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Item Type	Article
Authors	Yoo, Audrey
Citation	Yoo, Audrey. 2019. Book review: The bioarcheology of dissection and autopsy in the United States, Kenneth C. Nystrom -- Lambda Alpha Journal, v.49, p.18-19
Publisher	Wichita State University. Department of Anthropology
Download date	2026-05-19 13:17:09
Link to Item	https://soar.wichita.edu/handle/10057/20044

Book Review: The Bioarcheology of Dissection and Autopsy in the United States, Kenneth C. Nystrom

Key Words: Heath, Race, Personhood, Postmortem Examination, Medical, Socioeconomic

Audrey Yoo

Department of Anthropology

Michigan State University

In *The Bioarcheology of Dissection and Autopsy in the United States*, Kenneth C. Nystrom has compiled a range of articles that track the development of dissection and autopsy in the medical profession in the United States, as well as examine how these activities interact with race and socioeconomic status. Many of these articles use skeletal remains to draw sociocultural inferences with regards to status and personhood. Recurring themes throughout the volume include the changing perception of personhood as it pertains to the body, social marginalization, structural inequalities, and the changing practices in medicine throughout the development of the country's history. In the book's introduction, Nystrom emphasizes the importance of recognizing the different social implications related to autopsy and dissection. Autopsies usually indicate that the individual was important enough to have their death investigated. They could also be indicators of a disease outbreak. Dissections, on the other hand, were a way to dishonor the individual being dissected. The rest of the book is divided into sections that are organized by the chronology and geography of the cases, focusing almost exclusively on cases of dissection (rather than autopsy).

The first section of the book concentrates on early case studies from Colonial era North America. In Chapter 2, Crist and Sorg describe the oldest skeletal evidence of autopsy in America, dating between 1604-1605. These were conducted to diagnose a mysterious disease, later determined to be scurvy, plaguing the New France colony on Saint Croix Island. The authors provide a description of postmortem examination through cultural and philosophical lenses, concluding that social status and religion likely were not factors in who got autopsied. In Chapter 3, Bruwelheid and colleagues investigated human remains from Colonial Jamestown that were disposed of along with medical equipment. This treatment suggests that they were part of a collection owned by surgeons, and that the deceased individuals likely belonged to a low status class, probably criminals. In the fourth chapter, Chapman and Kostro describe evidence of postmortem examinations on bones excavated from a coffeehouse in Colonial era Williamsburg. Coffeehouses were social spaces, and their analysis suggests that coffeehouses may also have been used for medical training.

The second section of the book contains one chapter, which focuses on case studies from skeletons excavated in public cemeteries. In Chapter 5, Novak constructs a biographical history of individuals in the Spring Street Presbyterian Church cemetery in Manhattan who showed evidence of postmortem examination. She discusses their examinations through the lens of personhood.

The third section of the book focuses on case studies taken from medical institutions. In the sixth chapter, Hodge and colleagues investigate the skeletons in Holden Chapel at Harvard University where medical classes were held, placing the postmortem examinations in the historical context of the development of the medical profession in the United States. In the seventh chapter, Owsley and colleagues present an analysis of the 19th century dissected remains that were dumped in a well in Richmond, Virginia. They discovered that the majority of the remains belonged to individuals of African or African American descent, suggesting that free and enslaved African Americans were especially vulnerable to the practices of grave robbing and dissection. In Chapter 8, Halling and Seidemann contextualize the postmortem examinations late 19th-early 20th century bodies excavated from the Charity Hospital cemeteries of New Orleans in terms of socioeconomic status, arguing that dissection was a form of structural violence. In Chapter 9, Muller and colleagues provide a historical context of the Robert J. Terry Anatomical collection, which is comprised of socially marginalized individuals, providing a historical sample of socially marginalized individuals who were at risk of systemic violence.

The fourth section of the book focuses on skeletal case studies from almshouse cemeteries. In Chapter 10, Dougherty and Sullivan document the most common postmortem examination procedures done on late 19th century bodies of socially marginalized individuals in the Milwaukee County Institutional Grounds. In Chapter 11, Richards and colleagues distinguished between dissection and autopsies in the Milwaukee County Poor Farm of 19th century Wisconsin, placing emphasis on the marginalized status of people living in Almshouses. In Chapter 12, Crist and colleagues describe the Blockly Almshouse in mid-late 19th century Philadelphia in the context of the growing medical field. The marginalized people in this almshouse were buried, granting them more respect than the dissected bodies that were discarded as trash. In Chapter 13, Nystrom and colleagues discuss the structural violence implicit in the dissection of bodies from the Erie County Poorhouse in Buffalo, New York. They argue that certain marginalized groups in the nineteenth century were at heightened risk of violence by dissection. In Chapter 14, Grauer and colleagues demonstrate how the dissections done on bodies from the Cook County Poor Farm and Insane Asylum in Illinois serve to highlight the prejudice against the poor in the nineteenth century. In Chapter 15, Lowe analyzes evidence of postmortem examination conducted on bodies that were excavated from the Albany County Almshouse Cemetery in New York.

In the concluding chapter, Nystrom provides a synthesis of the evidence for postmortem examinations found on remains that were excavated from public cemeteries. He discusses factors such as race and personhood that may have factored into the postmortem treatment of the bodies.

The Bioarcheology of Dissection and Autopsy in the United States is organized in a clear and predictable way. Nystrom does a great job synthesizing and interpreting the information presented in each of the articles. He provides historical contexts to the claims being made about the cultural implications of dissection and autopsy, and he does so in language that is easy for a lay person to understand. This book is good for undergraduates and non-specialists.