over his life-course. In the second section, I discuss Eddie Boy's kinship-aging dilemma, one he shares with others on Smith Island. Working analytically with traditional, ecological, and sensory knowledge, I show how labor in a kinship-based community defines Islanders' senses of self, which are integrated into their socio-ecological systems. Further, I take Smith Islanders' ways of knowing (Berkes 2015) as a dynamic process embodied in their life-courses. I show how changing socio-ecology has altered the potential for intergenerational relations, which older islanders cherish, and how such changes in late life pose a new aging dilemma for current Smith Islanders.

Context and Methodology

Smith Island, accessible only by boat, is the home of Maryland's largest island community in the Chesapeake Bay (9.2 mi², 4.5 mi² Land / 4.7 mi² Water). The island community's 200 people are divided into three distinct villages: Ewell, Tylerton and Rhodes Point. Most Smith Islanders refer to their island as the only home that they have ever known. Kinship structure is central to Smith Island's social organization. Smith Island descendants trace their history back to the original British, Welsh, and Cornish settlers from the 1600s. Moving from Virginia and Maryland's Eastern Shore, they sustained themselves on the island by small scale farming, gardening and hunting, and later by crabbing and oystering. They, and others, refer to their occupation as being "watermen."

Historically watermen used sailboats, called skipjacks, and left home for days to sail north in the Chesapeake Bay in search of blue crabs and oysters. During the youth of those whose life histories I collected, many young men left home as teenagers and worked for several weeks at a time with their kin on sailboats in the bay. Boys were socialized and prepared by their kinsman for working on the water from an early age. Smith Island families were forced to part with some community members multiple times in the past, whenever the crabbing and oystering economy was in decline. They were particularly hard-hit during World War I and World War II. Working on the water in the Bay changed drastically after WWII, when many watermen transitioned to working on motorized boats and again, during the 1980s, when a gradual change, caused by new environmental regulations for waterman, took place.

I began fieldwork on Smith Island, Maryland in the summer of 2013 when I returned to the island for my second visit after a brief, but memorable, visit in 1995. It was in 1995 that I met Smith Islanders Ken and his wife Iris on the dock in Crisfield when they welcomed me onto their boat. In the summer of 2013, Iris was 89 and Ken 88; they were the oldest people on Smith Island. I visited them every day. We talked, watched television, and listened to the marine radio. They let me photograph them and answered my many questions related to their life histories. These experiences with Iris and Ken led to my interest in researching aging on Smith Island. I met other people on the island in those first two years and on my visits in 2013 and 2014 and with some who were open to talk to me and invited me to their shanties and homes, like Eddie Boy, I developed closer connections. I recorded 24 life histories, observed and photographed people at work, at church, their homes or when walking in public spaces. It is from those histories, observations and visual practices, that I developed an interest in exploring Smith Islanders' patterns of knowledge as they relate to patterns of learning about a place to which they are so deeply connected.

Between 2015 and 2017, in addition to casual conversations with individual islanders, I participated in social events, such as church meetings and traditional annual celebrations on the island. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork on Smith Island between 2013 and 2017, I developed my thesis identifying the significance of relationships among the self, work, knowledge, kinship and sense of place which were developed over the life-course. From the beginning of my fieldwork, I was struck by the contrast between the membership and leadership of older adults in the Smith Island community and the struggle for “agency of marginalized older adults” Lynch 2013, 199 on the US mainland. Their engagement in their island’s traditional work, social life, and problems with land management proved to generate an “active and energetic adulthood” Lynch 2013, 188.

Yet, as did other social scientists working in communities affected deeply by environmental and population changes (Marino 2015; Norgaard 2011; Paolisso 2006), in my research site, I witnessed painful dilemmas lingering over the community’s vision of its future while experiencing major land and population changes. In recent studies focused on a sense of place, some scholars have pointed out that sense of place and the belonging to a home, territory, landscape or seascape, often becomes apparent when such attachment is threatened (Basso 1996; Casey 1993; King 2014; Paolisso 2006). Smith Islanders’ have a sense of self and kinship-based community, which, connected to their place-based knowledge, provides them with an existential sense of what they call independence and freedom. These related sensibilities are being challenged by local as well as global socio-ecological changes.

Anthropological studies of life-course processes across time and cultures emphasize the link between individual experience, social relations, and the environment (Sokolovsky 1990; Danely and Lynch 2013). Theoretical models applied to analysis of human ecology and environment, are generally defined by cross disciplinary approaches (Berkes 2015; Roscoe 2014). Research that addresses alarming and uncertain changes in diverse coastal socio-ecological systems world-wide, suggests that because the globalization of trade in marine products is impacting marine ecosystems and global climate patterns, it is critical to reconnect social (human) and ecological (biophysical) systems (Berkes 2015; Paolisso 2006; Roscoe 2014; Fiske 2016).

