

# Introduction

Aubrey Thamann and Kalliopi M Christodoulaki

Death is our constant companion, and it is  
death that gives each person's life its true meaning.

—Paulo Coelho, *The Diary of a Magus*<sup>1</sup>

The editors of this collection met in 2003 while working on their doctoral studies at Purdue University. Death was a topic we both gravitated toward as graduate students, and mortuary practices became an important part of both of our graduate work. We stayed in touch after completing our degrees and talked about working together in the future. We reconnected in 2012 at the memorial celebration held for O. M. Watson, a beloved emeritus professor in our anthropology department, who was also my mentor and one of the reasons Kalliopi became an anthropologist. In 2017, I was asked by the sociology department at Wittenberg University in Ohio to present my research at their biannual colloquium. In preparing for this talk, I revisited the funeral directors I had spent so much time with and the family members and friends I had lost during my studies. I knew it was time to collaborate. Kalliopi and I both found this topic to be so beautiful and meaningful in its simplicity, yet no one had done this kind of study. Our work within our respective disciplines had exposed us to reflexivity and studying mortuary practices as participant observers, but we had not come across a study that connected the two. I reached out to Kalliopi and we put together a call for papers. The response took us by surprise; people from a variety of disciplines contacted us about their work. From these, we selected those who understood what we wanted to explore. The resultant collection is a collaboration of like-minded scholars whose experiences with death profoundly shaped their scholarly work.

This interdisciplinary collection of essays utilizes reflexive scholarly inquiry to interrogate cultural responses to dying and death. The essays

analyze various aspects of death while acknowledging that death affects us all, including researchers who study death. Any analysis of the topic cannot be decontextualized; yet, almost all academic studies of death ignore the scholar's relationship to death and mortality. This is short-sighted, as we must all inevitably grapple with loss and mortality as we examine cultural responses to death. In this work we try to rectify this omission by highlighting how the contributors have both critically viewed mortuary practices as observers/researchers while also being emotionally invested participants.

In his essay "Death in the Ethnographic Present," Renato Rosaldo questions the traditional ways of analyzing death and bereavement in ethnographic work. He writes:

Ethnographic writing concentrates, in short, on routine expressions of grief and programmed ways of handling the corpse immediately after death. Thus the central subjects become the least involved and the deceased rather than the chief mourners. In all cases, the ethnographer stands as spectator, witnessing events from the outside and not asking people about their subjective experiences. Most ethnographic accounts see grief in partial and mechanistic ways and even remain sceptical about the emotional experience of grieving. They (implausibly) maintain that the work of mourning occurs only in connection with formal rituals.<sup>2</sup>

Rosaldo then includes excerpts from a journal he kept in the months following his wife's death, as well as those from several other authors, as examples of how grief could be portrayed in U.S. culture. His focus is on bereavement, on the emotions felt. The funeral rituals were important but not central. In conducting cultural analysis, then, why do we largely ignore bereavement?

Rosaldo argues that "the problem with ethnographic writing on death resides ... in an excessive reliance on a metaphoric rather than a metonymic analysis of culture in general and ritual in particular ... rituals are regarded as coherent arenas within which cultural wisdom can be explored."<sup>3</sup> The examples of this are easy to find. Rosaldo offers some in this essay. We often forget (or ignore) that even we as cultural analysts are still subject to the pull and sway of our own cultures. In suffering a loss, we grieve; others merely follow ritual.

Emile Durkheim wrote of the significance of rituals in this metaphoric way. In discussing mourning rituals, examples of what he called "piacular rites," or those rites that require or are equivalent to atonement, he wrote of both negative and positive rites—taboos and performative acts.<sup>4</sup> Positive rites exist, for Durkheim, to create and maintain social solidarity; this is primarily the result of a force arising from participation in a shared system of beliefs and values, which molds and controls individual behavior. In this functionalist approach, mourning does not represent feelings

but instead exists as the rituals performed to sustain social connections and one's role in society. Specific mourners perform specific acts based on relation to the deceased. These roles are usually divided by gender and lineal relation, such as maternal male kin, wives, sons, or daughters. Mourning ritual acts are performed not out of any real feeling of loss but because these acts serve to reify social connections and roles.

