

The Work of the Dead: A Cultural History of Mortal Remains

By T. W. Laqueur (2015)

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Reviewed by Candi K. Cann

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When Evita Perón died in 1952, her body was embalmed and displayed for days, while over two million Argentines filed past to pay their respects (and thousands of people would be treated at local hospitals from being crushed as they waited to file past her corpse). From there, she was placed on display in a standing coffin, in the CGT, the largest and most powerful Peronist trade union in Argentina. Three years later, her corpse was stolen by the military, first hidden in a van behind a cinema, and later stored inside the city's waterworks. During this time, her body was mutilated and beaten, and a finger chopped off, with various other rumours circulating about Eva's post-death adventures.

In 1957, with the help of the Vatican, Eva's corpse accompanied Juan Domingo Perón to his exile in Italy and was buried for a time in a cemetery in Milan under a false name. In 1971, Evita's corpse was exhumed and flown to Spain, where she allegedly resided for the next two years on a platform near the dining room table in Juan and Isabel (his new wife) Perón's new home. Finally, the body of Evita returned to Argentina along with the Peróns in 1973, where Juan Domingo once again became Argentina's president. A reburial was staged for Evita's body in Los Olivos, a wealthy neighbourhood in the northern part of Buenos Aires. When Juan Perón died the following year, Isabel quickly went to work utilising both the corpses of Evita and her husband as a way to secure and solidify her power. She

Affiliation

Baylor University, USA.

email: Candi_Cann@baylor.edu

first displayed the corpses, and then attempted to establish a more permanent Peronist memorial that would contain the bodies of both Juan and Eva Perón. The memorial never came to pass and Isabel was ousted by another military coup in 1976. As Laqueur writes of bodies and the modern world: 'Bodies are dug up and reburied to right, or to revenge, some wrong of the past, to create memorial communities, to shape or reshape history, to assimilate their component parts into new scientific narratives, to advance medical knowledge and training, to entertain the curious' (p. 318).

In short, corpses perform work. They have agency and perform important roles in the world of the living, whether acting as material reminders of what no longer remains, as state emblems of patriotism and sacrifice, or as Thomas Laqueur demonstrates, by mapping out necro-geographies that reflect changing theological and philosophical views. *The Work of the Dead: A Cultural History of Mortal Remains* traces the history of corpses and their work in the world of the living. His book rivals Philippe Ariès' classic, *The Hour of Our Death* (Knopf, 1981), in cultural importance, and in scope and breadth of research. It is a particularly relevant history of corporeal remains and demonstrates that bodies – even, and, perhaps especially, dead bodies – matter in the world of the living. Laqueur divides his book into four sections: (1) 'The Deep Time of the Dead', (2) 'Places of the Dead', (3) 'Names of the Dead', and (4) 'Burning the Dead'.

The first section establishes a key premise of Laqueur – that bodies as corpses still perform work – and as such, have value, both in economic terms, and in philosophical and historical ones. Arguing against Diogenes' treatment of the dead as mere rotting organic matter, Laqueur posits that 'Personhood persists where it manifestly no longer resides; the dead, as represented by their bodies, are somewhere and are something' (Laqueur, p. 31). Corpses, both literally and figuratively, matter. Laqueur traces the importance of corpses across history, but it is his observations of the changes in the perception of the dead in the eighteenth century that are of interest to the reader: the transformation of bodies to spirits (and ghosts – first made possible through the Platonic split of body and soul) eventually led to an obsession with keeping the dead alive through memory (or history). Laqueur argues that in the eighteenth century, ghosts first moved into the realm of scientific scepticism, and thus possibility; for him, the persistence of ghosts confirms that enlightenment thinking and post-reformation theology were not enough to banish revenant spirits, and he posits that the dead without their bodies still haunt minds and hearts, confirming that ghosts (the bodiless dead) might be here to stay (pp. 76–7). The deconstruction of ghosts is really a genealogical exploration of Western classical history itself, tracing the importance of the corpse and the rise

of the role of history through memory. For Laqueur, ‘The dead, like death itself, are of overwhelming consequence. We care for them, and they work for us on making and remaking the very foundations of our species’ Being, individual and communal’ (p. 106).

This allows the reader to begin the exploration of Laqueur’s second section, the ‘Places of the Dead’, a fascinating and important account of necro-geography in (mostly) Britain and France, and influenced theoretically by Marx, Foucault and deCerteau. This chapter examines the shift in burial practices in the West over the last several hundred years from mass graves situated near holy sites (churchyards) to civic spaces for bodies (cemeteries). In many ways, Laqueur’s necro-geographical account mirrors and supports Ariès’ genealogy, tracing the shift in the understanding of death from its communal impact to a fear of a loss of self. Laqueur traces these shifts from the ground down, placing changes in burial practices, sanitation laws, views of the body, medical practices and theological treatises side by side, telling the story of the rise of the modern cemetery through changing views of the body. He writes:

In English law, every body had a place and every place had its bodies. It was the parish courtyard... . The denial of this right (that is, refusal to properly bury a dead body) constituted a posthumous exclusion from the political and cultural order, an obliteration of personhood after death, and could be sustained only under special and often contested circumstances. (p. 148)

Thus, one’s *life* and one’s place in it could be reflected through the treatment of the *dead*, or more specifically, the corpse. The dead, then, do more than signify our universal fate; they also mark our place in life.

