Dying matters:

An ethnography of the death awareness movement in the ostensible West

Eveliina Kuitunen
student number 1132406

Green Templeton College
Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology, University of Oxford

2023

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Anthropology

110,062words

CONTENTS

FRONTMATTER

LIST OF FIGURES 4

ABSTRACT 6

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS 7

INTRODUCTION 8

SITE AND METHODOLOGY 14

PART I MEMENTO MORI

Chapter 1 The worm at the core 41

Chapter 2 Speaking death 65

Chapter 3 Mattering good death 96

PART I CARPE DIEM

Chapter 4 Bringing up the bodies 129

Chapter 5 Touching community 166

Chapter 6 Networked necrobiographies 197

POSTSCRIPT 217

BIBLIOGRAPHY 223

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1 – Victory Over Blindness, Johanna Domke-Guyot 2018 16

Figure 2 – Loved & Lost, an information board about the exhibition in the cathedral. 17

Figure 3 – Pictures taken of the Loved & Lost Project by Simon Bray, demonstrating use of cathedral wall space. 18

Figure 4 – Photographs representing the present absence of the deceased who feature in the original photographs recreated with participants, in side-by-side view. 18

Figure 5 – Photographs were accompanied by project participants' words displayed as hand-written notes on white paper rectangles: an example of accompanying material. 18

Figure 6 – A picture taken of a biblical memento mori message displayed at the cathedral altar; unrelated to the exhibit but parallel, ahead of Easter Sunday on the same week. 19

Figure 7 – An image of a mobile screen capture of the *Deathling Den* Facebook page in the hours following the fire at Notre Dame, 15.04.2019 – author concealed. 20

Figure 8 – A screen capture from Twitter indicating one of the earliest mentions of "death positivity" by Caitlin Doughty in 2013. 27

Figure 9 – The author's name features in traditional first- and last name format alongside 23 other donors or patrons in an *Ask a Mortician* video credit roll in 2018; many look to be screen-names and mononyms. 27

Figure 10 – A screen capture from YouTube from a 2023 video by the Ask a Mortician channel; the length of the credit roll for patrons suggests a significant growth in scale and sponsorship of production and a greater likelihood of donors appearing with "real" given names instead of user handles. 28

Figure 11 – Diagram of Robert Hertz's arguments (1960) as presented by Metcalf and Huntington (1991,83). 48

Figure 12 – An image of a screen capture following a Google search; the suggested result features a misrepresentation of Kellehear as arguing or diagnosing a death-denying society in his work. (2023) 57

Figure 13 – A collage featuring examples of of some prompt cards and feedback sheets at Death Café events. The cards marked GraveTalk were used at a Death Café in Elephant and Castle and are, in fact, printouts pertaining to a Church of England death-talk initiative to match Death Café (whose site does not mention death cafés, perhaps because of guidelines about no affiliation to religious entities. 67

Figure 14 – Examples of speech-bubble logos and media; Dying Matters and Marie Curie 'Talk About' campaign; Reach and Co-op Funeralcare grief-podcast promotion. 85

Figure 15 – The *What is a Good Death* event display stand at Cambridge Central Library, including a magnetised board for poetry and prompts to share feedback or event hashtags on social media. 98

Figure 17 – A picture of the What is a Good Death stand, providing an overview of some of the materials provided to the audience; this includes a sheet of black heart stickers bearing the event details and hashtags that participants could wear, a poetry flyer, and a copy of a graphic novel by Neil Gaiman that anthropomorphises death as a young woman. 100

Figure 18 – A mobile screen capture of a digital illustration shared on Facebook, Twitter, Reddit, and LinkedIn, most frequently on pages for hospices and by nurses. The artist is uncredited, with the drawing's first use likely in 2017 by *Institute for the Study of Birth, Breath, and Death*, an American centre offering training programmes for death doulas and "grief work". The image is juxtaposed with a screen capture of a negative social media reaction, originally found below the picture in its comment section. 107

Figure 19 – A gift-tag shaped label with a ribbon, distributed to attendees at the Royal Trinity Hospice awareness event. Written responses to the question of "how do you live every moment" could be affixed to the small decorative tree displayed in the room. 112

Figure 20 – A Hospice UK and Dying Matters participant flyer available at multiple Awareness Week 2019 events encouraging writing numbered lists. 127

Figure 21 – Examples of participatory writing for public display, including large plywood trees at Wanstead Library to add written notes to (see also fig. 19) organised by *Life.Death.Whatever* and a lightbox-style bulletin board at *The Departure Lounge* installation by the Academy of Medical Sciences at Lewisham Shopping Centre, both part of Dying Matters Awareness Week in May 2019. 128

Figure 22 – The DDD14 Conference Bingo Sheet for participants 130

Figure 23 – A promotional water bottle for a funeral provider distributed to conference guests 132

Figure 24 – Examples of decorative metal plates and handles on display at the Coffin Works museum. 142

Figure 25 – Coffin Works paraphernalia, including ring plates, handles, an assembled display coffin, and a jaw support or "collar" for posing the chin for display. 143

Figure 26 – "Anti"-death positive rhetoric in 2019 via memes deriding Doughty and NOR innovations via "conventional" morticians' meme pages *@opencasketculture* and *@mortician_memes* on Instagram..147

Figure 27 – Paper flowers atop a cardboard coffin lid 165

Figure 28 – Flyer for *The Birth of Death* at Tara Theatre..166

Figure 29 – An image likening death and birth via allusion to an umbilical cord or spiritual rebirth, circulated in the *Deathling Den* in 2021...176

Figure 30 – A screenshot example generated via Tiktok in September 2023 under the search term 'Roxane Gay Morgue'. 'Morgues prefer women' yields three times as many views, but this image is chosen for its inclusion of Gay's original tweet (upper left) dated March 2023. Though the tweet is deleted and stills are unavailable, it circulates freely in video formats..179

Figure 31 – A small collage of embracing and touching imagery; screenshots via INELDA, LWDW, Gentle Dusk, and Marie Curie. 184

Figure 32 – A photograph of a Dignity Funerals poster in a funeral home window urging readers to "forget everything you think you know about funerals". 193

Figure 33 – Flyer for the play *Human Jam,* performed at Camden People's Theatre in 2019 197

Figure 34 – Map of HS2 Plans in 2023 following line cancellations. 198

Figure 35 – Lyrics to *The Rights of the People* by Thomas Spence, distributed to the audience at Human Jam to allow joining in song. 201

Figure 36 – The "ball and box" model of grief as presented by hospicecare.uk (left) and Lauren Herschel (right) 207

Figure 37 – *The Departure Lounge* installation at Lewisham Shopping Centre...208

Figure 38 – Graphs modelling the Social Change Ecosystem and the Death Positive Library scheme via orderofthegooddeath.com and LibrariesConnected.org.uk 213

Figure 39 – Self-portrait at the Old Operating Theatre Museum, part of Old St Thomas' Hospital in London 222

ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the so-called death awareness or death positivity movement and the way in which issues surrounding mortality, the dying process, and treatment of dead bodies are made to be matters of care. Presenting current Western institutionalised frameworks for handling death and dying as insufficient or harmful, the activism I follow is concerned with issues of accessibility, environment, and enriching customs of ritual or memorialisation.

Through twelve months of fieldwork across the UK as well as extended online ethnography, I present participants as comprising heterogenous affective communities and publics that perform ethical dispositions and orientations towards a generalised sense of inauthentic or disengaged (post)modernity, or its death care complex. While death awareness is a primarily Anglo-American endeavour, in my multisited, multimedia work I propose "west" is largely virtual and identificatory, insofar as it relies on totalising narratives of lost systems of meaning or sociality. A frequently cited motif in death awareness work is the power of conversational events to remove death denial and as such, a question I engage with is one of the origin of such a belief, and the experienced efficacy or desired outcomes of these interventions. My fieldsites include Death Cafés, conferences, pop-ups and plays staged as part of Death Awareness Week Festival for community outreach.

I discuss critiques of neoliberal therapeutic discourse or emotional individualism in relation to achieving "good death" and the relationship between death awareness and emergent spiritualities, as novel methods of gathering around death speak to reassessed bonds to the dead, or to nature. I have chosen care as a theoretical lens as it not only relates to the stewardship or maintenance of the dead and dying in medical or funerary contexts, but because of its affective charge of being concerned or complicit. The problem is not merely "who will care for these people" and "what kind of care is good enough to make death better", but "how can I make others care as I do?"

Taking my cue from work on caring in more-than-human ontologies from interdisciplinary posthumanist thinkers including Puig de la Bellacasa and Haraway, I propose a neologism to accompany rhizomes, tentacles or frictions in the intellectual tradition of affect theory in *fathoming.* With its etymology in the measurement of outreached arms or embraces, I posit that when "words fall short" around death, efforts or complaints surrounding it exemplify fathoming as a particular kind of poesis and reach.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am indebted to my DPhil supervisor, Professor Inge Daniels. My start at the Institute of Social & Cultural Anthropology could be described as rocky, as I was left without an advisor early on. I could not have hoped for a better mentor to take on this project, and I apologise for the fallow time between chapters. Thank you for your pep-talks and patience, for fostering community between students in your famous discussion groups, and for introducing me to *Westmalle Trappist*.

This work would never have been possible without the generous doctoral research grants awarded to me between 2018 and 2021 by the Osk. Huttunen Foundation. I relish the opportunity this foundation has afforded me in becoming part of the university I was so excited to attend, and I hope to have lived up to their mission of supporting Finnish culture and championing its academia abroad. Special recognition is owed to representative Timo Åvist, who helped me apply, asked engaging questions during my initial interview, and made sense of scheduling and extensions in email correspondence.

All errors remain my own, and whatever merit shines through I dedicate to my parents, my sisters, to Mike, and to Conor.

INTRODUCTION

> *So, death, the most terrifying of ills, is nothing to us, since so long as we exist, death is not with us; but when death comes, then we do not exist. It does not then concern either the living or the dead, since for the former it is not, and the latter are no more.* – Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus*[1]

I begin this section with an Epicurean notion of death and self being mutually exclusive, not because I seek to assess the strengths of experiential philosophical concepts such as privation (whereby in marking loss of sensory experience, death cannot be apprehended as good or bad), or Feuerbach's description of death as "a spectral being that is only when it is not and is not when it is" (Schumacher 2011, 165). Such efforts would undoubtedly make for fascinating discussion in another thesis, but one that owing to its abstraction would bear little resemblance to everyday understandings. In building a project on thoughts about death, a reader frequently comes up against a Western philosophical focus on one's own extinction, or natality as temporality; a position on selfhood or its persistence. In *Tractacus*, Wittgenstein posits that "death is not an event in life" (1921,88) but writing as an anthropologist I cannot help but argue the opposite – when we speak of the trouble of death, we describe survivals in the wake of loss. If the death we talk about when we converse is nothing but grief, love, worry, memory, or anticipation, I say those are the ingredients of human death. My choice of opening quote may be liberating to some: that it is not reasonable or rational to fear death, and to simply make hay while the sun shines. But I wonder if Epicurus would have written such a thing to Menoeceus had he been recently bereaved; I wonder why he bothered having an epitaph engraved. I thought about why fear of death was presumed to be about lingering presence or absence instead of the concerns of how the continuation of life will feel without something that constituted your social world, or whether your widow could pay for the funeral.

The part of death not being with us fits with an absence of dying in my fieldsite, however, and might be more anecdotally expressed in an interaction I shared with a neighbour in the early days of my research.

> "So, what's your PhD about?"
> - "Well, it's about death and dying or more like, what people's attitudes are towards it"
> "Wow, that's heavy. I mean, I guess it makes sense you're at Green Templeton, it being more of a medical college."
> - "Well, it's not really a medical anthropology project, it's looking at these groups who want to encourage people to think about death or talk about it more."
> "Okay well, still. How do you manage it? I mean, it must be really tough, talking to people who are dying? Where do you meet them?
> "- I actually haven't spoken to anyone who's dying, as far as I know… It's sort of about the Western culture surrounding dying, and how people say it's taboo, and how they're trying to change that and reform funerals and…"
> "Oh, so you went to a lot of funerals? Is it more Christianity, like their afterlife beliefs?"

I floundered as I admitted the only funeral I had been to over the research period was an unrelated family event in Finland, and that eschatology really never came into it. Moreover, I had no religious bounded community to pin down as clear-cut case study – if anything, such affiliations were ignored as much as possible in my research environments. Luckily, my interrogator was soon side-tracked by asking me whether I had heard of Tibetan sky burials.

[1] https://classics.mit.edu/Epicurus/menoec.html, translation by Robert Drew Hicks

Succinctly, this project is not so much about death as it is an examination of communication, and the production and circulation of knowledge surrounding care for dying. A more facetious reader may remark that an analysis of how information is circulated or interpreted – verbally or otherwise – is all an ethnographic project can be, and the more phenomenologically bent critic may suggest this project speaks to death as every examination of humanity must, as living is identical to dying, an essential relationship to time that grounds our being in the world. It is close to a trope in introductions of sociological compendia on dying to suggest that death is the most important thing in life (Jacobsen 2020, 2) or a defining fact of our species, with so-called Terror Management Theorists arguing all human endeavour is self-preservation through immortality projects (e.g. Greenberg, Pyszczynski, and Solomon 1986; Becker 1973), and others pointing out that "historically, everyone that has lived has died", underlining a unique relationship to the sense of need to die (Bauman 1992). I say this to pre-emptively dodge spending much time ruminating on the nature of death or writing death theory with a "capital d". Having dedicated much time and attention to deathscapes, I am struck by the opportunities presented by plurality. I would be interested in writing about ideas of post-mortem agency and newly established composting facilities for human remains; I might continue reading about the cult of relics or 17th-century embalming manuals; I engaged with the stickiness of unwelcome inheritances or cluttered homes of dead people and took far too many photographs of tombstones to not focus on gifts; there is much yet to discuss regarding pandemics or the mourning for heads of state. For the time being I focus on people in the UK – and owing to the partly online nature of my research, a broader Anglophone "West" – and their concerns around what they describe as a generalised death culture. I have documented ways participants seek out discussion on death in semi-structured contexts under an umbrella of an ideological movement that has most commonly been termed Death Awareness, though Death Positivity and Death Literacy or Death-Consciousness exist as alternative labels.

My introduction to Death Awareness was one many of the people I met shared; I clicked on a YouTube video. As part of undergraduate research for a dissertation on ritual lamentation and professional mourning, I had just finished watching young women wailing with reckless abandon in a competition for *plañideras* in San Juan Del Rio when the sidebar suggested I watch a somewhat click-baiting offering by a channel called *AskAMortician* entitled *Ask a Mortician: Corpse Poo*[2]. The tongue-in-cheek nature of the channel's content was immediately apparent, as was host Caitlin Doughty's underlying professionalism and mission. In a series of videos, Doughty had sought to answer the public's questions about what being a mortician entailed, with all its occasionally gruesome details. Her most popular videos to date include factoids about what happens to hip, knee, or breast implants after death, how to distinguish coffins from caskets, what happens during cremation, and how post-mortem procedures such as the closing of eyes or mouths on corpses prepared for viewing are enacted – injectors, wires, and small convex semi-circles covered in spikes. Brandishing a copy of anthropologist Ernest Becker's 1974 Pulitzer Prize- winning *The Denial of Death*, Doughty presented her erstwhile funeral home as a less invasive, more "natural" alternative to American standards; "how would you feel about your mouth being sewn shut?", she asks. In the near-decade Doughty has been on my feed, her channel has grown exponentially, boasting over 266 000 000 views and just over of two million subscribers at the time of writing. Between 2014 and 2019, she published three *New York Times* Best Sellers; the first closer to a memoir on becoming a mortician, the second a semi-ethnographic "voyage around the world to find good death", and the third a text based on questions children ask about death, inspiring the title *Will My Cat Eat My*

[2] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gv7MSFgT8TE (2012)

Eyeballs. Of most interest to me, however, was a collective called *The Order of The Good Death* that she founded in January 2011 alongside the advent of her channel.

The about-page on the *Order*'s website describes a revolution afoot in how "our society" – geographically undefined – handles death, counting its members as its *avant garde*. Recently, a convenient list of central tenets or "pledge" was added for willing participants, presented below. Joining is informal and could be as simple as signing up for a free mailing list or subscribing to social media updates.

- "*I believe that by hiding death and dying behind closed doors we do more harm than good to our society.*
- *I believe that the culture of silence around death should be broken through discussion, gatherings, art, innovation, and scholarship.*
- *I believe that talking about and engaging with my inevitable death is not morbid but displays a natural curiosity about the human condition.*
- *I believe that the dead body is not dangerous, and that everyone should be empowered (should they wish to be) to be involved in care for their own dead.*
- *I believe that the laws that govern death, dying and end-of-life care should ensure that a person's wishes are honoured, regardless of sexual, gender, racial or religious identity.*
- *I believe that my death should be handled in a way that does not do great harm to the environment.*
- *I believe that my family and friends should know my end-of-life wishes, and that I should have the necessary paperwork to back-up those wishes.*
- *I believe that my open, honest advocacy around death can make a difference, and can change culture."*

My questions about the types of people attracted to the movement were answered, in part, on the page listing members of note: there were morticians or funeral directors, conservationists and eco-burial pioneers, artists who specialised in memorial jewellery, pathologists, and a multitude of academics representing the multidisciplinary field thanatology (or death studies) has become. It was at this intersection of professional and public interest at which I kept scrolling through, discovering a dizzying array of titles attached to members' profiles, or in recommended resources. *Dying Matters, Death Café, Grief Café, Life Café, Good Life Good Death Good Grief, Life Death Whatever, Talk Death, The Good Grief Project, The Good Grief Trust, The Death Talk Project, Dying2Talk, WhatsYourGrief, The Conversation Project, Death Over Dinner, Death Hangout, End Well Project, The Bucket, WeCroak, YG2D You're Going to Die, Simply Dead, Let's Talk About Loss, Loss Project, BrumYODO (You Only Die Once), Dead Social, Doing Death, Compassion in Dying, This Grief Thing, When you Die, The Dying Kind, Beyond, A Course in Dying* and *The Death Literacy Institute* all seemed to promote conversation or education. *Mors Mortis Museum*, *Cemetery Club* and *Coffin Club* for those more interested in artefacts. Fans of podcasts, in turn, might be served by Cariad Lloyd's *Griefcast* that won three gold prizes at the British Podcast Awards 2018 and another in 2019. There was the BBC 4 *We Need to Talk About Death, Doing Death, Dying Matters podcast, Death in the Afternoon, Death et seq.*, *Let's Talk About Death,* or *The Dead Honest Podcast*; in 2022, comedian Kathy Burke began a series called *Where there's a Will, there's a Wake*, interviewing celebrity guests about their ideal deaths. It is difficult to keep track, as many of the aforementioned groups or campaigns – however loosely defined, as some exist as little more than Twitter profiles – would also host events such as festivals, training courses and conferences, with changing titles or hashtags stemming from the same umbrella groups. *Dying*

Matters Awareness Week, Dying to be Heard, A Matter of Life and Death, Death Salon, Good Grief Festival, Future Matters, A Wake in Progress, Good Mourning, Living Well Dying Well, Demystifying Death, Death Festival, Death on the Fringe (dedicated to listing death-related performances happening alongside the Edinburgh Fringe Festival), *Deathsploration*… By the time *Death Positive* became a group (or "sub") on Reddit in 2016, I knew I was onto something.

I do not list these names simply to elucidate the founders' knack for puns, nor do I set out to describe all of them or ignore the nuance between concepts like grief and dying. Instead to the colleague who grew worried as I presented a number of groups and pointed out that such a fragmented site is too ambitious to cover, I want to stress that it is this diaphanous international web and its cacophony of voices that exemplifies an intentional methodological position. What kind of landscape sprawls ahead of someone who becomes interested in Death Awareness, and who produces this material? Clearly, the online echo chambers or architectural properties still relatively new to ethnographers can fire a feedback loop, from seeking information on advance statements for health care preferences on YouTube to sticking paper flowers on a cardboard urn at a disused coffin factory – or at least, allowed such in my case. What are the potential pathways to identifying (or not) as part of a movement or ideology? How globally or locally informed are these networks?

Moreover*, how did we get here*?

In his work on multi-sited fieldwork, George Marcus proposed the researcher trace their object of study by following: following either the people; the thing; the metaphor; the plot, story, or allegory; the life or biography; or the conflict (Marcus 1995). As mutually constitutive or interwoven these apparatuses may be, I think that which I follow falls most closely under conflict – or to introduce yet another shade of differentiation, *complaint.* In her recent publication *Complaint!*, Sara Ahmed describes instances of students and academics lodging complaints at educational institutions following harassment or abuse of power, and in her first chapter complaint becomes a phenomenology of institution: to complain can be a way of "putting glasses on" (Ahmed 2021: 19) that cannot be undone, uncovering structures or their boundaries. It is upon trying to twist doorhandles that we see which ones remain locked. In the death positive pledge above, there are numerous conditionals: the culture of silence should be broken, everyone should be empowered, care should ensure wishes are honoured, and the environment should be protected. Each event I attended that aimed to oppose an idea of what they called taboo pointed at a gap between what life was, and what it ought to have been instead.

One might note out that the groups of people I met were not necessarily negative, or that to choose complaint looks like a judgement of something often quite optimistic, meaning-making, or creatively rebellious on my part. To cast someone as complaining is typically to not listen or dismiss the validity of their claim. It is to contest these concerns of irrelevance or apathy that Ahmed applies an exclamation point to her title and points out that complaint is not a linear case of cause and effect, but a way to collective. The people I speak to had varied trajectories and beliefs but seemed to all agree that we could *do better*. When we agree that "we don't do death well" [3], there is identification through recognition of mutual complaint – one is on the inside of the broader "we" of denial culture or dominant narratives enough to associate with a counterpublic "we". Furthermore, there is a recognition of death being what we make of it or *do* rather than a simple biological event, as alluded to in the banner text of

[3]Such statements are commonplace in media, eg. https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/10/upshot/were-bad-at-death-first-we-need-a-good-talk.html as they are in death awareness contexts. See chapter 1 for literary claims of avoidant culture.

the Order website before a redesign in 2020: *death itself is natural, but the death anxiety of modern culture is not*. Paraphrasing Latour I may ask if we were ever modern to begin with, and hope this paragraph helps explain my choice of *ostensible* West in the title of this piece. Rather than placing quotation marks around west or a placing a "so-called" to invoke my scepticism for the applicability of the term or claim it untrue, something ostensible is what is declared or presented as. This *we* of complaint that responds to what is "our modern" or "of western society" exists in the representations and recontextualizations of this trope or metanarrative, something I will describe as both poetry and performance in service of awareness in chapters two and six.

The other half of my title – dying matters – is left uncapitalised to prevent undue affiliation with *Dying Matters*. Though their work is of direct relevance to mine and informed parts of my in-person ethnography, I do not mean to imply that I represent or act in the name of a campaign.[4] At the inception of this project, the Dying Matters Coalition, founded in 2009, was part of NCPC, or National Council for Palliative Care, and listed comprising roughly 32 000 members across England and Wales. NCPC merged with Hospice UK in the summer of 2017, and *Dying Matters* is now classed as a name for a campaign; as Hospice UK is the national charity for hospice care comprising a network of over 220 hospices, it is difficult to quantify membership or scope. As of 2022 their (also sleekly refurbished) website suggests:

> "We know that millions of people like you believe in what we're trying to do. And so, we're working with the public, with the health system and with partners from across the cultural, arts, education, and faith sectors to achieve it."

My involvement with Dying Matters was primarily through their annual Awareness Week, occurring annually in May. My fieldwork coincided with the eighth such event in 2019, that comprised over 400 events across the UK, and an estimated 800 000 social media engagements by their analytics. Before elaborating on the events I attended over a compact week or two or the other organisations that set up pop-up cafés, art exhibits or film screenings, I return to the topic of title in regard to – and with great regard for - the work of Maria Puig de la Bellacasa. In *Matters of Care*, Puig de la Bellacasa addresses Latour's work on matters of fact becoming matters of concern in constructivism and expands it with a theory on matters of care. Briefly, "representing matters of fact and sociotechnical assemblages as matters of care is an intervention." (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017,54) In my reading, in death awareness death would constitute one of the "neglected things" the author refers to in her book, towards which multiple ongoing doings can transform or engender obligation. It is once these responsibilities and techniques that make up care– including reciprocities, durations, epistemes –are examined (care-fully) that alternate relationalities or ontologies emerge and foster ethico-political standpoints that add to a world. Care will be afforded more attention in chapters four and five, as will the use of matter standing for both meaning and physical substance. For now, and to summarise, death awareness activists believe dying matters and that it is meaningful in a way that does not yet garner the care it deserves. Indeed, the campaigns in its name *know that millions of people like you believe* – but care is more than believing, seeing, or moral proclivity to care about: it is also to care for.

So, what have we been doing wrong thus far? Was death neglected and if so, how, by whom?

---

[4] As for the *Order of the Good Death*, a button to join the campaign led through to a form that allowed one to submit an email for newsletters; I suppose my subscription qualifies me as member.

I admit that mentioning complaint in this introduction is a self-critical realisation in part, as in earlier phases of fieldwork I was concerned with what was to be achieved: what does this talk really do about the status quo, or ask for? If people wanted good death, they would have to define it! How can participants keep saying there are no places to talk about death when they shared dozens of spaces, awash with years of such talk? It was not until I took these complaints at face value that they began to sound less like "we need to talk about death", and more like "we keep talking, and I want you to notice". In Ahmed's work on the institutional complaint, policies may be in place, and guidelines for best practice or diversity may be spoken with conviviality, yet they may not perform (Ahmed 2021, 50–52): some speech acts become nods that do not "do" what they appear to agree on.[5] Indeed, death talks have been happening since long before the turn of the 2010s, when most of the groups or channels for outreach listed above were founded. Death studies or public curiosity about death may be having "a moment"[6], but it is not its first spin in the limelight: the last publication regarding a large-scale movement for death awareness was Lyn Lofland's *Craft of Dying,* which after its release in 1978 was rather difficult to get a hold of until an eerily convenient 40th anniversary reprint was made, delivered through my mail slot four months into my fieldwork. Lofland described what she called the *Happy Death Movement* for death positivity in the United States in language that was often less than flattering but revealed anachronistic activist rhetoric that was delightfully – or discouragingly, depending on your agenda – identical to material circulated today. "The assertion that death is or has been a taboo topic in America and that such a taboo is bad is, as we shall see, a cornerstone of one aspect of the happy death movement's emergent ideology. It is not surprising, then, that an important focus of reform activities is the destruction of this presumed 'structure of silence'" (Lofland 2019, 59).

It is with following a particular complaint of death becoming unspeakable that I begin this work and find my field, presenting a chapter on methodology and ways of positioning oneself in death awareness contexts with express attention to the virtual.

---

[5] I do not want to erase the contexts of legacies of discrimination, race and queerness discussed in *Complaint!*, but note that Ahmed's points on the complainer rendered tiresome or unimportant can be extended to typically more privileged statuses when it comes to certain types of activism: twice over the course of fieldwork I was questioned in academic settings for examining a "white middle class women's club", where what happens is dismissed for "sounding like first world problems!"