Place Making and Ways of Knowing

Through the process of place-making, Smith Islanders construct not only their social history and traditions, but also personal and social identities over generations. The process of place making correlated with the process of growing old on Smith Island, results in a deep attachment to place. Today, Smith Island narratives are still defined by membership in a closely knit, kin-based island community. To define Smith Islanders’ belonging to their ecology, I take their sense of self as connected to a process of place-making (Basso 1996). Keith Basso wrote in a different ethnographic context, “Knowledge of places is therefore closely linked to knowledge of the self, to grasping one’s own community and to securing a confident sense of who one is as a person”. For Smith Islanders, water and weather define every aspect of their daily lives and their prosperity, as well as their losses, their happiness, fatigue, joy, suffering, and death: “Weather is everything and wind is the weather here,” islanders say. This is a very significant ethnographic “rich point” (Agar 1994, 141) shared by the islanders, and it precisely defines the relationship with their sense of place, knowledge, and identity. Water and weather, controlled by the unpredictability of wind, is to them a humbling force. The limits set by their integration within larger complex ecological systems is what connects Smith Islanders, in their perceptions of a self in time and place, with their ancestors.

For generations Islanders have continued to re-invent their lives. All the while they try to stay connected with their kin from the past by what they define as their cultural heritage and their traditional life. Smith Islanders’ definition of a traditional life is closely related to the concept of traditional knowledge (TK) and traditional

ecological knowledge (TEK), defined by Fickert Berkes (2015) as “a cumulative body of knowledge, practice, and belief by adaptive process and handed down through generations by cultural transmission about the relationship of living beings (including humans) with one another and with their environment” (3). When examining Smith Islander’s TEK from a life-course perspective, I further differentiate TEK from ways of knowing (Berkes 2015), which is considered a process (Berkes 2015; Ingold 2000) “You have to be born on Smith Island to be a Smith Islander,” islanders say. This saying expresses their deep awareness of the skills one must learn from relatives in the early stages of life in order to survive and do well on the island.

I further explore in this article the process of “becoming” with special emphasis on an experiential learning from early childhood and a development of sensory knowledge islanders have in relation to their environment. I encountered another example of process of becoming a Smith Islander when one father expressed to me his joy over a photograph of his little boy in a family album. The photo showed his boy alone on a small boat. The father’s gaze on this image evoked his sense of pride and accomplishment, as it was part of his son’s experiential learning. Experiencing water, in addition to mastering the skills of how to manage the boat, is for islanders a vital form of day-to-day close sensory interaction. Veronika Strang (2004) points out that while water shapes diverse sensory perceptions and meanings, water also has universal, consistent qualities evident in its continual change and movement. As some islanders told me, their attitude, “going with the flow,” is their way of responding to the movements of the water surrounding the island. These sensory skills are inherently necessary in adaptation to the island environment. Peoples’ analogies about movement in life on the island are accounts of sensory ways of knowing, reflecting on their outlook on life. For Smith Islanders, water is a powerful metaphor expressing ideas and emotions in their lives and correlating with the concept described by Strang (2004): “People imagine ideas and emotions flowing between themselves and the world, and in this system, as in any other, there is a ‘proper order - boundaries and limits, a correct balance’ of flow” (68).

Letting Her Go

Eddie Boy retired from working on the water in the summer of 2016. When I walked into his shanty (a working space that is a wooden building dedicated to processing and storing the waterman’s catch and other work), it was a hot and humid morning at the height of the summer season. To my surprise he was not there, so I stepped outside and looked for him on the boardwalk where his boat was tied up. Eddie Boy was standing on the end of the pier by his shanty watching two young men getting ready to leave with a boat. Having spent considerable time there, I recognized that they were not from Smith Island. Eddie was intensely quiet, leaning on a piling while the boat was slowly pulling out of the slip. Having watched watermen on Smith Island operate their boats with practiced ease, I could tell that these strangers were just learning the craft. It was when the boat turned and I could read the name “June” on the stern of the boat, that I realized what just happened. Eddie Boy had sold his boat (see Photo 2).

The boat headed out of the harbor and I followed Eddie Boy as he walked quietly inside the shanty. During early mornings in the summer, his wife June was always there with him, picking crab meat. But that morning, Eddie Boy sat down in his chair, situated in the middle of the room, and June was not there. In his quiet, I realized that I had just witnessed an extraordinary event. I broke the silence by asking about the absence of his wife, and he said, “June went to the mainland. She is not happy about this, she is not ready, but I told her I am.” Then he continued, “I had to slow down first, but now it’s time to stop. I had to let her [the boat] go.” There was no regret in Eddie’s voice. He had come to accept that he had to let his boat go. Having witnessed the life-long connections between a waterman’s sense of self, his family and his boat, I recognized the symbolic power of the boat in the men’s lives. Eddie Boy’s childhood memories shed a new light on what I witnessed that summer morning, when Eddie Boy made a step towards retirement and “let her go.”



Photo 2. Smith Island Maryland, Eddie Boy “Letting her go” (Photo by Jana Kopelent Rehak)

“I can’t imagine living my life elsewhere,” said Eddie Boy when I asked him about aging. “I take time to sit and observe nature and enjoy,” he calmly said. “We live a simple life here, without major distractions and material conveniences people have on the mainland,” as he put it when he spoke about his sensory joy and personal satisfaction.