I especially appreciate Laqueur’s emphasis on death from a sensory perspective. Laqueur invokes haptic and olfactory details that remind the reader of deCerteau’s ‘Walking in the City’ (California University Press, 1984), as the role of the senses and memory are intertwined with ideological shifts regarding the body and its afterlife as a corpse. Laqueur writes, ‘The historical question in this case is why the ancient smell of hidden corrupting flesh became pollution, why a commonplace odor became a threat not just to health but also to the social and moral order’ (p. 222). Laqueur argues that offensive smells had been a part of everyday life for centuries, and rotting bodies and their odour of putrefaction were nothing new; what was new was their interpretation in the medicalisation of death, and of bodies in general – the shift, as he argues, to enlightenment ideas of sanitation that mirrored the shift to death denial in general. Death denial, or literally, the refusal to further accommodate the dead – and their noxious smells – reflects the move from bodies to memory. The memory has no

smell, no haptic sense. As Laqueur muses, ‘The old idols of the dead began serving new gods: history, memory, and sentiment’ (p. 260). Laqueur is also quick to examine the differences in class – between those who could afford land and lavish burial places, and those who died unknown, or at least, unremembered. He argues that the pauper funeral operates as the ultimate problem in modernity, as it essentially demonstrates ‘the possibility of falling irrevocably from the grace of society, of exclusion from the values of one’s culture’ (p. 327). Dying poor and unremembered was a failure of modernity to remember those who could not pay. This observation leads to Laqueur’s third section in his book, the ‘Names of the Dead,’ or an examination of death in the enlightenment era in which all individuals have names, and thus deserve to be remembered (even when the nameless have lost their bodies and are disappeared or missing in action).

In the ‘Names of the Dead,’ Laqueur moves away from necro-geographies of bodies to memorials of names, challenging the often implicit assumption that one must have a body to be remembered. He argues that ‘Names of the dead, like exhumed bodies, can remake history for the present’ (p. 424). Various twentieth century memorials are examined in this section (World War I memorials in Europe, the Vietnam memorial in Washington D.C., the AIDS quilt memorial, and various Shoah memorials for World War II). Laqueur invokes art installations, poetry, photos and narrative in this section, weaving together the importance of names, bodies and death in the shifting focus to memory. Laqueur concludes, ‘In this way, the Great War began what we might think of as self-memorialization: the thing standing for itself, the ruin as the witness to something beyond itself’ (p. 486). A name, then (reminiscent here of Derrida), becomes *more than* and, as such, signifies the body in the contemporary world. The shift here is important and is crucial to Laqueur’s argument regarding the body. Similar to the corpse, the name, even a bodiless name, points to a life once lived and worth remembering. This argument made – that those named, even without bodies, still have value in the contemporary world – Laqueur moves forward to his last and final section, ‘Burning the Dead.’

This section is a valuable concise history of cremation in the West from a practitioner’s perspective (rather than more traditional clerical perspectives and histories), and makes some valuable insights into the role of technology and shifting definitions of death. Laqueur writes of cremation, ‘Speedy, clean, technologically sophisticated cremation represented the maximum modernist program of nineteenth-century science in the face of dead, indeed in the face of all human history’ (p. 502). Laqueur goes on to argue that medicine, interested in serving the living (what he calls the ‘regime of life’), managed *literally* to remove the odorous offence of death

through cremation. Now, one could die well, erase oneself and become ash through technology. Laqueur concludes this section/his book with the implications of this shift on dying itself, and the highly medicalised culture of dying as it exists today in the hospital, cordoned off from everyday life, and efficiently geared towards living, not dying well.

Laqueur's final comments echo Atul Gawande's *Being Mortal* (Metropolitan, 2014), and Gawande's emphasis not on saving life at all costs, but dying well, and Laqueur suggests that there is a need for further studies on the act of dying itself, in a model similar to the way in which Laqueur has examined death across history. I would suggest, though, that because Laqueur's study is so firmly situated in the Western classical tradition through his expansive examination of death culture in Britain, France and, to a lesser extent, the United States, there remains a deep need for similar studies on necro-geographies and death culture in other parts of the world – in Asia, Africa and Latin America. Thomas W. Laqueur's *The Work of the Dead: A Cultural History of Mortal Remains* is an indication of how much bodies – and especially dead bodies – have yet to teach us – about memory, life and the importance of community, and like Evita Perón's recurring resurrection as a corpse, about how the dead continue to reveal their importance to the living.