[6] https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/22/nyregion/the-positive-death-movement-comes-to-life.html
https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2013/10/death-is-having-a-moment/280777/

SITE AND METHODOLOGY

This thesis is informed by fourteen months of multisited ethnographic fieldwork conducted between September 2018 and November 2019, in an endeavour to construct an understanding of how "death awareness" is manifest and experienced in the UK and broader narrativized West. My site is a hybrid, networked public and given its virtual or geographically unbounded contours, digital methodologies, research ethics, and positionality are discussed closely in this chapter. In addition to following online spaces and collecting and transcribing pieces of relevant media, I attended 23 varied in-person events as a participant observer. From a base in London, I visited six cities in the UK and frequented spaces such as Death Cafés (p.65) to "follow the thing" (p.22). While activity was spread across the research period, I attended nine events over Death Awareness Week in May 2019 (p.13), marking a significant portion of case studies included. Hosted in venues such as libraries, theatres, hospices and museums, many visitor events centred on inviting guests to be active speakers or co-creators in tasks (e.g. p. 66, 118); more traditional notetaking and audio recording was augmented by such engagement.

Below, I describe a day in the field to foreground discussion on the porosity of arrival or departure in and from the field, and what I term "anxious" methods in ethnography, particularly as it relates to discussing emotionally charged sites. I point to parallels in the calls for depth of engagement or affect in anthropological theory to an alleged globalised, anxious estrangement or disorientation surrounding death and community that carry through following chapters.

On the fifteenth of April 2019 – around seven months into my official fieldwork period – I was visiting Manchester for the first time. A friend's friend was hosting some kind of housewarming, and I decided to take advantage of the opportunity to leave the city and take a day off. After all, I had bought a rail card for various conference travel and wanted to make the most of the discounts. And how long would I be the type of person who could enjoy spontaneous day trips on Mondays? Evidently, I had left too narrow a window before booking and braced myself for a six-am departure from Euston; one of those mornings where you burn your tongue on station coffee with a flimsy plastic lid you have to fold open, not even enough time to grab a greasy pasty. Stepping out of the station on the other end, the first thing I saw was a queue of bronze statues. Soldiers seemingly leading each other by the shoulders, life-sized and with bandages wound around their eyes. *Victory over Blindness*, it was called, and the attached plaque told me it commemorated the 30 000 wounded discharged with defective eyesight in the First World War, 3000 of whom were permanently blinded.

Figure 1 – Victory Over Blindness, Johanna Domke-Guyot 2018

Hungry by now and with an afternoon to spare until my friend was able to meet me, I decided to take on her recommendation about a new vegan spot by the cathedral as it seemed easy enough to navigate to. Still nearly an hour early for lunch, I gathered sightseeing was as good a way as any to pass the time. I felt the oddly specific trepidation of going up to a heavy door of a church, unable to tell whether it was closed or simply dark and quiet, or whether I was interrupting a service of some kind when I saw a sign before the nave. As it turned out, it was informing me of pieces currently exhibited in the cathedral that I blinked at incredulously. *Loved and Lost*. Local photographer Simon Bray had started a participant project in which he had asked people to send in pictures of themselves with a dead loved one, to recreate the images that featured their marked absence. The sign described allowing a return to places as experience to express what may be outside words, and overcome pain, or provide a platform for others to acknowledge their losses. These pictures were accompanied by notecards of interview quotes from the bereaved:

Figure 2 Loved & Lost, an information board about the exhibition in the cathedral.

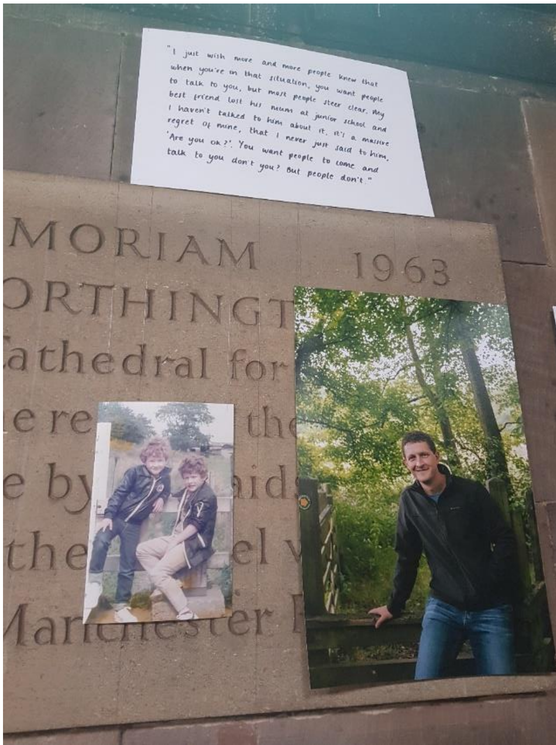


Figure 2 – Pictures taken of the Loved & Lost Project by Simon Bray, demonstrating use of cathedral wall space.

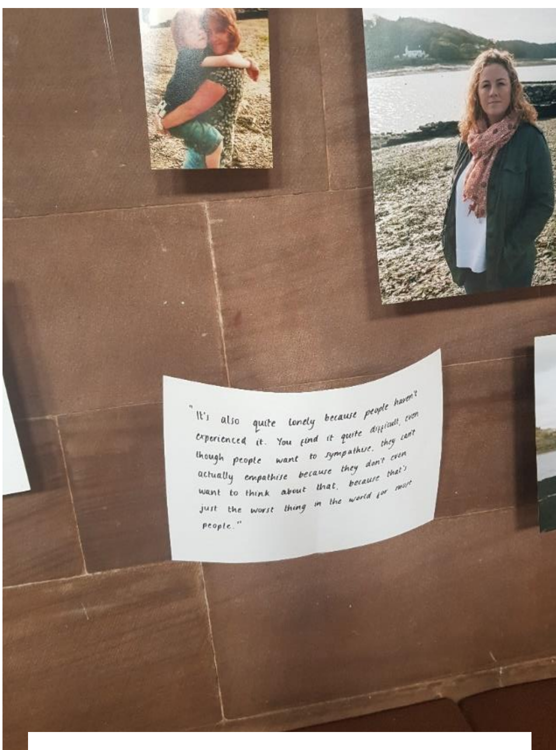


Figure 3 – Photographs representing the present absence of the deceased who feature in the original photographs recreated with participants, in side-by-side view.

I just wish more and more people knew that when you were in that situation, you want people to talk to you […]

Figure 5 – Photographs were accompanied by project participants' words displayed as hand-written notes on white paper rectangles: an example of accompanying material.

Figure 6 – A picture taken of a biblical memento mori message displayed at the cathedral altar; unrelated to the exhibit but parallel, ahead of Easter Sunday on the same week.

I was struck most by a photo of a woman on a pebbled shoreline, maybe by a loch, as she held a child to her chest, their arms and legs wrapped around her in an enormous smile. My lip quivers as I look at the newer version, her alone, hands tucked into her pockets. Her notecard describes the loneliness of an experience most cannot and would not want to try to imagine. Another is of a man who looks to be in his thirties or forties, whose submission reveals he may have been living with loss for a long time: his original snapshot has a washed-out tint and features two boys peering up from under soft mops of curly hair. Perhaps they were showing off their new matching tracksuit jackets and crisp Nike trainers; perhaps this was the last photo the man took with the boy, and neither could have known it would be. In his interview notes, he regrets having failed to ask a schoolfriend about his mother's death. It had to be twenty, thirty years since? And he thinks about what his caring words may have meant to someone else.

I took a few photos because I felt I had to, and turned around to see the altar dressed in purples for lent, as well as an enormous sheet of fabric with painted letters obscured by the pulpitum that I could only really catch a poor snap of from the aisle:

Remember thou art dust and to dust thou shalt return

I had eaten my lunch, rifled through the vintage shops at Affleck's and bought the party hosts a bottle of wine by the time my phone started vibrating with notification after notification – Twitter, news widgets, Facebook – and I learnt that the Notre Dame was on fire. One of the red bubbles on my screen was from a death positivity chat I was a member of with a new thread for those upset by the news:

> "Guys, is it normal to feel kinda like someone died?"

People had begun to leave many sad faces in emoji reaction and validated each other's feelings. Absolutely, you are valid, and we are joint in the face of a great loss, something irrecoverable and what was worse, it seemed valiant efforts and gallons of water could not do enough – things could never be the same. As the story developed and news of celebrity pledges of millions of dollars flooded in, one commentor did add a more glib tone.

> "Oh okay, so with everything happening in the world, billionaires find another way to show off how little they care about living people."

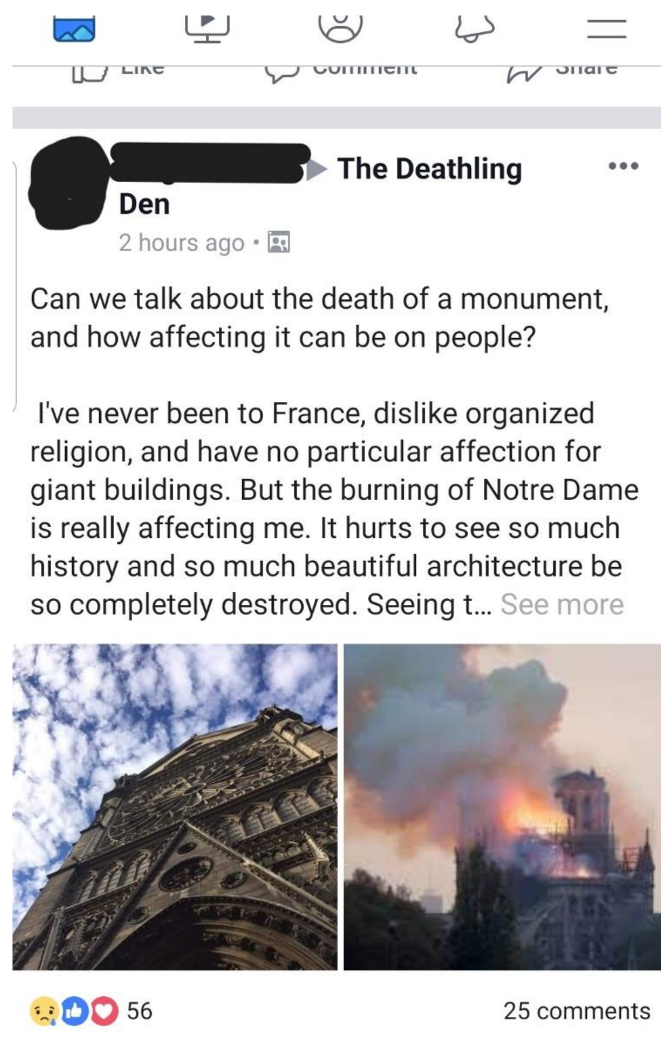


Figure 7 – An image of a mobile screen capture of the *Deathling Den* Facebook page in the hours following the fire at Notre Dame, 15.04.2019 – author concealed.

I admit I felt somewhat disoriented watching the flames that evening and wondered why I minded whether a crown of thorns I had never heard of nor believed had touched some messianic head was safe.

More likely the mood resulted from the way I had meant to take a day off death, only to have it follow me around. I had previously made conscious efforts to book into exhibitions about death or grief based on events-pages or newsletters of the groups I followed yet here they were too, uninvited and ubiquitous. I thought I might unwind on the train home and opened Instagram to a targeted ad emblazoned in orange and yellow spheres and a demand to GET HAPPY - download a meditation app to live *your best life.* The next was from a private company that suggested I donate my eggs. What a waste to have them expire. My course mate texted me to ask whether I had watched “that new Ricky Gervais thing on Netflix yet” – *After Life*. Reviews for the dark, yet supposedly heart-warming new comedy about a widower had been sent to me by family and acquaintances four times in the month that had passed since its premiere.

Hybrid forums and networked publics

As discussed in the introductory paragraphs, my first contact with death awareness was online and I have found that throughout the project and the in-person encounters involved, online space retained its position as much more than a means of recruitment or search engine for relevant “live” gatherings. Many ethnographers have noted that online and offline ethnography as dualism is outdated (Shumar and Madison 2013; Airoldi 2018), recognising the overlap that defines a networked age whereby online phenomena and their observation is no “less real” than offline engagement (*ibid,*663). Material referenced in this fieldwork was not limited to posts, blogs, or private messaging, but is also made up of videos or film, audio as podcasts or playlists, and images as personal photos or intertextual memes, and activity is largely based on shared and forwarded media. The medium is the message and necessitates an overview of the affordances of the space itself as well as a brief discussion of multi-site, multimedia methods and their particular challenges as presented by ethnographers in anthropology and data science research.

In their work on blogs as ethnographic texts, Kurtz and her co-authors suggest online research may be currently underdeveloped due to a lacking methodological protocol to counter potentially overwhelming quantities of available materials. The authors propose a three-pronged division of approaches to the online space: (1) the “big data approach,” (2) the “quantitative approach,” and (3) the “qualitative approach”(Kurtz et al. 2017). Big data analysis might concern governments or corporate interests and generally refers to the mining or harvesting of large numerical datasets to record or predict consumer behaviours or broad trends, for which the example of search engine queries (such as Google Flu tracking influenza outbreaks) and Facebook user data scandals are given. I have no experience with software for extraction of metadata or statistical training and find this to be out of my academic remit. As for quantitative approach, the authors give no further definition or explanation for its division from big data; I suspect the grouping is due to differences of scale, as well as an assumption that quantitative data is a given, or does not need justification as qualitative material does. I do cite figures provided on websites when I feel it expresses the influence of my field, such as in records of viewer counts or membership numbers listed on websites. I did not employ any systemic sampling such as in Kurtz’ work on weight-loss focused personal blogs whereby “adjacency and proximity operators like quotation marks” were used and weighed against different search engines’ results (*ibid*,5), or Airoldi’s text on Erasmus-student experiences that retrieved 1500 Tweets under the Erasmus-hashtag. I did not employ methods such as “seeding”, where one analyses frequent expressions to generate key words for new sample searches and indeed, did not Google to “find” my site – beyond searching for supporting

academic literature - in a desire to keep my involvement as close to classic "snowballing" methods as possible. For example, when a YouTube video encouraged me to join a mailing list or follow an Instagram page[7], I did so.

I mean to challenge the original statement of underdevelopment of ethnographic online research as not due to excessive quantity of material met by researchers trained in "a focus on in-depth knowledge of people" (*ibid*,1), but in the persistence of traditional ideas of the field and how people can come to be known. Researchers do not neglect to "pursue collection and analysis of larger cross-sectional samples of online texts" due to "often feeling too overwhelmed" (*ibid*,2), but due to binding and containment of the local. In Hine's description of the challenges of online work, "if culture and community are not self-evidently located in place, then neither is ethnography" (Hine 2000, 64). Some theorists have gone so far as to suggest that digital methods are "shortcuts" or (lazy) means of becoming non-participant observers (Przybylski 2021), begetting greater asymmetry. It is unsurprising that ethnographic approaches to the internet have been typified as dealing "exclusively with isolated or interconnected sites and their communities of users" or "geographically bounded communities that have an online component" (Airoldi 2018, 663) such as school clubs, and immersive and "self-contained worlds" in the form of *Second Life* or other web games based on inhabiting virtual realms as avatars (Kurtz et al. 2017,3). Such projects may be palatable in their treatment of online sites as if fixed or relatively stable places to "go", made up of familiar faces instead of dynamic and volatile changeable collections – "fields made of fields" (Airoldi 2018,662). I was confronted with containment in my first year, when my first supervisor proposed I choose a "real fieldsite" abroad, and in applying for a fieldwork grant from the Wenner-Gren Foundation. I received very kind feedback on my ultimately rejected proposal:

> "Fascinating, with potential to re-orient studies of mortality and existence, propelling anthropology of death in new directions [...] but it is unclear who the ethnographic subjects are – people with terminal illnesses, activists, social workers, clergy, someone else?"

I struggled to articulate my frustration when one of the pre-fieldwork queries I sought to answer was precisely this emergent "we"; of course decisions and limits for enquiry must be made for presentation, but an arbitrary bounding by location, career, faith or age group would be misrepresentation and wholly antithetical to a movement that relies on a supposedly intersectional, unbound western, and non-denominational shared concept of "our death culture". I am appreciative of over thirty years of work to "follow the thing" but feel as if arguments for the virtuality of *all* community must still be made in defending my choices and explain that simply because one follows conversations on platforms where one cannot know each participant, it is not a nameless online public. One may not know the context in which any given person made a post but can learn what kinds of things they think are appropriate, ethical, aspirational, public or private. Yet in appreciating logistical internet capacities to collapse distance or time, or reach a broader pool of participants (Markham 2005,257), it remains important to avoid writing as if this renders pockets of text "content" or passing passive discourse analysis off as ethnography (Hine 2000,23). Participants feeling fewer inhibitions about sharing private stories on forums that permit anonymity or physical invisibility does not mean there is no embodiment, just as the ability to answer a Facebook message half a world and a half-days' time zone away does not remove the texture of intra-active tempo – indeed, it may highlight these factors. As Høybye stresses in an ethnography of online cancer support groups, to assume writing is fixed or a "final product to be collected and

[7] As in introduction p. 7-8

archived for further study and that there is 'less to miss' in a text-based world will often be a dead end" (Høybye 2016, 456). The solution offered is that of paying closer attention to the ethnographic presence.

In their critical challenge to big data, boyd[8] and Crawford warn against the "destabilising amounts of knowledge and information that lack the regulating force of philosophy" (Berry 2011 in boyd and Crawford 2016, 666) and share a concern for older forms of intellectual craft – discovering why people do and make – getting buried in the computational. My understanding of the intellectual craft of anthropologists is one of philosophy with people in it (Ingold 1992,696), with its regulation in explicit reflection on the way researchers are such people-making people, too. Anthropology dwells in the recognition of photographs made, not taken. In comparing different scholars' definitions of ethnography, Hammersley mentions Lutz's elegant summary: "thick description of the interactive processes involving the discovery of important recurring variables in the society under specified conditions, and as they affect or produce certain results and outcomes in the society" (Lutz 1981 in Hammersley 2018,4). If so, it is implicitly "*my* thick description". There is a balancing act between researchers participating in settings as outsiders, but not on the outside; looking on, but not onlookers with all-seeing eyes. When Høybye notes that text should be considered "one of a number of actors in the social space of the internet and must be experienced in the context of that interaction" (Høybye 2016, 457), I want to add a note to say that it *cannot but be* experienced so. I do recognise this as reference to an intentionality of orientation that enables certain insights and believe that when ethnography is an encounter, it is one that is theoretically and ethically deliberate, both before and after the fact. Herein lies the second challenge to the quality of qualitative work online: if we agree that by our engagement the data is thickened and the virtual is site, how do we respond to its constituent voices in accordance with best ethical practices? Chronologically, the establishment of ethical guidelines for my methodology was the first point of action. Before discussing the types of social actors and interactions examined by multi-sited multimedia ethnographers briefly mentioned above and the relevance of their concepts for my project, I must steer back to explaining how and where I could follow the thing.

In preparation for fieldwork, I had wanted to ensure I was going about things right and booked two appointments to discuss ethical issues in digital ethnography with a professor convening methodology modules at the OII (Oxford Internet Institute). I explained that I had concerns about fair, consensual use of data. As boyd and Crawford remark: "it may be unreasonable to ask researchers to obtain consent from every person who posts a tweet, but it is problematic for researchers to justify their actions as ethical simply because the data is accessible" (boyd & Crawford, 2012,672). I don't know what answers I had expected, but it was soon obvious none were clear-cut: guidance was to say that by and large, ethical issues online and offline were similar cases of making one's own context-dependent casuistic evaluations that can change through the course of study. Consulting the AoIR (Association for Internet Researchers) Working Committee recommendations[9], the base tenet is one of not doing harm, and of being most mindful when engaging with participants reasonably perceived to be most vulnerable or susceptible to such harm. A broad consideration proposed was of acknowledged publicity: "the greater the acknowledged publicity of the venue, the less obligation there may be to protect individual privacy, confidentiality, right to informed consent, etc." (5). For Kurtz et al., for example, the public nature and searchability of the blogs about weight-loss made

[8] danah boyd intentionally stylises their name with non-capitalised letters, see eg. http://www.danah.org/name.html

[9] Accessible online at https://aoir.org/reports/ethics.pdf

them fair based on Snodgrass' suggestion of adherence to "local understandings of what constitutes public as opposed to private online exchange" (Snodgrass 2015 in Kurtz et al. 2018: 8). This is still prickly and subjective, inviting discussion on the overlapping modes of movement online or the simultaneous different registers of engagement on the same platforms.

What about instances where people share material on private blogs they would be highly unlikely to broadcast on other fora? The authors suggest many bloggers use pseudonyms or unidentifiable usernames already, making anonymisation irrelevant. But what about when the same username is featured on their profile on a different website, or makes up part of their email address? What about when their avatar image can be reverse-searched on Google Images and lead to a page that might have more traditionally sensitive data; by the by, why was the gathering text texture par excellence on the types of blogs that frequently utilise images of bodily changes for record-keeping? The authors had decided to only include blogs that mention residence in the United States in their about-sections and write of their observations regarding age and gender, or how much "deception" to protect personal image is involved, and ask whether it was methodologically sound to confirm demographic data through Twitter if the link between profiles was easy enough to ascertain. They admit these delineations often felt "highly artificial" (*ibid,*8). While there was a recognition that online "people are able to perform diverse physical, emotional, and social identities" (*ibid*,2), there felt to be an underlying truer identity that traversed platforms. Discussions on whether blogging was a way to transcend nation, gender or age are unavailable when the relevance of the category is pre-ordained. Its texts serve as means to an end rather than the end itself. To make an analogy of public space, one might argue a page on Twitter is a public square.

> It is considered ethical to record activities in a public place without consent, provided that individuals are not identifiable. […] We would be justified to simply record conversations and not tell anyone that this was taking place. On the other hand, one can argue that chatroom conversations are normally ephemeral. Participants have a reasonable expectation that they are not being recorded. (AoIR, 12)

My gut reaction is to refer to intent and purpose: what person chatting to a friend on a café terrasse is expecting each word to be overheard? How different is it to describing the performance of the busker with an amplifier attached to his guitar in the same square? What does the recorded tape of a conversation show understandings of beyond the operation of a button? Generously, it can be fieldnote in the implication that the researcher was once there and stayed in quiet earshot for long enough. It is the replicability and precision of direct textual citation or audio and its accessibility that makes presence less straightforward and all the more important to denote. In the AoIR handbook, researchers are urged to see whether there are statements affiliated with venues (chat rooms, game servers, etc.) that indicate that discussion is logged or temporary and whether there are mechanisms for privacy such as "moving" to a break-off private window, or use of encryption. Yet as Airoldi notes on his analysis of Twitter, the architecture of a page does not obviously mean privacy or publicity. The hashtag-based navigation of the site allows for large-scale political movements and what Papacharissi describes as an affective public: powered by affective statements, ambient feeds are produced that pluralise expression in regimes democratic or otherwise (Papacharissi 2014, 129). Still, some users may reply to tweets as if in a kind of chat room, "building regular virtual relationships which coexist with the predominantly ephemeral forms of sociality conveyed by the platform" (Airoldi 2018,665).

Papacharizzi builds on O'Sullivan's notion of broader blends of "masspersonal" communication, whereby individuals use traditional mass communication channels for interpersonal communications and vice versa – say, a marriage proposal on a jumbotron screen – as well as new channels that generate mass communication and interpersonal communication simultaneously (Papacharissi 2014: 21). Beyond an idea of protecting identity, one must consider that the busker may want his performance applauded and that likewise many authors of website contributions consider their text intellectual property that should be properly credited. Making decisions about what is sensitive material can erase users' own judgements about what is intimate or general (Kurtz et al. 2017) and is expressly relevant to my work: if the mission of death awareness is to normalise conversations about death and dying, who am I to promote its treatment with special category delicacy? This ambiguity of audience may be behind the poor synthesis of face-to-face and mass communication methods (Papacharissi 2014: 19). Rather than acceding to pessimism about whether "volatile digital traces left by users who barely perceive themselves as a collectivity" can be studied ethnographically at all (Airoldi 2018,664), I return to following a thing that here is a conflict or complaint that grounds a west that is *ostensibl*e in that it is born when performed and professed, thus made outward and observable.

Writing of chat room users in the early 2000s, Markham quotes an interviewee to emphasise the importance of text in negotiating identity: "in cyberspace one dwells in language and through language". Following such a thought, "I speak, therefore I am is not enough [...] I am responded to, therefore I am". (Markham 2005, 249) This is something of an exaggeration, as the concerns over non-participant observation or the "spying" researcher can belie, as does the existence of "lurkers", or users that read and dwell but do not make written contributions that is frequently discussed (e.g. Snodgrass 2014,470). Such users that make up a majority do not cease to exist in their silence, and the topographies of sites increasingly display tacit participation that contribute to shared sense of place. Messaging services have introduced "seen"-markers or doubled blue check marks; Reddit features a green blinker that tells you how many others are reading the same page; services like YouTube, Twitch and TikTok tell you how many viewers are watching a livestream. The idea that "offline the body can simply walk around and be responded to [...] online, the first step toward existence is the production of discourse" (Markham 2005,249) is an aging dichotomy but is a fair point when it comes to following participants – when following an assertion, those knowable to me are the ones who speak up somehow. This is of course, not a new concern to anthropologists who have long discussed the trouble of feeling they are relayed something performative or presentational, told "what they want you to hear" (eg. Hsu 2010, 166, Sutton 1978) as opposed to a "backstage" of self. There are more and less talkative people everywhere. How much should the ethnographer speak?

For Høybye, participant work in online community must include writing not just as a matter of transparency, but because "engaging in collective writing is the means for inclusion in a support group"(Høybye 2016,457). Taking part in practices of writing posts, she describes learning a shared language and conversational style.

> "I entered the field by my own particular style of writing, like any other newcomer. By the social practice of writing [...] I slowly adapted to communal expressions, while at the same time engaging in social negotiations and contributing to and affecting a creative social anticipation that was shaping the new social order produced in the internet cancer support groups" (*ibid*,457)

In writing, the producers and recipients - here called "speaker" and "interpreter" - could share social action, and text is said to become extension of the body. I understood the statement on writing as a kind of apprenticeship and was moved by the kinds of relationships Høybye describes having formed with participants, but still puzzled by the idea of inclusion. The seven support groups observed on discussion boards were open to people who had finished active treatment for cancer and had consented for the study in writing after completion of a rehabilitation course. Consulting a previous article on this study in a medical publication, I found that these peer support groups were founded and access controlled by Høybye and co-authors, run in a software platform hosted by The Danish Cancer Society, and only accessible through password and email invitation received after registration for a study - with access closing after 13 months. Furthermore, while there are many examples of the types of post messages left by other participants, there is remarkably only one written contribution by the author: she announces the death of a group member after being asked to relay the message in a private email. I am by no means advocating a style of autoethnographic insiderism where only those with diagnoses can talk about the experience of shared diagnosis – denoted as the common affective thread of the groups – but do not know how much the author can model themselves "any other newcomer". Ideas of reactivity or the "naturally occurring" (Hammersley 2018) as opposed to researcher-instigated situations are in part reductions by which researchers are not parts of a social world (Shumar and Madison 2013, 8), and fantasies of ridding ourselves of the supposed artifice of authorship. Yet I cannot help but wonder how conversational style or social order may have looked when not taken as negotiation with the researcher. Snodgrass points out that the online non-participant may be first characterised as "non-obtrusive" method to make informed choices. To make meaningful hypothesis or ask questions, for example, one needs to know whether a site is active or popular - or not. Similarly, becoming familiar with common jargon or trends may make eventual participation easier (Snodgrass 2014: 472).In the peer support groups above, here there was no community without the fieldworker. I do not get to wipe a slate or write the rules of the game in this way. The project was on the internet but not *of* the internet in the networked or imaginary belonging I grapple with.

