

Thamann, Aubrey and Kalliopi M. Christodoulaki (eds.). 2021. *Beyond the Veil: Reflexive Studies of Death and Dying*. London, New York: Berghahn Books. 248pp.: \$130.00/£97.00. 256 pp. Hb.: \$130.00/£97.00. ISBN: 9781800730649.

Book review by

El-Sayed El-Aswad

University of Michigan (Ann Arbor, US)

Beyond the Veil: Reflexive Studies of Death and Dying is an excellent and admirable edited volume that illuminates the intricate relationship between researchers and their subject matter of death and dying. Going beyond Durkheim's structural-functional analysis of death rituals, the book's contributors, without overlooking the issue of social cohesion, applied reflexive approaches through which they displayed their personal experiences, feelings, and emotions while observing and analyzing near-death experiences and mortuary practices, particularly those related to their relatives, friends, colleagues, and other informants. Renato Rosaldo's ethnographic study, in which he discusses the impact of his wife's death on both his research and life, is considered by the contributors to be an exemplary model for their scholarly work. Despite the book's general methodological-theoretical emphasis, it encompasses a great deal of captivating reflective and factual anthropological material. In a word, what distinguishes this book is its attempt to keep a balance in dealing with such research perspectives as subjectivity/objectivity, emic/etic, inside/outside, and individuality/community in a complementary way. However, more work is needed to determine the relationship between these research perspectives.

In addition to an introduction and conclusion in which the editors, Thamann and Christodoulaki, expound on their topic, this volume contains eleven fascinating chapters clustered around four key thematic parts. The first theme concerns "delaying death" and is addressed by two essays. In the first chapter, Alison Witchard shows that her grandmother's death due to cancer provided her insights into understanding the severity of

the medical cases of women who developed breast and ovarian cancers. As a result, Witchard was able to sympathize with those ill women who, like her grandmother, expressed their wish to stay alive not for selfish reasons but to maintain their relations with their families. Discussing the issue of immortality, Jeremy Cohen, in *Chapter 2*, displays suspicion regarding the claim of some members of the People Unlimited Inc. (PUI) that they seek to be immortal to keep a connection to their community, notwithstanding their failure to take proper action concerning antiaging. He also reveals that his great-uncle's death raises questions about people's attempts to delay death.

The second part of the book focuses on "caregiving" and is addressed by two articles. Carina Nandlal, in *Chapter 3*, expresses her emotional disruption upon seeing her mother suffer from dementia. Nandlal views music as an important element not only in the caregiving for her dying mother but also in providing her with an effective means to foster positive feelings during this difficult time. In *Chapter 4*, Kalliopi Christodoulaki examines her identity as a researcher, adherent, or maintainer of community cultural norms, granddaughter and good caretaker when dealing with the illness and subsequent death of her grandmother.

The third theme, "confronting death," includes three chapters dealing with the issue of coping with death. Aubrey Thamann, in *Chapter 5*, reflects on more than eleven funerals (concerning relatives and friends) during her fieldwork in Indiana. She discusses the nature of Americans' fear of death and how funeral directors, while controlling their emotions, help people grieve, reconcile their losses, and achieve a collective human bond or *communitas*. In *Chapter 6*, Ekkehard Coenen performs as a researcher and a funeral director to show the impact of the subjectivity of an ethnographer on the observation both inside and outside the field of death and dying. He concludes that his actions as an ethnographer and a funeral director, dealing with the dead and the mourners, impacted his perspective in writing about the subject. Sarah Nytroe, in *Chapter 7*, applies an intersubjective history and self-reflective approach to study the American Catholic culture of death by interviewing her family members (maternal grandparents and mother) while seeking to remain objective, focusing on their changing experiences coping with death before and after Vatican II.

The last part, "memorialization," comprises four essays. Debbie A. Hanson, in *Chapter 8*, engages us in a case study to memorialize Harmon Killebrew, a former Minnesota Twins baseball player. To highlight Killebrew's personal history and attributes impacting the community, Hanson utilizes performative commemoration, including cyber-shrines, spontaneous shrines, news articles, and websites such as twinsguestbook.com and [© Slovene Anthropological Society 2023](http://lega-</p></div><div data-bbox=)

cy.com that offer Killebrew's family and fans memories and condolences. Supported by commemorative photographs, postcards and letters, Olivia Guntarik and Claudia Belote, in *Chapter 9*, show that they and other people can express their grief, loss, and condolence privately and publicly by creating or using digital cemeteries, cyber-shrines, and cyber memorialization. Rebecca Moore, in *Chapter 10*, discusses the long process, which took thirty-three years, to install proper monuments memorializing a large number of those who died at Jonestown, mostly African American, of which two were her sisters and one her nephew. Moore, presenting elegant photographs of a number of monuments placed at various cemeteries, contends that the act of memorializing the substantial number of stigmatized dead necessitates great effort, funding, ethics, patience, and collaboration. Finally, in *Chapter 11*, Kami Fletcher, as a participant and researcher, contextualizes African American death and mourning customs through the lens of the R.I.P. t-shirt that she personally experienced wearing to memorialize her late nephew (Chill). She provides photographs of various t-shirts that function as symbols reflecting the broader African American funerary tradition.

Despite the emotionality expressed by the contributors in their inquiries about death and dying, they not only conducted interviews professionally and objectively but also presented their findings impartially. Overall, this insightful and well-researched book, written in uncomplicated language, should attract both specialists and non-specialist readers. It is likely that scholars and educators would choose this book for their courses and research because it deals convincingly with the important issue of death and mortuary practices from a distinct and fresh perspective. As a part of a larger orientation among anthropologists, this reflexive and interdisciplinary study is an important contribution to the scholarship of death, dying and bereavement.