

Time, Age, Change

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***The Big Move: Life Between the Turning Points.* By Anne Wyatt-Brown, Ruth Ray Karpen and Helen Q. Kivnick; afterword by Margaret Morganroth Gullette. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2016. Pp. 107. \$18.00 (paperback) \$17.99 (electronic).**

***Transitions and Transformations: Cultural Perspectives on Ageing and the Life Course.* Edited by Caitrin Lynch and Jason Danely. Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2013. Pp 280. \$120.00/£85.00 (hardcover); \$27.95/£19.00 (paperback); \$34.95 (electronic)**

In different ways, both these volumes highlight conceptual and practical ways of facilitating transitions in societies that have lost grand narratives, or experienced disruption to practices that might otherwise guide people through these events. They are focused on transitions in later life, especially aging into old age, but provide insights of relevance to any age and stage. They make important theoretical and empirical contributions to life course studies, emphasizing the ubiquity of change and transition, the gains as well as losses that accompany them, and the fluidity of stages, all of which have been long-overlooked in the social sciences, where stability has been considered the default position, or norm, and aging has been viewed from the perspective of decline and loss. Not only do these volumes emphasize the ordinary nature of change, but, whilst recognizing the structural and ideological challenges that exist, they nevertheless highlight the possibility of agency over fate, identifying the resources that might help muster this. In terms of temporality, too, both suggest through diverse examples how hegemonic life course narratives that depict moving through the life course in terms of a linear, unidirectional dynamic are belied by lived experiences of cyclicity and interplay between the different ages and stages. These involve not only intergenerational exchanges but also a fluid interplay of age identities within individuals at any one stage.

The Big Move originated in a 2011 presentation given at a Gerontological Society of America (GSA) conference that was subsequently developed into book form at the suggestion of Margaret Morganroth Gullette. The book is centered upon Anne Wyatt-Brown's account of a major life transition: moving into Roland Park Place, an assisted living facility (in her case, being younger and healthier than most at seventy-one, she went because of her older husband's health care needs). The unique format of the book, mirroring that of the conference presentation, starts with Wyatt-Brown's account and is followed by commentary by three of the scholars acting as discussants at the time, all of whom are uniquely placed to tease out particular strands in Wyatt-Brown's story. Wyatt-Brown's first discovery was that her years as a gerontology scholar had not prepared her for the experience of living amongst frail old people, and indeed she was ambushed by doubt and despair when, arriving with her husband at the dining room for their first dinnertime at Roland Park Place, they were met by a throng of walkers and wheelchairs parked outside the door. She subsequently experienced personally and observed the way old age is Othered, both by those visitors living on the "outside" and by those healthier and youthful who, whilst living on the "inside," were carers for others or otherwise identified as "third age." But gradually she adjusted, made friends, constructed the routines of an ordinary life. She concludes by highlighting two positive experiences above all. First, rather like an anthropologist, she appreciates the opportunity to acquire an emic view of old age, where before she had only the etic view of a gerontologist. Secondly, she appreciates the solidarity and understanding she shared with others going through similar life experiences.

Ruth Ray Karpen follows with an essay that examines Wyatt-Brown's story, and then change more generally, through the feminist framework of "care," which indicates a moving not just into the physical space but into the "*emotional space*" of others (33, emphasis in original). She notes that this renders Wyatt-Brown uniquely positioned to assume the

archetypal role of the crone, both within the field of gerontology and equally in her own life. Barbara Walker's idea of the crone, she adds, also suggests an alternative way of viewing both present and future in the concept of cyclical time: "like a sunrise or sunset passing from darkness to light, and from light to darkness. . . . The Virgin [becomes] the Mother [becomes] the Crone" (Walker 29, cited on 37). Next, Helen Q. Kivnick applies a psychological approach to Wyatt-Brown's story, analyzing the changes and responses to change depicted by Wyatt-Brown through the lens of Eriksonian life course development theory. Therein she identifies Wyatt-Brown's "thematic strengths" or Eriksonian "virtues" such as competence, purposefulness, and generativity, suggesting that, whilst developed earlier in life, they continue to stand her in good stead for the changes of old age. Indeed Kivnick suggests that there are lessons for us more generally in growing into old age with resilience by "appropriately exercising and renewing thematic strengths as each life stage requires" (44) as well as exercising "anticipatory mastery" (53), since these strengths nested within one like in a Russian doll, providing our main chance for "optimizing continuity" (54). Finally, Margaret Morganroth Gullette picks up on the theme of ageism, the stigma-by-association that Wyatt-Brown faced, and the distinction between insider/outsider based on age, and suggests ways of overcoming this. Perhaps the most important is the way Wyatt-Brown has chosen, namely through narrative, particularly the telling of her story in a way that breaks with the hegemonic narrative of decline and instead "speaks from the inside of a potentially estranging experience in a way that makes it familiar, and bearable, and indeed acceptable, and in the reader's imagination, livable" (66), thereby doing something to counter the terrible mystique of old age. Appropriately, the volume finishes with a useful bibliography of a variety of fictional and non-fictional accounts of life in a variety of residential contexts in older age, running the whole range from aging in place to entry into assisted living. Such works are offered as an aid for imaginative empathy, so that any of us may be better able to think seriously about our own later lives,

whilst providing more immediate help for those planning or contemplating their own Big Move.