A situation in which I considered writing for participation was the context of *the Deathling Den*, mentioned in the introduction to this thesis and referenced in the screenshot-image of this chapter (p.24). I had steadily followed and watched three years' worth of videos from the YouTube channel *AskAMortician* by Caitlin Doughty, a California-based funeral director and activist who founded *The Order of the Good Death* in 2011 and in doing so, is the primary media personality or deathfluencer[10] and originator of "death positivity" as a label for the ideological orientation of the movement I study in 2013.

[10] https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/16/business/boom-time-for-death-planning.html Deathfluencer is a 2021 coinage from *The New York Times*; traditionally Doughty and her fanbase identify as "deathlings".

Figure 8 – A screen capture from Twitter indicating one of the earliest mentions of "death positivity" by Caitlin Doughty in 2013.

Figure 9 – The author's name features in traditional first- and last name format alongside 23 other donors or patrons in an *Ask a Mortician* video credit roll in 2018; many look to be screen-names and mononyms.

While today the *Order* has its own fellowship and grant programme (for individual and community projects to address social and systemic problems in death), earlier videos concluded with credit to charities such as the People's Memorial Association[11] and a call to consider donations through the channel's Patreon, to enable the production of videos and development of the Order's website as the channel was - and remains – free of advertising. Patreon is an external membership platform founded in 2013 for content creators to offer monthly subscription plans or pledge levels with exclusive rewards in accordance with donation sum. At the inception of the Order's Patreon site in 2014, highest benefit levels offered included private Skype meet-and-greet calls with Doughty herself, while lower sums might allow gifts such as branded tote bags, hand-written thank you- postcards, and access to behind-the-scenes outtakes from videos.[12] I joined in January of 2018, when a video announced the five dollar tier offered the opportunity to be listed in a credit roll at the end of videos as well as access to a new "secret club" hosted on Facebook. In 2023, minimum donations for "production tier" and accreditation has risen to $20 and help pay three video editors, and previously free content such as the Ask a Mortician-podcast and blog are for members paying over ten dollars. Rather than receiving merchandise, pledgers of over five have passworded access to more exclusive merchandise shop and can receive its discount codes at $60+. The highest current tier is $100+ monthly, which allows for a personalised video message and a

[11] The People's Memorial Association or PMA is a funeral education and advocacy nonprofit organization based in the state of Washington and founded in 1939 in the wake of a co-operative movement in the U.S "to establish an alternative to the high prices and predatory sales practices of the funeral industry" https://peoplesmemorial.org/aboutpma/mission-vision-values.html

[12] See eg. September 2014 *Ask a Mortician Patreon Campaign* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hTTPj8Uc9-k

curated gift box – but members must have been at this level for a year before it is mailed. Patreon showed over 8000 patrons were subscribed in 2022, with this information now hidden. I have reason to believe a great number are production tier, given the change in end credit scenarios: in January 2023, credit roll on a YouTube video is very fast, but still takes over three minutes to play.

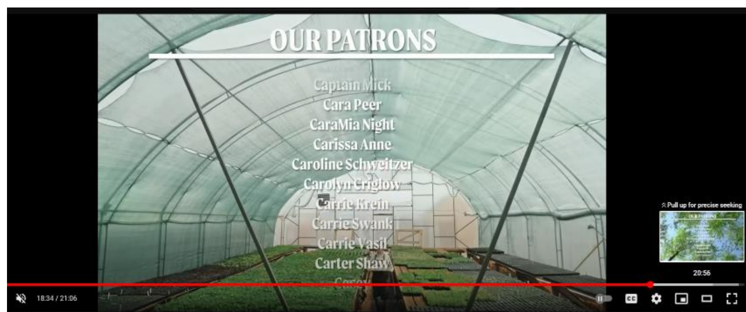


Figure 10 – A screen capture from YouTube from a 2023 video by the Ask a Mortician channel; the length of the credit roll for patrons suggests a significant growth in scale and sponsorship of production and a greater likelihood of donors appearing with "real" given names instead of user handles.

This is all to say that the insight afforded by my five dollars between 2018 and 2022 is already indicative of a bygone, more homespun era and a snapshot of attempt for accessible community: the "secret club" called *Deathling Den* (henceforth "the Den") that I was allowed to join was in fact disbanded on New Year's Day, January 2022. The moderators cited their ethical concerns about Facebook as a host as a decisive factor, though some members hypothesised it was a matter of control: at its inception the group had two moderators and grew to comprise just over 800 members in April 2018. The final figures I recorded suggest 2400 members at the end, with six staff. These numbers do not represent a steady rate, however. When requesting access to the private Facebook group, one had to check a box to confirm they had paid appropriately. Due to a loophole in the structure of Facebook at the time, existing approved members could invite new additions from their friends lists, thereby overriding exclusivity. As a post in February 2019 from the head moderator reads:

> "There have certainly been snafus where non-Patrons have been let into the Den (nobody's in trouble), your mods work hard to honour the people who support our work by keeping the Den a closed group. With that in mind, we will be removing non-Patrons from the Den in one week – by the afternoon of February 22. This is not personal, this is not punishment, we merely want to be fair to the Den members who have pledged money to Patreon, and the Den is their perk."

Rules for discussion such as use of content warnings for posts about certain topics (e.g. pregnancy loss and bodily harm) and definitions of best practice were reposted and renegotiated frequently, as were means of ordering the group. Humorous comics and memes were popular but may have been jarring when interspersed with candid discussions on grief; this led to pinning "midweek humour thread" and "bereavement Monday", allowing users to navigate to an intentionally bounded area of conversation. In 2020 the group saw its first notes from a user that suggested suicidal ideation, which led to crisis line numbers being added to the group description page. Ideas of privacy and publicity were fluid and as in the AoIR note about paying attention to mechanisms of "moving" to different registers, I decided to paraphrase and anonymise by default when citing conversations on this page. In Miller's and

Sinanan's work on Facebook and the images uploaded there by users, the authors criticise a longstanding lack of pictures in studies of what is a very image-centric network of communication (Miller and Sinanan 2017) and as such, I wanted to utilise screenshots and other screen recording browser extensions. As on page 16, I blacked out names and profile pictures of users as a baseline, but in cases where pictures were obviously identificatory or taken by the poster I sent direct private messages to users to ensure consensual use. I could simply not make a post to "announce" myself in good faith as there was no way of ensuring the floods of new arrivals – unruly even for moderators - could be informed of observation. In the last two years of the Den, I saw three members recruiting participants for study but had more specific frameworks for interview: two American teenagers mentioned their high school social studies courses now include Doughty's work in the curriculum and were interested in writing a senior project on postmortem photography. A Dutch postgraduate in sociology wanted to interview LGBTQ+ participants on questions of accessibility for minorities in end-of-life care and funeral planning, such as protection of trans identity and deadnaming in funerary contexts. I did not want to create a call for interview like this because by virtue of membership, I was already answering a question of what being "part" of death awareness was like.

The Den was characterised as a safe space and clubhouse, and I took this to mean an expectation of intimacy and like-mindedness: as Høybye notes of the members in the cancer support groups, participants describe sharing things they felt unable to freely share with family or "actual-world friends" (Høybye 2016: 461). Though one may argue that handing over five dollars (or some cases, not) does not spell encryption beyond public access, I saw many references to relief that "deathlings will understand what I'm saying", and deliberations about problems in other social settings, such as family arguments about disposal of bodies: death positivity is largely anti-embalming, for example. I wanted to appreciate the closed group, but also recognise that its closure both in access and now in time makes it a less searchable and thereby, "safer" site. boyd (2010) proposes that networked society is made in properties of persistence, replicability, scalability, and searchability. Persistence is somewhat self-explanatory as a relative permanence of discourse. Replicability about ease of reproduction and remix, while scalability lends the potential of virality and spread across platforms and media. Searchability, finally, is in the organisation of commentary into indexable and algorithmically taggable material - which this Facebook group that cannot accept new members is not.[13] Papacharizzi extends networking in a stress on shareability, noting that the architectures that make publics attain discursive materiality thrives on and rewards sharing; shareability invites and discourages particular genres of social activity (Papacharissi 2010,122). I take sharing to be not just "forwarding to more eyes of audience", but share-*ability* in an expectation from a public one makes one's own. Death awareness is not simply shared experience – of grief or critical orientation towards contemporary industry - but an experience *of* sharing.

The space granted to this description of the Den above serves to elucidate concrete ethical decisions I have made but does not mean to make this thesis one of a specific or bounded page. As Hine points out in her work on real-time newsgroups and bulletin boards, "the ethnographer cannot stand in for every user and recreate the circumstances in which they access the newsgroup, but she can at least experience what it is like to be a user (Hine

[13] Website archiving tools such as Ghostarchive and Waybackmachine profess to not store pages that are accessible through password or form. I have reasonable basis to believe the identities of members are protected from search through citation.

2000,23)". A very early observation I made about the pages I visited - and one I trust is familiar to any user - was their cross-posting and reliance on references to the same pieces of media. In the Den, shared enjoyment or expertise regarding Caitlin's content is a given, with questions like:

> "hey, does anybody remember which video has the thing about states where you need to contact a funeral director even if you're doing a home funeral? Thanks!"

More generally and as in the case of Dying Matters – the campaign by Hospice UK to promote conversations about death (p. 12) – activity is about posting links to articles or other pieces of media. Approximately two thirds of the Facebook and Twitter output of Dying Matters consists of thumbnail previews of articles in popular newspapers, magazines or journals, and were often shared with little to no accompanying caption. Engagement with such content quickly steers the participant: when metadata and cookies are collected one "moves in non-linear directions from one page onto pages that have something in common" (Airoldi 2018,664). In 2018, I saw a three-minute video from BBC Ideas on television entitled *Dying isn't as bad as you think,* narrated by palliative care physician Kathryn Mannix. In this video, she promoted talking about dying, something "we have stopped doing". I later saw this clip on Facebook – not in the context of a group or resulting from a follow, but simply on my newsfeed presumably due to being in the UK, as it had reached over three million views in a year. I saw the clip once more in 2019, shared on the Den where participants expressed excitement about Mannix's upcoming book on the need to talk about death and yet again on Twitter, where the doctor's own account post celebrating the milestone of Facebook views achieved was recommended to me based on having previously looked at Dying Matters' feed. Hospice UK's current death-themed reading list has been compiled by Mannix, and she is patron of End of Life Doula UK, an organisation whose videos appeared on my YouTube home page. There is a level of presumed intertextuality and recognition of this overlapping global quality whereby its absence can be surprising to participants. One such instance related to discussion about Death Cafés (see chapter two). A handful of Den-members were discussing their favourite questions to ask at these in-person conversation events about death, and a young woman commented in dismay:

> I went to one in my local area a year ago…… it was so weird. They didn't know who Caitlin was!!?? They'd been doing it for 2 years and I was the new one, so I just didn't fit in. It's not how I pictured a death positive event.

Salazar and Orobitg develop a concept of latent, imagined community in their fieldwork surrounding couples in Barcelona undergoing treatments at a fertility clinic that I find helpful in describing the discursive bounding of my site. The authors reference political historian Benedict Anderson writing on nation-building making imagined communities who "in most cases will not meet one another, but imagine themselves as a community through particular forms of mass communication" (Salazar and Orobitg 2011,239). Those receiving artificial reproductive therapies (ART) expressed the uniqueness of their experience as one that could not be understood by those who had not lived the process, yet they do not define themselves as "members of" or attempt to engage socially with such a community – there is no identity investment. The Den is something of an outlier in my research environments in that there is an official title or category of "deathling" as generally, there was anonymity and changeability: of the Death Cafés I attended, for example, only two had repeat attendance. Here, I appreciate the depiction of community as context standing for "a frame of meaning, that is, a domain inside which 'things make sense'" (*ibid*,237). Salazar and Orobitg cite Appadurai's work on media as a development of Anderson's ideas, whereby mass mediated "electronic capitalism"

has a central role in the creation and diffusion of images and thereby legitimate individual imaginaries. Perhaps this informs their choice to use press clippings as method. In presenting couples with media narratives about ART, the researchers found greater complexity than interviews could offer and suggested couples "become conscious of their own experience (as a shared experience) above all through the press" (*ibid*,241). Participants did not merely identify or contrast with the narratives they were presented with but became aware of themselves and the variation in their own social context. In criticising "selfish" or "unnatural" uses of IVF and embryos people made statements about what they found normal or healthy, and negotiated their desires as ordinary; likewise some tried to reorient to empathise with people who behaved as they would not, or brought their strangeness into more familiar frames – after suggesting women in their forties having children was undesirable, one couple noted old or unmarried mothers had "always existed" *(ibid*,246)

The work underlines the way in which media is not a direct source of imagery, but semiotic diacritic (Appadurai 1996,53); the participants are of the same community though their families are different because they are *syntagmatically* related to events. I cannot delineate participation or field by people who identify as having a specific belief about death, but by an affordance of connection in a mutual virtual world where deliberate death talk makes sense. This virtuality is discussed at length in Lange's anthropological study on YouTube which mobilises Amit's argument that *all communities are virtual communities* and that mediation and dispersal have nothing to do with "not quite real" – community is "an idea or quality of sociality" (Lange 2019, 153). Lange describes the YouTube she writes of as not a URL, but that due to conceptual migration a site made YOUTUBE, an "alter" that depicts a multiplicity of the service; "a contingent of YouTubers interacts via Twitter, thus creating an alter on Twitter" (*ibid,*222), for example. She spends time behind screens and face-to-face with video-makers and notes that while posting continues for some, for others participation no longer means content creation, and YOUTUBE is a social framework or future ideal.

This mixture of online and offline dwelling brings me at last to hybridity and a return to an observation from Airoldi regarding the way Twitter could be used as "personal" chat room as well as Høybye's work on cancer support groups, where her community post was predicated on a private email. Individuals can bond interpersonally and "masspersonally" simultaneously, and flows converge: interpersonal sources may have more or less credibility on some topics, just as larger spaces may not provide the same type of access available by asking an interpersonal acquaintance (Papacharissi 2014,22). Being "participatory" in a media landscape can range "from internal, conceptual engagement [...] to creating one's own works, as well as points in between. All of these practices are active experience" (Lange 2019,37). The types of posts on the Deathling Den range from looking for interviewees or advice on paperwork relating to prepaid funeral plans, and many signal interaction by no more than Facebook reaction emojis; the hosts of Death Cafés are crystal-wielding death doulas in their twenties and retired doctors alike; the events held during the UK's national awareness week are both academic conferences and interpretative dance. Høybye did not consider her position as researcher or undiagnosed as an obstacle to being within, and upon reflection I agree such a differentiation would be unhelpful in my site, which by following complaint I come to see as similar to what Callon et al. call hybrid forum:

> "Forums because they are open spaces where groups can come together to discuss technical options involving the collective, hybrid because the groups involved and the spokespersons claiming to represent them are heterogeneous, including experts, politicians, technicians, and laypersons who consider themselves involved. They are also

> hybrid because the questions and problems taken up are addressed at different levels in a variety of domains." (Callon et. al 2011, 18)

I do not have the scope here to discuss the differences of nuance between assemblage or actor-network theories, nor delve into just how indicative of "dialogic democracy" (Dobson 2014) this term truly is. I choose it for its seeming optimism in the face of hybridity which I must face for better or for worse "in a hybrid world where home and field are no longer neatly separated" (Shumar and Madison 2013,256).

For many participants the notion of being observable or digitally imprinted is assumed and inevitable. A difference between the 2002 and 2012 editions of AoIR, for example, points at a far more astringent take on whether any work online can be omitted from ethical consideration. To the statement on not harming human subjects, there is an addition whereby "all digital information involves individual persons [...] even if it not immediately apparent how and where persons are involved." Rather than wondering how to extract, the researcher must lean into the way they are also already involved. As Przybylski says of hybrid fields, "when at a live concert, an individual may make and share a video from the audience, in that moment acting as audience, content maker, and distributor, all at once" (Przybylski 2021,40). Part of my "being there" was about being accessible and implicated. I entered Facebook groups and YouTube discussions under my own full name, and my profile pictures are the same across most platforms. I believe this immersion helped in many ways, such as when I was contacted by five strangers about my research simply by virtue of having a university student page. Three instances of emails to my .edu address between 2019 and 2022 were to do with prospective postgraduate students who wanted to write on topics similar to mine. Another was a message to my LinkedIn from an oncologist in my native Finland, who was planning a seminar series on palliative care. The last was a message about collaboration from the newly launched *What is a Good Death*- research group at Cambridge (see chapter 5) whose founder I saw speaking at an event, and who had thought to look me up after a quick introduction. All the while, I realise I only had a LinkedIn account because its creation was a mandatory component in applying for job seeker's allowance in Finland, and I did not have a Twitter account at all until the research group I joined asked I make one for the promotion of our upcoming pop-up. I went to hear a panel discussion at a hospice in London and found photos of myself in the audience posted on their social media. The research-sharing site Academia.edu was a helpful way to download pdfs of articles, then it began to hum with notifications about my name having been Googled somewhere.

Anxiety "as method"

In the aforementioned hybridity as in the Mancunian anecdote that began this methodology section, I have tried to hint at a level of presence or atmosphere that is to some degree, counter to anthropological recommendation - yet all the while practically prerequisite. The subheading makes a nod to Michael Jackson's reading of Devereux's 1967 *From anxiety to method* with which he opens an edited volume on *Emotions in the Field* as the discussion of both emotion and anxiety – however defined by participants and researcher - was exhaustingly prevalent in my work. I examine Joanna Cook's suggestion that anxiety and doubt are *endemic* to anthropology, following which "consciously viewing doubt or anxiety as a part of fieldwork can enable further learning" (Cook 2010, 239) to draw attention to this motif in future chapters.

It was apparent from planning stages that death is – or was taken by others to be – a subject necessitating high levels of emotional engagement, and that time spent with participants

might be marked by affective intensity. Some expressed concern for my "coping" or questioned an invitation I had made to melancholy. Attempting again to be as prepared as possible, I participated in a Vicarious Trauma Workshop held by the university's Social Sciences Division in February 2018. Of the list of practices to try in the avoidance of "vicarious trauma" or compassion fatigue, many extolled distance as a means to protect both oneself and ease fieldwork when participants were unwilling to recount difficult experiences. Bodily techniques for practicing "safe empathy" included taking note of mirroring often practised in close interaction: one could consciously "unmirror" by changing pace of breath, posture or position, if an unconscious matching of the participants movement was present. Whilst intimacy was recognised as a strength and sign of interpersonal skill in the workshop, we were told that rupturing and bounding could be healthy too: drinking from a glass of water to break a gaze that felt overwhelming or touching one's own arm and wiggling toes to feel the inside of a shoe, for example. Safety might also reside in the monitoring and noting of one's own emotional state, and is similarly recognised in *Emotions in the Field*, where Davies describes the nature of immersion in the field as widely agreed to be at the heart of anthropology. Whether Evans-Pritchard's "adjustment transference", Geertz's "social arrival" or Hastrup's "incorporation", a degree of assimilating states of mind or embodied perceptual shift is marked as both necessary and troubling:

> Rabinow [...] endured times of difficulty by contemplating the loving communitas to which he would return. Margaret Mead consoled herself with her relentless occupation of writing home. Rosemary Firth found relief in writing her diary, which she called "a lifeline" [...] used as an emotional outlet for an individual subjected to disorientating changes in his personal and social world. (Davies 2010, 84)

For Davies, these "reparative strategies" of emotional respite pointed to a common ethnographic disorientation. Yet given my research environment, I began to question whether I "immersed" right when I could not relate to traditional ideas of integration and corresponding means of withdrawal; somehow I felt already there, unable to enter, but never free to leave. I empathise with Lo Bosco's work commenting on feelings and emotional ethnographic labour in Portugal, focused on a local autism advocacy movement. As the primary participants of this study were mothers of autistic children, Lo Bosco feels her presence was frequently questioned and in tension: why was she there if she was childless, not even a relative of an autistic person; when "this is something you only understand when you have a child" and she had "nothing to do with it"? (Lo Bosco 2021, 10) I was often preoccupied with entering spaces built around death, often of and by the bereaved, when my "real motives" were the source of endless curiosity. Admittedly, the appraisals I met were often pleasant, but engendered some level of guilt or implied assumption of proximity to death, to the tune of "it's wonderful you want to help/to turn your experiences into something positive/to use your position at an important university to teach other people how important it is to talk about death". I believe I fell into a research pace similar to one described by Lo Bosco as if to compensate for a distance fostered by an implication that I could not understand death for lack of exposure, or my disengagement in an agenda. The author notes that as participants were often busy parents of young households, simply scheduling time and conversation was difficult until she integrated Facebook messages, online chats, texts, voice messages or photo sharing, enabling frequent and impromptu interaction. While contact was abundant:

> I often found myself suddenly thrown into fieldwork just because one of my interlocutors reached me on my mobile phone, or because I received a notification about a discussion of a relevant topic within a virtual advocacy group. [...] sharing videos via phone or computer allowed my interlocutors to have a pervasive and widespread

> presence in my daily life. Although this circumstance allowed us to strengthen our relationship, it also led to an overwhelming degree of sharing. (*ibid*,12)

As the article progresses, an argument is made for the increased recognition of the epistemological value of emotions in fieldwork as a greater focus for (doctoral) training to "reverse this long-standing habit of relegating the emotional experience of fieldwork to something private, personal and almost secret" (*ibid,*8). I dare say that in much of the material I have seen, both in and outside of fieldwork, emotions and feelings are held in great esteem – under certain conditions.

Ruth Behar writes extensively of the merit in vulnerable self-reflexivity in her fieldwork concerning funerary customs in Northern Spain, during the course of which her grandfather passed away. There is an assertion that what happens within the observer must be known if nature of observation is to be understood (Behar 1996,6) and indeed the emotional ranges of researchers can inhibit and enable insight as in Rosaldo's celebrated *Grief and the Head-hunters Rage*, wherein the tragic experience of his wife's death in an accident: "Only then was I in a position to grasp the force of what Ilongots had repeatedly told me about grief, rage, and headhunting" (Rosaldo 1989, 175). In the case of Høybye's work, it is the affective presence of the researcher that earns ethnography its title: the *only viable way* to do justice to our field is in "our capability to become affected by the social engagement" and applies online in "the profound experience of not meeting people face-to- face, but still being deeply and bodily affected" (Høybye 2016, 451, 453). Writing of the ways she imagines her participants' heartbeats as they write to each other and the pains their pain causes her, there is another complaint about a lack of "true" emotional affection reflected in our writing, and I feel I am being called heartless for experiences of banality, or for switching to another browser tab.

Behar cites some of the same passages Jackson does in his appraisal of Devereux that denotes a starstruck admiration of ideas "still fundamental to any exploration of the relationships between observer and observed" (Jackson 2010, 36–37) grounded in a marriage of anthropology and psychoanalysis. In this framework, "we do violence to the complexity of lived experience when we make analytical cuts between emotion and thought, or emotion, the senses, thought, and action" (*ibid*,35) and through some notion of psychic unity, the investigation of the other is one of the self. By his notion of countertransference, fieldwork is indicative of the researcher's unconscious and anxieties, and writing anthropology is as any activity "to bring an illusion of order to their lives" constituting psychic defences. To such universalising theories I am tempted to levy a conference joke made by Beatty in his compendium on anthropology of emotion: "what did the postmodernist say to the informant? Enough about you; let's talk about me." (Beatty 2019, 270). I cannot be wholly satisfied with Beatty's calls for emotion-infused writing either, however, as its edges scrape at the conditionality I have hinted to. To fears that anthropology will be reduced to navel-gazing after three decades of writing culture debate, he notes "readers are all embarrassed victims of too much information" and that authoritative work is free of the "whiff of the confessional" (*ibid*,272). A greater issue than the cringe of indulgence is said to be the assumption that one can know the emotions of others when basis for knowing is deemed not deep enough. As in a criticism of Navaro-Yashin's work on affectivity of environment in Cypriot ruins:

> [her] approach to what she calls 'her material' is emphatically theory-driven and, in a way common with much recent ethnography, only loosely grounded. Her interpretations are suggested as much by her reading as by what her 'informants' say and do. Use of the old distancing term 'informant' is revealing: there is little intimacy

> between ethnographer and subjects; many of the informants are anonymous and generic. (*ibid,*221)

Without taking sides or delving into numerous discussions about how emotion, feeling and affect are differentiated for now, it appears that when emotion and affect must be discussed as depth, intimacy, and intensity, a failure to communicate "anthropologically relevant knowledge" as created in heartfelt mutual interaction or tension (Hsu 2010, 168) is evidence of shoddy work. Beyond postcard anthropology of "I was here" to overtake the armchair, there is "I was here, and this is how it moved me – and not just me". When written feeling is profound capability to become affected, the non-cognitive experiences (Luhrmann 2010) or Hastrup's "raw moment" are visceral or unpredictable, and hint at proclivities like those mentioned in Luhrmann's work on religious community in the United States. Individuals must have "something else, a capacity, perhaps an interest in allowing these cultural ideas to change their lives" – some do, some do not (Luhrmann 1989 in Davies 2010,21). I recognise the advantage in understanding one's own inclinations and their influence on observation, but think a trend is identifiable whereby the ethnographer's emotion is to be edifying and connective, proof of social achievement. The trauma workshop, Firth's diary and Lo Bosco's commentary alike are imprinted with a management of the weight of other people's emotion and lifeworlds or allowing the self its safe respite: emotion discussed is that which arises from the field, rather than something that precedes and trails it, imperilling the work. It does not generally make people "look bad"[14] but bleeds with empathy that opens greater understanding or at worst, constitutes a blockade overcome by a thoughtful presence.

I had not had many thoughts on whether I was socially adept or not before these years – whether I was lonely or had community, whether I had projects, passions and bonds that "made my life truly matter" – until they were reiterated many times a week as the hallmarks of good life or death. I had not really felt academically rejected until my first closer staff encounter at postgraduate level suggested I change topics or that my appearance hurt my credibility; I did not worry whether I was unkind or thoughtful in conversation until another student told me I sounded blasé and unfeeling when describing my site. To save much further confessional shame this excess of information must be causing the reader, I surmise that over the course of this research a constellation of shocks and illnesses, concealment and unstable living conditions were undoubtedly somehow manifest in my gradual physical incapacitation and orientations towards others. At the very least, I did not feel inclined to invite them over for cups of tea[15]. When following fieldwork and in the midst of the first Covid-19 lockdown in the UK I was diagnosed with generalised anxiety disorder with potential post-traumatic stress, part of what I found interesting about the online cognitive behavioural therapy and treatments prescribed was just *how* generalised anxiety had become in clinical rewordings. I was not hypochondriacal, I was "experiencing health anxiety". I did not have writer's block, I suffered from "anxieties surrounding writing". There was something circular and captivating about the specific becoming a catch-all, which could then also be addressed by their trite

[14] A reflection on writing that serves as unique contrast is Orin Starn's 2022 'Anthropology and the misery of writing' in *American Anthropologist* 124(1) in which suicidality, panic, and self-obsession of dissertation processes are cited, as well as mention of ghost writers and use of (study) drugs.

