



Transnational Death

Edited by

Samira Saramo, Eerika Koskinen-Koivisto and Hanna Snellman

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Introductory Essay

Making transnational death familiar¹

The recent death of a beloved great-aunt rapidly set into action my family's transnational network. While Finland is our family's home country, my great-aunt lived primarily in Sweden, and other close relatives have established homes throughout Canada and in England. With no children of her own and no will that explicitly expressed her final wishes, we, the bereaved, were left to determine where she would be buried, how her homes and belongings would be reconciled between two countries, and how to bring the family together at this time of grief. In this moment of family rupture, we joined countless other families, today and in centuries past, in the processes and emotions of transnational death. Such intimate negotiations, hinged on individual deaths, collectively shape and reshape identities, traditions, symbols, and cultural borders.

The inevitability of death occurring away from one's homeland and hometown accompanies migration and the resultant separation of families and communities. Mobile people, now as in the past, have to develop and utilize multiple strategies to deal with the realities of death at a distance. Death demands its own solemn rituals and practices across cultures and times. Such practices often solidify the attachments to place held by those who are dying and also those who mourn them. Migration, then, provides unique opportunities for individuals, families, and communities to reflect on how such place- and culture-bound practices can operate in new geosocial contexts. Transnational death raises questions about identity, belonging, and customs, but also about the logistical care of bodies, rituals, and commemoration.

From the perspectives of Ethnology, History, and Folklore Studies, both death *and* migration have been much studied, but scholarship on death in the context of migration and transnational lives has received far less attention

1 I am grateful for grants from the Jenny and Antti Wihuri Foundation (2017), the Academy of Finland (2017–2020), and the Department of Contemporary History, University of Turku, which have made this research and book project possible. Thanks also to the team at the University of Turku's John Morton Center for North American Studies for intellectual support.

until recent years. To delve into the expansive territory of *transnational death* as a field of inquiry, we must consider migrants' ruminations on mortality away from the home community, how individual migrants and migrant communities respond to deaths in the home community, and how the home community mobilizes when their migrant members die. On individual and collective levels, to borrow the words of Alistair Hunter and Eva Soom Ammann, "the end of life is a critical juncture in migration and settlement processes, precipitating novel intercultural negotiations."² In order to situate the developing field and the present collection, this chapter introduces some of the main issues and themes that migrants, their communities, and researchers encounter in the context of transnational death.

Deadly migration

In both historical and contemporary contexts, migration is an uncertain endeavor, and one where death continually reminds of its presence. Migratory journeys over vast waters or difficult terrains, even in the best and safest conditions, pose risks.³ For many, the voyage has been deadly, such as for the 50,000 Irish immigrants who died on their way to North America during the "black" year of 1847,⁴ the 6,000 undocumented migrants reported dead in the Mexico-U.S. borderlands between 1998 and 2014,⁵ and thousands of refugees still facing grave dangers daily on the Mediterranean Sea.⁶ These are but a few examples. For those who safely arrive at their destination, the realities of immigrant life keep the presence of death ever near. Migrants today often confront the same obstacles of poverty and ghettoization that characterized nineteenth- and twentieth-century immigrant life.⁷ Instead

- 2 Alistair Hunter and Eva Soom Ammann, "End-of-life Care and Rituals in Contexts of Postmigration Diversity in Europe: An Introduction," *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 37, no. 2 (2016): 97.
- 3 For an historical overview of mortality rates on immigrant-carrying ships from Europe to the United States, see Raymond L. Cohn, "Mortality on Immigrant Voyages to New York, 1836–1853," *The Journal of Economic History* 44, no. 2 (June 1984): 289–300.
- 4 For a case study of this deadly migration to Toronto, Canada, see Mark G. McGowan, *Death or Canada: The Irish Famine Migration to Toronto, 1847* (Toronto: Novalis, 2009). See also Philip Hoare, "'The sea does not care': The wretched history of migrant voyages," *The Guardian*, April 21, 2015. Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/apr/21/the-sea-does-not-care-wretched-history-migrant-voyages-mediterranean-tragedy>.
- 5 Alex Nowrasteh, "People Die Trying to Get to America, Too." Foundation for Economic Education Blog, October 22, 2015. Available at: <https://fee.org/articles/people-die-trying-to-get-to-america-too/>. The reported number of deaths may well be less than the actual number of lives lost in the Mexico-U.S. borderlands.
- 6 UN Refugee Agency, "UNHCR seeks support for alternatives to dangerous refugee journeys," July 18, 2017. Available at <http://data2.unhcr.org/en/news/16417>.
- 7 See, for example, Roger Waldinger, "Not the Promised City: Los Angeles and Its Immigrants," *Pacific Historical Review* 68, no. 2 (May 1999): 253–272; and