Durkheim argued further that once mourning is performed to completion, it is over. For Durkheim, mourning is not a spontaneous, emotionally based reaction to a death but rather a demonstration that the loss has actually had an effect. Any way we might physically demonstrate grief—whether through crying, wailing, self-harm, or other ways—merely fulfills a social obligation.<sup>5</sup> Durkheim did not see mourning and the rituals performed surrounding the death of a family or community member in relation to emotions expressed but as means to cement social ties.

Durkheim also argued that mourning rituals are obligatory, both from a societal point of view and from that of the individual. He wrote, “For a family to tolerate that one of its members should die without being mourned would give witness thereby that it lacks moral unity and cohesiveness.”<sup>6</sup> A society, according to Durkheim, functions the same way—it needs to demonstrate that the individual plays an important role in social cohesion in order for the individual to work toward that same social cohesion.

The authors in this collection do not believe that mourning rituals are performed solely to maintain social ties; rather, this is merely a result of performing them instead of the sole reason. It makes sense to provide a funeral for a deceased person. After all, we want to know that we matter. Funerals show that the deceased mattered in life, and we want funerals for ourselves for the same reason. Social cohesion can be maintained by demonstrating that individuals are important and that their absence has a collective effect. However, most of the authors herein have lost people and know that feelings accompanying loss are very real—anger, sorrow, guilt, and even happiness.

Further, the mourning process is hardly over once the rituals are completed. Rosaldo continued to write about his wife's death and its effect on his research for years after she died. In chapter 5, Aubrey Thamann discusses a cousin taking her wedding ring back thirteen years after the suicide of her husband. Rebecca Moore is still working on how to properly memorialize her family members and others who died at Jonestown. Grief is not over once the funeral ritual has concluded. Durkheim saw the actions performed as being the only (or at least most important) aspect of the funeral process, and as having one sole function—that is, the maintenance of social structure. Yet the authors in this collection demonstrate that the rituals can be a vehicle through which we can express those feel-

ings and that people do not always mourn according to custom, or even at all.

Durkheim is not alone in his assessment of the important role funeral rites play in creating social solidarity and how relationships can be demonstrated through mourning ritual. David Mandelbaum, in his chapter in Feifel's interdisciplinary collection on death, writes:

Participation in the ceremony has yet another effect on the participants. It gives them a renewed sense of belonging to a social whole, to the entire community. ... The villagers and visitors go in procession, led by music, to clear the cremation ground, build the pyre, prepare the feast, and do other work in preparation for the ceremony. These group activities and the dancing which follows not only bring general enjoyment but enhance feelings of social unison.<sup>7</sup>

Later he argues that "rites performed for the dead generally have important effects for the living. A funeral ceremony is personal in its focus and is societal in its consequences."<sup>8</sup> Much like Durkheim, Mandelbaum sees the essential nature of mourning ritual for social cohesion, but is this the only point? The authors in this collection demonstrate that it is not.

Vicki Lensing tells us that funerals have several goals, including those that are physical, social, psychological, and sometimes religious. She writes:

The social goal is to provide group support for the mourners by the community recognizing the change in relationships brought about by the death. The psychological goals are to assist the mourners in accepting the reality of the death and provide a starting point to process the feelings associated with grief.<sup>9</sup>

Lensing, a funeral director, wrote this article to speak directly to her colleagues in the funeral industry, but it is relevant here. She recognizes the significance to social solidarity, here discussed as "relationships," but notes with the deeper analysis Rosaldo argues for that the emotions connected to loss are equally important. This collection is meant to continue the discussion started by Rosaldo. </FL>

