

Practicing Life and Death in the Caribbean

Passages and Afterworlds: Anthropological Perspectives on Death in the Caribbean, edited by Maarit Forde and Yanique Hume, 2018. Durham: Duke University Press, ISBN: 978-1-4780-0014-3

Passages and Afterworlds is a hugely important volume to the study of life and death in the circum-Caribbean. While the title and subtitle of the volume indicate a focus on death, the authors within the volume think as much about the living, how the living interact with the dead, and how the dead interact with the living. Importantly, the authors in this volume helpfully expand what is meant, or, indeed, could be meant, by “Caribbean.” This volume brings together groups from the Caribbean that are rarely placed in the same collection, which provides an innovative approach to Caribbean studies: a region-wide perspective that goes beyond the dominant narrative characterization of it as the “Black Atlantic.” The authors seemingly know this as Paul Christopher Johnson notes in his essay: there are certain communities, namely, Cuban Santería and Brazilian Candomblé, that have received the abundance of attention in Caribbean anthropology. He calls them “the stars” (34), and as a result of their stardom, the overwhelming abundance of information on the Caribbean focuses on these groups and their adjacent communities. However, this volume ambitiously sets out to think about life, death, and the dead in under-considered contexts, such as Jamaica, Suriname, Trinidad and Tobago.

The volume consists of nine chapters, an introduction, and an afterward. The chapters are divided into two sections. The first section, “Relations,” considers how the living interact and live with the dead, and, conversely, how the dead do the same. Essays here draw attention to Garifuna practices of making the dead present (Johnson), the porous boundary between the living and the dead in Amerindian communities (Mentore), the role of morality in the formation of ancestors in

Ndyuka maroon communities in Suriname (van Wetering and van Velzen), how funerary practices, such as burial, create and extend kinship ties (Hume), and, lastly, an examination of Haitian practices for finding the cause of death beyond biomedicine (Richman). The essays in section two, “Transformations,” look instead at how rituals of and for the dead have changed over time and in relationship to wider sociopolitical events. Here, for example, the authors consider how the 2010 earthquake changed Haiti’s relationship with Gede, the lwa of death (Cosentino), how legislation and juridical pronouncements affect one’s relationship with the dead (Forde and McNeal, respectively), and a personal reflection on death with the Samaaka maroons (Price). The volume ends with an afterward by Aisha Khan gathers together themes from the chapters and explores “truth” as a conceptual framework in anthropological research.

As mentioned above, the authors in this volume do not attend to “the stars” of the Caribbean. In considering the dark and vast space between the stars, the volume steps out of the starlight, as it were, and enters into a treacherous territory of potential and pitfall. Both Forde and Khan’s respective Introduction and Afterward do a wonderful job of providing a nuanced summary to an innovative and much-needed collection. At the same time, this innovation comes at a cost. The rich literature that makes up the history and theory of the Introduction and the Afterward cannot equally engage with all the necessary literature. The expected literature, from Frazer to Herskovits, from Palmié to Matory, is present. However, the literature required to understand Hinduism in the Caribbean, for example, is noticeably missing from these essays. This means that the chapters within are placed in a decidedly Black Atlantic cover while simultaneously eschewing that description. This only goes to prove the importance of the chapters gathered together here. The opportunity exists, then, to think about the Caribbean outside the Black Atlantic framework—or, at least, not only within such a setting. That is to say, how might we consider the Caribbean as the Afro-Asian Pacific, too? Or, as the Indigenous Atlantic?

In her introduction, Forde ends with a caveat of sorts, suggesting that language is inherently limited in its ability to capture something of the rituals contained within the text. She argues that a move to consider poetry and visual art would prove to be a powerful ally as we attempt to write about experiences and things that are excessively beyond the linguistic. Here some authors stand out for their engagement with art, such as Cosentino. However, the text lacks any real engagement with these orientations. Indeed, it is only Cosentino’s chapter that broaches this subject and

approach. Potential, then, exists to consider the rites of Caribbean peoples through photo essays, sustained engagements with ritual objects, and poetry.

There exists another opportunity for an examination of practices of people left out of this volume. While the volume sets out to forge new ground, one wonders about the dead in other parts of the Caribbean. Noticeably missing from the volume is work on the Spanish-speaking Caribbean, departmentalized Caribbean islands, or non-sovereign states, like Puerto Rico. How might these other places and communities help to fill out the Caribbean?

The volume comes out of a Wenner-Gren-funded workshop held in Barbados in 2011. The essays in this volume point to this in two different ways. At times, it is explicitly stated by the authors who say their essay offers “brief thoughts” or say as much in the notes at the end of their chapter. Here, the essays usually suffer from a lack of foundation or through-line. That is to say, the essays are gathered around a central theme and a loosely structured argument. At other times, this is more stylistic of the edited volume. Meaning, the individual authors of the volume seemingly write independently of each other, without making reference to the other chapters, or how another author’s essay might be helpful for context, reference, or comparison. As such, the authors, perhaps unintentionally, perform the Caribbean: the resonance and dissonance of the entangled practices.

Passages and Afterworlds is a timely edited collection of essays that shines light onto lesser-known practices in the Caribbean. It will prove to be a useful addition to anthropology, religious studies, and Caribbean studies courses as it sheds light on all of these simultaneously and individually. By reorienting our attention to other communities and practices within the Caribbean, this volume reiterates a centrally important point: the Caribbean has never been one thing. It is the site of constant movement and, often violent, combination. Keith E. McNeal’s chapter illustrates this well. He opens his chapter by thinking about the confluence of practices at a funeral in Trinidad: “Here we have a deceased Christian Indo-Trinidadian whose hybrid funeral is conducted at a political party constituency office, Presbyterian Church, and neotraditional Hindu cremation site” (200). Not only is it a blurring of boundaries between politics and religion, but also between religious communities and practices once thought disparate. Likewise, the volume performs this: communities thought to be disparate are gathered here and boundaries begin to blur.

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