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Book Review

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In *Rituals of Care*, anthropologist and ethnographic filmmaker Felicity Aulino examines care practices predominantly in Northern Thailand. This ethnographic monograph uses a critical phenomenological approach to provide detailed information on how Thai people care for their elderly relatives who are nearing the end of their lives. Aulino's work is a strong contribution to the study of aging in the field of medical anthropology specifically because of the focus on the embodied performativity of care evident in her research practice and analysis. With this monograph, the author attempts to deal with what she feels are lacks in anthropologies of care, stating that

My focus is care in the everyday, and the ordinary is the route by which I want to bring attention to the habituated ways people provide for one another — not only at bedsides, but also in the boardrooms, corner stores, or any number of mundane daily interactions.
(2)

As such, she highlights limitations in the works of certain medical anthropologists who have, in her opinion, primarily focused on “emerging technologies of the self and subject formation, health-care professionalization, and social welfare reform” (22). Within this scope, only a few have addressed embodied practices of care. Ethnographic inquiries that have focused on embodied practices of care have been limited to mostly European, North American and predominantly Christian cultures. To fully unlock care as an object of study, Aulino argues, there needs to be more ethnographic inquiries outside of North America and Europe (22).

As the title suggests, in this book care for the elderly near the end of their lives is examined as a ritual or as the “repetitive acts that achieve effects through their correct performance” (13). Aulino here follows in the footsteps of Annemarie Mol (2008), Catherine Bell (2008), and Seligman and colleagues (2008), but explicitly focuses on the ritual mode of caring as a social practice as opposed to an individual experience: she examines the mundane bathing, cleaning, diapering, and feeding of various Thai families as a performative ritual of caregiving, at the end of life (147). Examining care as a ritual, allows her to focus on caregivers' embodied routines in habituated action that “bring a wider range of human experience into view” (24). For example, since Buddhism is the predominant religion of Thailand, various ethnographic encounters taught Aulino how important the concepts of karma and merit are in care practices. Karmic debts and merit can span throughout a person's lifetime. As a result, these are important factors influencing caregiving practices in Thailand. Karma offers the caregiver a reason to

accept a situation and merit is made by physically providing care for the elderly or person in need. Aulino links care as a ritual to Theravada Buddhism, the Abhidhammic theory of mind, social hierarchies, and the social body.

The importance of karma and merit in caregiving practices can also partly explain the importance of volunteerism in Thailand, which has become a national strategy to combine caring for the elderly with merit-making. The civic engagement of care is done by relatives rather than non-family members in a typical volunteer setting. Caregiving is framed in such a way that the stress is on the merit that volunteers will gain through their good deeds rather than on the obligations that family members must care for their relatives. In Chapter 4, Aulino explores how volunteerism and caregiving are tightly mixed in with political issues in Thailand, because the ways that people care and provide for one another through karma and merit are the very ideas that continue to maintain inequality and oppression. This brings us to the unique insight that, for social and political change to arrive, people would first have to detach themselves from the familiar ways of caring for one another and the social body. Thus, framing care as a ritual—both embodied, connecting, religious and political—Aulino humanizes the daily care of caregivers and those they care for while making her book an excellent example of the possibilities of holistic anthropology.

One criticism of Aulino's books is that it is written very academically with a lot of anthropological jargon that may be difficult for the average audience to understand. This really narrows her audience to academic researchers. Despite this, the book would additionally serve as a valuable introduction to those starting their education or career in the field of anthropology, exactly because she goes through many of the anthropological terminologies, defines them, and gives good references that examine these concepts further.

Overall, *Rituals of Care* is an excellent book, which offers a thoughtful approach to everyday care in Thailand. By framing care as a ritual, it conveys the everyday mundane rituals included in care and the importance of embodied care practice. It also calls for anthropologists to be creative in their ethnographies by encouraging them to shift away from traditional European and North American populations and cultures. The book is also a great recommendation for those who wish to learn more about Theravada Buddhism, caregiving, volunteerism, medical anthropology, and Thai society and culture in general. Aulino delves into specific Thai politics, economics, and religious aspects that many scholars may be unaware of. As the world emerges from the COVID-19 pandemic, this book will serve as an exceptional starting point for how researchers can begin to examine care and caregiving around the world.

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