One impetus for the undertaking of this project was to bring together individuals who would add to the conversation begun by Renato Rosaldo's influential essay "Grief and a Headhunter's Rage," in which he questions the privileged position of the researchers along with the problems that arise when you try to apply a Western scientific model to studying culture. In this essay, Rosaldo discusses his initial objective analysis of why the Ilongot people practiced headhunting. He laments his inability to really connect to the practice, which his consultants explained by saying that "rage, born of grief, impels [them] to kill [their] fellow human beings."<sup>10</sup> Rosaldo goes on to say that he did not understand the practice largely

because he did not understand the connection of grief to rage. Up to that point, he had not experienced a loss that filled him with both emotions. He writes, “The *emotional force* of a death, for example, derives less from an abstract brute fact than from a particular intimate relation’s permanent rupture.”<sup>11</sup> Rosaldo then explains that following the death of his brother in 1970, he began to understand the connection the Ilongot felt between grief and rage, but it was not until the sudden death of his wife shortly after beginning fieldwork with the Ifugaos, also of the Philippines, that he truly understood. He writes, “Immediately on finding her body I became enraged. How could she abandon me? How could she have been so stupid as to fall? I tried to cry. I sobbed, but rage blocked the tears.”<sup>12</sup> It is in this moment that Rosaldo finally internalized the reason the Ilongot practiced headhunting.

Connected to our collection is Rosaldo’s use of this reflexivity—this placement of his own experiences in tandem with those of the people whose cultures he studied. Rosaldo tells us that his “use of personal experience serves as a vehicle for making the quality and intensity of the rage in Ilongot grief more readily accessible to readers than certain more detached modes of composition.”<sup>13</sup> This is what we’ve done here—the authors in this collection have used their personal experiences to make their research more relatable to our readers. We have all utilized reflexivity to bolster our work.

Our collection shows the universality of death as a topic of study across disciplines while adding a seldom-heard voice to the conversation: that of the researcher. The scholars herein are able to conduct a much deeper analysis of their subject matter by connecting their own experiences with bereavement. The results thus contribute both as additions to the scholarly conversation of each author’s specific field and as an overall collection.

The move toward a more reflexive study of culture began in anthropology in the 1970s, although the concept had been around for several decades by that time.<sup>14</sup> Rosaldo illuminated how an objective, scientific approach when dealing with death and grief did not allow one to truly understand those experiencing loss. By bringing our awareness to ourselves, we do not deny that we are impacted by these events. In some instances, we had to confront our own impending death, even when, as Freud wrote, “our own death is indeed unimaginable, and whenever we make the attempt to imagine it we can perceive that we really survive as spectators.”<sup>15</sup> We are all spectators to the world around us, including when we contemplate our death or the death of a loved one. The importance of reflexivity is that in our postmodern world, one that questions science and objectivity, we can with this study show continuities between the researchers. For as Philip Carl Salzman argued, “The way to improve ethnographic research is, thus, not for the solitary researcher to delve within him- or herself, or

to make him- or herself the subject of the account, but to replace solitary research with collaborative, team research, in which the perspective and insights of each researcher can be challenged and tested by the others.”<sup>16</sup> That is what we have tried to do with this research. We wanted to examine how death, a normal biological process, impacts all of us, not just those we have chosen to study.

Each author selected has a unique perspective on an observance relating to the dead, death, or dying. Some have had close ties to either the terminally ill or the deceased; others have extrapolated from what they have observed as bystanders to an expansion or modification of the researcher’s own philosophy or emotional state relating to dying and/or death. These accounts each include both a critical analysis of the practices witnessed and an understanding of the emotional component that all aspects of death provoke in humans, whether it is disgust, fear, awe, sadness, anger, or even joy. As Jean L. Briggs showed so clearly in her ethnography *Never in Anger: Portrait of an Eskimo Family*,<sup>17</sup> the thoughts and emotions of the researcher and of those being researched can be incorporated in a meaningful way into the study and subsequent analysis of the topic being investigated. The outcome is a better understanding of cultural practices and the various perspectives and feelings individuals have about a particular topic. We found that all the contributors helped to illuminate both their thoughts and feelings along with those of their research subjects.