Transitions and Transformations is a collection of essays by social anthropologists on aging and old age and the various transitions and role changes that accompany this. Its approach is to avoid cordoning off age into a hermetically sealed compartment and instead to portray aging as a “context of interaction among and between generations, including the imaginative landscapes of memoirs and aspirations” (6). This allows the authors to focus on what they think is far more interesting, namely, “how individuals come to occupy those roles and how they make transitions to the next role by interacting with a world full of cultural meanings” (9-10). Each of the essays, although grounded in close ethnographic study based on fieldwork in a wide range of locations including the USA, Japan, China, Nigeria, South America, and Europe, make reflections concerning various levels in society from the minute to the global, the micro to the macro. Like *The Big Move*, this volume also originated in a conference, namely that of the American Anthropological Association (AAA) in 2009 and specifically the first ever panel session organized by Caitrin Lynch and Jason Danely of the newly convened AAA Interest Group on Aging and the Life Course.

Mary Catherine Bateson’s essay considers new ways of understanding the life course, arguing that changes in its organization, particularly with the introduction of the third age (or what she calls Adulthood II), demand the re-examination/reinvention of the meaning we attribute to all life stages. In particular, aging and old age should be “included as part of the creative process of composing a life” (34). Agency is prominent in Caitrin Lynch’s essay, which discusses the meaning of work for older workers in a Boston needle factory (where the median age is seventy-four and the oldest worker is 100 years old). In this community of older workers, people have chosen to work past traditional retirement age and by doing so are able to counter the marginalization, outsider status, and devaluing they experience even within their family context. This

work gives them a sense of agency that is far more valuable than the minimum wage conditions under which they labor might suggest. The role of agency is also highlighted in Jennifer Cole's essay, not only for younger people, for whom socialization is a process of "active and selective acquisition" (223), but also, in a way that is mostly overlooked, for older people. Indeed Cole suggests that the "movement toward old age is a profoundly innovative process" (226) but that this is often overlooked by both ageist assumptions and by temporal notions that associate youth with progress and innovation whilst old age is associated with decline and conservative tendencies. It is decline ideology that similarly serves as an obstacle for older people in attempts to forge a future. Cole notes that instead of being aided by the positive and encouraging progress narratives and bildungsromane younger people can use as resources, "one gets the sense, repeatedly, of the passage of time and the weight of negative social expectation against which the elderly must push to make new futures" (228).

Indeed, there is an emphasis on time and temporality throughout this collection of essays, and a common theme includes alternative approaches to time in other cultures as well as a revisiting of the linear approach that dominates Western theoretical approaches. For example, in ways that overlap with Kivnick's essay in *The Big Move*, Bateson's essay points out that people often mistakenly see the Eriksonian scheme as linear, ignoring or overlooking its cyclicity: they neglect, for instance, that the key issues at each stage appear, either through anticipation or recurrence, at other stages, and again that the transitional changes of adolescence are repeated in mid-life. Jason Danely also posits a link between the distinctive Japanese concept of time in the notion of *ryōkō*, involving engagement with gods and spirits and therewith the coexistence of multiple time perspectives, with Western concepts of the life course. He suggests that *ryōkō* and the generative life cycle model, with its associated spiraling movement of time "affirms some of the distinct qualities of time as experienced in Japan, but in many respects it

also resembles Erikson's assertion that old age involves reengaging with identities and crises of earlier lifestyles" (Danelly 117).

This insight is similarly conveyed by Wyatt-Brown, who notes the cyclical nature of time in the continuing care facility. For example, far from it being something strange, an island cut off from the mainstream of adult life, she describes the nostalgic feeling she has of being back in college, especially when bumping into friends in the laundry room. She recounts also how, during an interval in which she took turns with others reading to a dying friend, Alice, the latter took comfort and derived a sense of meaning from passages which emphasized cyclicity and eternal recurrence. One emerged from a biography of the writer and conservationist Rachel Carson who, when she was dying, reflected with pleasure on the one-year lifecycle of monarch butterflies and delighted that she was also part of such a natural occurrence, something which similarly resonated with Alice. Another arose in the memorable last lines of *The House at Pooh Corner*, which depicts the moment when Christopher Robin, preparing to leave Hundred Acre Wood for boarding school, bids farewell to both his dear childhood friend and, indeed, his childhood, but this farewell held only in one version of time, which was not the only version: "So they went off together. But wherever they go, and whatever happens to them on the way, in that enchanted place on the top of the Forest, a little boy and his Bear will always be playing" (Milne 179-80, cited on 25). This left all moved, readers and read-to alike, which included Alice and her young grandson as well as the Roland Park Place residents gathered at the bedside.

Indeed both volumes stress that, whilst ubiquitous, transitions are nonetheless challenging, offending the stable identity at the core of Western cultural norms and imparting existential fear in a social context in which decline ideology is the lens through which we view our lives. Such decline ideology insinuates itself early in our lives, especially perhaps for women, and we need only consider the experience of Simone de Beauvoir who feared every stage as potential loss, from the time she knew herself to be getting too big to fit into her mother's lap any longer,

to the age of twenty-seven, when she was liable to burst into tears after a glass of wine at the thought of death, to later in her fifties when she saw the future only as a series of losses awaiting her. Her biographers report, however, that the doom Beauvoir was expecting did not materialize and that, on the contrary, her later years were times of fulfilment and pleasure, personal and professional. By keeping silent on this matter, all her memoirs done, she nevertheless inadvertently contributed to the maintenance of the myth of decline. What both these books reveal is not just the truth of change and impermanence throughout the life course but the continuity that is equally a feature, the gains that are equally present with the losses. In doing so, they suggest ways that our theoretical and everyday narratives can be revised and reworked in order that, like the bildungsroman of youth, they may provide frameworks in which we can age with confidence, and perhaps even with a sense of curiosity and adventure.

WORKS CITED

- Milne, A. A. *The House at Poob Corner*. [1928] New York: Dutton, 1961.
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