of encountering improved conditions, in the past decades “unprecedented numbers” of newcomers to Canada, for example, have been “enduring chronic unemployment, and severe income shortfalls [...] leading to dependence on food banks and, for some, exposure to homelessness.”⁸ Poverty, in turn, results in increased risk of physical and mental illness, disease, and mortality.

Though socioeconomics are but one factor, comparing the health of migrants with that of native populations in eleven European countries, Aïda Solé-Auró and Eileen Crimmins concluded that “migrants generally have worse health.”⁹ While new immigrants may arrive in the settlement destination in better health than the native population because of immigration screening processes, “the health of immigrants tends to worsen over time.”¹⁰ In an international review of immigrant women’s health, DeAnne Messias found that “for immigrant women living in urban environments characterized by poverty, squalid living conditions, violence, lack of sanitation, and exposure to infectious diseases, the risks for poor physical, mental, and environmental health are exponentially higher.”¹¹ Language barriers, cultural differences, and difficulties in navigating new healthcare systems often create obstacles for immigrants’ access to healthcare.¹² Undocumented and even low-paying employment often leave migrants without occupational safeguards, and work-place injuries and fatalities are all too commonplace.¹³ Furthermore, a 2012 governmental study on the mental health of recent immigrants to Canada made clear the link between poverty and psychological distress: “Recent immigrants in the lowest income quartile were significantly more likely to report experiencing high levels of stress and emotional problems compared to those in the highest income quartile.”¹⁴ Suicide risk in immigrant

Garnett Picot, Feng Hou, and Simon Coulombe, “Poverty Dynamics among Recent Immigrants to Canada,” *The International Migration Review* 42, no. 2 (Summer 2008): 393–424.

- 8 Heather Smith and David Ley, “Even in Canada? The Multiscalar Construction and Experience of Concentrated Immigrant Poverty in Gateway Cities,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 98, no. 3 (September 2008): 689.
- 9 Aïda Solé-Auró and Eileen M. Crimmins, “Health of Immigrants in European Countries,” *The International Migration Review* 42, no. 4 (Winter 2008): 873.
- 10 Laurence J. Kirmayer et al., “Common mental health problems in immigrants and refugees: General approach in primary care,” *CMAJ* 183, 12 (2011). Available at <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3168672/>.
- 11 DeAnne K. Hilfinger Messias, “The Health and Well-Being of Immigrant Women in Urban Areas,” in *Women’s Health and the Worlds Cities*, ed. Afaf Ibrahim Meleis, Eugenie L. Birch, and Susan M. Wachter (University of Pennsylvania Press: Philadelphia, 2011), 151. For a historical example, see Eysyllt Jones, “Politicizing the Laboring Body: Working Families, Death, and Burial in Winnipeg’s Influenza Epidemic, 1918–1919,” *Labour: Studies in Working-Class History of the Americas* 3, no. 3 (2006): 57–75.
- 12 Messias, 158.
- 13 Michael C. Kearl, *Endings: A Sociology of Death and Dying* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 250–261.
- 14 Anne-Marie Robert and Tara Gilkinson, “Mental health and well-being of recent immigrants in Canada: Evidence from the Longitudinal Survey of Immigrants to Canada,” *Citizenship and Immigration Canada Report* (November 2012), iii.

populations has also raised concerns.¹⁵ For all of these reasons, poverty has been linked to increased mortality risk.¹⁶ These risks may be further compounded for migrants, who face a multitude of structural, cultural, and psychological barriers to their well-being.

Immigrant health and well-being, and culturally diverse notions of “good death,”¹⁷ especially in the context of aging immigrant populations, are increasingly significant considerations for receiving countries, healthcare and social work professionals, and, of course, researchers of transnational death.¹⁸ Though migration is often conceived of as an opportunity for a better standard of living and greater freedom, it is accompanied by great risks, uncertainties, and even feelings of exile.¹⁹ The idea of “deadly migration” can be seen as shaping cultural attitudes and imaginations about emigration. Acknowledging the inherent relationship between migration and death serves as a useful entry point for unpacking the emotional toll of transnationalism felt by individuals, families, and communities.