The contributors in part 1 of this collection consider what it means to fear death and how their study subjects might put death off for as long as they can. For the first chapter, “An Absent Presence: The Co-constitution of Loss,” Alison Witchard interviewed women who are genetically predisposed to develop breast and ovarian cancer, many of whom elected to have preventative mastectomies and risk-reducing bilateral salpingo-oophorectomy. Alongside this, Witchard contemplates how the loss of her own grandmother, her first major loss, affected how she as a researcher came to understand the choices made by her consultants, whether that meant preventative surgery or not. In chapter 2, “Immortality and Existential Terror: Learning the Language of Living Forever,” Jeremy Cohen writes about the time he spent at RAADfest—an annual conference “dedicated to radical longevity and life-extension.” As Cohen discusses his fieldwork with people who believe they have unlocked the secret to immortality, he reflects on his own near-death experiences as well as the death of his great-uncle, ultimately questioning the various ways people try to mitigate their fears of death and dying.

In part 2 we move closer to death, as the authors in this section address caregiving at the end of life while grappling with the potential of death. In chapter 3, “Living, Caring, and Dying: Music and the House of Endless Losses,” Carina Nandlal, an art historian and music scholar, examines

what it means to be a caregiver to a person with dementia and how music has helped her and her family cope. Nandlal also more broadly explores the connections of music and empathy to cultural understandings of eldercare in present-day Australia. Kalliopi M Christodoulaki considers the consequences of the illness, care, and subsequent death of her grandmother in chapter 4, “Death and Fulfillment: Mortuary Performance and the Impact on Self.” Christodoulaki examines the effect this loss has had on her own identity, not only as a granddaughter and member of the community but also as a researcher studying the connections between loss, grief, and identity.

The authors in part 3 confront death, exploring the ritual processes we use as we come to terms and cope with death. Aubrey Thamann discusses the cultural importance of funeral work, weaving in her own experiences with loss and grief in chapter 5, “Crossroads: Life and Death in Indiana.” She works to emotionally and theoretically reconcile the losses in her life and comes to understand how funeral directors help bring together people in mourning to help them with the grieving process. In his desire to understand his own research into death work more thoroughly, Ekkehard Coenen became a funeral director while conducting his research in chapter 6, “‘What Has the Field Done to You?’ Researching Death, Dying, and Bereavement between Closeness and Distance.” Coenen focuses specifically on the balance funeral directors must strike between emotional connection and professional distance while working with grieving families and explores how the feelings of disconnection he had from funeral workers changed so that he was able to shape his perspective of the profession and thus impact his writing about the subject. The final chapter in this section, chapter 7, is Sarah Nytroe’s “The Historical Study of Death and Dying: The Intersection of Familial Stories and Catholic Rituals,” which explores the intersection of the personal and professional realms in her historical research of a “good death” in the Catholic experience. Wanting to connect more deeply to her work, Nytroe began interviewing family members regarding their changing experiences with death before and after Vatican II. She also came to learn how Catholic rituals helped her grandparents deal with the death of their child.

Finally, in part 4, we move beyond the event of death to memorialization. Debbie A. Hanson discusses memorializing Harmon Killebrew, a former Minnesota Twins baseball player, in chapter 8, “Touch ’Em All: Memorializing Harmon Killebrew.” Hanson offers us a case study in performative commemoration, including spontaneous shrines, cybershrines, and news articles to show how the death of a popular figure creates a community while highlighting his best attributes. In chapter 9, Olivia Guntarik and Claudia Bellote intersperse their discussion of cybershrines and digital cemeteries, “After Life: Laying Flower Memes on

