

# *The Poetics of Processing*

MEMORY FORMATION, IDENTITY,  
AND THE HANDLING OF THE DEAD

*Edited by Anna J. Osterholtz*



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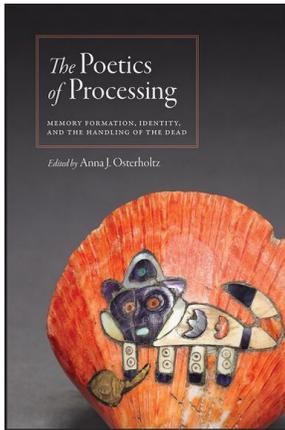
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## The Poetics of Processing: Memory Formation, Identity, and the Handling of the Dead

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*Reviewed by Jessica Spencer and Kaleigh Best, Southern Illinois University Carbondale.*

This edited volume synthesizes material presented at the 2016 Society for American Archaeology symposium where discussants utilized Neil Whitehead's (2004) poetics of violence model and applied it to the taphonomic processes commonly found in mortuary contexts within the archaeological record. Whitehead's theory is utilized in bioarchaeology to examine death through the experiential lenses of the perpetrator(s), victim(s), witness(es), affiliated/non-affiliated communities, and the social messages conveyed to the society as a whole. While the entire book focuses on personhood, social-cultural memory, and dis-tribution of power through the poetics of processing, it is divided into three parts focusing on overt violence, postmortem internments, and anatomization.

The book begins with Anna Osterholtz discussing the theoretical foundations in which the poetics of violence described by Whitehead (2004) can be applied to the poetics of body manipulation surrounding death. This chapter justifies the application of this theory to understanding the cultural and historical relationships between the living and the dead. It provides an introduction of how mortuary treatment is tied to societal constructions and how physical manipulation of the body performs specific meanings within a community, cosmology, and between other affiliated groups along with the researchers holding social power in the inclusion, interpretation, and processing of their collections.

Chapter 2, written by Beth Koontz Scaffidi, takes one of the more sensationalized mortuary treatments, Peruvian trophy head taking, to show the meaningful performative interactions by the living and dead through the liminal phase. The ritual of trophy taking is performed through costumes, props, and connections to animals for political power over enemies and nature, to communicate social meaning and memory, and exert dominance within society. Koontz Scaffidi emphasizes the transformational agency as a result of processing, however depending on when, where, and how these rituals took place, different meanings can be interpreted. While the author's ideas are expansive and encourage multi-faceted explanations, they should be interpreted cautiously.

Kyle Waller and Adrienne Offenbecker, in Chapter 3, use the House of the Dead in Chihuahua, Mexico to emphasize the multiple perspectives present during an act of violence. In this case, violence is performed to send cultural meaning and symbols to the community to reaffirm social control. Instead of focusing solely on the victim's experience like previous, antiquated bioarchaeological studies, the authors discuss the perpetrators, victims, and witnesses' role in the sacrificial act. In Chapter 4, Kristin Kuckelman uses scalping

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observed in the ancestral Pueblo peoples of the US Southwest to further elaborate on the social relationship between the three aforementioned players but emphasizes each group may have differing motives and perceptions despite all participating in the same act. These acts of violence reinforce social cohesion among their respective groups.

Although Chapter 3 and 4 could have provided stronger evidence for their respective arguments, they offer a prelude to Chapter 5, which serves as the culmination for Part one, discussing the performance of overt violence in the archaeological record. This chapter by Debra Martin and Anna Osterholtz continues the discussion of social control through corpse mutilation in the American Southwest, but more importantly discusses the reductionist tendencies present in bioarchaeology and embraces the complexities and variability found in the archaeological record. The authors emphasize that variability is where the meaning in the violence lies. They expand the discussion of the duality of violent discourses used as a political message/control, to create/destroy identity, and instigate a cosmological correction.