Transnational community building and reciprocity

For generations, economic uncertainty, workplace dangers, and multifaceted traumas have become unfortunate hallmarks of immigrant experiences. For immigrant communities, then, death and care of the dying and deceased have often been primary concerns. In her foundational study of Finns in Canada, Varpu Lindström reflects on early immigrants’ “preoccupation” with death: “Having seen unmarked shallow graves where ‘some foreigner’ was hastily buried – no name, no place of birth to identify the victim – they feared meeting the same fate. Who would send a message to Finland

15 Much research has focused on suicide in immigrant populations. See, for example, Katarzyna Anna Ratkowska and Diego De Leo, “Suicide in Immigrants: An Overview,” *Open Journal of Medical Psychology* 2 (2013): 124–133; and Tim Wadsworth and Charis E. Kubrin, “Hispanic Suicide in U.S. Metropolitan Areas: Examining the Effects of Immigration, Assimilation, Affluence, and Disadvantage,” *American Journal of Sociology* 112, no. 6 (May 2007): 1848–1885.

16 See, for example, Hyun Joo Oh, “An Exploration of the Influence of Household Poverty Spells on Mortality Risk,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 63, no. 1 (February 2001): 224–234.

17 In Michael C. Kearl’s words: “Deaths become good when they serve the needs of the dying, their survivors, and the social order.” Kearl, 122. For a recent assessment of notions of “good death” in the context of diversity and medicalized palliative care, see Eva Soom Ammann, Corina Salis Gross, and Gabriela Rauber, “The Art of Enduring Contradictory Goals: Challenges in the Institutional Co-construction of a ‘Good Death,’” *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 37, no. 2 (2016): 118–132.

18 See, for example, Sandra Torres, Pernilla Ågård, and Anna Milberg, “The ‘Other’ in End-of-life Care: Providers’ Understandings of Patients with Migrant Backgrounds,” *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 37, no. 2 (2016): 103–117.

19 See, for example, David A. Gerber, “Moving Backward and Moving On: Nostalgia, Significant Others, and Social Reintegration in Nineteenth-Century British Immigrant Personal Correspondence,” *The History of the Family* 21, no. 3 (2016): 292, 310.

to my old parents? Who would see to it that my remains were disposed of with dignity?”²⁰ The solution reached by many immigrant communities in the nineteenth- and twentieth-centuries, Finns included, was the establishment of mutual aid sickness and funeral funds. These were often tied to ethnic cultural organizations, unions, temperance societies, or religious organizations. These collectives aided in funeral arrangements, provided financial contributions, and sent word to kin, if necessary.²¹ Exemplifying how widely spread such funds were and “the value placed upon dignified burial,” in her study of the city of Winnipeg in 1918, Jones found “approximately forty functioning mutual benefit organizations in this period, including Jewish, Italian, German, English, Chinese, Bohemian, Polish, Ruthenian, and Hungarian groups.”²² In North American Finnish enclaves, fifty-dollar burial benefits were organized as early as 1888.²³

Regulations and customs pertaining to the care of corpses and burial procedures vary greatly from place to place. This makes transplanting death traditions to new settlement areas difficult, and many migrant communities today are facing the challenges head-on. The University of Reading-led research project “Deathscapes and Diversity: Making Space for Death and Remembrance in Multicultural England and Wales” identified failures to address the rites and needs of minority religious communities in many studied burial facilities.²⁴ Other research case studies confirm the project’s findings. For example, British Hindus have struggled to establish religiously adherent open-air crematoriums.²⁵ In such cases, ethno-religious communities come together to negotiate and rework rituals that acknowledge the unique conditions posed by migration, while remaining faithful to traditional practices. The result may be the establishment, for example, of ethno-religious cemeteries or fine-tuning the processes of corpse repatriation for traditional burial in the homeland. Accordingly, funerary services catering

20 Varpu Lindström, *Defiant Sisters: A Social History of Finnish Immigrant Women in Canada* (Multicultural History Society of Ontario: Toronto, 1988), 56.