Emotional engagement with the landscape, as Anderson suggested, is not limited to sources of food and shelter, but includes sources of beauty, power, excitement and other human values (Anderson 1996). One evening, while sitting on a bench by his shanty at the end of the day, watching the sun set, Eddie Boy said:

Every year a group of men, well to do men, reserve a winter weekend in my shanty. They come from up north in February to Smith Island. They stay around the table here and shuck oysters while they keep the outside door open to watch the sun on the water. They come down here from their ‘worldly life’, all the way to me, to seek something special. One of them told me that this is the best time in his whole year. For me this is what I have every day and all year around. I am happy. They come for one weekend I have a year to feel my happiness.

When reflecting on his growing old in a place, Eddie Boy often speaks of joy from gazing at the sky, watching light on the water and listening to the birds. He takes time to sit and observe the island’s landscape, a beauty he does not take for granted. Such “mesmeric qualities” of water, as Strang (2004) put it, “are of particular interest in considering sensory perception and the creation of meaning” (51). His stimulating day-to-day interaction with seascape and island landscape, resulted in a strong bond between Eddie Boy and his environment.

A year later, Eddie Boy was diagnosed with an advanced cancer. After his brief stay in a mainland nursing home, he decided to come back to his island home. Uncertain about how much time he had to live, Eddie Boy

remained inside his house in the care of his wife and children through the summer of 2017. For a while Eddie Boy's sickness made him invisible to the public. The Smith Island community was distressed over his rapidly diminishing strength and his absence from public spaces. That distress intensified in the community with the news about his brother Junior, also diagnosed with cancer. Eddie Boy had established an important role in the Smith Island community over his life-course. He was among the islanders who never left the Island even when others evacuated before a storm. Fellow Islanders consider him and his brother Junior to be pillars of the community. "Eddie Boy is a very good waterman," people say, and, emphasizing his wisdom, "one you can always ask for advice." During summer social events Smith Island collectively expressed compassion for the pain and physical suffering of the two brothers. It was apparent to me that their sickness affected the whole community.

The Male Life-Course on Smith Island: Learning the Ways of the Waterman

"For her size, she was about as smart a boat as there was on the Bay."
Capt. Edward Harrison

Edward Asbury Evans, called "Eddie Boy," was born on Smith Island in 1938. With the exception of two years in Baltimore during World War II, he has lived on Smith Island all his life. For Eddie Boy's generation, as for previous generations, survival on Smith Island depended on absorbing traditional knowledge while growing up. People originally settled Smith Island with the intent to farm. He traces his ancestry back eight generations to the Eastern Shore of Virginia on his mother's side, and to the Western Shore of Virginia on his father's side. Eddie Boy recalled how he first recognized his desire to become a waterman:

Well, all my life from when I was a small kid, I always desired to grow up, naturally, like most children do, to be like their father. I mean my father and grandfather was with me like anybody else. They were role models with me. I never cared to go to school, if I could get out and work on the water. I always had a desire from a very early age to have my own boat and just be my own boss. Now, at that time you didn't look at it as being your own boss; it was more or less the freedom part of it.

From the perspective of his childhood memories, Eddie Boy recalls his first taste of being on the water as a feeling of power and freedom. But learning how to captain a boat is not just knowledge of certain skills, it is part of the larger process of ways of knowing, which include social, sensory, and emotional knowledge as well as knowledge of trade and the environment (see Berkes 2008), Eddie's admiration of his father and grandfather is not exceptional among Smith Islanders. As I noticed during my fieldwork, other watermen expressed their childhood memories of togetherness and closeness during the learning process with their kinsmen in a vivid way. For some it is their strong relationship with their fathers, other male kinsmen or mentors, like a boat captain. A boat is an essential part of a man's life-course on Smith Island. Eddie Boy reflects on the process of developing ways of knowing through learning how to captain a boat, a critical skill for Smith Island boys entering manhood:

And pretty well every kid around here, when they got eight, ten years old, in between there, had a skiff of some type. Now, some was fortunate enough to have new ones, some was lucky enough for to be able to find one that somebody had throwed away and they'd fix it up and whatever. But we were always just messing around with these type of skiffs, riding 'em like our fathers' boats and what have you, and it was a lot of fun, but it also built the desire into you to be competitive, because you always wanted a boat that was better than the next boy's that was your age, and you were trying to do something different than he was or trying to go faster and things of that nature.

I would say that when I was no more than nine years old, I had my first skiff, which was a big thing for us at that age. It's more or less like a kid today when you get 16 and you get your first automobile or something. It was really a big deal with us when we got our first skiff. Probably didn't cost over 30 or 40 dollars. Didn't have a motor on it, but at that age we could take that skiff here in the shallows all around the island with a sail on it. We were always rigging sail on it and it was something that your parents pretty well let you do your own thing. If you wanted to put a funny looking sail on it that was fine. It was your boat.

As I show here, Eddie Boy's recollections of learning on a small boat, a skiff, provide an insight into the process of becoming a Smith Island waterman. Getting that first skiff, when Eddie Boy was growing up, was a rite of passage on Smith Island. It meant learning traditional skills, gaining sensory knowledge and emotional satisfaction in a child's desire to be like his parents. It was a first taste of being empowered and feeling freedom, as Eddie Boy put it, and away from parental restrictions, while learning "the seascape's rhythm" (Maurstand 2004, 277).