[15] While some non-structured interviews were conducted as part of this fieldwork (see eg. Lisa and Matt p.102, and Edwin p. 82), they formed a small part of this research. A more observational approach supported an ambition to portray the multitude of sites where death is explored and captures the ephemerality of social cohesion that does not necessarily extend beyond a given space, or aspiration to community that is diagnosed lacking. However, I can reflectively acknowledge that my erstwhile health issues and anxiety surrounding acceptance – as a researcher or participant – negatively impacted my ability to take initiative to approach people to meet in person, further manifest in the vignettes that frame chapters frequently pointing towards moments of embarrassment or perceived judgement.

panacea: of the written modules I had to complete by certain deadlines (the irony!) each consisted of an exercise to "recognise what I was thinking" and "challenge yourself to reformulate that in a more helpful way!".

It was not my first therapeutic rodeo, and I had longstanding suspicions about "talking out" or renewed condition through making thoughts or feelings explicit in speech or text; any prior relief I had experienced was achieved by avoiding those who shared my erstwhile condition and removing myself from contexts where such stories became entrenched or criteria for engagement. I understand this attitude may be pathologized as repressive, antisocial or the very least and befitting this piece, another kind of anxiety. Might I be blind to the interpersonal effervescence or atmospheres of communal support in the networks I followed if they were not sensations I had access to, or experiences of? How inhibited was I by having the "wrong" affect? When it comes to a sense of precarity, how helpful is an intervention that says, "you may think things and feel things; do not trust these thoughts and feelings"? I suppose this is what the contradictory affirmations of "your thoughts and feelings are valid" were for. All the same, there were obvious parallels to the conversations on denial and authentic living, whereby death was natural, "modern anxiety was not" (p.10). Death might be beautiful, meaningful, and even a dear friend[16] – for those who were correctly adjusted. An individual's failure to die well could be placed on the same tab as my failure to write well: needs to work on their anxiety. This, in turn, ties into the neoliberal stories of self-optimisation that minimise illness, which I have no doubt could read as a well-meaning democratising shift to destigmatise the ill, or to suggest everyone shares a spectrum. We are not mentally ill, we "have mental health" that meets "issues" that can be tended, maintained, or promoted. Mental health can be self-help, scented candles, yoga classes, and advertising about how everyone stands to benefit from paying for therapeutic services[17]; mental illness is outside of production, as to the counsellor who suggested I apply for disability retirement at 26. I will return to public intimacy, proliferation of psychology and the confessional in chapters 2 and 3 but want to underline this elaboration on anxiety is a potentially totalising or deterministic overlay when (reasons for) its saturation or potential value in and through a field is not addressed.

I was not aware, during the fieldwork, that I was "anxious". The naming and medicalisation of this condition, when applied as a retrospective lens, risks shading everything in its wake. Though each ethnographic narrator is an unreliable narrator in their own way, a nod to anxiety seems a fine way to pull the rug from under one's feet. Here I want to clarify that this psychosomatic experience or condition is not mentioned as a positionality qualifier for myself: a "while reading, keep this in mind". I do not want to navel-gaze beyond this chapter. Rather, it seems incumbent to talk about anxiety and wellbeing when death is made a matter of either, or both of the two – as are debates in the social sciences. It has become a matter of fashion to conflate care, concern, worry, involvement or doubt with anxiety: whether writing of the anxious modern (eg. Bauman 2007; Dunant and Porter 1996) or postmodern age, the word is sown with abandon through titles, and considering ourselves as living through eras of high anxiety and acute insecurity has become "a matter of sociological common sense" (Jackson and Everts 2010). Not only did my participants express concerns or evaluations about their

[16] Beyond social media posts or event discussion, see for instance the BMJ and their 2011 editorial 'Death can be our friend' by Murray, Jadad and Smith.

[17] The online company *BetterHelp*, for example, advertises heavily on podcasts and was the United States' most prolific in this context, with trackers suggesting the company spent more than twice as much as any other advertiser and retained pole position for volume through the entirety of 2022 featuring on over 1000 different programmes, primarily in the comedy genre.https://www.insideradio.com/free/strong-end-to-2022-as-magellan-ai-says-top-15-advertisers-spent-37-more-last/article_ade84644-9c99-11ed-84c9-9771cdb5a899.html I have heard countless slots in leisure time and find they frequently endorse therapy as equivalent to exercise in the maintenance of health.

own mental states – whether they were suffering from death anxiety, or if they had yet achieved acceptance – many flatly suggested disengagements from ritual (death practices lost to death denial) were *the* source of "modern day anxiety". For anthropologist Michael Jackson, a concern about whether he had amassed enough data to write a thesis was termed anxiety, as was his reliance on an interpreter for conversation. Anxiety is defined as universal and what happens when "microcosm merges with macrocosm" (Jackson 2010: 50). In the same volume regarding emotions in fieldwork, Francine Lorimer writes of study conducted in a psychiatric hospital in Denmark and produces what are to me flatly offensive statements about countertransference – not only was she "empowered" by participants' illness, she also suggests depression can be "exciting, even euphoric" and that "we [anthropologists] *all experience anxiety* when stressed" (Lorimer 2010,112)[18]. Of course, depending on which concerned headline one consults anywhere between 36 and 74 percent of British postgraduates and doctoral researchers do report or experience depression and/or anxiety, with higher numbers *expecting* to develop a disorder as par for course of study, and a majority leaving academia with maintenance of mental health as cited motive[19]. I am not trying to underline the uniqueness of my experience. In writing on her fieldwork, Joanna Cook deftly describes the self-doubt shared by peers in early research:

> [...] neither I nor my peers understood our doubts to be part of the fieldwork process, believing them to be rather the result of inadequate fieldwork practice. Common worries included questions about doing too much or not enough, what counts as participant observation, how to define the boundaries of the research, self-questioning about the role of the anthropologist (the methods employed, the "data" being collected), and finally concerns about what will result from so much investment on the part of the researcher herself (Cook 2010: 245)

Cook writes of her initiation as a *mae chee* nun in a Buddhist monastery in Thailand and doubts both her mode of work – whether or not her personal life and fieldsite were separated enough – as well as her monastic trajectory and practice. Her body was too fast or loud as she moved wrong or held herself in a seated posture unbefitting a *mae chee*; her thoughts wandered in meditation. Soon, however, these doubts were points of commonality with other nuns who internalised a responsibility to offer examples of moral perfection to laity cook*(ibid:* 255) and participants commonly assumed younger practitioners would have "struggles" they needed counsel and support with. Once anxiety was approached inquisitively it was applicable in both meditation and fieldwork where "they are employed in a way that enables the practitioner to continue to learn" (*ibid*,251). Cook hits upon the doubled responsibility of living up to the field as both physical site and a discipline that prizes adaptability and is likely more acutely felt by researchers making their first contributions. This responsibility is extended if one believes anthropology itself is "in a state of ontological anxiety" or has "ethical, existential anxieties" (Lambek 2011) as it ponders whether the centre can hold in the wake of "threats".

[18] I cannot help but be equally disturbed by the author when she presents depression as a language between two bodies, "thriving on contact with others". Here, antidepressants are posited as potentially valuable when they might blunt registering and response to others "and this blunting inhibits the intensification of the depression". In my fifteen years of experience, intensification of depressive disorder is wholly about anhedonia and absence, response to others being blunted to such an extent that they cannot compel you to want to survive any longer- the absence of shared language.

[19] Hazell, C.M., Niven, J.E., Chapman, L. et al. 2021 'Nationwide assessment of the mental health of UK Doctoral Researchers.' *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications* 8, 305 https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-021-00983-8 . I footnote as I do not commit sufficient attention and detail to the specificities of the studies and surveys (sample size, questionnaire contents) in this text and to point out that this study is frequently referenced misleadingly in lay speak.

For Bertelsen and Bendixen, the ontological turn (marked roughly from the 1990s) is only one iteration of "anthropology's long-standing will to radical self-doubt – of the discipline and of the West (Bertelsen and Bendixsen 2016, 27)." I do not suggest self-doubt and exploration of the boundaries of work is harmful or novel but have struggled to shed my imagined executioner's hood through reading. In Hammersley's evaluation of whether ethnography "can survive" for example, journal contents are said to be impoverished partly due to streamlined fieldwork and increase in quantitative or "mixed methods" that are too "thin". Ethnography is:

> "[...] not a case study, which narrowly focuses on a single issue, or a field survey that seeks previously specified data, or a brief encounter (for a few hours each day for a year, or 12 hours a day for a few months) with some group. Those types of research are ethnographic but not ethnography! (Hammersley 2018,4)

I was worried my shorter or changing acquaintances had made me one of the generic, "only loosely grounded" recent ethnographers Beatty balked, or that if concerns surrounded "the loss of the ethnographic object" (Lambek 2011,319), a diffusion of place or demographic made me its loser. In a scathing essay, Tim Ingold laments the inflation and devaluation of ethnography, partly due to its application in other social sciences - or the kinds of studies I refer to in relation to the online space. Here, autoethnography is an oxymoron and objects have no ethnography; ethnography is, in fact, the opposite of participant observation, which is about learning with others in an "ongoing series of transformations each one of which alters the predicates of being". Ingold has some anthropologists rhetorically stripped of such a title when "the ethnographer writes up; the anthropologist—a correspondent observer at large—does his or her thinking in the world (Ingold 2014, 391)". In Markham's estimation, too, ethnography as a term is applied by scholars who do not know what to call their work (Markham 2005, 255). I fail to understand which kinds of thinkings do not happen in the world but gather that what is to save us from atrophy is described in turn as proper, rigorous, long-term, committed, attentive, sensitive, and yet again – deep.

Is depth in duration? For Rosaldo, depth should be separated from the presence or absence of elaboration and can be supplanted by a concept of force, an "enduring intensity in human conduct that can occur with or without the dense elaboration conventionally associated with cultural depth" (Rosaldo 1989: 176). Høybye's anthropological viability is couched in emotional bond and expressivity, as when she was enormously saddened by a new diagnosis of one of her support group members: she felt unwilling to share how deeply she was moved until realising "not sharing the extent of this emotional affection created a momentary distance in my own sense of connection to the community that I was working hard to be a part of" (Høybye 2016,463). How was one to prove they had known enough and felt enough, especially when these faculties were called into doubt relentlessly – when even the merely stressed anthropologists are anxious or embarrassingly self-absorbed, haves and have-nots of it-factor proclivity, mere ethnographers trying to peddle theory and text analysis, or assume they understood the emotions of another? A habitual guarding of fieldwork as a rite of passage and "sacred" socialisation that may romanticise suffering has been noted since the 1970s (Hill 1974). Beyond crisis of representation there is a rejection of the anxious who do not mend themselves to become teachable and more recently, a watered-down recourse to the language of psychiatry I mean to poke fun of in this subheading.

In both my field encounters and their transduction, I felt echoes of what has been termed a "narrative turn" in psychotherapy, wherein focus is on patients' stories. Participants at a Death Café might worry whether their dead relative had a "bad death" because they did not demonstrate enough volition to speak of it (see chapters 2, 3), whilst college committees need

applicants to be familiar with specific genres of self-reflexive narratives of hardship to attribute support. Brown et. al evaluate the linguistic genre of therapy and summarise Shotter's social accountability: to be competent social actors, we must be able to account for our actions as being those of properly autonomous, socially competent adults (Brown et al. 1996, 1572). Accountability is achieved in demonstration of our adherence to intelligibility and rationality – to paraphrase, when telling the right stories. I feared I could not demonstrate the competencies of feeling or transformative encounter I felt anthropologically compelled to present until whether in disorder, injury or with the medications meant to combat these issues, I found breaking some "rules" for narration necessary.

First, readers will have already observed references to states of websites and phenomena (e.g. Covid-19) that occurred after my official fieldwork project; this is necessary due to both the vastly increasing popularity of my topic and influx of publications, but also the dual benefits and drawbacks of online permanence or lack thereof. Though I produced numerous screenshots and have used website archiving sites to try to replicate conditions of years past, when data is stored in hyperlinks or commentary on the contents of a page, it is changeable and a poor representation if left inflexible. Around 2021 there was a thorough development of most of the sites I visited, for example, as well as policy reform most likely in response to the pandemic – I cannot always retrieve an "as it was". Furthermore, I have substantial lapses in memory[20] between late 2019 and the beginning of 2022 marked by a weak grasp on times and names. The fact that so much of my work is retrievable in some sense - in the dated chat-logs of WhatsApp or in old recordings and videos - is a gift, but I cannot pretend retrospective emergences can match those past. I have lost a chapter in a hard-drive crash and know rewritings will be laden with the deathly textures of years since; a few funerals, my continued correspondence with some of my participants, and the way being associated with death and dying affected my relationships. Whilst some doctoral researchers I know are met with blank stares or polite nods when work comes up, a topic of "ideas about dying in the West" was accessible to everyone – and felt popular despite suggestion that death is not readily spoken about. I worked in two pubs and a shoe shop to support myself through the degree and ended most shifts listening to men leaning over their pints to tell me how things "*really* were" when it came to dying or answering questions about "which culture has the best funerals" sitting on a stack of combat boot boxes in the break room. Participants' opinions on death are heavily influenced by concepts originating in academic writing beyond anthropology, and I make interdisciplinary references when it is relevant. I opted to limit inclusion to people met between 2018 and 2019, but I do not think it a denigration of fieldwork – either mine or as a general practice - to allow supplementation to their narratives, closer to practices of collaborative ethnographers; to ask "hi, I think you said this that time we walked to the station together – is that right?" and see what is left to learn.

The hybridity of field is to be recognised honestly as informing both method and eventual writing, as is the comfort in affordance of time it offered me and likely many of my participants. Høybye pointed out that on her internet cancer support pages, participants found relief when "they were continuously concerned with not showing too much anxiety in their actual-world life" (Høybye 2016, 461). Beyond the intimacy of candour informed by a certain degree of invisibility, the potential displacement of immediacy outside the face-to-face can be a promise: this is here for you when you are ready. Having sat through healthcare

[20] Much work in psychiatry and neurology is dedicated to evaluating the interrelation of affective disorders and impaired working memory and attention eg. Rock, P. et al. 2014 'Cognitive impairment in depression: A systematic review and meta-analysis' in Psychological Medicine, 44(10), 2029-2040 or Shackman, A. et al. 2006 'Anxiety selectively disrupts visuospatial working memory' in *Emotion*, 6(1), 40–61

interventions via the university, NHS and Finnish health systems online as well as seeing lectures, concerts, protests, vivas, and the funerals of George Floyd and Elizabeth II alike play out on screens, I am weary of defending the ethnographic valence of certain ephemera. If virtuality is taken to be affect-buffer against force or the lack of long-term involvement with participants a non-intimacy that saps profundity, why is this any less valuable analytically? If there is indeed a death anxiety or taboo (chapter one), might relative divulgence in online conversation not offer interesting points about its evasion? Whether or not, for example, teletherapies or online courses can compete with "live" encounter, it does not change their lived reality and their mass adoption as more than substitution.

I chastised myself for not spending time with people I had met during fieldwork more until I noticed I had not met anyone I did not work with for over seven months. Instead of taking myself to be an exception or victim of isolation engendered by social media habits or mental incapacitation, I maintain that this can simply be *what living looks like*. Maybe guests at Death Cafés do not want to spend time with each other outside the designated two hours. Maybe anthropology that looks too detached to purists is to be expected when the UK government has declared loneliness one of the greatest public health challenges of "our time" and is introducing "social prescribing" of community activity at GP practices in 2023, and Americans are alleged to spend less time with friends than ever before[21]. The shared experience of thinness can become distinctive and saturated enough to be thick, especially when it evokes such concern, complaint – or "anxiety" – in those advocating for different modes of living unto death, searching for ways of relating to one another.

In this chapter, I have described how my fieldsite was located with consideration to the imagined community (p.30) given participants' variable connections to my chosen topic of death awareness. Recognising issues around ethical access in analyses of simultaneously interpersonal and "masspersonal" communication online and offline and potentially emotionally laden or sensitive themes, I describe steps taken and guidelines followed to navigate spaces respectfully. I include a level of autoethnographic reflection to discuss not only the exigencies of fieldwork, but some current academic debates on how fieldwork is best adapted to text.

[21] Economist Bryce Ward's November 2022 op-ed for the Washington Post references the Bureau of Labor Statistics' American Time Use Survey (ATUS) to suggest people spend around three hours weekly socialising; https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2022/11/23/americans-alone-thanksgiving-friends/ ;
journalist Jessica Grose's riposte at https://www.nytimes.com/2022/12/03/opinion/holidays-social-media.html suggests this alarm and association of in-person loneliness with surging anxiety or depression misappropriates blame to technology, overlooking virtual friendship and systemic demands on diminished leisure time.

PART I MEMENTO MORI

I loved my friend.
He went away from me.
There's nothing more to say.
The poem ends,
Soft as it began,—
I loved my friend.[22]

CHAPTER 1 THE WORM AT THE CORE

In a 2019 *Annual Review of Anthropology* piece, Matthew Engelke points out that the journal had not published an article on the anthropology of death in the sociocultural section in 35 years, suggesting "time is ripe for another consideration" (Engelke 2019, 30). A note is made that "other subfields" have made more recent assessments, and that medical anthropology, archaeology, or the anthropology of violence – to name but a few – frequently engage with topics of death. In the same breath, however, the author notes that important edited volumes (Das and Han 2016; Robben 2017; 2018), articles, and compendia feature "little to no explicit engagement with 'the anthropology of death' per se. It is this *per se* that sticks with me as something of a mixed message and an initial concern in delineating the literature relevant to my thesis: what is *the* anthropology of death, if such a thing had fixity? Engelke accedes that the anthropology of death is capacious and an ever-broadening field, all the while noting such an anthropology "per se and perforce [is] often framed by two main interests, each crystalised by Hertz". Indeed, Hertz's 1907 essay about the relationship between ritual and death amongst Dayak peoples of Kalimantan is "still one of the most cited and seminal works in the field" (Palgi and Abramovitch 1984). Featuring in most opening chapters of anthropological or sociological collections on death (e.g. *ibid,* Bloch and Parry 1982, Metcalf and Huntington 1991, Venbrux 2007) as well as setting foundations for individual studies such as Seremitakis (1991) or Arnason (2014), a century of Hertz, Durkheim, Van Gennep, and Malinowski digs in its heels as the popularity of death as a topic looks to surge. As Engelke reminds us, just as during the 1980s "renaissance" of foundational texts "we are still finding new ways to think critically with Hertz"- listing numerous studies from the 2010s that prove this point. Be this as it may and before delving into the specificities of Dayak belief, I understand this preoccupation with Hertz to be bound to the style of reading that makes "per se" a given. What are the privileged "two main interests" anthropologists have and how can something be *perforce* – necessarily, inevitably – only *often* framed by them?

In this *Annual Review* article, anthropologists are described as traditionally focused on funerary rites and mourning first, or as a secondary interest, on the corpse. The categories are diluted immediately as Engelke rephrases them as an interest in "how life persists" (is this not

[22] From *The Weary Blues* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1926) by Langston Hughes. This poem is in the public domain.

applicable to all living?[23]) and "the stuff of death", before presenting a slew of new research ordered under four groupings ranging from materiality, commemoration, body authority or sovereignty, to souls and cosmology. Though the field is recognised to abut broader debates on issues such as suffering, medicine, faith, race or modernity, with its framing of the legacy of an old classic in contemporary work, the piece participates in the self-same trademark. Why apply Hertz as a lens if everything is but often necessarily reducible to his essay; why introduce two interests to eke them into four? It feels a certain theoretical precedent to writing anthropologies of death is such a criterion, those who omit it are not recognised to be producing such a thing at all and/or must find a way to adopt it. Importantly, this anthropologists' staple is also held aloft as "the key theoretical reference point for sociological work on death" (Davies 2000, 97) or as for Evans-Pritchard who introduced the English translation in 1960, "representative of the culmination of two centuries of sociological thought in France" (Hertz 1960, 11), originally published in *L'Année Sociologique*. This note is not merely to preface future crossings of disciplinary boundaries in my writing, but to ask how a comparative reading on mortuary practices in Polynesia, Australia and "several Melanesian islands" maintains relevance across physical and less literal fields in Greece and Japan alike; supposedly evidenced in Scheper-Hughes' writing on infant mortality in Brazil (1992) as in Yurchak's article on the display of Lenin's preserved body (2015). Its applicability may lie in its relative simplicity. Ultimately, what people think about death affects what they do about it – and vice versa. I present my own reading of Hertz's essay and its most popular re-analyses to tie my fieldwork less to structural commonalities with Pacific rites, but to the production of an intellectual tradition and an overlay exemplified by Engelke. He suggests literature on mortuary practice expresses a "variety of ways in which death can be conquered" by life, but does Hertz speak of conquest? That life carrying on in the aftermath of death is symbolic victory casts death in the role of adversary, a problem to be dealt with, or - as in the title of this chapter – the consciousness of which philosopher William James dubbed "the worm at the core" of human existence.

It is beyond commonplace to insist death is not spoken about. In my introduction, I alluded to the fact that it is this tautology that undergirds much of the practice of death awareness or death positivity. This chapter presents a timeline of work in support of such a claim as well underlining that the interdisciplinary output of thanatology or death studies is part and parcel of the movements I follow. Not only are some of the figureheads of death awareness groups the producers of shared death-related media, but belonging is often enacted around shared media, whether in reposting articles or shared readings of certain book club staples. Moreover, the impetus for death awareness is explicitly informed by the arguments presented by social scientists from the twentieth century onwards and an image of personhood, "human nature", western modernity and death informed by processual or functionalist models of psychology and ritual. The lines between scholarly or "everyday" conversation blur out of distinction in a project on the dissemination of information when academic sources are paraphrased as justification for action, such as when a participant cites "the five stages of grief" in their experiences of death – proposed by psychiatrist Elizabeth Kübler-Ross in the 1960s - or as academics are expected to make work public and impactful.

Since the inception of my PhD project, for example, medical anthropologists Bethan Michael-Fox and Renske Visser have founded a death podcast (2021), the latter also maintaining a death-themed reading blog and serving in an administrative role in The Association for the

[23] In Tim Ingold's definition of anthropology, for example, "Anthropology is *open-ended* because we do not seek final solutions but rather ways along which life can keep on going."

Study of Death and Society (ASDS). Their Twitter page, in turn, retweets frequently from The Order and The Centre for Radical Death Studies (CRDS). In 2019, one of the CRDS founders was Sarah Chavez, the executive director of The Order and main administrator or "den mother" of the Deathling Den group (see p. 19, 27) as well as a founding member of the Death Salon event series in California – similar to Death Café (see chapter 2) - and Death & the Maiden, another death positivity site working from an expressly feminist perspective. Medical anthropologist Erica Borgstrom, for example, is an editor of Mortality – the premier academic journal on interdisciplinary study of death and dying – as well as managing a Twitter page called *deathinageofcovid,* launched in 2020 as a place for resources on death, dying and bereavement around Covid-19 and appears in a BBC Ideas video on end-of-life planning now often auto-played alongside Kathryn Mannix's (p. 29). In Giddens's terms, the social scientist could be in a "double hermeneutic" relationship to society as their analytic vocabularies influence and inform lay concepts, which in turn informs analysis (Giddens 1990)[24] This complicity is evident in situations of "we" I have sought to address earlier, whereby even when it is unclear where "we" live, certain practices are "ours"; both I and my interlocutor expect the other to tell them what is typical of "our death culture" or more specifically, often await an explanation from me as to how our culture became one "of death denial", or how our relationships with mortality "became unhealthy". I cannot help but be curious, more so, about where denial emerged as a matter of interest and propose it may be social scientists all the way down, influencers today as they already were. For the sake of narrative and convention[25], before addressing the granular or virtual local conceptions of death closer to my contemporary fieldsite, let us begin with Hertz in the 1900s.

Wet and dry

Robert Hertz's *Contribution à une Étude sur la Représentation Collective de la Mort* first appeared in 1907 and established his position in the Année sociologique school or research team of sociologists – including Marcel Mauss and Henri Hubert - who from 1896 collaborated with Émile Durkheim to create a journal of the same name. Durkheim's conceptions of religion, magic and the nature of social collective are multifarious, and its thoughtful discussion would require and has inspired innumerable volumes; the representation of a Durkheimian school of thought as unanimous in definitions of terms or consistent with itself is equally ineffective. Nevertheless, typical attributions include a notion of "social facts" defined in *The Rules of Sociological Method* (1895) that point to facts as distinguished by externality, constraint, generality and bolstered by comparative, causal analysis. In his introduction to a translation of *The Rules*, Steven Lukes notes that the ambiguity of social facts as "external to individuals" has led critical readers to interpret this claim as "external to all individuals in a given society or group" as opposed to "external to any given individual", leading to charges of reified "hypostasised" society – not entirely unfoundedly. Lukes associates Durkheim's language with that of 19th century physics, as collective force and social current "impelling men" may "determine behaviour from without, just like physico-chemical forces" (Lukes 1982, 39).

---

[24] Rather than representing a contamination or occupation with the self, this overlap can be desirable; for Ingold anthropology "means to study with people, not to make studies of them" (2014,391)

[25] Perhaps instead of convention, I might call it *ceremony* as Robben does in his call for anthropology of death for the 21st century: "The influence of Robert Hertz and Arnold van Gennep, […] has waned even though their works still seem to stand tall as a result of ceremonial citing. (Robben 2018,xv)

The macro-level of theorising phenomena associated with this school is generally applied in religious and ritual contexts in broad strokes through a bipartite filter, with all religious belief predicated on a distinction between "two fundamental genera" of the profane and sacred things, the latter protected and separated by interdiction. While the form this distinction takes may vary, to Durkheim its existence is universal. Another influential *Année* contribution published immediately after Durkheim's definition on religious phenomena could be that of Hubert and Mauss, discussing sacrifice as a tripartite ritual of entry by sacrifier or their object, a middle of transaction between sacred and profane, and exit rites for dissolution of the situation (Hubert, Mauss, and Evans-Pritchard 2016 [1898]). Predating van Gennep's well-known 1909 rites of passage characterised by three phases by some years, Hubert and Mauss's 1898 piece was not translated into English until 1964 under the direction of E.E. Evans-Pritchard who provides its foreword – exactly as he does for the work of Hertz in 1960. [26] In its description of death as social fact that constrains behaviour and the rituals surrounding it allowing society to a) first separate the dead and through b) transformation of polluting or profane matter c) free both the living and the dead of specific bonds permitting integration into a realm of the dead, Hertz's essay exemplifies features characteristic of its analytic entourage. Its lasting impact in the field of death studies looks to reside in disagreement about what constitutes its most original contribution.

The translation of Hertz's death essay by Claudia and Rodney Needham saw it flanked by a 1909 piece on religious polarity and the pre-eminence of the right hand, and in E.E. Evans-Pritchard's foreword, both are recognised as having merited his great admiration and inclusion in lecture materials for "many years". Davies elaborates that Hertz had fallen into near oblivion, "forgotten even in Oxford" according to Louis Dumont, who autobiographically directs Evans-Pritchard's attention to it following a lecture on Mauss in 1952 (Davies 2000, 101). This disregard is attributed in part to the death of Hertz at only 33, alongside some of Durkheim's other younger students killed in the 1914-1918 war - though I suspect another factor may have lurked in the very breadth and ambition that invites readers to return. In her preface to a 1928 collection of Hertz's essays, his widow Alice suggests a juvenile enthusiasm that his mentors "pruned" to size. Robert was to restrain, "return to the canvas and paint with less fantasy" in the scientific illusions of the *Année.* While Alice notes no resentment from her spouse – "they were right, it was childish", she reports him confessing – it is in her following admiring remarks that one might read another clue about relative lack of recognition.