21 For example, see Lindström, 57; Marc Metsäranta et al., *Project Bay Street: Activities of Finnish-Canadians in Thunder Bay Before 1915* (Thunder Bay: Thunder Bay Finnish-Canadian Historical Society, 1989), 54, 128–129; Carmela Patrias, *Patriots and Proletarians: Politicizing Hungarian Immigrants in Interwar Canada* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1994), 79, 100. See also Samira Saramo, “Terveisiä: A Century of Finnish Immigrant Letters from Canada,” in *Hard Work Conquers All: Building the Finnish Community in Canada*, eds. M. Beaulieu, D. Ratz, and R. Harpelle (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2018), 171–172.

22 Jones, 63.

23 Carl Ross, *The Finn Factor in American Labor, Culture and Society*, Second Edition (New York Mills, MN: Parta Printers, Inc., 1978), 23.

24 Avril Maddrell, Yasminah Beebeejaun, Katie McClymont, Brenda Mathijssen, Danny McNally and Sufyan Abid Dogra, “Diversity-Ready Cemeteries and Crematoria in England and Wales” Briefing Note (2018). Available at: http://blogs.reading.ac.uk/deathscapes-and-diversity/files/2018/07/Polycynote_Diversity_Cemeteries_Crematoria_Online.pdf

25 Alistair Hunter, “Deathscapes in Diaspora: Contesting Space and Negotiating Home in Contexts of Post-Migration Diversity,” *Social and Cultural Geography* 17, no. 2 (2016): 256–258.

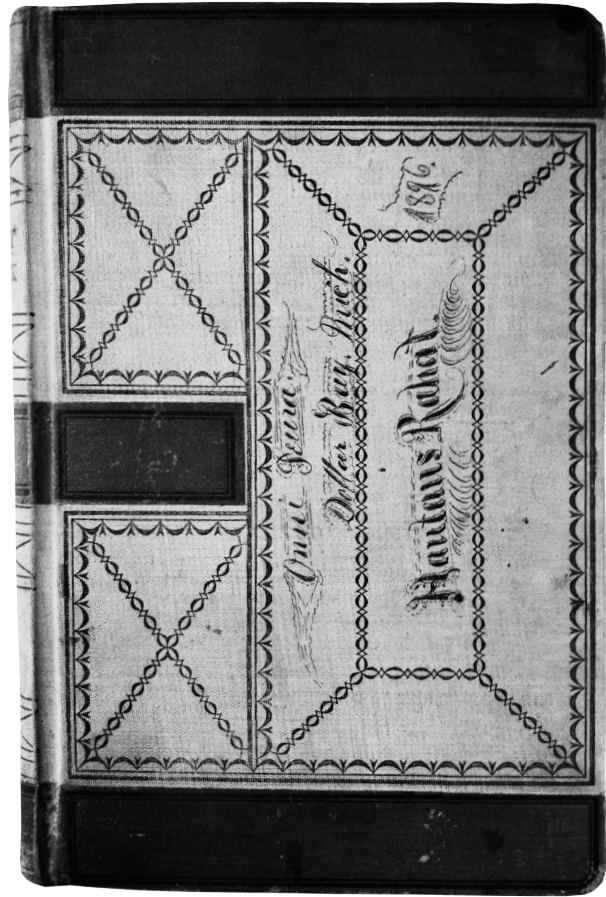


Image 01: Dollar Bay, Michigan, Finnish immigrants' "Onni" Funeral Fund, 1896. Finnish American Heritage Center / Photo by Samira Saramo.

to specific ethnic communities are often offered by members of the group, such as Berlin's Muslim undertakers, studied by Osman Balkan.²⁶ As in generations past, migrant ethno-religious communities today continue to organize formal mutual benefit funds to cover member deaths and, as Jordi Moreras and Ariadna Solé Arraràs have shown for Moroccan and Senegalese communities in Spain, the costs of repatriating corpses to the homeland.²⁷

Such intragroup reciprocity, however, often takes more informal and spontaneous forms. Where formal mutual aid funds or insurances are not in place or do not cover the needs of bereaved families, kinship and community networks are activated. The significance of these informal systems is as great or even greater than formalized insurances, considering the social and emotional support structures they have built in. Monetary collections are regularly organized, for example, by Burmese Buddhist

26 Osman Balkan, "Between Civil Society and the State: Bureaucratic Competence and Cultural Mediation among Muslim Undertakers in Berlin," *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 37, no. 2 (2016): 147–161.