Becoming a Smith Islander and a waterman is a long process of sensory and experiential learning that stretched over the course of childhood and gradually into manhood. Buddy, one of the middle-aged watermen, remembers how his dad would take him to work on his boat: "My dad put me in the box on the boat and I would be with him all day. I even fell asleep and was mad when my sister woke me up when we arrived home in the afternoon. I didn't want them to know that I was sleeping, but it was all so good." Mark, one of Buddy's contemporaries, remembered, "As kids we would play in a skiff catching crabs with nets. We would also go dock to dock when we didn't have a skiff catching crabs hiding near pilings. Later when I began with my father at first, I would do small jobs like steering the boat, throwing buoys overboard, whatever was helpful to my dad and the mate he had working with him."

Learning the rhythm and craft of their work from an early stage over the life-course, is a pattern in the many childhood memories that I collected from Smith Island's three communities. The Smith Island men, with whom I had the opportunity to talk, remembered their childhood play related to their father's work and their initiation into the process of becoming a waterman. Some men discontinued their seasonal crabbing and oystering, over their life-course, yet their childhood narratives reveal similar patterns of learning. Bobby, a tugboat captain, described how his dad would teach him to control his skiff: "One day Dad asked me to take crabs to the shanty. Our shanty was out on the water near marshes on your way to Rhodes Point. As I was coming closer, I stopped the engine and let her drift slowly towards the shanty. 'You have to get her there much faster than that,' he let me know. I need to move faster with her."

For watermen, experiential knowledge of the seascape is part of the traditional knowledge that they learn from older male kin. "The seascape evokes the senses in various ways and the body responds to this particular environment through engaged forms of sensing," wrote Anna Maurstand (2004) in her articles about small-scale fisheries in the north of Norway (280). Smith Island watermen live most of their lives on the water and it is their extensive sensory knowledge of the seascape that shapes "men-only" ways of knowing. When defining their work, "on the water" as they say, Eddie Boy and others rely on their sensory experiences drawn from their closeness to nature and, in particular, the water. The sensory experiences on the island, expressed as the fabric of everyday life in the sounds, smells, tastes and sights, are all shared elements of Smith Islanders' sense of place. The earthy smell of marshland, the smell of freshly washed clothes and perfumes in church, the taste of local food, the sounds of the wind crossing grassland, the sound of water pushed by wind into the island shore, the water trickling on swimming crabs in shanties, and the sputter of crab boat engines before sunrise returning from work

in the heat of midday are all parts of what Paul Stoller (1997) may call sensual cultural complexities.

Eddie Boy's memories further show how early experiences on the water with a skiff lead to a quick transition from mimetic and ritualized play on the water to the final stage: a rite of passage to an assigned job. This is how he recalled his first work trip to the mainland,

The first time that I had-- and I remember it real distinctly. I was 12 years old, and my father let me go to Crisfield the first time by myself in a big boat to take the crabs (a one hour boat trip). And looking back on it, I can see where it's pretty young, you know, to trust a large boat to go to Crisfield, even though -- I'm quite sure my father had thought this out plainly and he picked the type of day that he says it's okay to do, that he felt that it was going to be a beautiful day and you could see a long ways and them type of things. But, still, looking back, it was pretty young for to be trusted with that. I didn't trust mine with my boat at that age. I mean, they were a little bit older than that before I would trust 'em with that type of a boat. But anyhow, my father did.

We can see here how this first work assignment quickly turns from childhood play on the water to an adult experience of taking responsibility. We can also see the kind of sensory knowledge Smith Islanders must learn early in their lives. Eddie Boy gives us a suggestion here, that while mastering the boat on the water is a critical skill for watermen, sensory knowledge learning is also about learning to embrace and overcome ever present solitude and fear of death when working on the water. In looking back on his youth and his father's approach, and from the position of a parent, Eddie further reflects:

He always gave me the freedom to do these types of things, and it was a good thing that he did, because by the time I was 16 years old, my father became seriously ill and he couldn't work for two years. I had to take charge of the family at 16 years old. My brother was 14 and I was 16, and we'd take that boat, I was in charge because I was the oldest. My father made that very clear. And we managed, believe or not, to look out for our family, and we had a large family. It was six children of us and plus mom and dad, and dad was sick. And we managed to keep that family together with enough -- put food on the table and all the other expenses going for them two years. So if we look back, then my father was wise to let me learn at an early age...Naturally after that, as I began to get a little older, then I wanted my own boat. And at 18 years old, I had my own boat, my first boat.

Eddie Boy's reflexive memories show how, on Smith Island, men's relationships with kin and boats are formed in early childhood and continue to develop well into manhood. Eddie Boy's life on the water and on the island continued with his marriage to June and the birth of five children. When I first met him, he was in his seventies, he was a working waterman and respected leading elder in his community. His narratives led me to further explore others' memories of childhood which reflect experiential learning and the role of a boat in the life-course of an islander. I found that learning by playing with a skiff was preceded during early childhood by much earlier play with a small toy boat. The toy boats were carved from one piece of wood, then painted and boys would pull them with a rope. Jennifer, Eddie Boy's sister, remembered when her son got his first tall boots that made it possible for him to play in the backyard at high tide: "He was there for hours, playing in the water with his tall boots on. After he set up the stations in line and connected them with a rope, he pushed his little toy boat from station to station, playing crab pots pulling."