> "From the temporary burial to the final burial and the achievement of resurrection, initiation, the communion of the individual with the world of the hereafter. Perhaps he exaggerated the importance of this discovery? May we nevertheless allow a witness of these happy days to recall the young scholar, barely out of adolescence, absorbed by his work to an extent that for months, even learning the language, he lived with the Dayak who became for him not matters of data, but reality in flesh and blood." (Hertz 1928, x translation mine)

As Hertz wrote primarily in the British Museum between 1904 and 1906 and was not personally acquainted with the numerous populations he wrote of, Alice looks to recognise the tidal shift from armchairs and verandas in the 1910s and 20s, pre-empting Evans-Pritchard's critiques as she suggests he realised how much more alive in-person study was a few years after the death essay. Evans-Pritchard acknowledges this: "he came to realize that such a study from books could never equal experience at first-hand" (Hertz 1960, 11), perhaps explaining the lessened tarring by a brush of Durkheimian "philosophical speculation, often highly didactic

[26] Coincidentally, 1960 also saw the publication of *rites de passage* in English.

and illustrated with the barest information about the simpler societies" (*ibid*,15). Still, for Evans-Pritchard, Mauss and Hertz retain "some of the formulas which clouded Durkheim [...] the appeal to collective consciousness, vague and ill-defined, to the dichotomy of sacred and profane [...] equally vague and ill-defined." Hertz also exhibits "Durkheim's irritating manoeuvre, when a fact contradicts his thesis, of asserting that its character and meaning have altered" (*ibid*, 12). In nearly eighty pages, Hertz sprawls through the Dayak of Borneo – as it happens not the name of a particular people, but a word common to middle Borneo languages meaning "upriver" - beginning with the Olo Ngaju, a large grouping of river peoples in south-eastern Borneo. In the next breath, however, Hertz discusses the Malay archipelago as a whole, or the Olo Maanyan, the Dayak of Kapuas, Bali and effects of Hinduism, the Alfuru of central Celebes, the Sea Dayak of Sarawak, "some Bantu", "certain Papuans", Polynesians, North- and South American Indians, the Dene, the Parsi, the Mazdaist, the Avestan, Caribs of French Guiana, Madagascar, the Andaman Islanders, "several ethnic groups of Timor", the Betsileo, the Maori, the Alfuru of Central Celebes, the Binbinga, the Warramunga, the Gnanji, Orinoco headwaters and confederations of Hurons, Mabuiag islanders, the Chinook, the Naga, the Bahau, "central Australian tribes", Dutch Christians or Kutai Dayak, Mdanyan or Toradja, with Muslim influence and mythologies of Hades or the Styx for good measure. To this contemporary reader, the influx of proper nouns for various different types of soul and essence or state of decay, as the rivers or their longhouses for feasts and ossuaries are mixed in a first impenetrable soup of notes from afterlife homes to chiefly office to breast milk, and it seems little wonder most anyone can find something of attention – or lose the thread. In 1991, for example, Metcalf and Huntington suggested "the complex issues raised by the death essay have yet to be discussed" and "symbolic aspects have been passed over". To order some of the vast scope, those interpreting Hertz tend to divide the work into twos or threes.

Whether in Borneo or Australia, Hertz presents a specific rite of secondary burial or secondary treatment recognised by Metcalf and Huntington as "relatively rare, but particularly characteristic of Southeast Asia" (1991). In this model, Hertz finds "in most primitive societies the dead bodies are only stored in the tomb where they are first placed. After a time, they are given a new funeral and receive the final funerary rites which are due to them." Following this statement, "death has not always been represented and felt as it is in our society" (Hertz 1960, 28). Setting aside France and remarks about supposed advanced peoples, Hertz makes an effort to identify the dead body as a collective representation that is not unchangeable, but rather than the carcass of an animal, an organic or physiological event to which a mass of beliefs, emotions and activities are added. If "in our own society the generally accepted opinion is that death occurs in one instant" (*ibid,*28), in a double burial death is incomplete or irresolute without a phase preceding "final rite". In the Malay archipelago bodies spend "a more or less long period of time" (29) in temporary shelter, with chiefs and other influential persons in their own houses until final burial. Referring only to the Olo Ngaju, Hertz finds mentions of delays from seven to eight months to a year between death and final ceremony, though for some of his sources "the usual delay is about two years and in many cases four or six, even ten years elapse before the last homage is paid" (31). In Hertz's understanding, the duration of the intermediary period – the title of his first subchapter – can be a matter of the material conditions placed for final ceremony as for the Olo Ngaju *tivah,* owing to the magnitude of funerary feasts and the extensive preparations required. Yet such exterior causes "are not sufficient to explain the necessity of a period of waiting and to fix its length", as the primary motive and "right thing to do" is to await the total decomposition of the corpse until only dry bones remain, "without any doubt" determinant in delay and duration.

The engagement or expedition in processes of decomposition are detailed by Hertz, ranging from the Olo Ngaju collecting resulting fluids in earthenware pots under coffins (or allowing them to run to the ground) to other Dayak mixing products of decomposition with the rice eaten by close relatives during periods of mourning. Whether final rites are cremations, lamentations or dances is of little relevance, as is the mode of pending placement:

> "From our point of view there is a strict similarity between the exposure of the corpse in the branches of a tree, as is practised by tribes of Central Australia, or inside the house of the living, as is found among certain Papuans and among some Bantu tribes, or on a platform specially raised, as is usually done by the Polynesians and by many Indian tribes of North America, or lastly the temporary burial chiefly practised by South American Indians. All these various forms of temporary burial [...] are equivalent for us. They all have the same object, namely, to offer the deceased a temporary residence until the *natural* disintegration of the body is completed." (41, emphasis added)

The purity and danger of intermediate or liminal matter is lifted into relief citing examples such as Parsi beliefs in *Nasu,* a devilish infection that resides in corruptible flesh and endocannibalism among the Binbinga, for whom "the living incorporate into their own being the vitality and the special qualities residing in the flesh; if this flesh were allowed to dissolve, the community would lose strength to which it is entitled" (44). Seemingly contrary instances are glossed over, as when instead of exposing the coffin to the atmosphere for the Dayak it "is often preferred to bury it fairly deep, even though this means digging it up later". Customs are admittedly co-existent and can be substituted for one another or omitted, yet "the rite in its essence is constant". All the while minimal intervals for natural disintegration is highly variable: the Arunta suggest reincarnation happens once bones are dust, and the Gnanji that it occurs once the rain has washed the bones. Olo Ngaju *tivah*, furthermore, is usually celebrated for several persons at one time, with families sharing expenses while "in other societies the feast is repeated at regular intervals every three years" for all those dead in the interim. As for the Confederation of Hurons, a periodic exhumation or "feast of souls" occurs once every ten or twelve years; how is this related to completion of disintegration or constitutive of a separation completed? Even instances of embalming and mummification for maximised preservation (here, Hertz drops natural as object) "do not differ essentially from the temporary ways that we have listed" (41), and in instances where secondary burial does *not* occur, the dual period is made applicable, for example when in "Indian tribes of South America" a rope may be tied to a buried corpse which is buried immediately, but the end of this rope is left visible on the surface of a tomb – once this material erodes and vanishes, the soul of the deceased can be considered to have arrived in another world. (52)

Each attempt to set clear boundaries is quickly overturned by the author himself, as in the establishment of relative purity and safe inertia of bone followed by remarks on relics and Andaman islanders' necklaces of sacred or potent bone "warm with spiritual power". An early statement has temporary burial-places "almost invariably isolated" (30) to separate the dead; what then, of the repeated cases of wake-like watching over the dead body, and discussions on the intense funerary contagion that afflicts widows, who partake in the state of the deceased who "whether through duty or self-interest [...] live in an intimate and continuous contact with death (51)? There is the thesis of the potentially malicious soul lurking too close to living human habitation, to be accompanied and tended to either diminish or precipitate its dissolution, perhaps kept by a fire to keep dangerous influence at bay and warm the wandering spirit - then an immediate caveat, as when among the Alfuru there is a belief that the soul remains by the body until final ceremony "but the most common belief is that the

soul goes to the underworld immediately" (35). It is through some calisthenics that Hertz clarifies that the communal home of souls is that which it cannot yet enter and casts a line to local variations on soul lodging and the role of psychopomps, or guides through the perilous journey to the beyond as "parallel to that which is done to the remains of the deceased, a funeral service is performed which changes the condition of the soul" (58). The discussion on fates of the body rounds itself off in resonance with work on sacrifice, as temporary burial is not mere disintegration but "changes the character of the corpse, it turns it into a new body, and is consequently a necessary condition for the salvation of the soul [...] far from destroying the body of the deceased, it recreates it and makes it capable of entering a new life." The expression of this recreation varies, as in a Malagasy belief whereby decomposition may birth some mythical animal, or for the Betsileo for whom "it is forbidden to give the remains a burial or to work in the fields so long as the deceased has not 'returned' in the form of a small worm." (48) Double burial has been described in terms of wet and dry by Davies, as well as Hockey, Prendergast and Kellaher - applying the notion to contemporary British ceremonies around scattering ashes of cremated bodies (e.g. Prendergast, Hockey, and Kellaher 2006), but it is from the lines of life created in literal embodied or a symbolic regeneration – and often Hertz's concluding remark that in completing processes of synthesis and disintegration "society, its peace recovered, can triumph over death" - that most authors take their cue.

Geometry

The ambiguity that makes reading Hertz's essay a "yes, but-" is at its heart testament to the complexity of relationships with the dead that continues to inspire, and is repeated by Malinowski observing mourning on the Trobriand Islands: there is on the one hand a desire to preserve the body or to retain at least parts of it; on the other, a desire to be done with it, to annihilate or put it out of the way; to maintain a tie and break the bond (Malinowski 1955, 41). In Hertz's examples the recently dead and their souls are both pitiful and vulnerable, to be spared homelessness or demonic incorporation and to be held or fed – or far too polluting to touch or gaze upon directly. The intermeshed desires or quality of facts and actors exemplify a meaning to be found not in separate entities, but in their interrelation, and though he considers sacred-profane dualism the fundamental theory of Hertz's work, Evans-Pritchard is the first to comment on the establishment of a pattern for "three sides to death", whereby to understand the corpse, the soul, and the mourner is to understand their expression of "the same idea of transition" (Hertz 1960, 15).

Metcalf and Huntington in turn first note "there are thus two phases" – of disaggregation and reinstallation – and double burial is made triad in elaborating not simply an organically dead becoming socially dead, but the socially dead being welcomed into the fold of dead being. It is placed, in a way, in the power of three when separation – liminality – integration is applied to three categories of actors at once; when the state of the body is writ on the bodies of mourners, and these mourners relate to one another based on the social status or proximity - literal or symbolic - to the dead. First published in 1979, Metcalf and Huntington's *Celebrations of Death: The Anthropology of Mortuary Ritual* looks to be the first in a series of Hertz-inspired projects, even "the first in a long time" to pursue death rites collectively and until 1991 - in the authors' estimation - the only general and integrated anthropological treatment of deathways. Whether due to religion becoming unfashionable, or English symbolic analyses of the sixties and seventies habitually presented as double columns of paired oppositions, there had not been an explicit triangle until a schema presented by Metcalf and Huntington in their chapter re-examining double burial:

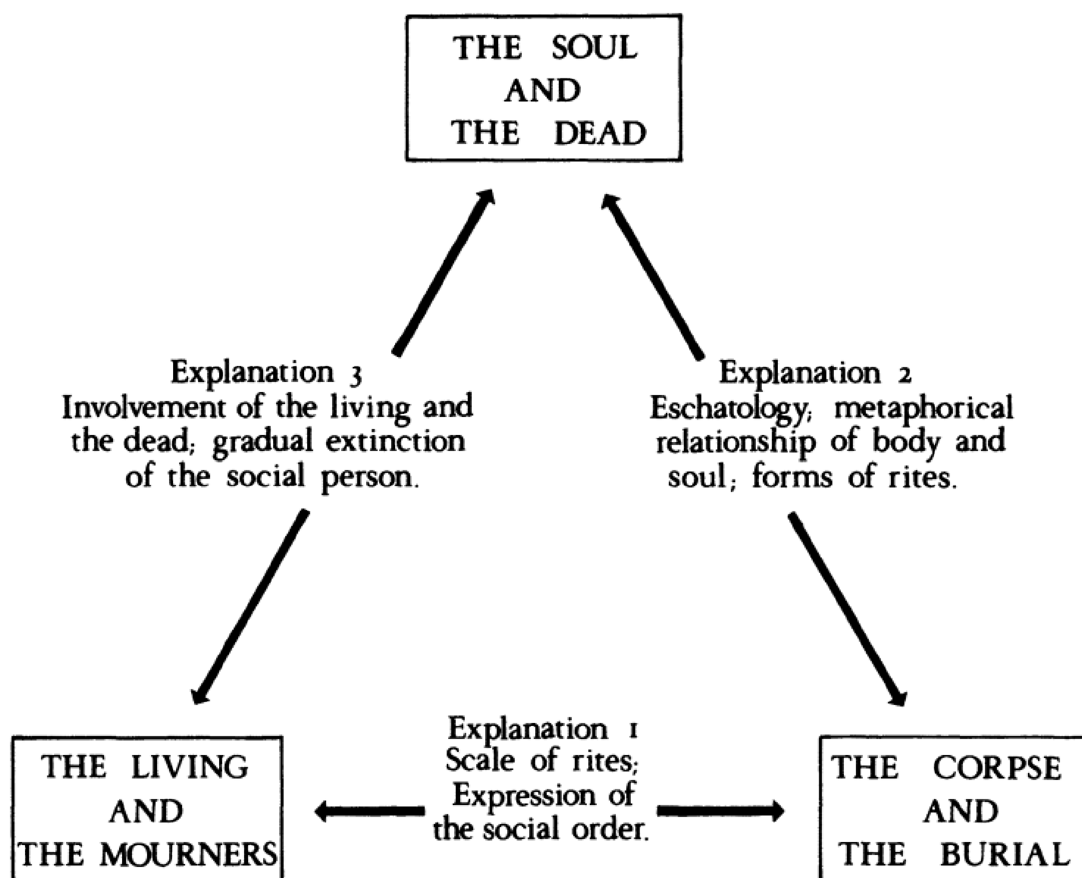


Figure 11 – Diagram of Robert Hertz's arguments (1960) as presented by Metcalf and Huntington (1991,83).

James Green numbers among present-day writers for whom Hertz is reducible to such a shape, writing that the essay's insight was of funerary rites having implicit logic, the three points of a triangular system being "survivors, corpse, and whatever place the dead are believed to go", and rather than concentrating on points themselves, it was their connections that interested him. In this reading, "treatment of the corpse reveals the rest of the system. Begin with the survivor/cadaver relationship, the base leg of the triangle, and the rest follows" (Green 2012,86). I am not convinced a "base leg" is in the spirit of these findings, as all points keep the others in suspension as if by bowstring, but Metcalf and Huntington seem to model in such a manner, too. "Contrary to what Evans-Pritchard implies, the arguments differ not in which of the actors takes centre stage, but in which pair of actors is brought into dialogue" (1991,79). Here, "Hertz's dramatis personae" of corpse, soul, and mourners are directly identifiable as "each part of the essay is devoted to one of these". Green's "whatever place" varies somewhat from the schema above where "the dead" and their communion with the soul are the point,

rather than a destination of sorts, underlining a nuance by which Hertz enables the recognition of a community of the dead – ancestors, spirits, etc. – that retain agency.[27]

As I see it, the original essay is divided first into two: headings “Intermediary Period” and “The Final Ceremony”, then further under a) body b) soul c) living, but later d) the final burial and e) admittance to the land of the dead - each hewn under the aegis of temporality. It may be fitting, then, to bloat the triangle into a pyramid with notions of duration and time informing its dimensionality. Though the choice of dry bones may not be the most coherent throughout, in Hertz’s work things take time and though he applies both terms, instead of *transition*, *transformation* holds steadier. While comparing decay to cremation, for example, he notes “the violent action of the fire spares the dead and living the sorrows and dangers involved in the transformation, or at least it shortens that period [...] the reduction of the body to immutable elements.” (Hertz 1960,43) Yet speed does not mean *eliminated* process, as in multiple statements about death occurring over a series of affordances, such as gradual easing of behavioural rules of mourning, never in a moment: the soul “frees itself gradually from its earthly tabernacle” and memories and images of the dead are ties disentangled in often “psychologically painful” internal partings (*ibid*,82). In a three-dimensional shape, differing proximities and propinquities fit change in duration and delay, as in explanations of how those closest to the deceased are subject to greater demands, or why different attention is afforded to members of different status. The triangle presented by Metcalf and Huntington resonates with me in a potential to remodel; to mould it to look both truer to my reading of Hertz, and to begin engaging with mortality alongside ontological forms and ecologies typifying a multispecies anthropology of the 2010s, from Donna Haraway’s tentacular thinking to Anna Tsing’s work on mushrooms.

To underline this analogy, then, consider for example the box of living and the mourners: rather than constituting a whole they may be more or less close to each other, sharing a loss or separated by impurity for more or less great durations of time; among the Olo Ngaju distant relatives might resume ordinary life after a few days following death, but a widow could not remarry until final rites. The soul may leave the living but be unprepared to be among the dead for some time - or distend somehow: in another Olo Ngaju example the soul is cleft in two, “the marrow of the soul” or essential personality and “corporeal soul”, of which the latter remains with the corpse until *tivah* and the former “continues to live, but its life is unstable” (Hertz 1960,34). The box of “soul and dead” is muddied in awaiting a conjoining, and vitality blurs. One prong of the pyramid[28] may reach the other immediately, such as in immediate burial, whereas gradual extinction might extend over decennia: this is to say nothing of the duration of rites themselves. Time is equally timely in recent transhumanist discussion on the boundedness or refashioning of biological life, and work on online afterlives or the necrographic imaginary (see chapter 6). Whilst secondary treatment may be relatively rare (Hertz suggest singular rites are result of foreign influence, but Dureau (1991) claims full and abridged sequences have always been available), the suggestion of mental states or emotional lives of survivors depending on or changing alongside that of the body or soul of another and influencing treatment makes Hertz useful to authors engaging with models of grief. Interpretations around emotion and obligation, however, have proven to be sites of debate.

[27] These categories have been expanded and explored in anthropological work on materiality and social roles of the dead to be discussed more closely in chapters 4 and 6, including work by Hallam and Hockey on material cultural extensions of the body (2001,197) and the implications of virtual memorialisation for afterlife.

[28] Looking ever more rhizomatic or crystalline, I do not mean to take on the formidable endeavour of expanding on Deleuze here; the choice of pyramid is vis triangle to “fatten” or fill in an existing structure.

Secondary rites are as fallible as any other and when intermediary periods extend from days to months or "issues arise and so prolong this period, sometimes indefinitely" (Hertz 1960,39), or when instead of separation there are offerings left to ancestors or periodic celebrations or ghostly presences unable to attain fulfilment, arguments Hertz makes for a resolution, liberation, or "final, pacified character" of death consummated should be taken with a grain of salt. Robben points out that "the fluidity of processes of life and afterlife, and the porosity of material and spiritual realms are much greater than was assumed by the founding fathers of the anthropology of death" (2017,xxxi) and promotes work that could imagine life and death as coexisting ontologies that constitute one another instead of distinct realms bridged by rite. This does not seem to grant Hertz the credit he is due or may be a result of an excessive focus on the essays conclusion's Durkheimian bent that does not, in my mind, match the preceding analysis. Though the essay maintains – and is frequently cited as doing so- that "the last word must remain with life" and intimates newness, I do not unreservedly agree with readings that suggest Hertz's death as initiation marks "a rebirth" and that society must "change death into life again" to acclimatise: surely, this is only the case if one thinks of death as a certain type of thing in the first place. To present this quote in its entirety:

> "Exclusion is not final. In the same way as the collective consciousness does not believe in the necessity of death, so it refuses to consider it irrevocable. Because it believes in itself a healthy society cannot admit that an individual who was part of its own substance, and on whom it has set its mark, shall be lost for ever. The last word must remain with life: the deceased will rise from the grip of death and will return, in one form or another, to the peace of human association" (Hertz 1960,78).

I may be semantically pernickety in reading the continuation of a manner of life despite physical death not as a negation of death or its occurrence, but indeed a way of relating in recognition of and as a result of death, not rebirth but reacquaintance[29] – but here, we may be veering too far into metaphysics. All the same (as its title suggests) in 1983, Bloch and Parry's *Death and the Regeneration of Life* finds the essence of Hertz in symbolic ties between death and fertility or reproduction of society and in doing so, the authors launch an argument with Metcalf and Huntington, critiquing their ignorance of Hertz's "central preoccupation". The latter pair retaliate in the 1991 edition of *Celebrations:* Bloch, they suggest "is not so much reinventing the wheel as the flat tyre" (Metcalf and Huntington 1991, 10) and accuse him and Parry of perpetuating a brittle view of society with little room for surprise. The impassioned exchange derives from Bloch's alleged focus on ritual as a form of social control and a theory of society's creative representation governing individual response and foregrounds a momentary drift in theoretical discussion in thanatology. From religion, kinship or materiality an anthropology of death steps into the fray of psychic universals, prioritising concepts of conquest or abstractions of death drives, fear or terror and denial, truth or defeat - to the detriment of values or volitions driven by interpersonal affection and care I hope to ground my own work in. Debates through the 1980s and 1990s risk flattening the triangle into a line of varying length between beginnings and ends, sidestepping the (sheepishly revealed) inconsistency or inconclusive processual relationality of Hertz's original. Perhaps this is due to insufficient reflection on what substance is when individuals in society are "part of its own substance".

[29] Or reallocation, in Bloch and Parry's terms: they give an example on work on reallocation following Hertz in Goody's (1962) analysis of how the roles and property of a deceased LoDagaa are redistributed.

Reborn or regenerated?

Metcalf and Huntington begin their analysis of Hertz in posing the "deceptively simple question" they take to be its crux and catalyst: "Why is the corpse feared? What is the origin of the horror that surrounds it?" (*ibid*, 80) They are quick to point out that it is no matter of mere hygiene or natural disgust as a reaction, and that expressions of fear can be evidence of sociological motivation, but an inadequate explanation. It is not the state of a body but the rent the passing personhood leaves in a specific social fabric that informs attitudes:

> "In one and the same society the emotion aroused by death varies extremely in intensity according to the social status of the deceased [...] At the death of a chief, or a man of high rank, a true panic sweeps over the group. On the contrary, the death of a stranger, a slave, or a child will go almost unnoticed."

This observation is followed by a mention of Hertz's descriptions of menacing objects that must be destroyed to allow reconstruction or freedom of a soul, noting that these explanations are complimentary: one suggests why the death of any person causes fear, the other shows why intensities of scale vary from one person to another. Pollution in this context is not "fundamentally a matter of contact with, but of relationship to, the source of contagion." (82) The authors recognise the symbolic weight of loss having to do with a given society's image of itself and accredit Hertz with the perception whereby "when a man dies, society loses in him much more than a unit; it is stricken in the very principle of life, in the faith it has in itself" (Hertz 1960: 78). In furnishing their own work on Berawan rites, Metcalf and Huntington stress attention to particular forms so as to not overlook their idiosyncrasy, and find the theory exportable, but not universal. This seemingly harmless chapter invites mutual accusations of reification and an excess of Durkheim when it comes to Bloch and Parry, who note similarities between Hertz's essay and Durkheim's *Suicide* – both advocating that issues of suicide and death thought of as supremely individual and personal have broader social, non-individual aspects.

Bloch and Parry suggest that Hertz's attention to mortuary rites "is intended to show how these rituals organise and orchestrate private emotions [...] both institutionally governed and the manifestation of an emotion which appears falsely internal" (Bloch and Parry 1982, 3). I cannot find evaluation of falsehood contra interiority in Hertz[30], but setting this aside, another complaint lies in Metcalf and Huntington offering "no new analytical framework", repeating fulsome praise or approbatory stress on parallels between states of corpse and fates of soul – "a focus that has tended to take the discussion away from the relation between death and fertility symbolism" (*ibid*, 5). Seemingly, Metcalf and Huntington ignored the locus understood here as 1) social construction of emotion and 2) the relationship between biological individual and social collectivity. "With Hertz, we share a concern with the social implications of mortuary practices, though not his view of society as an entity acting for itself", Bloch and Parry elaborate, considering social order a product of rituals rather than their cause. Rituals are not "society" responding, but occasions for creation of that "society". How then, do Metcalf and Huntington claim in their 1991 riposte that contrary to their beliefs, Bloch and Parry are the

[30] Reading generously, Hertz states: "those who observe such practices justify them by alleging their affection for the deceased and the sorrow they feel at having lost him. But these motives are not enough to account for the rite; this is often compulsory; the women on whom this duty falls are threatened with capital punishment if they do not comply. It is thus not simply a question of the spontaneous expression of an individual feeling but of a forced participation of certain survivors." (Hertz 1960, 51) "Enough" and "not simply" do heavy lifting- but what does a true emotion look like, anyway?

pair positing "society shapes the emotions of members through ritual", and thus "claim the mantle of Année Sociologique?" (Metcalf and Huntington 1991, 3)

Upon closer reading with the aid of Dureau's critiques of Bloch and Parry, it becomes apparent that their preoccupation with regeneration derives from an even earlier anthropological tradition – largely excluded from materials after the 1980s. The work of Swiss anthropologist Bachofen, published in 1859, is concerned with Greek and Roman symbolism and mythology and begins in descriptions of Dionysian and Orphic mystery cults wherein painted eggs feature "as symbols of fertility and femininity" in some Roman tombs and funerary games. The rites "glorify nature as a whole, with its twofold life and death giving principle"(Bachofen et al. 1992, 39). Following this, Frazer's 1890 Golden Bough considers such cults with an interest in killing representing fertility or renewal, particularly "how the killing of divine kings regenerates the fertility of the community" (Bloch and Parry 1982,2). Bloch and Parry discuss the Lugbara, Merina and certain Chinese examples and seek to challenge femininity as a locus of birth, insofar as "untamed sexuality of women is identified with the dangerous, socially unproductive wild". This contrasts with "a sacred ancestral fertility controlled by men in which women would appear to be but passive partners" (*ibid*, 19). The association of femininity and putrescence or physical reproductivity in sex are made symbols of nature, harbingers of discontinuity away from a less profane rebirth; it is in funerary and initiation ritual that "timeless order is created" and "the biology of mere dirty mortality and birth" are transcended by what is eternal. "True life, fertility, is therefore somewhere else" in the final chapter of Bloch and Parry's book, not "a low illusion located in the world of women" who are "left holding the corpse" whilst authority dispenses life's "victory over death, victory over the physical, biological nature of man as a whole" (Bloch 1982 in Dureau 1991,24). Much time could be expended on debates over nature-culture models and gender or the specificities of the two pairs' issues with each other's work; here I am more preoccupied with Dureau's characterisation of this ideology as largely *economistic* worldview.