27 Jordi Moreras and Ariadna Solé Arraràs, "Genealogies of Death: Repatriation among Moroccan and Senegalese in Catalonia," in the current volume.

communities in North America and by Yalaltecos in California.²⁸ In both cases, such traditional practices are brought by migrants, though the forms have developed according to new, local sociocultural realities. Through their participation in collections for deceased members in both the homeland and hometown, as well as in the immigrant enclave, migrants can stay firmly connected with their transnational community. However, it is worth noting that such dual social obligations—essentially to contribute to two places—can place a difficult financial burden on migrants and their families.²⁹

Cash donations are complemented by *in kind* assistance to the dying and, after death, participation in mourning events and rituals. With families dispersed across the world, positive “death kin work,” as Anna Matyska demonstrates, is the “cumulative effort of an entire transnational family.”³⁰ People fulfill different necessary roles according to their abilities and where they are located. As Gutiérrez Nájera and Alonso Ortiz explain, the system of reciprocity ensures that ideally each community member’s contributions are matched and returned when their life eventually comes to an end.³¹ For Burmese Buddhists, “merit-making,” referring to religious/spiritual participation and taking care of monks, both solidifies migrants’ place in their transnational ethno-religious community and also ensures a good and respectful rebirth for the deceased.³² Reciprocity in the form of assistance and adherence to religious and cultural rituals serves as a powerful tool for creating group cohesion and easing grief at times of death.

The emotional weight of transnational death

Karen Wilson Baptist, writing about the death of her parents, reflected on the feeling of being weighed down by grief while simultaneously feeling “unfettered and groundless, for the landscape of home and of family seemed now lost to me forever.”³³ The death of a loved one represents a significant rupture in a bereaved person’s life. Such a rupture calls into question one’s identity, place, relationships, and life direction. It stirs multiple and ambiguous emotions. When faced with death, as Amy-Katerini Prodromou points out, “the whole concept of self must be reworked and revisited when we attempt to define ourselves within the literal (geographical) and

28 Chipamong Chowdhury, “The Spirit of the Gift: Burmese Buddhist Death Rituals in North America,” in the current volume; Lourdes Gutiérrez Nájera and Ana Alonso Ortiz, “Expressing Community: Zapotec Death and Mourning across Transnational Frontiers,” in the current volume.

29 See, for example, Gutiérrez Nájera and Alonso Ortiz, 91–93.

30 Anna Matyska, “Doing Transnational Death Kin Work in Polish Transnational Families,” in the current volume, 53.

31 Gutiérrez Nájera and Alonso Ortiz, 90.

32 Chowdhury, 113.

33 Karen Wilson Baptist, “Diaspora: Death without a Landscape,” *Mortality* 15, no. 4 (November 2010): 294.

psychically altered space that results from this new absence.”³⁴ In the context of migration, when the deceased and bereaved are separated by borders and geography, belonging and mourning are hard to pin down.

Migrants commonly already tackle questions of what “home” means to them and how to best fit into and fulfill their social roles while straddling multiple physical and psychological spaces. Death exacerbates the need for such negotiations. For many, with passing years and the passing of relatives and friends in the home community, “the ‘home’ of their imagination and memory shift[s] and disappear[s] in their absence.”³⁵ By turning to memories, migrants can assert their place. David Gerber’s multidisciplinary analysis positions immigrants’ *nostalgia* as “an adaptive mental strategy for negotiating continuity and change.”³⁶ In “Bittersweet: Everyday Life and Nostalgia for the 1950s,” Eerika Koskinen-Koivisto and Hanna Snellman conclude that “nostalgia is often attached to topics and periods of time that are linked to a certain amount of struggle and misery, and above all contradictions.”³⁷ Through shared nostalgia, intimate transnational networks can create shared frames of reference and build collective futures. Nostalgic reminiscences of the deceased can also simply be consoling. As one of Gerber’s studied immigrants wrote in 1824, memories allowed her to “lose the present in the past.”³⁸

Bridging the past with the present through nostalgic recollection frequently has therapeutic—or at least beneficial—results. However, others struggle to reconcile the ways in which their past experiences and connections link to the person they have become and the position they find themselves in. For example, Susan Matt traces several examples, from Guinean slaves in Early America to Irish immigrants in the twentieth-century United States, where the profound, melancholic longing for home – that is, “homesickness” – was seen to both cause death and be alleviated only by death.³⁹ For some, thoughts of both living and dying away from familiar people, places, and customs prove very difficult. This may be especially true in cases of forced displacement and resettlement. As Zophia Rosinka notes, the “inability to return home [...] intensifies the desire to return and the sense of longing for home.”⁴⁰

34 Amy-Katerini Prodromou, *Navigating Loss in Women’s Contemporary Memoir* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 6.