What makes Jennifer's story such an interesting example about childhood on Smith Island is the interconnection between experiential learning and imaginative play. For some, the connection with the work

boats is also manifested in their interest in work boat models. When visiting Smith Island homes, I noticed work boat models, old and new, displayed in the living rooms. Some models are passed down from the previous generation, others are more recent. These boat models are considered a form of art and skillfully crafting them is a creative activity. They also enable cultural heritage to be shared by makers during local art festivals and events.

Because of their location and livelihood, Smith Islanders' lives are inseparable from their boats, or, as Eddie Boy puts it, "a boat has a very significant place in the life of a Smith Islander." From early childhood imaginative play mimics adulthood. The child's ownership of a small skiff provides a first taste of freedom, of competition, and of adventure, as well as a taste of desired adulthood. Work on the water begins during childhood and continues into late life, and the boat is one of the central elements of family sustainability. Smith Island work boats are cared for daily. Watermen clean their boats every day and do small scale repairs during the season, while large scale maintenance of the boats is done during the off season.

In addition to their care for each work boat and pride in model boats symbolic of their cultural heritage, I noticed the watermen's emotional connections to their boats. Watermen refer to a boat as she and often name their boats after their wives or daughters. Paula Johnson (1992), in her book about Smith Island work boats, emphasized how the workboats were personalized by watermen and families. Glenn Lawson, in her book, said that a boat was always treated like a very important member of the family and with respect. Capt. Edward Harrison, as Johnson (1992) pointed out, expressed the sensory experience embodied in working on the boat. "Being on the boat all your life, that boat becomes part of you. Helps raise your family" (12).

The notion of freedom, embodied in a man's boat and work on the water, is one of the significant patterns in Eddie Boy's life-course narratives, one which he shares with his fellow watermen. Dwight, Eddie Boy's brother-in-law, spoke of how a sense of freedom comes from working on the water: "When you look from your window, here on the island, you see what is happening outside on the water and right then you can tell how weather will affect everything. You are free to go and do what you need to do. You have knowledge and experience and act on it as you please with flexibility." For Eddie Boy, Dwight, and others, this sense of freedom comes from the flexibility and ability to move physically with the water and weather and the ecology of which they are a part. It is what Maurstand (2004) defines as temporal rhythms and belonging to a particular lifeway. In related discussion, Strang (2004) discussed a manageable flow between the social context and the environment. An experienced sense of freedom combined with knowledge of ecological diversity and change and with sensory knowledge of the seascape drives the Islanders' own flexibility to interact with their environment.

Both ecological knowledge and flexible work practices are an approach strategically important for local sustainability in small scale fisheries. This has been well researched by Berkes (2013) and other socio-ecologists (e.g., Paolisso 2006; Ponkrat and Stocker 2011; Roscoe 2014). The Islanders' ecological knowledge includes their concepts of cyclical and annual time, their understanding of weather and water patterns affecting the island, and a developed comprehension of the biodiversity in the bay's ecology, all of which is recorded in journals and passed on by mentoring watermen. Becoming part of the island's ecology in the company of their kin has been essential for Smith Islanders. Their shared knowledge of the bay's water, crabs, fish, oysters, birds, and other animals inhabiting the ecosystem is passed down through generations.

As it is in many diverse coastal communities, traditional knowledge on Smith Island is an evolving process, one which is learned by the practice of doing (Berkes 2015). A cumulative body of knowledge based on collective experiences and observations brought together, interpreted, and shared produces what Berkes (2015) defines as a community knowledge (229). The opportunity to pass their knowledge on to the next generation, a practice that Smith Island watermen are well-known for in the bay community (Warner 1976), seems to be a

significant part of the work. From Eddie Boy's and others' narratives we can see how, from early boyhood to late life, work shapes "the life-course obligation" Guyer and Salami 2013, page 206 in the life of a resident of Smith Island.

Due to better availability of health care, increasing longevity, and the absence of a younger generation, Islanders find themselves working longer. As is happening in many other places, Smith Islanders are now experiencing a rapid demographic change and are becoming a "super aging society" (Lynch and Danely 2013). Older adults are the largest full-time working population on Smith Island today. Many return to their work shortly after they undergo a major illness or surgery and continue to work until they reach the physical limits of their working lives due to illness or death.

As they approach what Bateson calls "stage in Adulthood II" Bateson 2013, page 21 many adapt by working fewer hours on the water during the crab season and not working during the winter oyster season. Unless they have to stop going out on the water because they are seriously ill, they battle illnesses, overcome work injuries, and work until the final stage of their lives. Watermen forced to move to a nursing home on the mainland still follow seasonal weather, crab cycles, and the market in media and by calling their kin. Moving to a nursing home on the mainland is a painful time, both for an individual and for the community. When individuals in late life cannot sustain themselves on Smith Island, and there is no family or friend who can help them, they have to leave. People generally resent leaving and feel overwhelming stress at such a possibility. They do everything they can to stay as long as they can.

Growing Old as a Waterman: Stories in the Place

Eddie Boy, like other aging watermen, maintained his excitement about work into his late seventies. Admitting that his physical limits frustrate him, he tried to retain the status of a working waterman into late life. Since work and individual independence are generally highly valued on Smith Island, the main occupations for older adults become those of maintaining economic independence, sustaining heritage, and managing one's work and health conditions. On the island, some watermen meet for early morning coffee in the local shop and talk while they listen to the marine radio and television. In the company of others, they enjoy telling stories and jokes, discussing their work and weather, and supporting each other in times of hardship. Elders on Smith Island enjoy their place in the community.

