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Gary Laderman. *The Sacred Remains: American Attitudes toward Death, 1799-1883.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996. xi + 227 pp. $30.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-06432-2.

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The American Way of Death

In Jane Smiley's recent novel, *Moo*, a satire on life in Academia, one of the characters is upon an up-and-coming branch of transdisciplinarity, "Death Studies." What seems facetious in the setting of Smiley's novel might better be seen as a useful prescription in the very real (if often satirical) world of academic endeavour. What "Death Studies" in the real world lacks is, it would seem, a real element of transdisciplinarity. There are lively sessions on "Graves and Gravemarkers" at the annual Popular Culture conference. Although the narrow title to the session tends to suggest an exclusive material culture or anthropological perspective, the presenters seem as wide-ranging and various as the competing course at the Kentucky Derby. There are the anthropologists and the area specialists. And then there are the savvy amateurs, those people who–if you happen to take a lift from them–will inevitably stop the car to take in the sights of rural graveyards. And then there are the people who have studied the work culture of, say, death care "technicians" (as opposed to professionals) in Kalamazoo.

A great deal can be said and done within the area of "Graves and Gravemarkers." But I would say that there are quite clearly differentiated areas that go toward the composition of Smiley's figurative "Death Studies." And one of these has been the "History" of attitudes toward death, or death "practices" in a particular period within a given region. This branch of historical endeavour has been popular particularly in Europe and the British Isles, where a tension between Catholic and Protestant traditions has produced a richly textured history of local and national cultural practices around the less than mute, and quite substantial, cultural presence of the corpse. The strength of such histories of death (the work of John McManners, John Morley, Michel Vovelle and, of course, Philippe Aries, springs to mind here) is in their nuanced analysis of the impact of changes in religious thought–changes that were not merely philosophical but thoroughly legal, social and medical.

What these scholarly histories of death have demonstrated is that, effectively, death touches upon every center of human endeavour. Death, in cultural terms, is the backdrop to all forms of human knowledge. The history of death should therefore be about more than burial practices, the landscape and architecture of cemeteries, or belief in the life of the soul. But, like all histories, the disciplinarily orientated study of death does have to offer up a horizon, outside of which its purview will not fall. Gary Laderman's *The Sacred Remains* is such a work.

By beginning with the death of Washington (and the public ceremony attendant to his demise) and ending–more or less–with the assassination of Lincoln and the grand national tour of his embalmed body, Laderman shows a crafty eye for periodization. His study firmly centers the conflict and mass death of the Civil War at the logistical center of his work. But the periodization is really only part of the disciplinary location of the work. Laderman follows the lead of the grand histories of death written by his European and English counterparts by having a regional focus–that is, the Northern States. Laderman unravels changing Protestant symbolism around the corpse in an era of medicalization and the scientific progress that would increasingly sever the individual, perishable corpse from the imperishable spirit of the dead. After the shock of massive and continuing fatalities during the war, and the breakdown of traditional burial practices, the symbolic power of the corpse became, on the one hand, greater (which Laderman demonstrates with a finessed reading of the historical context to Lincoln's Gettysburg address) and also lessened. Always the raw product of analytic medical and scientific knowledge, throughout the war the corpse was more comfortably relinquished by friends and family to the hands of various experts.

One of these groups of professionals was the embalmer-undertaker, who promised the return of the

remains in a state suitable for a viewing. But another interested party of professionals were from the newly established Army Medical Museum. These enthusiast professionals were intent upon recording both war-related pathologies and any other oddities of nature that might come there way. Although initially resistant to the visiting doctors who would rifle through the piles of severed limbs outside the camp hospitals, the legitimate claims of science on the dead and parts of of the dead was soon accepted. (Even accepted, as Laderman points out, in the names of the dead themselves. When Dr. John Brinton tried to secure the remains of a "remarkable injury," the dead soldier's comrades blockaded the burial site. When Brinton explained the higher purposes to which the relic would be put, the dead man's comrades apparently relented, one of them "remarking gravely, 'that John would have given it to me himself, had he been able to express an opinion"' [p. 147]). When it opened, the Army Medical Museum, like Matthew Brady's exhibit, "The Dead at Antietam," drew large numbers of visitors.

Laderman links this period of fascination with the corpse (and with images of the dead and deathliness) with the concurrent (and later much greater) success of embalming. The idea of "looking death in the face" was particularly strong mid-century, a compulsion given a further fillup by the invention of photography (and the rise of the postmortem photograph) and a popular obsession with narratives of crime and urban degeneration. But some of those coming to look at both Brady's scenes of battle and the morbid objects at the Army Medical Museum were coming, both symbolically and literally, to look for a lost part of themselves. The relatives of men who had been buried in Southern soil came, for instance, to glimpse the arcane scene of battle that had claimed their beloved (and, by implication, to look literally for the image of their dead on those battlefields). And, as Laderman notes, "maimed soldiers also visited the [Army Medical] Museum, often in search of missing limbs" (p. 147). The integrity of the corpse was an important symbolic concept and–simultaneously–an increasingly important material property. One of the strongest parts of Laderman's work is his analysis of the ideological work of the corpse during wartime.

Laderman's is a thorough and intelligent and well-informed study. But I did find that it should have been more aptly (or specifically) titled given how closely it fits within a disciplinary tradition of regional/period studies of attitudes to death. The work proclaims itself to be a history of no-less than "American attitudes" to death but its concern is principally with the White, Protestant middle-classes in the North. The comments Laderman does make about those whose lower status in civil society effected their status in death (for instance, the regiments of Northern freed blacks who were intitially assigned to burial duties) are tantalising and, relatively, rare. There is more to "American attitudes" in both this period and place than what Laderman finds. But this is not to belittle the general breadth and scholarly strength of the work. *The Sacred Remains* should be useful to historians and Civil War scholars as well as to subject specialists.

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