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Book Review

– *Life and Death in Latin American Cities: The Necropolis at* Stake, by Christien Klaufus. Bristol University Press, 2025

In March 2020, at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, images from Guayaquil, Ecuador, circulated globally, showing bodies wrapped in plastic on city sidewalks as families waited weeks for recovery and burial. These scenes were often framed as exceptional disasters, but they more often revealed how ordinary and how infrastructurally fragile the management of death can be in large, unequal cities. Christien Klaufus in *Life and Death in Latin American Cities* (2025) builds on decades of ethnographic research and cases like that of Guayaquil to show precisely how public systems of death care meet – or fail to meet – the everyday practices through which people care for their dead. Klaufus centres her analysis on what she calls "the troublesome cohabitation of the living and the dead" (p. 2), showing how this cohabitation extends far beyond the moment of death and into struggles over space and dignity. Drawing on 2,200 visual materials, as well as local publications, and ethnographic work conducted between 2014 and 2024 in Bogotá, Medellín (Colombia), Lima (Peru), Buenos Aires (Argentina), Quetzaltenango (Guatemala) and Cuenca (Ecuador), the book asks how relationships between the living and the dead have structured Latin American urban space; how disposal and commemoration extend across physical and virtual realms; and how unequal access to postmortem care reshapes claims to dignity, citizenship, and what Klaufus calls a "right to the city of the dead" (p. 26).

Together with her research team, Klaufus conducted semi-structured interviews and participant observation with cemetery and crematorium managers, deathcare workers, civil servants, heritage conservators, and clergy. Her background in anthropology and architecture, as well as her earlier work on "deathscapes" in Latin America (2014), allows her to approach these questions through a spatial analysis that is both rigorous and evocative. This is evident in her use of metaphors – most notably the house metaphor – to conceptualise necropolises as zones of cohabitation and encounter between the living and the dead. "When the house of the living collapses, socially or physically, new threats may appear in the necropolis" (p. 84), Klaufus writes.

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Departing from more conventional definitions of the necropolis, Klaufus demonstrates how it is best understood not as a static site but as a chain of post-deathcare facilities responsible for the movement, circulation, disposal, and material transformation of human remains. One of the book's most compelling contributions lies in showing how class disparities persist in death. Those who are able to keep the remains of their loved ones intact and in situ in perpetuity are frequently those who do not depend on public resources to conduct funerary and postmortem services. In contrast, within the public necropolis, the dead are constantly touched and moved, and progressively reduced in size to occupy less space in already saturated, limited fields.

By focusing on public, non-profit, and municipal funeral services and mortuary practices carried out within the State infrastructure, Klaufus centres the spaces where poor citizens are made to wait for assistance from the State. This focus allows her to show how disputes that structure the relationship between the living and the State resurface with and after death. She examines, for instance, the ambiguous role of the State, in cities like Medellín or Bogotá, as both auditor and identifier of human remains produced by armed conflicts and political violence (NNs), and, at the same time, as the perpetrator of those very crimes. She also analyses the marginalisation of public spaces of death within local public policy – spaces often deemed politically unproductive and therefore unworthy of investment. The result is the chronic underfunding of public cemeteries and mortuary infrastructure, leaving the most vulnerable families deprived of recognition, justice, and possibilities for collective mourning.

At the same time, by integrating the study of the necropolis into the polis more broadly, Klaufus identifies other, subtler forms of everyday engagements with death and social life that emerge not only as acts of "resistance" against the State, but as what anthropologist Tania Lizarazo describes as "processes alongside violence" (2019, 178-179). These are forms of empowerment that do not necessarily arise in explicit opposition to the State, but rather in spite of it. Klaufus traces these processes through the multifunctionality of the Latin American public necropolis, where the house of the dead also serves as a space for informal commerce, football games, tourism, festivities, and everyday sociality. Here, the profane is not disjoined from the sacred. The necropolis emerges, then, as a site in which the living and the dead not only cohabit, but transit and compete. As Klaufus notes, "The public cemetery is thus perceived as a spatial node of injustice and possibility alike" (p. 26).

The book opens the door to further inquiry into the relationship between public and private cemeteries, as well as between public and private funeral services, a line of inquiry Klaufus notes but does not pursue here. Attending closely to how class, economic access, and rural-urban divides intersect across public and private necropolises could further illuminate how these spaces continually meet and overlap, even as they are formally or supposedly separated. None of this detracts from the significance of Life and Death in Latin American Cities or its contribution to the study of urban spaces in the region. On the contrary,

Klaufus's work invites us all to continue thinking about Latin American cities and their living and dead.

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