As watermen on Smith Island grow old, participation in storytelling becomes an obligation connecting people and places across successive generations. Storytelling practice has long served effectively in passing on knowledge and providing a space for elders to actively participate in the social life of the community. Storytelling, just like experiential learning, has a significant place in the life-course of people in the Smith Island community. Barbara Myerhoff compared story-telling to soul making, and further wrote, "growing souls through stories is the making of the world" (2007, 89).

Storytelling practice has been deeply established in the life-course of Smith Islanders for generations. Stories are told during social gatherings and community events and are often also part of casual talks. "At Tangier they call us 'yarnies,' said Jennings, one of the elders, with laughter, "meaning we could tell long yarn stories." Storytelling relates to Smith Island life in the broadest sense; stories are related to serious tasks, such as weather, work, social life, faith or death, but are used as well as to entertain. Some stories, deeply rooted in the island's oral traditions, are re-told and could be called "old yarns," addressing upcoming crisis shared crosstime. "Any crisis that comes up has been dealt with years back, and that's how stories came into being" (Kitching 2011, 81). The stories, important in the times of crisis, as Jennings puts it, represent old wisdom, available for Smith

Islanders across generations. These stories, based on actual events or dreams and visions, and often related to the dead, have a significant place in the Smith Islanders' oral traditions and circulate in the community through successive generations. Confrontation with the death of a kinsman is a severe condition of the life-course for Smith Islanders. Nearness to death is always part of day-to-day life, as Jennings points out, "You go out and you don't know if you will come back." Stories of the dead are structured according to knowledge of a place, a body, or self and faith, and often include aspects of a secret. Some stories and dreams overlap, just as they do in the story involving Eddie Boy, which I encountered while having casual conversation with Anita, the librarian.

Anita, remembered the story about her uncle's death. "He was going out in a small boat, just to check on something. Weather changed fast and the wind was so strong that his little boat was swept up. His body was lost in the sea and they couldn't find him for days. Then, Eddie Boy had a dream about the place where he was. They went there and found him." When I asked him about this story, Eddie Boy confirmed it:

It was Sunday afternoon, after church, when I came home and like my usual routine is, I eat and lay down on the sofa. That day I couldn't fall asleep. I was slowly drowsing away when in my mind I keep returning to one place on the water in a grassy area. I got up and told my wife June that I have to go there. I was thinking for a moment that I may go later, but then I went and the body was there. I am glad I did, because if I waited for later we would have never found the body.

Eddie Boy finished retelling his story and the resulting silence in the living room carried a chilling sense of the sacred surrounding events in his narratives. "Wisdom sits in places," wrote Keith Basso (1996, 75) about landscape and language in different contexts. For Smith Islanders, the wisdom accumulated in stories also sits in places. Place-based stories and dreams are closely related to seascape knowledge, supernatural powers and belief systems, as well as islander's relationships with their dead. Eddie Boy's detailed knowledge of the seascape and his concern with a fellow islander, mirrored in his dream, prompted further action, and became a story circulating throughout the community.

While all age groups can participate in story-telling, elders, as they are in other small traditional societies, are the keepers of old stories, reflecting the values and a knowledge of their community. As Berkes (2008) put it, "Elders provide corporate memory for the group, the wisdom to interpret uncommon and unusual events and they help enforce the rules and ethical norms of the community" (132). The current generation faces a painful dilemma. "There is hardly anybody here to tell the stories to," as one elder put it. Holding onto their stories in the absence of a next generation, Smith Islanders' find their traditional roles in intergenerational relations challenged.

Migration of younger generations to the mainland has a profound influence on their aging parents and grandparents on the island. Aging Smith Islanders are still active storytellers in their community today, but, in the absence of their children and grandchildren, they are losing the opportunity to pass their stories on to the next generation. While older adults could not likely imagine their lives in any other place, being engaged in different work, or losing their Smith Island community, they have supported their children in seeking education followed by finding a new profession on the mainland. The majority of Eddie Boy's children's generation left the island for work. The grandchildren are not pursuing careers on the water, instead they are seeking higher education. They visit the island sporadically, usually only one or two times per year. Typically, their parents and grandparents travel to the mainland to participate in their grandchildren's lives or for holidays. In a kinship-based community, separation of the family by migration presents a dilemma for this super-aging island community (Lynch and Danely 2013).

Eddie Boy and his wife June, like many others, are proud of their kids: “My granddaughter is doing really well at the University of Baltimore Law School. She already has an internship and her article was accepted to a professional journal, she is doing well!” Eddie Boy said multiple times over the last two years: “As far as I know she is the first lawyer from Smith Island and when the judge picked her for an internship, he told her that a reason he picked her is because he knew she must have worked twice as much than others to get where she is.” Watching their granddaughter succeed on the mainland, they are caught in the kinship/community dilemma.

