

The logo for the Anthropology Book Forum, featuring a stylized blue and white circular design on the left. The text "Anthropology Book Forum" is written in a bold, white, sans-serif font across the top of a dark blue rectangular background.

Anthropology Book Forum

Open Access Book Reviews

Politicization of Body Processing and Manipulation

Review by Itzamara Ixta

Osterholtz, Anna J. eds. 2020. *The Poetics of Processing: Memory formation, identity, and the handling of the dead*. University Press of Colorado Louisville.

Keywords: Body processing; Violence; warfare; social politics; ritualistic burials

In present day Western society, the act of processing bodies is often unseen, with a body being presented to its kin once ready for burial. The idea of corpse manipulation is seen as a natural next step after a person passes away. Similarly, other cultures throughout time have had ritualistic processes for their dead that extended beyond the burial. In *The Poetics of Processing*, Anna J. Osterholtz focuses on body processing and the ways in which body manipulation serves as a social tool (3). The book itself is separated into three sections- 1) the Americas, 2) Europe, Eurasia, and Africa, and lastly 3) Anatomization. Section 1 focuses on historical sites in Peru, Chihuahua, Mexico, and the Southwest. The second section has case studies focused in Africa and the Middle East. The last section focuses on anatomization, the dissection and analysis of bodies, within the United States beginning in the 19th century.

Osterholtz begins the volume by introducing body processing and the poetics model. The Poetics Model was a theory developed by Neil Whitehead, where he applied the concept of poetics to violence and the way in which it creates identity (4). Whitehead concludes that violence itself is both constructive and destructive, and emphasizes social identity while enforcing hierarchies and power structures (4). Whitehead's model goes beyond violence and the immediate gratification, but evaluates violence as a cultural trait. This concept is highlighted by each author throughout the book.

Within the first section, there is a clear pattern of violence through cultural performance. For instance, at the site of Uraca in Majes Valley, Peru, trophy heads of enemies are used to emphasize cultural power and dominance over enemies. The trophy heads act as agents that elicit responses from the living with a changing relationship dependent on the maker and victim (34) Chapter Three, Four and Five continue to emphasize the significance of manipulation and processing as part of ritualistic behavior. The same poetic element viewed here falls under cultural performance that allows a varying interpretation of what violence is. The Paquime site of Casas Grandes, Chihuahua, used body processing as a means to enforce community norms and social control. In holding public ceremonies, the act of processing enemy bodies brought about

community cohesion. Likewise, the regional focus of the Southwest highlights the overlooked importance of an audience. Without an audience to view the violence, norms cannot be enforced, and the performative violence loses its cultural impact and social identity. Debra L. Martin and Anna J. Osterholtz emphasize that the complexity and symbolic force of violence is a long-term processual event reinforced by new acts of violence (94). In this case study, a community met by stressors can use violence to maintain their identity as one and symbolically place themselves above the enemy.

In section two, the reader begins to understand violence as a means to maintain social order. Within the Aksumite kingdom, burial rituals and processing is directly tied to the concept of group hood vs personhood and the deviation from social norms (103). In Ancient Egypt, the concept of group hood is ruled by the Pharaoh, who executes violence against threats to order (123). Section two sparks the conversation of the legitimacy of violence. In modern society, the idea of dismemberment is labeled as violence, a common ethnocentric viewpoint. That is, examples of violence in past societies may seem exaggerated by our standards that outlaw any form of violence against another. However, for these cultures, these processes are socially acceptable and for the greater good of their society.

Lastly, we enter the importance of anatomization in the United States. The concept is defined as dissection of cadavers. In chapter 10, the authors Christina J. Hodge and Kenneth C. Nystrom place emphasis on the poetics of the body as communication tools and material practice (189). By the late 19th century, social hierarchies in the United States had been set, and remains maintained their personhood. Anatomization began as a punishment of criminals, and eventually increased in occurrence for medical schools, where there were instances of illegal resurrection of remains, particularly of the disadvantaged (193). Remains of minorities, poor, and mentally ill were illegally acquired and used for medical schools. The authors then emphasize the poetics of space, particularly in the anatomical theater that serves as a heterotopic space (198-203). The acquisition of remains is questioned when it comes to famous collections like Hamann-Todd which consist of unclaimed remains. Poetics here differ from the first two sections, and they focus on the postmortem treatment symbolic in Western culture. Here, remains are stripped of their personhood, with their identity erased or reduced to material (213-230).

The book itself is carefully curated around the theme of poetics. The concept itself is shown to be variable culture to culture, but often is dependent on social norms. The need for an audience is invaluable for reinforcing social control. Poetics are amplified through the material, architecture and space (241). The last section ties together the clear distinction in processing between premodern and modern societies. Violence emphasizes the importance of a social hierarchy and domination over the enemy. It is important to consider that in the U.S., without human remains and associated collections, we wouldn't have advanced science and research. However, the poetics of this violence extends beyond body processing and shines a light on political structures that aim to strip disadvantaged communities of their personhood and identity, thus labeling them an 'other.'

Itzamara Ixta is a first-generation master's student in the Department of Geography and Anthropology of Louisiana State University. She is interested in mortuary practices among burials in the Andes, with an emphasis on social hierarchies and gender roles. She holds a bachelor's degree in Anthropology from the University of California, Santa Barbara.



© 2022 Itzamara Ixta