In Bloch and Parry's introduction there is "a logical connection between the conception of life as a limited good and that death and reproduction are inextricably related". This is paraphrased by Dureau as "new life is seen to cause the death of the living, there being only finite amounts of substance/souls/reanimating spirit in the reservoir of any culturally defined cosmos"(*ibid*, 26) I am not sure extension of their claim to *any* cosmos is fair, but the analysis of Bloch and Parry's use of Malinowski's work on *baloma* spirits of the Troabriand dead is thoughtful. Per Malinowski, after a person's death, a *baloma* spends another lifetime on the island of Tuma before animating a foetus carried by a woman of its subclan. This bolsters an argument that each subclan is privy to a limited quantity or clear "given stock" of spirit substance. Yet, as Dureau points out, the lifetime a *baloma* spends away is temporally unspecified, and *baloma* are not directly reanimated in those born when spirit children - derived from old *baloma* - are brought to expectant mothers by another. Consequently, shared substance may elude finite quantity, and the temporal vagueness of time spent "away" before re-utilisation challenges spiritual finitude and cosmology where natality engenders mortality. Dureau proposes in societies that value individualism, emphasis is often on trajectories from wombs to tombs rather than on the reverse, and accuses Bloch of Western Christian conceit. I might question the commitment to discussions of emotion Metcalf and Huntington were claimed to miss, as the scant reference I find is when the Lugbara, Cantonese and Merina social group is said to be "anchored not just by political power, but by some of the deepest emotions, beliefs, and fears of people everywhere. Society is made both emotionally and intellectually unassailable by means of that alchemy which transforms death into fertility" (Bloch and Parry 1982, 41).

It would appear the emotion applied to "people everywhere" is one of feared death to be vanquished, of negation or *denial*, as when death is presented as a problem as a prime marker of individuality and discontinuity; a political system of unchanging inviolable order necessitates "denial of history" achieved in erasing individuality (the symbolic killing of destroyed and expelled body) and "equating death with birth into the depersonalised collectivity of ancestors" (*ibid*, 11). The unassailable and eternal gel with Hertz's notion of pacification, but death ritual attempting "escape from time" (14) does not engage with indeterminate temporality that carries through his original essay. Evans-Pritchard may have considered Hertz's "final attribution of secondary mortuary rites to failure of people to adjust themselves, save over a long period of time [...] an inadequate interpretation of the facts" (Hertz 1960, 21), but it maintains intrigue. Why for example, do Metcalf and Huntington ask why the corpse *is feared* as opposed to asking why dying is not instant? Hertz's essay begins with a note on lengthy exposure becoming rarer as wakes "as in Ireland or among our own farmers" entail much *upheava*l; beyond expense an "inconvenience is strongly felt" (*ibid,* 30). A further allusion to the emotional demands wrought in time is made, in my understanding, when discussing the death of a small child or stranger prompting lesser reaction. Bloch and Parry take this - alongside protracted and elaborate ceremony for chiefs - as keeping emotion determined in socio-political hegemonic maintenance: "such individuals have not been fully incorporated into the social order" and have not occupied status roles whose dissolution have effects for the living.

I linger on Hertz elaborating that "society has not *yet* given anything of itself". As simplistic as it may sound, "giving" is an act in time, often repetitive – the dead person is "part of the substance" and has had the mark of others "set upon" (p.49), which could take us back to classic texts on commensality and the formation of personhood in a kind of substantive proximity; I am reminded, for instance of Gottlieb's work on early infancy in West Africa and local beliefs surrounding inclusion in a living world following dropping of the umbilical cord, weaning, or passing bowel movements (Gottlieb 2004). I do not wish to reduce greater regard to a result of greater time shared or vice versa, but as when ethnographic depth is sought in familiarity over sustained periods, many of the conversations I had with participants revolve around valued depth of experience or awareness of living and dying through affordances of time in care. This may occur in a concern that rituals are truncated, or that there are expectations to "get over" bereavements and "make the most" of finite living, that "historically" people spent more time with the dead, or even in relation to deaths of celebrities who we may have not met, but "grew up with". In reference to the economic framework of circulating vitality, one might shift vocabulary from transactions and exchanges to loans and debts – though I eschew writing equations.

Bloch and Parry find "almost everywhere religious thought consistently denies the irreversible and terminal nature of death by proclaiming it a new beginning" (Bloch and Parry 1982,9) in tune with Frazer and Malinowski, for whom:

> "The savage is intensely afraid of death [...] he cannot face the idea of complete cessation, of annihilation [...] And here into this play of emotional forces, into this supreme dilemma of life and final death, religion steps in, selecting the positive creed, the comforting view, the culturally valuable belief in immortality, in the spirit independent of the body, and in the continuance of life after death" (Malinowski 1955, 32–33)

That death is irreversible and terminal are tenets of considerable pedigree, and I cannot but disagree at first with Johannes Fabian's suggestion that in extreme academic parochialisation "Death in the singular" was abandoned in anthropological inquiry by anthropologists who

"had ceased to answer for humanity" allowing only deaths (plural) and forms of death related behaviour (Fabian 1972, 545). Further along in his 1972 reflections on death, another thesis emerges: "anthropological studies of death have been, by and large, assigned the role of providing the exotic 'other' to the sociologists 'we'" (*ibid*, 553). This statement captures the imposition of "knowledge" that expresses more of the spectator than an informant, as there does indeed appear to be a shared "supreme dilemma" of singular death from Bachofen to the 1980s - but one "we" long placed in the intellectual and psychological rather than supposed magico-religious realms. Robben notes that Sigmund Freud's psychodynamic explanations of "working through" over time have been influential in the anthropology of death, and that his writings on mourning and melancholy echo Hertz's essay: "time is needed for the command of reality-testing [...] when this work has been accomplished the ego will have succeeded in freeing its libido from the lost object" (Robben 2017, xvi)[31]. Though anthropologists, psychologists and sociologists alike have worked to dismantle concepts of grief work as cutting, freeing or breaking bonds (see chapter 2), the application of Freudian frameworks persists and is not limited to understandings of mourning.

When Fabian asserts that anthropologists wrote little about death between 1960 and 1970, the examples he does find "appear to agree on the fact that modern man 'suppresses' thinking about death" (Fabian 1972, 544), noting works that make a "suppression hypothesis" of death central to their analyses – some of these authors went so far as to suggest anthropologists may have been inhibited from engaging with death by such psychic avoidance. Geoffrey Gorer, writing of 1950s Britain declared that if sex had previously been an unmentionable natural process in Anglo Saxon societies (Gorer 1955, Gorer 1965, 171), death had taken its place as "new pornography"; a public had grown to deny grief as obscenity and resultingly could not communicate with the bereaved or mourn openly. The "great increasing callousness" was to be found in euphemistic language surrounding death and abandonment of mourning dress as well as the increasing number of people dying in hospitals rather than at home; it was recorded in psychosomatic manifestations of grief such as insomnia, weight gain or depression - suggesting a correlation between a culture failing to frame mourning in ritual and their maladaptive behaviours. (*ibid,* 59) In 1964, Robert Fulton makes similar claims about the United States, where death is "like noxious disease, a taboo subject" with those dying isolated and the dead hidden from view – the most susceptible to death are in retirement communities awaiting their fates "as the leper once did". There is a "vigorous assault upon traditional and sacred ceremony" and rituals for the dead are made little more than "empty, formalistic", wastes of time and money (Fulton 1964, 360–61) in a chicken-or-egg race to determine whether it was an "innate" anxiety about death that made a society such, or whether a collective burial of heads in sands made for anxiety. Contrasting Fabian's condemnation of portraying deaths of the other as primitive violence, killing and fear preceding a series of developments unto "natural or peaceful" rational death, a mid-century tectonic shift establishes "our" death a dangerous and "untamed" (eg. Ariès 1974). In Baudrillard's view of modernity, "there is an irreversible evolution from savage societies to our own: little by little, the dead cease to exist [...] they are no longer beings with a full role to play, worthy partners in exchange, and we make this obvious by exiling them further and further away from the group of the living" (Baudrillard 1976, 146). The explanation adamantly grafted onto this alleged

[31] In constructing the "pyramid" with time, I do not want to appear in support of conceptual resolution, i.e.. time may be needed, but its expenditure does not entail "success". For Hertz leaning towards transformation over transition, see "integration of an individual into a new world [...] accomplished in a molecular fashion, as it were, which requires time." (Hertz 1960, 82)

dispossession relies on a frequently uncritical universal application of individual yearning for immortality and sees anthropologists usher in so-called Terror Management Theory.

Terror and taboo

In an introduction to a 2017 collected edition *Death, Mourning, and Burial*, Antonius Robben echoes Fabian's remarks of parochialisation by suggesting that whilst at the turn of the nineteenth century anthropologists sought shared features, a period of evolutionary, functionalist or structuralist approaches ended with long-term fieldwork from the likes of Radcliffe-Brown, Goody, and Evans-Pritchard. "Conceptualising death, grief, and mourning was so daunting in the face of the tremendous variation", he suggests, "that anthropologists shied away from general models and frameworks, with only few exceptions in the 1970s and 1980s"(Robben 2017, 15). As meticulous and specific ethnographies proliferated alas, "the need for general concepts and models was nevertheless felt". In this context it is rather remarkable that Robben does not comment on Ernest Becker's 1973 Pulitzer Prize- winning *Denial of Death*; especially as a text from psychiatrists Robert Lifton and Eric Olson from the following year espousing a remarkably similar overarching psychodynamic cosmology occupies a full chapter. The further inclusion of sociologist Zygmunt Bauman's elaboration of culture as defiance and denial of death confirms that disciplinary boundaries are not criteria for exclusion - and indeed, whilst *Denial of Death* is primarily a work of psychiatry peppered with philosophy, Becker was trained as an anthropologist. Similarly absent is the work of French historian Philippe Ariès, whose publications through 1974 to 1981 feature in numerous edited volumes on death that typically combine contributions from medics, sociologists, historians, philosophers and anthropologists alike. Familiarity with these authors, I suggest, eliminates any suggestion that general models and concepts were abandoned in favour of nuanced multiplicity. Perhaps this is indeed why Robben distances an anthropology of death from such work? It may speak to their endurance amongst those who read on death, but not those committed to anthropology; the universals applied to death in the contemporary West look external to the field at first glance. Yet in an Anglo-American anthropological study, they cannot be set apart.

In his championing of an anthropology of Britain, Nigel Rapport suggests that in response to a 1983 initiative from the Social Science Research Council to develop anthropological – distinct from sociological – expertise on Britain, some outspoken critics (including Maurice Bloch) argued that since local sociocultural milieux were "covered" by other disciplines, anthropology ought to focus elsewhere (Rapport 2002; 2000, 21). The concession of "Western modernity" to other sciences leaves location undefined or subsumed into a presumed reader's "we think" or "our attitude" (see eg. Ariès 1974, Lifton & Olson 1974, Bloch & Parry 1982,15, Metcalf & Huntington 1979,21, Hallam, Hockey & Howarth 1999,9, Klass 2006,283, Robben 2004) and the risk of glossing over locality is evident in Metcalf and Huntington's ruminations on American mortuary practice in the 1980s: "Does the United States provide us with one case or several? The second pitfall is superficiality [...] We have more descriptive material about funerals in Indonesia than in America." (1991,193, citing Sudnow 1967). Similar concerns were raised by Faunce and Fulton in 1958, the authors lamenting little study outside non-Western or traditional societies ultimately spinning the water wheel: these studies were supposed absent due to a "reluctance in our society to acknowledge the presence and inevitability of death" (Faunce and Fulton 1958) resulting in customs fraught with "conflict, frustration, and anxiety" (*ibid*, 209). The number of cases a geographic or historical space may provide was of little concern to Ariès, as he presented *Western Attitudes Towards Death from the Middle Ages to*

Present in 1974, seeking to represent a millennium of European and North American death as a trajectory of *mentalités*, from a “tame” mediaeval death that did not elicit fear in its “natural” and empowering occurrence to a forbidden, invisible death characterising the 20th century.

Rather than specificities of coffin furnishings and funerary foods, anthropologists interested in death in the West were to content themselves with debates surrounding suppression or denial, as in Gorer, Faunce or Fulton above, or the work of Fiefel, who called for more studies on death in contemporary society in light of repression and avoidance characterising American attitudes towards death (Feifel 1959). In a recent two-part history of the death denial argument, Roberts and Tradii point out that by 1963 the thesis was established enough that sociologist Talcott Parsons suggested that the American society characterised by “a kind of denial of the reality of death” was a widely held, current public belief, launching the first challenge to its validity or relevance (Robert and Tradii 2019). By the 1970s, swathes of psychologists and sociologists had thrown their hats into the ring: Dumont and Foss’s 1972 title offers *The American View of Death: Acceptance or Denial?*; in 1984 Allan Kellehear – writing in Australia- asked *Are we a ‘death-denying’ society?* and parses through decades of such claims to negate them; in 1991 Tony Walter wrote *Modern Death: Taboo or not Taboo?* in a British context and would return to the argument for decades to come; between 2018 and 2023, five articles and a few theses have been published regarding broadly Western, denial-type portrayals. Returning to Robben’s omission of the core texts for denial in 2018, through some luck and checking different libraries, I discovered that in the first edition of *Death, Mourning and Burial* in 2004, both Becker and Ariès *do* supply chapters and invite reference in Robben’s erstwhile introduction. A decision to overlook them later is still curious but may be indicative of a greater recent anthropological corpus to replace materials from other disciplines, or simply a shared fatigue with a dated, yet ever-popular denial tussle. As Walter writes on his blog in 2014 reflecting on the twentieth anniversary of the influential volume *The Revival of Death*:

> I have had many such conversations with journalists since I published, exactly 20 years ago, *The Revival of Death,* a sociological book analysing the ‘revival’ of interest in death and dying. Today’s journalist, like every journalist I’ve spoken to, supposed this revival is just five or ten years old. Each asks about repression and taboo. […] Death is not taboo in contemporary Britain. [32]

The inexhaustibility of denial is present, as is a sigh of disbelief and hilarity as one Googles Kellehear’s 1984 article. His abstract clearly states that by its arguments: “Western societies are not ‘death-denying’ by any of the major criteria posed in the literature on the subject. To say that our contemporary societies are ‘death-denying’ has no theoretical or practical explanatory value” (Allan Kellehear 1984). Yet the first suggested, highlighted and enlarged online search result leads to the website of the charity *Marie Curie* and their TalkAbout campaign, launched in 2019 with the intent of encouraging conversations about death:

[32] I return to differentiating denial and taboo and their overlapping uses in my conclusion; as Ariès’ work is relevant to both themes of institutionalisation or medicalisation and funerary behaviour, the mentalités of forbidding death will be treated with more attention in chapters 4 and 5.

Figure 12 – An image of a screen capture following a Google search; the suggested result features a misrepresentation of Kellehear as arguing or diagnosing a death-denying society in his work. (2023)

The search result pictured above goes beyond representing my specific fieldsite and underlining the centrality of denial discussions to its existence or its relationship with academic publications and the circulation of information. When even the sharpest negation of denial can be transformed into evidence in its favour, one fittingly steps near an argument made against the application of the term by Kellehear: that its theoretical circulation "continues unchecked and unexplained" and "denial becomes not only an explanation but an explanation of why evidence for the original explanation is not readily forthcoming" (*ibid*, 713). This is to say that in instances of alleging death denial, repression is an ultimate psychoanalytic trump card, whereby if 1) people fear death but 2) they claim not to then 3) they are reacting to their fear with denial. But why fear to begin with? The explication of anxiety as methodological concern made at the beginning of this thesis may be stretched over the entirety of human condition if one seeks answers in work that would assert "the fear of death must be present behind all our normal functioning" (Becker 1973,16) or that all fear and aspiration alike is reducible to the universal anxiety of annihilation foundational to humanity, as Ernest Becker would have it.

In 2023, Becker's *Denial of Death* celebrates its 50th anniversary. I was reminded of this fact through emails from both *The Order of the Good Death* and CDAS, *the Centre for Death and Society* at the University of Bath as both organisations would see their major spokespersons – influencer, YouTuber-mortician Caitlin Doughty and Dr John Troyer, former centre director, respectively – participating in events for the public. Troyer would host a live-streamed online reading and discussion group on the book over six weeks, whilst Doughty looked to be more of a headliner, her name listed for *Ernest Becker, Terror Management Theory, and Death Acceptance: An Online Symposium Celebrating 50 Years of The Denial of Death, With Caitlin Doughty & Sheldon Solomon*. Of immediate note is the association between Becker, Terror Management Theory (TMT) and Death Acceptance made explicit through the entirety of the website for The Ernest Becker Foundation (EBF); though I had seen *Denial of Death* on recommended death positive reading lists, I had not expected it to have sparked an organisation that engaged with content relating to death awareness activism – that a fifty year-old book might have a Twitter account or a mission statement about "advancing understanding of death anxiety so that we may live together more peacefully." In 2022, the site had added a post on accepting death and social efforts to improve relationships with death (perhaps not coincidentally alleged to have begun in the 1970s) including the hospice and palliative care movements, green and alternative burials, death doulas and discussion groups, "eventually culminating in what is now known as the Death Positive Movement, a term coined

by The *Order of the Good Death*". Guest interviews had been acquired from Sarah Chavez – co-founder of the *Order* and previously administrator of the *Deathling Den* on Facebook (p.42) and Susan Barsky Reid, co-founder of *Death Café,* as well as representatives from other awareness websites and apps. The coherence of Becker's with those of death positivity or awareness, however, were not immediately apparent to me. Upon reading *Denial of Death,* I was ever the more baffled that it should yield such influence or be considered anthropological.

Becker's book is more earnestly about solipsistic heroism, as demonstrated by each chapter title: the depth psychology of heroism, the failures of heroism, the dilemma of heroism. An initial argument is offered whereby the fear of death is not merely universal human condition but "a mainspring of human activity—activity designed largely to avoid the fatality of death, to overcome it by denying in some way that it is the final destiny for man." (*ibid:*ix) "Primitives", he suggests, might celebrate death if they believe it a final elevation to a higher form or enjoyment of eternity but as "most modern Westerners have trouble believing this anymore", fear of death is "so prominent in our psychological make-up." Contradictory instances are not an issue, and "religions like Hinduism and Buddhism performed the ingenious trick of pretending not to want to be reborn, which is a sort of negative magic: claiming not to want what you really want most" (*ibid,* 24). All of Becker's mankind wants to be immortal and teeters between ever-present fear of death (necessary for survival) as well as a total obliviousness to this fear in conscious life, so as to not be immobilised by terror (*ibid,*17). Is automatic breath fear? Is a beating heart doing so to avoid its death, or simply because it is alive? Becker subscribes to a Freudian tradition, spending a third of the book on penis envy, castrated mothers or assertions that children toilet train for existential dread of their bodies; women are new life and therefore part of nature; mental illness is a problem of "weakness and stupidity" in the inability to practice heroism (251), and so on. As culture is conceived of as an opposition to nature, it "is in its most intimate intent a heroic denial of creatureliness" (87) and if the anxiety engendered by "animalistic" quality of the human is if for Freud a matter of sex, for Becker and Freud's contemporary Otto Rank it is one of death:

> "The new perspective on psychoanalysis is that its crucial concept is the repression of death. This is what is creaturely about man, this is the repression on which culture is built, a repression unique to the self-conscious animal. Freud saw the curse and dedicated his life to revealing it with all the power at his command. But he ironically missed the precise scientific reason for the curse." (96)

Combatting this curse, Becker suggests with a kind of adulation, might be the most challenging for great men: the suffering creative genius who tries to combine the "most intensive Eros of self-expression with the most complete Agape of self-surrender" while "perhaps men with fewer gifts have it easier [...] Freud lived the daimon of his Eros to the hilt" (173). That man should "stick out of nature with a towering majesty" and suffer the haunting ignominy of going "back into the ground, blindly and dumbly to rot and disappear forever" (26) is too painful a dilemma. The book does indeed read as an ode to early psychoanalysts and an unquestioning primacy of individual ego-motivation; a use of psychic terminology for social phenomena not only personalises and anthropomorphises "society", but in avowing "precise scientific reason" any notions of resurrection and continued vivacity – or its renunciations – are denials or "mechanisms" all the same. "Cultural fact" is extracted as if empiricism and scientific thought are not analogous cultural systems of ideation and alongside Dureau's argument that "denial as a theory means we disregard culturally constituted environments in favour of an ethnocentric imposition of knowledge" (1991,38), there is a frailty in the joining of individual anxiety as affect to any conceptions of organisational dynamics. As Kellehear points out, even if it were true all humans feared death,

of those who report it “both the type of fear and the image of death feared tend to vary markedly” (Kellehear 1984,714).

In Becker and Freud’s tradition, death is unwaveringly a total annihilation of the ego and primal anxiety, introducing peculiar theoretical implosions. Becker suggests, for example, that while a child may have no knowledge of death until they are between three and five, and grows to understand death “rationally” by nine or ten (what is rational, how are these age benchmarks established?) their innate arch-anxiety is present: “he is absolutely dependent on the mother […] if he were abandoned to himself this world would drop away, and his organism must sense this at some level; we call this the anxiety of object-loss” (Becker 1973, 13–14). Rather than a founding fear of deprivation or separation, Becker sees anxiety over an absent carer reduced to the primary anxiety, death – I am prone to ask whether the inverse would be more appropriate especially as all the while for Freud death simply cannot be imagined; we cannot conceive of our own death, as we are convinced of our immortality, still present as spectators. To speak or reflect on one’s own death, there is already a presumed survival or immortal position (May 2009), asking what happens when you die is in lay terms “granting death a you that could be around”. In these texts, mortality is presented as the culmination and definition of humanity, as a consequence of awareness - animals considered without such consciousness may not be immortal, but non-mortal (Heidegger 1972).

Philosopher Todd May summarises similar arguments in proposing that “the fact that we die is the most important fact about us”, because it is the end of every other fact about us, as in Heidegger’s concept of person as *Dasein* or position of being-towards-death, where a shared “they” colludes to put off *Dasein*’s authenticity, an “ownmost nonrelational possibility-of-being” (Crépon 2013). Confronted with immanence of death, the “constant tranquilisation of death” is addressed to ourselves as much as the dying person, as for May who discusses an example of a family witnessing a death of a child. One might think this loss more important to the lives of the parents than their own inconceivable void, yet the author insists:

> “It is not the death of someone else that is the fundamental fact of one’s life. […] As Heidegger reminds us, the salient fact about death is that it is for each of us my own death. We can hear about the death of others, go to funerals, even see someone die. However, they do not replace the singularity of one’s own death […] one’s own death cannot be understood by coming to terms with someone else’s death. The silencing of one’s experience, including the experience of the silencing of another’s experience, remains intimately one’s own in a way that cannot be understood by analogy with anyone or anything else.” (May 2009,9)

In these unassailable modes, death is divorced from loss; experiences of cessations or going without are not unique to death and therefore made not-death in privileging imperceptibility. May proposes that reactions to the deaths of others are “as though it were something that happened to them, rather than something about who they are” because to do so, one would recognise themselves as mortal “for most of us, at least most of the time, too much to bear”. (*ibid*, 47) But was recognition of mortality not the most fundamental of human things? If Bauman holds death cannot be grasped as it is an absolute nothing (thus devoid of meaning) fear of death is fear of the void - what is there to be anxious about or deny? How can mortality be unbearably present in the confrontation with deaths of others, something “about who they are” to be tranquilised, when death is emphatically where they are not, where I or you cannot dwell?

Under such conditions an anthropology of death is indeed impossible, and far from being the most important or interesting of facts, it is subsumed into living as indistinguishable semantics when anxiety predicates existence. Heidegger looks to take a softer stance on denial then Becker, as while he maintains most people live through denial of death (and that dwelling on death can be a form of denial, as dwelling can stand as an attempt to tranquilise), there is a potential for a kind of authenticity presented: one might come to terms with the fact of death as final, goalless, inevitable. "It raises a possibility that we would rather not consider: that our lives do not really have a meaning or a point" (*ibid,* 35), May suggests, making another assumption on what people can bear or tolerate. Philosophical musings on the nature of mortality will be revisited in conversation with my participants but for now, suffice it to say that I align more closely with Levinas's critiques of Heidegger, against conflating death with anxiety and self: the death of the other is instead that which "cuts most" and therein "not even their death per se, but their suffering and aging, their vulnerability, that calls for responsibility to not abandon." (Crépon 2013,15)

Becker's work is one of heroes and sacrifice, death in the name of ideology or state, and Otto Rank and Freud devote much to killing: for Rank "the death fear of the ego is lessened by the killing of the other" and through the death of another "one buys oneself free from the penalty of dying, of being killed"(Becker 1973, 99). Freud wrote in the aftermath of the first world war in a reflection on primitive man for whom killing and violence was natural, unhesitating; he proposes that though civilised man does not act on such wishes, "in our unconscious desires" we seek to kill all those who cross or offend us, symbolically murdering the other. There is a peculiar nostalgia in Freud's suggestion of a severed relationship with death in modernity, as "we search in fiction, in literature and at the theatre for that which we are obliged to refuse in everyday life [...] We can still find men who know how to die and know how to make others die. Only there can we find the condition for our reconciliation with death" and life may be "interesting again, rediscovering all its content" (Freud 1968 [1920], 6–7 translation mine). Unsurprisingly, Freud suggests that biblically the first of human crimes "could not have been other than patricide"; I trust that focusing instead on the story of fall from Eden would have conveyed less "interesting" soft narratives of paternalistic care, interdependency, and its troubling refutation. As death awareness and positivity tend towards promotion of care provision – in open communication between loved ones and medical or funerary professionals, or for ensuring "good" dying, negative motives of anxiety, fear, terror or denial seem instead to daub everything with self-interest, refuting vocabularies of love or affection. Similarly, a message of highly personal and "unique" grief and mourning is prevalent in these contexts ("there is no right way"), opposed to unifying psychological models. As such, I was curious to see how the death positive activists interviewed for EBF bridged *the Denial of Death* to their missions. The singular example from Sarah Chavez of *The Order* suggested Becker's legacy means:

> Being more self-aware of our fear of death can help us make better decisions [...] re-evaluate why we might hold some of our beliefs and values. This can help us to make fact-based, not fear-based decisions and will hopefully minimise harm we do.[33]

The relationship between decision-making and death anxiety is central to Terror Management Theory, a tenet in evolutionary psychology that states its inspiration in Becker's work. Writing in the 1986, Greenberg, Pyszczynski and Solomon suggest that as death is "the worm at the core" of living as per their book's tagline, it guides all human thought and action "from the

[33] https://ernestbecker.org/this-mortal-life/death-acceptance/sarah-chavez/

great art we create to the devastating wars we wage" and is "the real reason we buy expensive cars and crave fame" (Greenberg et al. 1986). Due to a supposed self-preservation and its drives, the paralyzing terror of death awareness is managed by cultural "anxiety buffers" of shared worldview and self-esteem. Here, TMT is close to Lifton and Olson's earlier proposal of symbolic immortality (Lifton and Olson 2017 [1974]) in cultural buffers of sorts: death anxiety is overcome in varying imaginative continuities, whether a biological (family, reproduction), theological (immortal soul or afterlife realm), creative (production of works or influences that survive biological death) external nature (suggestion of the persistence of a known world, such as familiar mountains), or experientially transcendent mode (psychic states of altered consciousness achieved in, for example, drug use that collapses time).