For Eddie Boy, like others on Smith Island, witnessing his children and grandchildren leaving the island first for school, and then for jobs, foretells the absence of people on the island in the future. While excited about his granddaughter’s success, he also knows that there is a painful price to pay: the continuation of his community. Struggling to hold onto their stories in the “absence of the listener is like the deprivation of an individual” (Myerhoff 2007, 20). Myerhoff (2007) writes of this experience, “It is as if all creation stories are stories of separation” (21).

Smith Island story-telling is an integral part of active agency for older people. Lynch (2012) points out that *agency* and *control* are two nouns that may not be typically associated in American society with older adults. Lynch (2012) writes, “Whereas they are important values in the United States, Americans seem to assume stereotypically that old people do not have agency: their bodies are failing, they are not in control, their life choices have already been made, and they are just finishing up their years” (199). Smith Islanders’ engagement in active work provides them with a sense of purpose, “an agency in their late adulthood,” (Lynch and Danely 2013, 199) and contributes to their “active and energetic transition to Adulthood II” Bateson 2013, 27. Yet, their obligation to carry on the island’s traditions, for the instance inability to pass on old stories to the next generation, leaves them unfulfilled.

Socio-ecology and Life-course

Small Island ecosystems, also known as “personal ecosystems” (Berkes 2018, page 97), are an interesting site for research, because island people often see limits to their environment more clearly than mainlanders. Just as in many other coastal small island communities, Smith Island’s ecology has been affected by storms, hurricanes, and land erosion. Today, with rapid environmental change and the decline in human population, members of an aging generation on Smith Island recognize their vulnerable position. Many Smith Islanders are not comfortable discussing the changes to their land in the context of global climate change, but they are very proactive in their land management activities preventing the land erosion. Land erosion on the northwest side of the island and high water levels on the east side have become critical focal points for the Smith Islanders’ efforts to improve their land resilience. Losing land to erosion poses a serious threat to Smith Islanders and requires careful land management. The US Government funded the construction of a seawall by the Army Corps of Engineers in two areas on the northwest side of the island, and it approved further funding for an environmental engineering company to investigate a land erosion improvement plan for the entire island. In addition to long-term communal land management supported by state and federal funding, Smith Island residents employ short term strategies to address high tide issues affecting both public roads and private yards.

Social and environmental scientists are trying to make sense of the complexities surrounding issues of climate change in traditional and often predominantly aging communities. Some anthropologists who are working with communities directly affected by rapid socio- ecological changes observed the problem of denial of climate change and defined it as a disconnect. They tackled the denial of climate change by conceptualizing it, based on a cultural model transparent in modes of communication, as environmental skepticism (Fiske 2016;

Marino 2015; Paolisso 2006). Shirley J. Fiske (2016), for example, defined climate skepticism to be a uniquely American belief system and the result of certain groups' resistance to scientific and governmental authority. As Fiske points out, among skeptics a sense of confidence is culturally bound and is a direct outcome of place-based knowledge and values. Current climate change has focused ethnographic encounters on local populations in small, rural communities, which, in turn, have provided evidence of a need to address the vulnerability of places affected by global environmental changes (Marino 2015; Norgaard 2011; Paolisso 2006). In my work, I offer an ethnographic account of place-based knowledge and values as they are connected to the aging process. The purpose of this research is to move beyond an academic critique of the denial of climate change. It is from here that I take a multiple analytical approach: the socio-ecology and life-course.

Danely and Lynch (2013) write, "A life-course approach to aging recognizes that as individuals age, their lives unfold in conjunction with those of people of different ages, and that all of these actors, who occupy different and changing positions of multiple cultural and physical environments over a period of historical time, are shaping and influencing each other in important ways" (3). In their publication *Transitions and Transformations* Danely and Lynch, offer cross-cultural comparative accounts of aging from a life-course perspective. They emphasize that a focus on the life-course in anthropological studies of aging represents, in theory, a shift from the static category of one person towards an inclusive multigenerational approach. From this life-course perspective, examination of work and kinship on Smith Island shows it to be a cross-roads of locally specific patterns of traditional work, storytelling, and a newly emerging multigenerational dilemma in a small rural community affected by socio-ecological changes. In this predominantly aging community, life history narratives, casual conversations, and ethnographic observations provided me with deeper insights into the meaning of work and kinship as it is integrated into the island's socio-ecology.

Conclusion

Eddie Boy died in January 2018. At his funeral, silence overpowered the traditional storytelling. Typically, at a Smith Island funeral people share stories and even jokes. At Eddie Boy's funeral, all the designated speakers struggled physically with their voices. It was as if all speech was silenced by the pain of losing him. I recall only one message as a collective echo across the crowded church in Ewell, "he was a person to go to, always available to share his wisdom." Everyone agreed that Eddie Boy's accessibility and ability to share his knowledge with others has become, in the eyes of Smith Islanders, a heroic way of being. His skill at surviving made him a successful waterman, yet at his funeral, I began to realize that the triumph of his life is his service to the community, the place where he belonged. Eddie Boy's life history is an account of personal experience over his life-course in relation to a place defined by a unique socio-ecology. I recognize in his life-course experiences multiple and conflicted elements which define Eddie Boy's agency in a small coastal community.

