

## BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

**Jenny Hockey, Carol Komaromy, and Kate Woodthorpe,** eds., *The Matter of Death: Space, Place and Materiality*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, 272 pp. \$US 85.00 hardcover (978-0-230-22416-2).

**T**he *Matter of Death: Space, Place and Materiality* is an apt title to this edited collection on death, dying and disposal. The editors play on the concept of “matter” in order to present multiple perspectives on the meaning, management, and especially the materiality of death. Their central argument is that the absence, or “hidden” nature of death materializes its presence and so challenges the idea that the sequestration of death contributes to peoples’ fear of it and its taboo status. This collection is a welcome addition to the death studies literature because it provides novel ways to think about death, dying, and disposal.

The editors use an overview of social constructionism and phenomenology to provide a theoretical framework for the collection’s focus on the management of death in the 20th and 21st centuries. In order to “make sense” of death, they first identify how categories and boundaries are socially constructed, and various chapters examine the liminal spaces created between life and death. The editors then apply a phenomenological approach to tie together the interdisciplinary discussions of death, focusing on people’s embodied experiences of spaces and places of death, and on how this materiality shapes their understandings. Many of the contributors use ethnographic data, collected mostly in the United Kingdom, to investigate the embodiment of these places and spaces in relation to death.

Unfortunately, the editors do not organize the chapters into sections highlighting the themes of dying, disposal and the materiality of death. Doing so would establish a more constructive relationship between the chapters and provide the reader with greater insight into their content. For example, Chapters 2–4 examine the process of dying and the institutional desire to either prevent or manage death once it is imminent. The authors discuss how workers, residents, patients, visitors, and architects make sense of death through the organization and design of the spaces for death inside places such as hospitals, residential care homes, and hospices. By highlighting the management of the threshold between life and death, these chapters offer a thought-provoking re-examination of how

our experience of dying is not primarily biological. The institutional need to govern death by predicting its immediacy in residential care homes, outlined by C. Komaromy, reveals how workers become unsettled with “sudden deaths” because they must operate in a set of circumstances that they cannot manage or control. K. Worpole examines how the architectural design of the hospice space keeps death hidden from other patients and visitors, for instance through the construction of a separate back exit to remove those who die on the premises. S. Page further considers the absence and presence of death in the organization of hospital space through the material presence of resuscitation equipment and the use of curtains to conceal the performance of CPR. The purposeful segregation of space to mask death therefore raises the question of who such spaces are for — the living or the dying or the dead?

The question of space for the living and the dead becomes troubled in the chapters that focus on body disposal. Chapters 7–11 identify the multiple ways of materializing spaces for the dead, including burials in cemeteries, natural burial grounds or private gardens/fields, and managing cremated remains by burying, scattering, or keeping them inside the home. The use of objects in spaces to mark the dead identifies an absence but also creates a public presence, while the presence of the dead in spaces that are not marked are often only for the bereaved. These chapters contribute to a discussion on the embodied experiences of death and body disposal in public and private spaces.

By making material culture its starting point, the editors state that this collection focuses on “how particular materialities can mobilize emotion, commitment and action.” For example, the corpse materializes death or death becomes materialized through the absence of the person who normally sits in the chair at the dining table. This collection centres on the “matter” — the *thing* — that makes sense of death through its presence rather than accepting traditional notions about the management or meaning of absence. Chapters 5, 6 and 12–4 further illustrate the importance of death’s material presence through discussions of stillbirths, coroner’s court, suicides, roadside memorials, and spirits.

*The Matter of Death* is useful for scholars in the fields of death and dying and material culture, as it succeeds on a number of levels. First, it challenges the reader to contemplate death by examining the zones between death and life, or the boundaries between the living and the dead in public and private spaces in order to question the often taken-for-granted spaces presented. Second, the focus on modern death practices in the 20th and 21st centuries contributes to emerging research in understudied areas such as natural burial grounds, and private burials. Finally, because the contributors specialize in different fields, including sociol-

ogy, anthropology, theology, history, and social policy, interdisciplinary perspectives provide refreshing ways of thinking about the organization and management of space in common places associated with death, such as the cemetery, and more uncommon places, such as the coroner's court. The editors achieve their objective of presenting multiple perspectives on death as each chapter of this collection provides interesting, informative and stimulating ideas on the subject.

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