The aforementioned immortalities might not appear a far cry from Malinowskian notions of religion or Hertz's ritual "triumph" of life but is more reductive and controversial once the second and differentiating "mortality salience" (MS) claim of TMT is introduced. By this hypothesis, if worldview provides protection against anxiety, reminders of mortality subsequently increase individual adherence to structures; to be more aware of death has individuals prone to defend normative ideologies from supposed threats to worldviews and respond negatively to those whose behaviour or existence does not align. The methodologies and MS-evocation of studies in TMT include measurements of "galvanic skin responses" and heartrate, and I number among those (Kirkpatrick and Navarrete 2006; Leary and Schreindorfer 1997) sceptical of the linkages between self-reported anxiety surveys, death-related videos (what kinds of death?), lectures on road fatalities, skin conductivity in anticipation of electric shocks, and opinions about U.S involvement in the Gulf War or the meaning of life. Nevertheless, TMT is employed in explanations of phenomena ranging from formation of prejudice to school shootings (Phillips 2023), and hundreds of studies across many countries and demographics buttress MS-arguments: evidence has suggested MS leads to participants' desire to punish moral transgressors more harshly (Rosenblatt et al. 1989) or prefer people who praise their countries. The uniqueness of death reminders in eliciting such response – as opposed their absence in reference to other anxiety-inducing scenarios such as public speaking, dental appointments or job loss – is countered thoughtfully by Kirkpatrick and Navarrete. The authors propose that instead of spelling universal death anxiety, MS-settings might be made distinct in reactivity not by their relation to death, but a position towards aid. The imagined failed exam does not engender adhesion as it is not a situation "in which coalitions could conceivably be part of adaptive solution". They posit that stimuli unrelated to death can produce similar results if they index challenges that could be effectively addressed through social support: since the other can provide aid in certain uncertainty and threats to bodily self-integrity can be addressed through social support, their thesis holds that "increases in normative orientation are ultimately aimed at recruiting assistance." (Kirkpatrick and Navarrete 2006, 295) A gentle shift from stark dyads of accepted or denied in anxious attachment to vulnerable interdependency and the recruitment of assistance in care is a key interest in my work, and in the endurance of taboo or denial, its self-aware rhetorical application is of great import.

In 1972, Fabian highlighted a critique levelled against an emergent "suppression" theory by sociologist Werner Fuchs: he argued that sociologists and psychologists trying to make denial of death the cardinal topic of their analyses are "in fact arguing very much like the Christian theologians who lament modern man's apparent indifference to death"(Fabian 1972, 552). To Fuchs, these analyses of death were undergirded by interests in preserving the vanishing influence of religious institutions rather than a commitment to reporting fact (Fuchs 1969,7 in *ibid*). Similar criticisms have been applied to Ariès, suggesting his opus closer to moralist,

devotional literature than a historical study (Whaley 1981, 8). Indeed, if contemporary work thematically privileging denial, taboo or other social invisibility of death is to be of value, it ought to recognise its ethico-moral engagements and arguments. When mid-century authors decry the transformation of the dead and dying into lepers or pornographies, they make a statement: this is not how the dead and dying should be treated. Kellehear's refreshing work against denial presents potential conversational avoidance of upsetting topics of death as stemming from aspirations for smooth relations, politeness and conviviality of conduct as opposed to fear of mortality itself. By this token, I suggest that if death is emotionally upsetting, instead of denying its occurrence or position in life, its circumstantial avoidances may be "denials" of that which severs us from one another in life. The emotional pain or upheaval of another may be inaccessible and unshareable, the space between outstretched arms: not denial, but defiance and maintenance in the face of that which would prepone our disentanglement. Tony Walter's blog post (p.55) indicates that if and when talk is required, it is not because it fills silence prescribed by alleged denying society: "[…] many people are doing so, not because it's been taboo, but because we have to evolve new ways to manage dying, funerals and mourning". Kellehear, in turn, has gone on to lead public health approaches to palliative and end-of-life care internationally, founding *Compassionate Communities UK* as a charity in 2018 advocating small-scale community development and civic engagement.

To conclude I return once more to Robben, whose introduction to a 2018 *Companion to the Anthropology of Death* ambitiously heralds *An Anthropology of Death for the Twenty-First Century* in its title. He suggests "a silent but steady revolution has been taking place in the anthropology of death during the last few decades", and that in addition to a "liberation" from Hertz, "new theoretical approaches […] are replacing older perspectives summarized by Bloch and Parry (1982), Fabian (1973), Goody (1975), Huntington and Metcalf (1979), and Palgi and Abramovitch (1984)" (Robben 2018, xv). Which are the perspectives to be replaced or supposedly connecting the theorists listed? Robben finds a classic notion of death "analysed within the restricted domain of liminal time" has been left behind in favour of angles where "life can be regarded as the beginning of dying and death the anticipation the new forms of living". Life and death are studied together as their boundaries are now understood as porous, and "liminality is understood more as a bridge than a demarcated time frame". Furthermore, Robben offers perspectives of regeneration could be "alternative to the conceptualisation of life and death as a dichotomy or incommensurable binary opposition" (*ibid*, xvii), citing Lambek or Desjarlais in 2016 presenting "opposed states of life and death as connected processes of animation, de-animation, and reanimation" or "co-poiesis" respectively. While severance and separation do exist in his essay, to borrow and defend Hertz here, it appears a supposed "old" anthropology of death is being symbolically killed to precipitate its renaissance. Did the Hertzian triangle (or what I call pyramid) and its indeterminate liminal time not speak to new forms of living or porosity; were the points on the triangle not bridged to negate dichotomous opposition and highlight their mutual constitution? Was regeneration not the core of Bloch and Parry? Another alleged opposing pairing to "debunk" in the new *Companion* was a starkly psychic or bioevolutionary grief, versus social or culturally constructed mourning - yet from the 1950s as in denial theorising giving culture an anxiety disorder or in Metcalf and Huntington versus Bloch and Parry passing "Durkheim's mantle" (p.51), the interiority or prescriptivist feelings surrounding death have been contested and conflated for decades. Rather than predicating scholarship on liberation and replacement, expansion on older theoretical positions enables reflection on the taken-for-granted in shared vocabulary in the very definitions of death. If, for example, death and life are more parallel than opposite, terms like "double death" and "nonlife" (Kirksey 2021), the extrication of social

and biological deaths (eg. Sudnow 1967) or the limitations of mortality as human phenomenon become relevant when global processes of non-reciprocal dissolution, destruction and decay produce "thanatological becoming" on a planetary scale (Aranda and Kirksey 2020).

There is a tendency in anthropology of death to declare change or new-found vigour: just as Metcalf and Huntington note their contribution in 1979 to be the first collection, Palgi and Abramovitch underline their article is the first to be appear in the Annual Review of Anthropology in 1984, and that "strangely enough, relatively few anthropologists concerned themselves specifically and directly with the subject", unlike philosophers (Palgi and Abramovitch 1984, 385). Once a list of names appears – Tylor, Frazer, Bachofen, Hertz, Radcliffe-Brown – it is clarified that anthropological work done may have led to many books but did "not create a fruitful tradition of research". In 1984, Kellehear found that if open conversations had indeed once been suppressed in medical contexts "today there is an increasing proliferation of literature indicating our "rediscovery" of death", making it difficult to hide from information on the topic, and a gradual tide was more "volte-face" and "the issue of disclosure of terminality to patients by their doctors has just about turned full circle since the 1950s"(Allan Kellehear 1984, 716). In their 1991 introduction Metcalf and Huntington note it is "now fashionable to deal frankly with a former taboo subject", discussed frequently in general press and professional journals. Walter cites Simpson who wrote in 1979 "death is a very badly kept secret; such an unmentionable topic that there are over 650 books now in print asserting we are ignoring the fact (Walter 1994)– ten years later, another 1700 were added, and though taboo was still declared, Walter proposed the revival of death was expressly popular in public and academic circles. Lofland termed it "radical chic" in her 1978 book, and in its anniversary foreword Troyer admits thanatologists may still resort to claiming a tabooed lack of conversation – the "obvious" foil - if only to make their own contributions seem more important, advancing careers and book sales (Lofland 2019, xv).

For its elegance in presenting an overview of ethnographies on death published after the 1980s, Robben's introduction would herald a greater revolution if it did away with a dichotomy of death either absent or present, denied versus accepted, silenced or spoken in Western contexts. It probably cannot, when towards the end of the same volume a chapter entitled *The Disappearance of Dying, and Why It Matters* by Helen Chapple opens by positing that "Dying as a phenomenon is under siege. Open awareness which allows a dying situation to be acknowledged and valued, is virtually unknown outside of hospice and palliative care" (Chapple 2018, 129). Writing as a physician, it is quickly apparent Chapple's focus is on rectifying the fraught or vulnerable positions of dying patients in the United States and care provision – so why call dying "disappearing" instead of for example, painfully neglected or mistreated? The rigidity of life versus death or completed separation or incorporation sit by another paradigmatic duo of anxiety or tranquillity. Relations are debated as obligations or prescriptions for stability over rupture more so than through terms of opportunity and responsibility. Death in all its guises is still "the problem of death". This is not to say that suffering is not relevant to human mortality (or to stretch the positive in death positive) but to use Metcalf on the Berawan as an illustrative example of behaviour founded in negation. The widow *suffers* because of the *vengeful* soul of the deceased, its *envy* of the living caused by its own *miserable* state; only by suffering can the widow deflect its *malice*. The soul and corpse may be feared or perhaps *pitied* (Metcalf 2017 [1982]). The avoidance of contamination and the removal of individuated threat are consistently theoretically privileged over the potential enjoyment and endorsement of becoming entangled. That which is reborn in many analyses of regeneration are babies, crops, political regimes or "worldview systems" to hinder anxiety – that which fortifies - rather than shared, irresolute, circulating affect, or celebrations of

interpersonal vulnerabilities. Examining Robben's article, one finds "love" only as part of "loved one" as shorthand for the dead or bereaved, yet in conversations I had in the field, people most frequently expressed thoughts around death in relation to demonstrating or feeling love, care and comfort, or respect and justice – not terror. If the efforts of the death awareness movement were to mitigate harm and enable better end-of-life decisions, my work is concerned with the narratives people build around such choices. If death is a problem, I discuss the way various facets are problematised and solutions are presented or left mute and toothless in the face of complaint (p.11). As such, in addition to the foundational texts on anthropology of death presented here, my theoretical engagement will branch to anthropologies of care in its emergence in case-studies framing the chapters that follow.

In this chapter, I have grounded research through literature review, presenting foundational texts for both the anthropology of death, and an intellectual tradition in the social sciences that undergirds prevalent arguments in my fieldsite about death denied, "tabooed", or sequestered in a Western context. Opening with Robert Hertz's 1907 essay on death rituals, I describe the centrality of the relations between actors around mortality to highlight the porous categories and evolving models that defy suggestions of universal anxiety – as in a Terror Management Theory - or a singular death concept.

CHAPTER 2 - SPEAKING DEATH

As I tapped Blighty Café in Finsbury Park into my phone's search bar, I realised I had heard of the venue I was navigating to before. The founder of Blighty, Chris Evans, had written an opinion letter for *The Guardian* earlier that year, defending what he called his "Commonwealth of Nations Café" after protesters had stormed the premises armed with accusations – the site, kitted out with a Winston Churchill theme, had been deemed a celebration of colonialism.[34] Whilst I was curious about how such a theme would be executed in practice (with bulldog figurines, fry-ups, and union jack bunting, I discovered), my visit in October 2018 was primarily motivated by it serving as host to one of the most frequent Death Cafés in London, occurring nearly once a month. The event was to take place after business hours, and the dimmed lights on the ground floor made me wonder whether I had simply gone to the wrong place or signed up for something more akin to a séance.

I checked the relevant email for our start time, as this was one of the popular locations, the type you sign up for by messaging the organisers on *deathcafe.com.* Whichever representative of the café had written the email praised the generosity of Blighty for allowing the use of its space and made concomitant expectations clear:

> We also ask that people buy drinks/cake during the event, so that we may continue to keep our venue. Teas, instant coffee, soft drinks, beer wine, and cake will be available for sale.

I skimmed the inside of my purse, brushing off crumpled receipts, crumbs and compacts before chancing upon a few pound coins.

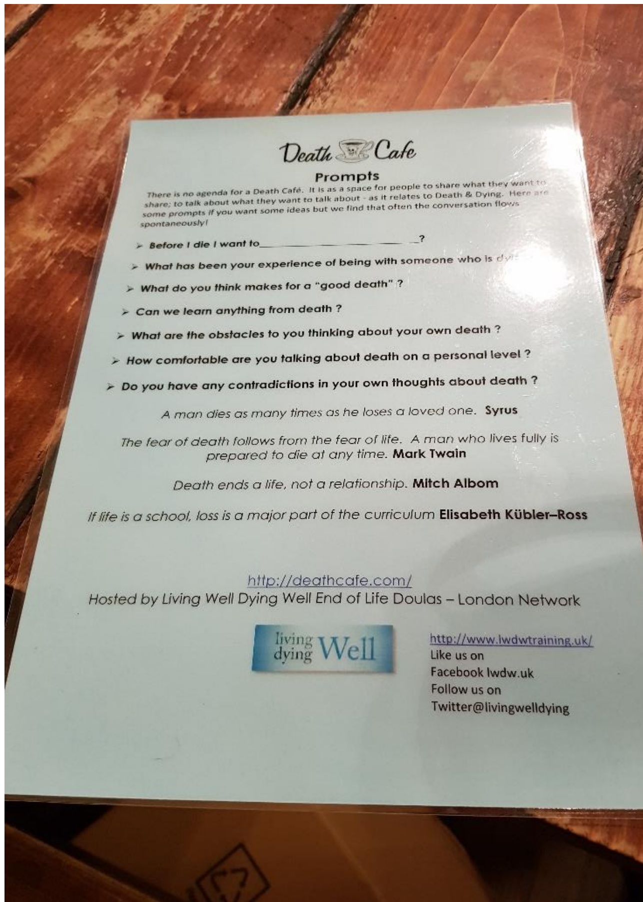
> We are sorry about this, but free venues are virtually impossible to find, and so we need to respect the needs of the venue. We hope you understand.

I later learnt that some cafés posted their meetings on third-party websites like Eventbrite or Evensi, charging up to five pounds per guest. I remembered Evans' insistence that Blighty was founded as "much more than a place for lattes and toast" before scrolling until I found the relevant section in his opinion piece: "we are a hub for creativity, entrepreneurship and, most importantly, charity. Upstairs at Blighty we have a workspace full of interesting businesses and local people. We hold yoga, life drawing and comedy events". This time checking the Death Café site, I found that Blighty's second location, Blighty India in Tottenham (Churchill murals replaced with Devanagari script and a neon-light Gandhi on the wall) also hosted Death Cafés, and dared suspect that events like these can be quite the feather in a hip, community-driven cap. I cannot remember when I first learnt of Death Cafés; I knew I had seen many flyers in trendier coffee shop windows and on foldout chalkboard signage, that my university's colleges had hosted some, and that they were referenced in Death Awareness spaces online, from YouTube clips to tweets. From what I understood, the specific Finsbury Park café founded by two end-of-life doulas had been running a few times a month since 2015, and as such I was unsure whether I might stick out uncomfortably, entering a tight-knit group of regulars.

I swung the door open and hesitated; though I was three minutes early, I had expected somebody else at the tables. "Are you here for the Death Café? Is it just you? Could I have your

[34] https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/jan/31/cafe-blighty-protesters-community-colonialism

name, please?" asked a middle-aged woman behind the counter as she reached for a list. I spelt out my surname letter by letter as a matter of habit, and she asked me what I'd like before gesturing at the spread of teabags and recommending the lemon drizzle. I'm relieved to find I had enough change for a cup of chamomile, and to hear there were already a few attendees upstairs. The comparatively brightly lit space above was a kitschy hodgepodge of Britannica: there are *Keep Calm*-posters, tea cosies, bobblehead monarchs, and I spotted a bowl full of little national flags on cocktail sticks. I thought about which sandwich on the menu might get impaled with a printer-paper emblem of Bangladesh, and how well the nostalgic and playful (or misguided, if we are to hear its detractors) aesthetic of the venue paralleled some of what I had seen in death awareness-adjacent photos online: cafés serving up skull-shaped biscuits, or members of the Den (p.27) on Facebook gushing over a grim reaper plushie or coffin-shaped pool lilo. The five tables varied in size, and could accommodate between four and eight people each, and only one of them was occupied when I stepped in – a man, perhaps in his early sixties, stroked a greying beard and seems engrossed in conversation with the woman next to him, and I got the feeling they knew each other. We exchanged a half-smile and nod of greeting recognition as I sat at the end of their table. My back against the wall and a notebook in my lap, I played detective-researcher, poised to keep tally marks of attendance at the top of the page. I was grateful to have something to do, as the tea was more scalding than sippable, and taking out my phone would have felt more of an intentional isolation in a setting championing conversation. I noticed laminated sheets of paper on each table; the skull-adorned teacup logo of Death Café heading a page of discussion prompts, though the subheading assured me that "we often find conversation flows spontaneously!" The organisers of this café also feature on this sheet – the London branch of the *Living Well Dying Well* doulas encouraged the reader to follow their Facebook page and Twitter-handle.



Death Cafe

Prompts

There is no agenda for a Death Café. It is as a space for people to share what they want to share; to talk about what they want to talk about - as it relates to Death & Dying. Here are some prompts if you want some ideas but we find that often the conversation flows spontaneously!

- Before I die I want to____________________?
- What has been your experience of being with someone who is dying?
- What do you think makes for a "good death"?
- Can we learn anything from death?
- What are the obstacles to you thinking about your own death?
- How comfortable are you talking about death on a personal level?
- Do you have any contradictions in your own thoughts about death?

A man dies as many times as he loses a loved one. **Syrus**

The fear of death follows from the fear of life. A man who lives fully is prepared to die at any time. **Mark Twain**

Death ends a life, not a relationship. **Mitch Albom**

If life is a school, loss is a major part of the curriculum **Elisabeth Kübler–Ross**

http://deathcafe.com/

Hosted by Living Well Dying Well End of Life Doulas – London Network

living dying Well

http://www.lwdwtraining.uk/
Like us on
Facebook lwdw.uk
Follow us on
Twitter@livingwelldying

Death Café Feedback form

Overall how would you rate this event? 5 = excellent 1= poor
Comments 5

How comfortable did you feel? 5 = excellent 1= poor
Comments 4

Did you find the overall discussion structure worked well? 5 = excellent 1= poor
Comments 4

Would you say that attending this event changed or affected your feelings around death and dying? 5 = excellent 1= poor
Comments 2 (this isnt necessarily a bad thing)

Any added comments or suggestions for improvement? 5 = excellent 1= poor
Comments

Figure 13 – A collage featuring examples of some prompt cards and feedback sheets at Death Café events. The cards marked GraveTalk were used at a Death Café in Elephant and Castle and are, in fact, printouts pertaining to a Church of England death-talk initiative to match Death Café (whose site does not mention death cafés, perhaps because of guidelines about no affiliation to religious entities.

A man and a woman in their early twenties walked in next and asked me if there was anyone sitting to my right. The man began a conversation with the older, bearded man, and I wondered whether their immediate conversation is another case of prior familiarity, the bearded man's propensity to speak to whoever is closest, or my notebook having an unapproachable forcefield about it – I resolved to put it away. "So, what were you writing about?" he asked me, confirming the latter suspicion, and introducing himself as Kenneth. "Oh well, actually, I go to these things for my work, sort of"; I was unsure as to whether I would do my bit about consent and research or interviews now or once more people arrived, but he interrupted my follow-up by asking whether I was a fellow writer and poet. "So, you study death? That's really cool", remarked the younger man. I described my PhD and its prospective title, feeling oddly defensive as I reassured everyone around me that I would not "use them for research" without consent. I passed around the notebook to collect email addresses, acknowledging how "weird it must be since we just met" – experiencing a strange relief to see that the table seemed more at ease with my fieldwork than I did. I tried to assuage my feeling of something like guilt by asking the young couple – Ellie and Ben - what they did, and find out they write too, and were co-producing a short film. I wonder whether the seeming creative chic of this circle has to do with Death Café, or with Finsbury Park and Blighty. The conversation turned to which films we'd seen most recently, with Ben admitting with self-professed embarrassment that he cried watching a recent film about Neil Armstrong. "That's nothing", I consoled him, letting everyone know the saccharine ending of *A Star is Born* made me sob. "I feel like it's quite good though, having a good cry. I'm such a crier, I feel so much better afterwards" added Ellie. Kenneth backs up this idea of catharsis, how emotions can feel "blocked up" and that certain films or songs are valued bittersweet tools to meet them with – whether or not one would be as fast to admit their artistic value. "Maybe that's what we're here after, too", he smiled.

A glass was struck in the centre of the room and the promising chatter fizzled out. The lady who had greeted me downstairs let us know that it was about time to start (fifteen minutes late) and that each table had been assigned a facilitator. On the bench opposite me, a blonde woman in a colourful cardigan waved her hand gently to identify herself. The space had filled, with five tables housing between four and six participants each. The demographics of this room exemplified what I would come to meet in future Death Cafés, with a female majority and high proportion of attendees who would come to mention a background in nursing or counselling, - though we may have been a slightly younger, as my quick survey of the room estimated seven of us in our twenties, and two in their thirties (the eldest present was ninety-six, "and proud of it"). This was not lost on a guest who commented on how wonderful it was "to see that young people *care*". Our host asked those who had visited one before to raise our hands. I estimated around six or seven hands up, but could not be sure which ones were those of facilitators; the host spoke as if answering a question I wanted to ask by exclaiming how they had never had so many returning guests.

"A lot of you will know the gist, then, but for the newcomers and as a refresher: I'm Caroline, and I've been hosting this café for a few years now. It's wonderful to see so many of you here. It's a brave thing to do, when most people don't want to talk about it at all." She went on to detail the principles of the Death Café following the official principles found on the Death Café practitioners' guide, to be found on the movement's website – section six[35]:

[35] https://deathcafe.com/how/

6.6 At the start of your Death Cafe it is good to set out some things:

• What Death Cafe is and where it has come from (see here) and our principles (above).

• Whether you're asking for donations and, if so, what these are for (see Death Cafe and money below).

• Some basic ground rules: listening when people are talking, respect for others' views and confidentiality.

The first points of "what and where from" were read off a sheet of paper, matching the paragraphs of the "about" pages linked through the guide: Death Café is not a physical space but a "social franchise", founded in 2011 by Jon Underwood following the *Café Mortel* organised by Swiss sociologist Bernard Crettaz. At a Death Café people gather "to eat cake, drink tea and discuss death", and in doing so "increase awareness of death with a view to helping people make the most of their finite lives." Group discussion is directed but with "no agenda, objectives or themes", and is to be a conversation between persons "united by the fact that we all must die", rather than grief support or counselling. "For those who are in need of support like that, we do have some brochures of professional resources available", Caroline added, and suggested that those who are recently bereaved or sensitive – including sufferers of thanatophobia, or fear of death - may find the situation "challenging" and consider attending a café "later in their journey". Anyone who was not comfortable was granted the opportunity to leave before we began. "Of course, everything here is confidential, and we want to keep this an open, safe space for everyone, so to keep that trust when we're talking about things that can be personal and emotional, take care not to interrupt others. This is not a debate or an argument, so be mindful that people can have different beliefs." Caroline assures us that most people find Death Cafés "uplifting".

Finally, we were encouraged to stay "on topic, please!", as while conversation drifting was natural, we should remember "what we are here for"; there would be plenty of time to chat about other things during the break. The reconciliation of no agenda, theme or objective immediately following set goals - of increasing awareness "with a view to helping people" - and a call for focus on our purpose amused me. I was troubled by my potential disruption of safety, as well as the establishment of fitting attendance in general. If all humans were united by mortality and discussion around death was taboo to be normalised, what of the implication that it should also be handled with kid-gloves, or that certain audiences need to look elsewhere? I lingered on the congratulatory nature of our supposed courage and dissimilarity to "most people" unwilling to engage thus, as well as the suggestion that doing so might enable us to "make the most" of our lives. Thanking us for our donations towards the venue hire, another of the event facilitators went on: "I think the popularity of this café goes to show just how death denying we are as a culture, and how important and in-demand these spaces are" – why not, indeed, recognise it as the inverse, and an example of a society fascinated with death and dying? I propose that as in chapter 1, the self-identification as counter-cultural and resulting empowerment relies on a rhetorical landscape of taboo, often supplemented by academic and journalistic texts.

Speaking the unspoken

At the inception of this project in 2017, American sociologist Jack Fong's *The Death Café Movement: Exploring the Horizons of Mortality* was published, marking the first monograph on the movement which at the time posited there "are close to 4000 Death Cafés across 37 countries" with the United States, United Kingdom, Canada and Australia hosting the vast majority (Fong 2017). It is unclear how Fong quantifies these cafés, as *deathcafe.com* expresses figures in events held – it is not a matter of whether there "are" cafés, but rather of how many "have been" with many events being one-off pop-ups, or if headed by the same hosts, held in a variety of locations (including online) at irregular intervals. Based on my notes, in September 2017 the official site boasted 6000 meetings in 56 countries, and 15 976 in 85 countries by March 2023, with the thresholds of 1000 and of 10 000 surpassed in June 2014 and January 2020 respectively. Of course, numerous events in the same vein will have been held without notices sent to the café website and as such, true figures are difficult to assess; to have one's event advertised at *deathcafe.com*, organisers must further agree to comply with principles about free entry and prohibitions about promoting one's business or "any conclusion, product, and course of action". Herein, any affiliations with private sector organisations in death and dying, political organisations, religious movements, or campaign groups "whose remit includes contentious issues such as right to die, abortion or vivisection" (Guide 8.8) are also forbidden. As such, Death Cafés hosted at many churches are omitted from figures, and one can see the emergence of spin-offs such as *Death Chat* hosted by Mireille Hayden, the British-French founder of *Gentle Dusk* – whilst this end-of-life support service based in London's Islington hosts Death Cafés, Hayden set up her 2020 Chat in Paris (*pour mieux aborder la vie* = to better approach life) with a 30€ participation fee and reference to her expertise as health psychologist. Informal café-type events are further seen at the beginning or end of other death awareness events making up Dying Matters festival week – such as following films screenings or presentations (see chapter 5) blurring event boundaries.

Fong's accounts are based on five groups in Southern California between 2014 and 2015 and unequivocally establishes Death Café "an existential and transformative social movement" based in the "sublime" liberation of its proponents from "technocratic, vulgarized" systems of mortality comprising media, market, and medicine. It is difficult to understate the laudatory conceptualisation of this work, with Death Cafés serving as emancipatory on even a metaphysical level for its participants (*ibid*, 57-8); Fong adopts Habermasian theories of communicative action to propose the discourses at these warm, life-affirming sites decolonise lifeworlds and are not only keys to uncovering truth, authenticity or meaning in life, but levellers of communication and community – rather than enchanting a disenchanted world, participants are thought to materially transcend them (*ibid*, 4). Whilst concerns regarding claims' ambition in relation to limited samples have been raised since (Žibaitė 2022, doctoral thesis), as well questions regarding the romantic or uncritical tone (Koksvik and Richards 2023, 2) in which death "can be beautiful", Fong joins Miles and Corr (2017) in defining Death Café as a movement of its own, "truly unique" as a community initiative. In my estimation – given these works centre on the United States - they represent a strangely insular reading, omitting recognition of broader Western death awareness or death positivity entirely. Whether Lofland's 1978 critique of the American Happy Death chic (p. 13, 70) or the establishment of mortician Caitlin Doughty's death positive organisation in 2011 had simply passed these authors by or not, the uniqueness of Death Café and its attribution to one or two thinkers in the 2000s is a point similarly spread by its practitioners and promoters.