My focus on Smith Islanders' life histories provides a larger context for understanding how traditional knowledge is constituted in the life-courses of individuals who are connected to a place. Reading Eddie Boy's life history and tracking narrative speech patterns about his work on the water, opened a new space for further exploration of traditional, ecological, and sensory knowledge. Moreover, his life history and speech open up a space to explore the symbolic embodiment of boats in the life-course of Smith Island males. By examining Eddie Boy's memories of his childhood, I show, from the perspective of his life-course, how the process of his becoming an adult waterman is defined by intergenerational practices structured by knowledge. I present outcomes showing how knowledge embodied in the life-course of an older person, Eddie Boy, underwent major shifts related to socioecological changes.

Smith Islanders' traditional knowledge, as I discovered, integrated into intergenerational relations over the life-course, gives purpose to residents a sense of agency in their late life. Linking the concepts of knowledge, place making, work, and story-telling to the process of growing old provided me with tools to illustrate islanders' sense of self, but also highlighted a late adulthood dilemma in a place affected by socioecological and familial change. Smith Islanders' feelings of belonging to the island gives them a deep sense of being connected to their ancestors, cultural traditions, work and community. To continue their traditional island life into their late adulthood, they must remain active and manage their work and health. They must do all this while bearing witness to the erosion of their land and community. As his case illustrates, Eddie Boy's emotional engagement with his boat, the seascape, and the island are essential parts of successfully aging in place. Yet as I see it, trends toward change also presented him with a kinship dilemma related to the discontinuity of his own heritage. These are elements which shape life-course experiences.

References

- Agar, Michael. 1994. *Language Shock: Understanding The Culture of Conversation*. New York: Quill.
- Anderson, Eugene. 1996. *Ecologies of Heart: Emotion, Belief and the Environment*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Basso, Keith H. 1996. *Wisdom Sits in Places*. University of New Mexico Press: Albuquerque.
- Bateson, Mary Catherine. 2013. Changes in the Life Course: Strengths and Stages. In *Transitions and Transformations: Cultural Perspective on Aging and the Life Course*. edited by Danely, Jason and Caitrin Lynch. 21-34. New York: Berghahn.
- Berkes, Fikret. 2015. *Coast for People*. New York: Routledge.
- . 2008. *Sacred Ecology*. New York: Routledge.
- Casey, Edward. 1993. *Getting Back into Places: Towards a Renewed Understanding of the Place-World*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Danely, Jason and Caitrin Lynch, eds. 2013. *Transitions and Transformations: Cultural Perspective on Aging and the Life Course*. New York: Berghahn.
- Dize, Frances. 1990. *Smith Island, Chesapeake Bay*. Centerville, Maryland: Tidewater Publishers.
- Fiske, Shirley J. 2016. "Climate Skepticism" inside the Beltway and across the Bay. In *Anthropology and Climate Change*. ed. by Susan A. Crate and Mark Nuttall. New York: Routledge
- Guyer, Jane.I. and Kabiru K. Salami. 2013. "Life Course of Indebteness in Rural Nigeria." In *Transitions and Transformations: Cultural Perspective on Aging and the Life Course*. edited by Danely, Jason and Caitrin Lynch. 206-217. New York: Berghahn.
- Ingold, Tim. 1987. *The Appropriation of Nature*. University of Iowa Press: Iowa City.
- Johnson, Paula. 1992. *The Workboats of Smith Island*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
- King, Sarah. 2014. *Fishing in Contested Water*. University of Toronto Press, Toronto.
- Kitching, Frances and Susan Stiles Dowell. 2011. *Mrs. Kitching's Smith Island Cookbook*. Schiffer.
- Lynch, Caitrin. 2012. *Retirement on the Line: Age, Work, and an American Factory*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press.
- Marino, Elizabeth. 2015. *Fierce Climate Sacred Ground*. University of Alaska Press.
- Maurstand, Anna. 2004. "Cultural Seascapes: Preserving local Fishermen's Knowledge in Northern Norway." In *Northern Ethnographic Landscapes*, edited by Igor Krupnik, Rachel Mason, and Tonia Horton. 277-297. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution.
- Myerhoff, Barbara. 2007. *Stories as Equipment for Living*. New York: A Touchstone Book.

- Norgaard, Kari Marie. 2011. *Living in Denial: Climate Change Emotions and Everyday Life*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press.
- Strang, Veronika. 2004. *The Meaning of Water*. New York: Berg.
- Paolisso, Michael. 2006. *Chesapeake Environmentalism: Rethinking Culture to Strengthen Restoration and Resource Management*. College Park: Maryland SeaGrant.
- Ponkrat, Bob and Laura Stocker. 2011. *Anthropology, Climate Change and Coastal Planning*. London: Routledge.
- Helen Kopnina and Eleanor Shoreman-Ouiment. ed. 2011. London and New York: Routledge.
- Roscoe, Paul. 2014. "A Changing Climate For Anthropological and Archeological Research: Improving the Climate-Change Models." *American Anthropologist* 116 (3): 535-548.
- Sokolovsky, Jay. 1990. *The Cultural Context of Aging*. New York: Bergin & Garvey Publishers.
- Stoller, Paul. 1997. *Sensory Scholarship*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Warner, William. 1976. *Beautiful Swimmers*. Boston: An Atlantic Monthly Press Book.

© 2019. This work is published under
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/> (the “License”). Notwithstanding
the ProQuest Terms and conditions, you may use this content in accordance
with the terms of the License.