Part II focuses on performative actions in burial contexts and begins with Dilpreet Singh Basanti's discussion on poetics of the house (Chapter 6). Within this chapter, the author seeks to explore the complex social dynamics including individual versus collective identity present within the Aksumite kingdom. They do this through evaluating differences between group stellae burials and an individual sarcophagus burial. The author raises thought-provoking questions about the fluidity of personhood within an individualistic identity and the collective group identity, however, the bioarchaeological examples used left the chapter's objectives unfulfilled and evidentially unsupported.

Roselyn Campbell draws upon the bigger context of the book through her discussion of displays of pharaonic-mandated violence within private and public domains in ancient Egypt (Chapter 7). Here, the author elucidates the difference between public displays of overt violence as a means of social control and criminal punishment, and violence within the ideological bounds of body preservation for the afterlife. Further, this type of violence in the form of body alterations, grave disruption, moniker removal, and removal from social memory also contributed to the exclusion from societal afterlife. Ultimately, this chapter demonstrates why having a good cultural and historical background is imperative to understand theoretical and actualized violence in an archaeological context.

Chapters 8 and 9 discuss how mortuary practices create and reinforce social memory through ancestor veneration in the Near East as society changes. In Chapter 8, Marin Pilloud and colleagues review potential ancestral veneration during the Neolithic, where group identity is strengthened through the maintenance of individual personhood retained under the family dwelling. As culture drastically shifted, burial practices stayed the same, emphasizing the importance of maintained social memory through mortuary belief. Although later chronologically, Chapter 9 (Megan Perry and Anna Osterholtz) also examines group veneration as society changes. However due to the multi-person and commingled interments from temporal re-use at Petra, the authors surmise that individual identity is diminished in favor of a shared group identity.

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Part III begins with Chapter 10's (Christina Hodge and Kenneth Nystrom) discussion on dissection as a social process and concludes with Carlina de la Cova's chapter on processing the destitute and deviant dead (Chapter 11). Hodge and Nystrom provide a comprehensive and theoretically rich history of anatomization within a discursive structural power/inequality framework. Within this chapter, the performance of dissection for a small elite group of society changes from an illegal clandestine gathering to a societally sanctioned demonstration of structural violence acted within an autopsy theater, under the guise of science. The structural violence experienced within anatomization is amplified through de la Cova's discussion of "donated" anatomical collections. Covering the often little-discussed dark history of the still widely used collections, the author elaborates on how marginalized individuals were erased to become objects, subject to rituals in the pursuit of science, and repetitively utilized as research materials, therefore perpetuating issues of structural violence. As de la Cova recognizes, modern anatomy continues to strive towards more encompassing ethical and biocultural aspects, however we feel these two chapters should be utilized to further needed discussions within the rest of biological anthropology, particularly forensic anthropology.

The book concludes (Chapter 12) with a student of Neil Whitehead's, Eric Haanstad, who while providing personal antidotes, summarizes each author's utilization of the poetics of violence and applies them to different anthropological situations. He concludes that despite complex, diversified scenarios, there is also commonality in how human beings perform culture, and those poetics invariably influence the mortuary record.

Traditionally bioarchaeology has focused on descriptive variables such as indicating rates of disease, number of traumatic injuries, and overall health of a population. However, as the field moves towards a more social bioarchaeology and tries to better understand the lives of the living, dead, and their interactions, poetics of processing will help provide an encompassing framework that fulfills postprocessual ideals of understanding the past. Poetics of processing can act as a larger theoretical framework that can be synthesized with other prominent social bioarchaeological theories (i.e., embodiment, biocultural model, personhood, gender, osteobiographical studies, etc.) to make stronger inferences about archaeological materials and their populations. This book provides a way for bioarchaeology to move forward with timely, thought-provoking discussions that encourage practitioners to realize our role as actors in the performance of the past. Although at times, some arguments were unsupported or unclear, we strongly feel that this book should be incorporated in all aspects of research by current and future biological anthropologists and archaeologists.

## **References**

Whitehead, Neil L., Ed. (2004) *Violence*. SAR Press, Santa Fe, New Mexico.