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## Sex and Death on the Western Emigrant Trail: The Biology of Three American Tragedies

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analyses to determine the character state of the LCA (chapter 3 and Wilson and Glowacki's chapter 13: "Violent Cousins: Chimpanzees, Humans and the Roots of War"), most synthesize these data in a similar fashion.

Despite my overall take that this will be an invaluable contribution to the primatologist's or paleoanthropologist's library, there were some gaps I would have liked to see filled. Almost all of the chapters are excellent in terms of their quality, aside from some disappointingly outdated references in several of the chapters. A few tended to over-generalize the "chimpanzee condition," falling into the habit of using only a select number of study sites as representative of the species in general, despite well-published evidence of subspecies and population differences. Much of the behavioral information pertaining to the evolution of social behavior and cognition stems from captive studies, perhaps not surprising given the nature of some of the cognitive aspects of human evolution.

Overall, the book is an excellent resource. I found most of the chapters provocative, even if I did not agree with their interpretations. I highly recommend this volume to students and scholars of primatology and paleoanthropology in particular and to anthropologists in general.

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*Sex and Death on the Western Emigrant Trail: The Biology of Three American Tragedies.* Donald K. Grayson. Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2018, 288 pp. \$29.95, paper. ISBN 978-1-607816010.

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This book offers a different look at how to think about the starvation and death that hounded emigrants attempting to get to California and Oregon in the early years of nineteenth-century US expansion. Specifically, the Donner party and two lesser-known Mormon handcart groups are scrutinized for what the patterns of age at death by sex can reveal. In the subtitle *The Biology of Three American Tragedies*, "biology" here means solely demographic data on sex and age at death. These are really the only biological variables examined, so the title *Sex and Death on the Western Emigrant Trail* is more accurate as to the subject matter; the subtitle promises more of a biological account than is actually delivered.

The author starts the book with an observation regarding his many years of traveling with teams of archaeologists to remote places. He states that when there is a crisis in the field, it is invariably the males who fix things and take risks, while the females stand back and provide "psychic glue" to keep the group focused. This anecdotal story is referred to throughout the book as a fact of human life that is universal, and later

chapters expound on this as a genetic and evolutionary feature of male and female difference. I found this framing device to be reductionist and even sexist in the ways that ideas about sexual dimorphism, phenotypic traits, and rigid constraints on behavior are portrayed throughout the book.

Many readers will enjoy chapter 2, where there is a careful and meticulous outline of the events leading up to the demise of many members of the Donner group when snowstorms forced them to stay in hastily constructed cabins and tents at the eastern foot of the Sierra Nevada. Minute details of the formation and early logistical decisions regarding how to make the passage to Oregon and California are provided. The author relies on many direct quotes from various diaries and archival material on dates, names, times, and places of people associated with the Donner party. Subsequent chapters apply this same rigor in reporting names and dates for two other ill-fated groups. The author interrogates the patterns of death primarily by age and sex but extends his discussion of survival to include differential marriage patterns and social connectedness to others between those who died and those who survived.

Chapter 3 is where the author spends the most space trying to establish why adult female survivorship was greater than that of males. He briefly reviews a small slice of studies from evolutionary biology and human physiology to build his case that males are risk takers (due to testosterone) and females are the “psychic glue” who hunker down and hold the groups together (due to oxytocin). The author marshals biological data on sexually dimorphic traits (essentially stereotypic male and female phenotypes) such as white and brown body fat distribution (females have more), hormonal systems, and other features of human metabolic and physiological functioning to bolster his contention that male-female mortality patterns during disasters can be predicted solely based on sex and age.

There is circularity here in the argument. The well-published death rates by age and sex note greater female survivorship. To explain this, the author presents carefully selected studies from among thousands to show that females survive cold and possible famine better than males. Then these findings from the literature are applied to the Donner data to show that one could have, simply from reading the literature, predicted that females would survive over males. So there is no testing of a series of hypotheses here. As a biologist, I found the conclusions of this study not very compelling, and surprisingly superficial in approach. Where are all the cultural factors that might have been important to understanding who survived? Where is the nuance and historical context regarding the disasters that have been written about by other archaeologists and bioarchaeologists? There is virtually no reconstruction of individual life histories, social status, level of education and wealth, health status and morbidity burden, or other factors that also might have had a substantial effect on survival. That phenotypic variability and plasticity is greatly influenced not just by genes, but rather by genes plus environment and culture, is a fundamental aspect of evolutionary biology. Yet, the book falls back on genotype (sex) and entertains no phenotypic variability when it comes to key features of male and female behavior and health.

A further problem is that the author examines the major stressors (cold weather and lack of food) and constitutional factors (age and sex) as either/or categories without ever examining the synergistic interplay between them. For example, we are told that the Donner males in general were “in the physical prime of life, yet not only did they die, but they died first” (p. 105). Later the author writes that one of the males “was said to be in weak health” (p. 106) and another of the males had an injured, possible septic, hand. One male child died from breaking into the food stores and overeating. Many of these small but important nuances and contradictions are found throughout the narrative. We are left not really knowing much about these people other than their names, ages, and sex.

I suspect that a large number of readers will find the simplicity of this book’s major idea (that females fair better during crises due to their hard-wired capacities) easy to follow. I learned much about the specifics of the Donner party and the other two groups who later traveled to Utah. Thus this book certainly contributes details of the broader economic and logistical factors at play. But in the end, I found the overall approach to be dismissive of legitimate concerns others have stated about the decontextualized retelling of the events devoid of any cultural or anthropological context. Veiled biological determinism underlies the basic approach by the author captured in such quotes as “The Donner party died as their biology dictated” (p. 121) and “important aspects of sex roles are biological in origin” (p. 122). Most telling is the last sentence in the book: “Human biology takes over, and the results are remarkably predictable” (p. 212).

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*Honoring Ancestors in Sacred Space: The Archaeology of an 18th-Century African-Bahamian Cemetery.* Grace Turner. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2017, 196 pp. \$74.95, cloth. ISBN 978-1-6834-0020-2.

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From the exigencies of urban development comes Grace Turner’s *Honoring Ancestors in Sacred Space*, a meaningful contribution to a growing body of research on the archaeology of the African diaspora that moves from the plantation to the urban center and calls attention to the variability of experiences that existed historically within communities of African descent. The volume centers on the archaeological analysis of her excavation of the Northern Burial Ground for Blacks in the Bahamian capital, Nassau, and explores the site as a cultural landscape manifesting accumulated, culturally meaningful African descendant memorial practices.

Turner engages theoretically with the disciplinary history and challenges of recognizing processes of cultural continuity and change within African descendant communities.