35 Laura Ishiguro, “Relative Distances: Family and Empire between Britain, British Columbia and India, 1858–1901” (PhD Dissertation, University College London, 2011), 204.

36 Gerber, 292.

37 Eerika Koskinen-Koivisto and Hanna Snellman, “Bittersweet: Everyday Life and Nostalgia for the 1950s,” *Journal of Finnish Studies* 19, no. 2 (July 2016): 5.

38 Letter by Mary Ann Archibald, January 1, 1824. Quoted in Gerber, 309.

39 Susan J. Matt, *Homesickness: An American History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 13, 28–30, 145.

40 Zophia Rosinka, “Emigratory Expience: The Melancholy of No Return,” in *Memory and Migration: Multidisciplinary Approaches to Memory Studies*, ed. Julia Creet and Andreas Kitzmann (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011), 34.

In her study of transnational family relationships in the context of the British Empire, Laura Ishiguro notes: “Death challenged the boundaries of family, changed its relationships, and provided disconcerting reminders of disconnection and distances of all kinds.”⁴¹ Being absent at the time of death can result in complicated feelings, including guilt. In Matyska’s study of Polish transnational families, interlocutors emphasized the difficulty of being away from dying elderly parents.⁴² Others carry regrets of not having been in more regular contact.⁴³ For some, absence results in a feeling of exclusion from the mourning process, which calls into question one’s sense of belonging.⁴⁴ Distance challenges the ability of mourners to work through the emotions of loss.

Connecting through transnational death

Before the advent of telecommunications and social media, word of death arrived by letter. Letter correspondence involves unique forms of self-expression and temporal limitations – especially in the absence of efficient, modernized international postal systems. Yet, letter exchange nonetheless shares much in common with the ways that distance is navigated in contemporary transnational relationships. Migrants today typically incorporate various communication technologies into their grieving process, and condolence letters are most often composed in email, Facebook Messenger, SMS, or expressed via Skype or a telephone call (from among a list of many other available communication platforms). As Ishiguro perfectly summarizes, the condolence letter, now, just as then, “[is] both insufficient and indispensable for expressing grief and consolation at a distance.”⁴⁵ Written communications, be they letters or social media posts, are indispensable in that they serve as “a heart-to-heart conversation with a trusted correspondent who is a sounding board” for the ambiguous memories and emotions propelled by death.⁴⁶

For generations, it has been common to include mementos, such as photographs or obituary clippings, in letters dealing with a death in a transnational family. Today, photographs and videos shared online serve the same function. Complementing written language, transnational mourning is, likewise, now often expressed through the use of emoji in online spaces.⁴⁷

41 Ishiguro, “Relative Distances,” 180.

42 Matyska, in the current volume.

43 Samira Saramo, “I have such sad news’: Loss in Finnish North American Letters,” *European Journal of Life Writing*, 7 (2018): 59–60.

44 Saramo, “I have such sad news,” 62; Laura Ishiguro, “How I wish I might be near’: Distance and the Epistolary Family in Late-Nineteenth-Century Condolence Letters,” *Within and Without the Nation: Canadian History as Transnational History*, ed. Henry Yu, Adele Perry, and Karen Dubinsky (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015), 219.

45 Ishiguro, “Relative Distances,” 195.

46 Gerber, 301.

47 Gutiérrez Nájera and Alonso Ortiz, 94–96.

Transnational Death brings together eleven cutting-edge articles from the emerging field of transnational death studies. The collection highlights European, Asian, North American, and Middle Eastern perspectives, and reflects on people's changing experiences with death in the context of migration over time. The collection begins with a thematic assessment of transnational death studies, and then examines case studies, divided into Family, Community, and Commemoration sections. Together, the chapters provide new insights on issues including identity and belonging, community reciprocity, transnational communication, and spaces of mourning and commemoration. The collection is edited by Dr. Samira Saramo (University of Turku), Dr. Eerika Koskinen-Koivisto (University of Jyväskylä), and Professor of Ethnology Hanna Snellman (University of Helsinki).



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