My Mother’s Grave and the Recollective Realm of Life after Death,” with pieces of Guntarik’s own cybermemorialization of her mother. Guntarik and Bellote look at what it means to enshrine someone online while navigating through the visits from grief tourists and negative responses from online trolls. The best way to grieve is also discussed in chapter 10. A dispute over the “proper” way to memorialize the dead is at the center of Rebecca Moore’s “A Monumental Problem: Memorializing the Jonestown Dead.” Moore, who lost three family members at Jonestown, argues that the act of remembering is neither simple nor straightforward, especially in instances of stigmatized death. In the final chapter of this collection, “Long Live Chill: Exploring Grief, Memorial, and Ritual within African American R.I.P. T-shirt Culture,” Kami Fletcher analyzes African American death and mourning customs. Her cultural analysis runs parallel to her personal experiences wearing the shirts. Fletcher situates these shirts within the broader history of the American Black experience and connects to her own place in that history. By wearing the t-shirts, mourners take control of how the deceased is remembered. It connects them to those who have passed and is a way to foster ties within the community and in the family.

Through all these accounts we have a view of death as being an impactful event that people address in various ways. Whether trying to prevent it, coming to terms with it alone, or searching for the support of others, we as authors have learned from death, but maybe not enough to understand it. Richard A. Kalish may be correct in saying the following: “Yet, I believe the truth remains that death is one event that our scientists know no more about than the sorcerers in New Guinea. We may know more about how dying occurs, at least the biological aspects, but none of us knows what death is.”<sup>18</sup>

What follows is an attempt, as St. Augustine instructed, to “let death be thy teacher.”

**Aubrey Thamann** is an American studies scholar and anthropologist. She received her doctorate from Purdue University in 2016. Her dissertation was an ethnographic study of funeral directors in Indiana, focusing on the social role they play in offering us the much-needed shared experience of collective grief in the funeral. An interdisciplinary scholar at heart, Thamann has begun research into the fields of fat studies and food studies, specifically exploring where these fields intersect.

**Kalliopi M Christodoulaki** is a cultural anthropologist and independent researcher currently working as a limited term lecturer at Purdue University. She received her doctorate in anthropology from Purdue University in 2010, and her dissertation research focused on gender roles,



community identity, and value systems on the island of Karpathos in Greece. Her research interests include religious practices, social identity, and cultural change.

## Notes

1. Paulo Coelho, *The Diary of a Magus: The Road to Santiago*, trans. Alan Clarke (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1992), 123.
2. Renato Rosaldo, "Death in the Ethnographic Present," *Poetics Today* 9, no. 2 (1988): 429.
3. *Ibid.*, 431.
4. Renato Rosaldo, "Grief and a Headhunter's Rage," in *Culture and Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), 1–21.
5. Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Karen E. Fields (New York: The Free Press, 2001), 392–93.
6. *Ibid.*, 400.
7. David G. Mandelbaum, "Social Uses of Funeral Rites," in *The Meaning of Death*, ed. Herman Feifel (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1959), 196.
8. *Ibid.*, 189.
9. Vicki Lensing, "Grief Support: The Role of Funeral Service," *Journal of Loss and Trauma* 6 (2001): 49.
10. Rosaldo, "Grief and a Headhunter's Rage," 1.
11. *Ibid.*, 2, italics in original.
12. *Ibid.*, 9.
13. *Ibid.*, 11.
14. See Philip Carl Salzman, "On Reflexivity," *American Anthropologist* 104, no. 3 (2002): 805–13.
15. Sigmund Freud, "Thoughts for the Times on War and Death," in *Civilization, War and Death*, Psycho-Analytical Epitomes 4, ed. John Rickman (London: Hogarth Press and The Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1953), 92.
16. Salzman, "On Reflexivity," 812.
17. Jean L. Briggs, *Never in Anger: Portrait of an Eskimo Family* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970).
18. Richard A. Kalish, *Death and Dying: Views from Many Cultures* (Farmingdale, NY: Baywood Publishing, 1977), 2.

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