Literature on Death Cafés proliferates, and if five years ago articles were scant, now one can consult a wide array of journals, albeit primarily in the fields of medicine or nursing, though some exist in death studies. Examples include Richard et. Al 2020, Morgan 2017, Nelson et. Al 2018, Koskvik 2021, Nelson 2017, Nyatanga et al. 2021, Chang 2021, Parry et al. 2021, Hammer et. al 2018, Seifu et al. 2022 and 2023, Olives et. al 2020, Browne et al. 2017, Getz 2022, Voutilainen and Vaipuro 2019. Between 2017 and 2023, I met two PhD students and one masters student working on theses regarding cafés at universities in the United Kingdom, United States and Finland respectively, in the fields of anthropology and psychology; I was turned away from a London café in 2019 due to "too many academics asking, now". Dozens of pieces exist in popular media, with thirteen articles between 2013 and 2022 in *The Guardian* alone; *The New York Times* covers them five times from 2017, as do *The Atlantic* and *Wired*; Death Café's own site hosts a blog with a decade of reflections on experiences from both facilitators and attendees. In an insightful 2022 thesis, Žibaitė suggests most of these writers have Death Café "clumped together with various other initiatives" or trends including the rising popularity of death doulas (see chapter 5) or green, "natural" burial, and cites Lofland who notes that in the 1960s and 1970s, her umbrella of "happy death movement" was similarly made up of what contemporaries dubbed "natural death movement", "death and dying movement", and "death with dignity movement" alike: it was

> "Sprawling, diverse, multistructured, [a] diffuse assemblage of individuals, organisations and activities concerned with promoting a change in American society with regard to its beliefs, emotional responses, and legal and normative practices about death and dying". (Lofland 2019, 56)

Žibaitė further notes that Death Café events increase significantly in May due to Dying Matters Awareness Week where they are a staple for most organisers (Žibaitė 2022, 18). As such – and perhaps inevitably, given my choices for delineating site – I cannot but disagree slightly with her first comments on Death Café whereby "placing Death Café under the umbrella of the Death Positive movement is inaccurate" (*ibid,* 24). In this analysis, Fong is criticised for presenting Death Café in a way that is "almost indistinguishable from more general narratives about the Death Awareness movement" (26), yet I venture that the similarity is precisely due to their shared, vaguely positive messages. It may be true that of Žibaitė's Scottish participants "only a few organisers and attendees I interviewed knew what 'Death Positive' was" (24) – generally the youngest or most internet-savvy – and that identifying as "death positive" is too narrow semantically. Reading more closely, one understands that the author treats death awareness and death positivity as distinct movements, preceding admission that positivity (associated with Doughty and the United States) could be seen as a "more visible, hip, younger version of the death awareness movement and not a separate entity" (23). I fall into this camp of onlookers with Ara Francis, who writes the epilogue to the 2018 edition of Lofland's *Craft of Dying*, recognising the contemporary "death positive" as adherent to Lofland's tenets for an indefinite movement.

An analogy is proposed by Žibaitė, whereby if death awareness and death positivity are "toolkits", Death Café is a "tool" – if the movements are collections of practices or attitudes, cafés are a specific type of practice. This is a fair and important note and critique to those overlooking the dynamics of a dedicated space or overlook local variation. Homing in on the practitioners then, it is stated hosts and attendees are people "who broadly think that it is good to talk about death". But what is a tool if and when it claims to not have a specific utility? For Miles and Corr, the uniqueness of Death Café lies in "no ideology or agenda for the gathering",

which could not be more obtuse; the ideology must be borne of a belief in the (good) effects of talk, a shared vocabulary, and more broadly in dialogue with an environment elsewhere presumed unspeaking - to shared detriment. As in the brief opening of a Death Café above, Caroline and her facilitators call us "brave" and unlike others; they identify a social need for places to speak; Kenneth and Ellie talk about catharsis; we are told which types of behaviours aid or harm open conversation, whether it be emotional excess or conflict; we are told of our uplifting purposeless purpose.

I will return to this café to describe ways in which attendees are concerned with speaking in – an especially (Crettaz 2010, 26)Bernard Crettaz (1938-2022) worked in Switzerland, directing the department of sociology at the University of Geneva until his retirement in 2003. His interest in death and dying is evident from 1982, in his co-founding of the Swiss-Romand society of thanatological studies in Lausanne – this followed a conference on regional mortuary customs held in the previous year. Depending on source consulted, the creation of the society was mandated or requested by PFG, *Pompes funèbres générales*, one of the numerous trading names of the French society of funeral directors, OGF, whose conglomerate represented 20 percent of the French funerary market in 2018[36]. The first *Café Mortel* was held in March 2004 in Neuchatel restaurant to 250 guests, with nearly 100 hosted by the last event in 2014 – meetings were held in Switzerland, France, Belgium and Canada to audiences between 15 and 300, each led by Crettaz. In his 2010 book *Cafés mortels: Sortir la mort du silence*, the author provides guidance for prospective hosts and makes clear the cafés origins in a specific Swiss tradition: Crettaz describes wanting to transmit and preserve the fundamental mortuary savoir-faire of "generations and generations" of the Valais region of the alps. There is a description of a *tiroir de la mort*, a chest of drawers in the family home Crettaz had previously been forbidden to peer into until one day, from its depths, his mother produced a tablecloth, a crucifix, votives, holy water… It is underlined that as the last of the family's children to live with his parents, he was to know how to prepare the body and the home when death came, from notifying the carpenter and gravedigger to setting up the wake. A further disappearing custom was that of the funerary meal or feast, written of extensively by Crettaz's wife, Yvonne Preiswerk: as in Žibaitė's words on Death Café, the meal is mentioned as "a symbolic tool" in the chest of drawers. In preparation for this meal, people of Valais would place "burial barrels" of wine in cellars at the time of their marriage in preparation for their funerals, or age mortuary cheeses for extensive periods. For the feast, bread would be baked in communal ovens, with the three foods – said to exemplify the people's connection to the land and its bounty – consumed in an often-joyous assembly of the community. Crettaz describes his father walking him to the family cellar where he recognised the "richness of his own culture" that was being forgotten and censored by church and state, and credits PFG for its recognition of people "wanting rituals but not knowing how anymore", allowing the thanatological society's work towards a "new familial ritual knowledge" (*ibid,* 25).

The first Café Mortel in France was featured in an article in *The Independent* in 2010, and read by Jon Underwood (1972-2017), a systems engineer based in Hackney who cited it as inspiration for his project. A student at the Jamyang Buddhist centre in London, Underwood left his career in tech to manage Jamyang between 2000 and 2002 and foster his devotion to Tibetan Buddhism with a specific interest in death: he volunteered in a hospice and trained in spiritual care for the dying (Žibaitė 2022, 14) and created a funeral industry directory in collaboration

[36] https://www.lesechos.fr/industrie-services/services-conseils/le-marche-des-pompes-funebres-poursuit-sa-consolidation-1214857

with the Natural Death Centre. Death Café was developed with the help of Underwood's mother, psychotherapist Sue Barsky Reid, and had its first event in 2011 at the family home; after three further cafés that year, Death Café was invited to a death-themed 2012 festival weekend at the Royal Festival Hall which was reported to be a success, and Underwood had contacted Crettaz to confirm his approval of this extension of his café model (*ibid* 14-5). The year 2012 also saw the production and publication of the first online guide for anyone interested in hosting similar events, and the first instalment further afield, in the United States. Before his death, Underwood had plans to open a physical, purpose-built Death Café in London, but its establishment fell to the wayside in 2015, with *deathcafe.com* blogposts apologising as the £39,574 raised from 182 investors was insufficient, and crowdfunded contributions were returned.[37] Beyond café updates, Underwood's posts evidenced a keen recognition and appreciation of other death awareness initiatives, as in a 2015 entry under a picture of Caitlin Doughty:

> "YAY for Caitlin Doughty. Caitlin is undoubtedly great. To have achieved what Caitlin has around death and dying in the context of our extremely death-phobic world is incredible. Who knows what Caitlin will go on to do. It will be a treat to find out."

He is similarly enthused by Bernard Crettaz, as in a 2014 piece describing a visit for the final Café Mortel:

> "[...] I went to Switzerland to meet Bernard Crettaz. It was a brief but magical trip and definitely one of the highlights of my life. Bernard Crettaz is the founder of Cafe Mortels, and his work inspired Death Café. Without him it wouldn't exist in the way it does." [38]

Furthermore, in response to a 2013 article in *The Atlantic* entitled 'Death is having a moment', Underwood reflects:

> "Death Café seems to have arrived at precisely the time loads of people wanted to talk about death. And there is currently a profusion of exciting and vibrant work around death. It's really wonderful to be involved. Maybe this is happening because we're all so brilliant and clever. But in the unlikely event that this isn't the case there's the question about 'why now?' Any thoughts?"

Crettaz's publications are harder to access and unavailable in English, perhaps explaining the missing comparisons between Café Mortel and Death Café events in many research projects. Café Mortel, for example, always included a meal and stressed the importance of pre- and post-dinner badinage and a mixture of events: people might visit nearby sites together, "such as dances at the bars, or swimming at the Couvet pool" (Crettaz 2010, 35) and exchange words and addresses spontaneously, drinking in conviviality making for a "festive air", walking around and approaching one another. It is by this lightness or exultance that Crettaz suggests profundity is accessible, de-dramatised and reclaimed by community in the face of specialists that "in their way, are colonising and evacuating death" (*ibid*, 32). He underlines the removal of expertise and the unity as a community of the living, with an insistence on being "far from therapy", even if "it does help people": the blurb of his book suggests a liberation from the "ghettos" of medicine, religion, psychology, and media. In this vein, it reads from the same hymn sheet of thanatological literature characterising the 1950s to 1980s (eg. Gorer 1955, see p.53-5) and associates the erosion of cultural confidence with the removal of the corpse from the family

[37] https://deathcafe.com/theme/deathcafelondon/
[38] https://deathcafe.com/blog/114/ ; https://deathcafe.com/blog/147/

home – in favour of the funeral home – from the 1950s onwards in Switzerland. This is further in line with the influential work of French historian Philippe Ariès, whose ambitious publications in 1974 and 1981 trace a history of "Western" death – primarily French/European – over ten centuries, describing a gradual alienation of humanity from death. In the Middle Ages, death was supposedly "tamed", not eliciting fear but celebrated as "natural" communal life, as an opposite to "untamed" forbidden, or invisible 20th century death. In these readings the comparative frequency or commonality of death in eras of high mortality are not explanations for proposed lack of "theatrics" of emotion at deathbeds – rather, emotional dis-ease is attributed to death becoming "unacceptable", as if by spontaneous collusion. For the author, an increase of attention paid to ritual is not a challenge to a thesis of loss: if for example in the 16th and 18th centuries rituals and ceremonies were elaborate, it is taken to be indicative of dramatised, "unhealthy", unnatural and obsessively feared death (Ariès 1974, 56–57). The "attitude" of a continent is placed on a timeline grounded on records of royal deaths and their princely final words of acceptance, seeming to disregard a possibility of revered heroism curated for posterity or how small a demographic such chronicles represent.

Ripostes to Ariès include the work of historian Ralph Houlbrooke, who lists multiple examples to counter broad strokes, including letters, diaries and autobiographies suggesting intense feelings of personal grief and notes the clerical insistence that expressions of fear would throw into doubt the Christian courage or faith of the dying, and the *Ars Moriendi*. The *Ars Moriendi* guides of the early 15th century seem to assert that the good death was a preoccupation that necessitated a guide, and its writers – just like the death activists of today – found that a great majority of people did not prepare or think about death enough in advance, with some lamenting the widespread disbelief in hell (R. A. Houlbrooke 1989, 11).Instead of exemplifying the practices of a people, the existence of a guide might point to a lack of coherence or adherence to the imposed idyll. More pointed criticisms find Ariès's opus closer to moralist, devotional literature (Whaley 1981,8), but its legacy lasts in the causative associations of attitude, pronouncement, and rite. Ariès emphasises a definitive moment of death in a *rite de passage* marked by the dying (who recognise their fate and create a will), the ritual facilitator (providing viaticum or anointment) and a community who declares the death. Less attention is paid to the biological imminence or protraction of death in relation to these rites, or his definitions of "natural". If in centuries prior death was customarily a matter of rapid decline, accident or infectious disease, the degenerative or chronic conditions that kill most contemporary westerners are incongruous with Ariès's leave-taking on a deathbed one retires to once their time comes, and passing is ambiguous when multiple "silent deaths" or social deaths occur (Hallam et al. 1999; Borgstrom 2017) - in, for example, the loss of autonomous eating, breathing, memory or communication. Rather than granting rite status here by extension of liminality or treating admission into palliative stages of medical care as viaticum or recognising pronouncement as an assemblage, Ariés finds acts abandoned in favour of passivity. Death is "demoted" from leaving to failing medical appliance – families do not perform death rites but enact denials, such as in the popularity of cremation: "the community no longer exists", he posits, and "has been replaced by an enormous mass of atomised individuals" (Ariès 1982, 575).

I am prone to agree with writers for whom denial-taboo is "overstated, undernuanced" (Walter 1991), "unhelpful, unnecessary and dogmatic" (Troyer in Lofland 2019, xii), but for Crettaz as for popular British palliative care physician and death awareness figurehead Kathryn Mannix (p.29-30), "we" are in a "tyranny" or "conspiracy of silence" (Mannix 2017), and I am yet to attend an event that did not lead with the proposition of taboo. Koskvik and Richard, in their 2021 article on Death Café interviewed 49 café organisers in 34 countries and over seven continents and

similarly found each stated death denial or death taboo as motive for their café work (Koksvik and Richards 2021). This is to say that while Café Mortel is expressly Swiss at first, its transference into other areas with international appeal is easy based on what I have previously called “ostensible” society or virtual community (p.12, 24) and to preface my argument that despite claims against market, religion, medicine, psychology or media in turn, the circulation of its principles is dependent on and resultant of the influence of each of these spheres. Beyond the misconception reinforced in media outlets regarding the novelty or uniqueness of death awareness likely aiding its appeal (Francis in Lofland 2019, 91), I draw attention to the stress on emotional component and ritual drama: Crettaz has his space “de-dramatised” and joyful, just as Ariès presented the tame, natural and “non-theatrical” acceptance of truth lost, with taboo as shorthand for secrecy, both stemming from and resulting in fear. The Death Café introduction likewise establishes an “uplifting”, unchallenging atmosphere. In Ariès’s understanding, death denial is about diminished capacity to *psychologically* engage and manage death or transition (Ariès 1982, 566–68), and such beliefs are echoed by participants who see speech as a way to “come to terms”, such as a philosophy professor who tells Fong that “we [in attendance] are living more authentically, we’re living more fully” (Fong 2017,96).

Following the trajectory of the café I attended in Finsbury Park, I found an article interviewing its organisers who were in search of a new venue, met with the mounting hiring fees at Blighty: here, Caroline describes Death Café as “better than therapy” for many guests[39]. But where does the notion that death can, or should be emotionally fulfilling or enriching come from? I agree with Tradii and Roberts’s statement by which despite drives for “normalising”, it is more likely a background of secrecy is crucially maintained to foster a sense of elevated intimacy (Tradii and Robert 2019). Furthermore, I believe such intimacy is modelled on the confessional, as in Crettaz’s proposition that “liberating the secret” is to “exorcise the power of death”, allowing “rebirth into authenticity” (Crettaz 2010, 9; 101). Fittingly, in an interview Crettaz presents the café as a funerary feast in its own right, as “often, attendees will have already done therapy – the café functions as more of a final rite […] it is when one accepts speaking in this context that one begins to allow death to leave”[40]. In the Death Café accounts below, I recognise examples of taboo talk and evaluate how and whether ideals of liberation and authentic or open conversations are enacted for or experienced by participants on the ground. Maintaining that Death Café represents a part of a death-aware constellation, I pose questions regarding the provision of a designated environment.

Whose turn is it?

Our facilitator cleared her throat once Caroline finished speaking and gave us a gentle smile; she had a quiet voice, and I missed her name. We were encouraged to go around clockwise in the circle, stating our names “and a bit about yourself and what brought you here today, and whether you’ve been to a Death Café before”. The introduction circle was monosyllabic at first, with Ellie and Ben answering together. They had not been before, and “thought it sounded interesting.” “Or, you know, we were curious to see what it was about”, Ellie added. There was a pause before our facilitator reminded us it was fine to say “as much or as little as we felt comfortable with”, and I suspected this meant the first turns had fallen under “little”. I took a deep breath and began to half-apologise in a chipper tone; I told her I had introduced myself to the table already, but “am actually doing a PhD on attitudes towards death in the UK”. There was another pause. “Right. Well… we want everyone to feel safe, and part of that is knowing

[39]https://www.hamhigh.co.uk/news/21148519.finsbury-park-death-cafe-founder-appeals-new-free-venue-keep-valuable-resource-going/ Bartholomew, E. 2020
[40] https://www.letemps.ch/societe/bernard-crettaz-ne-voudrais-faire-vieux-os (Gremaud, R. 2014)

nothing leaves this room. So, if everyone isn't okay with this, it's okay to say it isn't". I appreciated her commitment to protecting guests but felt slighted having acknowledged confidentiality in my introduction and made it clear I could be "off duty" if preferred; I wondered what the plan was if I was "not okay". I was grateful to hear Kenneth reply first and assure her I was not bothering anyone and "like she said, she told us already." He went on to say it was nice to have an expert at the table and looked forward to picking my brain; before I had a chance to denounce any such label our facilitator did so on my behalf, reminding him there were actually no experts when it came to death – "we're all equally experts, because it happens to all of us".

Kenneth told us his attendance was at the recommendation of a friend, as he had become a widower less than a year earlier. I felt I would have said sorry or extended condolences in any other setting, but nobody did. I saw sincere and tender expressions and thought we were likely equally unsure of whether it was normal to interject or ask questions, as the circle had not gone around yet - it might have been against the volunteering of stories "as much or as little." Once the circle reached our facilitator's turn, I thought I might try refreshing our start by asking her what brought her there, and she mentioned her work in end-of-life care. "Oh, that's really interesting – or I mean, it must be really rewarding? I think we'd all want to know about what it's like to work near death?", Ben offered. She told us this "wasn't about her" and that she would much rather leave her profession out of it as it was not "in the spirit of things." Crettaz had made points in his interviews about his consideration of the priesthood earlier in life and the anti-clerical dynamics of Café Mortel: he notes that in each speech act there was an act of assuming power, and that he was conscious of renouncing this power; transmitting it to those who had arrived was difficult but created "the gift". Kenneth presented another gift when he asked me if I had read any good death books lately, as he was really enjoying *Grief is the Thing with Feathers* – and got the ball rolling.

Death Café guidelines stated each café was as unique as the guests who made it, and Crettaz pointed out the first Mortel conversations may set the tone for the entirety of the two-hour session: if one begins on suicide, it may be all the event covers. Through literature, we made our way to memory, as Ellie mentioned her enjoyment of Terry Pratchett's *Discworld* series and the author's warm, but light-hearted musings on death – "he says a person's not really gone while you still feel their impact in the world, which I think is really sweet." We recognise how Pixar's recent *Coco* (2018) made a similar point. "Oh, how interesting! And what do you think of that?", our facilitator probed gently. I felt I had to find a personal anecdote and remembered how my grandmother occasionally said she would not bother with a name on her tombstone, "because the people who knew her would know where it was anyway" – I added that she was not necessarily entirely serious. "So, did they go ahead with that?", our facilitator asked. "Er, she's not dead yet", I replied. "But she's speaking to you openly about her wishes?" I clarified that I was not sure these were wishes. "And that's an example of why it's important we keep having these conversations.", our facilitator concluded. The other guests helped me paddle out of the conversational morass by saying it was normal, and that they had similar examples of how parents and grandparents might make "when I'm gone"- statements jokingly. "Humour can be a way to cope with things for some", our facilitator nodded sagely.

Kenneth began to tell us of his late wife by way of her wicked sense of humour and the defiant attitude she had taken towards her cancer, diagnosed "just a bit too late". It would be unfair to suggest he dominated the conversation, but there was a gravitas to his storytelling that had others fall silent; he said it was the loss of who she was that he struggled with the most. In the early days of the illness, he said they had talked a lot, reminisced on holidays and cried together. The hospital was miserable, but:

> "It was okay, I'd be there, and we'd do crosswords and talk about our day... and then she couldn't anymore. We were both big language nerds and had this thing with doing puns and spoonerisms when we talked; I could understand her body dying, but it's harder when it's the mind. She didn't feel like her. I think it was really comforting reading things about how you can have bereavement that's premature – or, I think they call it anticipatory grief. When they're still there."

I know I was not the only one with a tremble in my lip and could not help but feel at a loss for response – this respectful quiet was paired with a relative sense of validity. Our facilitator looked to be seeking out eye contact. "Oh no, I really can't begin to imagine... I haven't had an experience anything like some of you guys have", Ben said following what I assume was a moment of expectation for a contribution. It was difficult to know when a particular topic or story was "done"; we wanted to give each other's' testimony space and as such, the last few minutes were harder to fill. A host had tapped a teaspoon again, letting us know there were five minutes to go until the fifteen-minute break between halves. "Well, best not get into any new things, then", Ellie remarked, making a gesture at our neatly laminated sheet of talking points. Once the time had lapsed, our facilitator stood up and joined her colleagues, while Ben stepped outside for a cigarette. The rest of us stayed in place and though I could have used another cup of tea, nobody else at the table had had one to begin with. We leant in and snapped back to talk of films and songs, and whereabouts in London we all lived. "How are you all finding it so far, then?", I ventured, and met with a resounding agreement that it was great, nice, and/or good. "Sorry I went on a bit-" Kenneth started and was quickly assured his story was moving and beautiful. "It's nice to have a captive audience", he joked, suggesting that all his friends and family had heard "this stuff" many times before. "You feel like a broken record, but I think talking about someone is a way to keep their memory alive. I mean, she's obviously with me all the time and it's very real, so I don't mean that you'd forget them otherwise." Ellie concurred by mentioning she felt similarly when her father died; it surprised me he had not come up in the "official" café conversation yet, and that she would not come to mention this bereavement again in the second half, either. The break-spoon was tapped again for resuming and our facilitator said it had been great to see us all getting along, but it was time to "get on track". A charismatic young man I had not seen before walked into the room, somewhat lost – he said he thought the Death Café was a "drop-in-type thing" – and was allowed to join a table on the other side of the room under the proviso that it did not make us uncomfortable.

The final twenty minutes were spent shuffling chairs so we could join and find out just how even in the same space, each "unique bubble" could find similar or vastly different themes or perspectives; there was a vast circle facing inward, and I saw at least twenty people I had not seen or spoken to over the preceding hour and a half. "If every group could just tell us a bit about what you discussed amongst yourselves?", Caroline asked. "Or, you know, since there are so many of us, maybe you'd like to nominate a spokesperson.", she added after a few throats were cleared. I hoped it could be anyone but me. "Isn't this funny that we're being shy now, when we've volunteered to come and talk about death with strangers!" a lady on the opposite side of the circle cooed. She said she did not want to speak for everyone in her group, but wanted to take the opportunity to thank us all for proving that there are "lots of us deathy people out there!" There were some appreciative nods. Her tablemate echoed this point by adding it was important to not be afraid:

> "We like to think we're really rational and sensible about things, but when it comes to this it's 'no no no', it's like they're superstitious and if they talk about death, something horrible's going to happen, because it's morbid. They'd rather bury their heads in the sand."

Other table groups made sounds of approval and recognition, and it became apparent the experiences of social custom around open speech had been primary topics at four of the five tables. The jocular tone shifted to something closer to anger when the next participant chimed in; she emphasised that avoidance of death-related topics was not just "silly" or cowardly, but indicative of a cruelty:

> "It's a total lack of empathy. It's like they're saying, 'thank god it's not me' and want to avoid people who are suffering, they can't even say the words. That's why you get things like 'my condolences' that don't mean anything, or not saying 'dead'. I'm very matter-of-fact about it, you didn't 'lose' someone – they died."

I was taken by the latecomer who responded quite abruptly:

> "I think people have a lot of empathy; I think they're trying their best. Like at our table, we've been talking about the ways you can be a good friend with someone who's grieving."

His group had reached a conclusion by which simply offering to "be there" for someone was extremely important, as "everyone is different" and had varying needs – some may prefer to be left alone or enjoy time with friends by which they have an opportunity to "feel normal again". Kenneth shared his relevant positive experiences of text messages with a close friend, whereby he had received a text every day for the first month after his wife's death, asking if he needed anything; if he wanted to talk or have errands run or did not have the strength to cook. The woman on the other side thought these texts paralleled the problem in some way:

> "But they're putting the onus on you – *you* have to let them know your needs. And it's not the same thing – people are always ready to *do* something, because talking is the hard part. That's where you actually confront it, and they can't handle that. So, we have generic words, or say we want to be alone."

She went on to describe what she termed "tilt of pity"; that when hearing of her bereavement, conversational partners might knot their brows in concern, tilting their head to one side – she mimed the gesture. Pity, she elaborated, was condescending, "it's like saying 'poor you'". The young man pushed further by trying to establish the difference between pity and empathy, "because well… in that situation, it kind of *is* poor you?" and asked how things ought to be instead. A few more participants offered opinions on whether empathy was actually possible or actually "really presumptuous", because it implied pretence of being able to be in the position of another. "There's nothing worse than someone saying they understand, when they *literally cannot*, and "no, I think you're thinking about sympathy, not empathy." The scene was cut by a facilitator who said they enjoyed the "lively" conversation but wanted to hear other thoughts in the remaining time. After a beat, the opportunity was seized by a gregarious older woman who I was certain was a facilitator too but may have simply been a regular – in either case, I judged the subtle looks between facilitators to indicate this speech had been heard before.

> "Now, I know we aren't allowed to have points like this to make, but if I do have one axe to grind or a message for you to take home, it's to really stress the importance of making an advance directive or care plan."

She began to pull out examples of forms one could fill out – "and all online now too, so no excuses!", reminiscing about the first time she completed one, back in 1982. "You can update them any time you want". There was a reiteration of not advocating for anything specific, but that knowing our choices helps "if you don't want to be resuscitated, if you know who you want or don't want there, if you want to die at home instead of hospital, this affects all that."

Many sitting in the circle agreed that Death Café conversations we were having could make sure all our choices were respected, and I found the most interesting responses were those presented

by a pair by the window, a mother and daughter in their late eighties and sixties respectively. The daughter explained part of her motivation for attendance was to ease having these conversations with her mother, to make sure she had plans in place. "The thing is, if I'm that far gone that I can't choose, I don't mind what happens to me. I trust whatever you decide.", the mother reassured her daughter. "But mum", the daughter replied placing a hand on her shoulder, "how can we be sure it's what you would've wanted?"

I was bothered by the necessity or responsibility to have specific desires related to death or dying, as by the lack of Crettaz's ideal post-dinner mingling. Some volunteered to put chairs away and help tidy the space before locking up, and I was eager to gather Ellie, Ben, and the man who argued about pity – Edwin - largely due to our proximities in age, and my knowledge that two of us needed the same underground line home. I thought it would be easier to propose a trip to the pub this way. Caroline looked bemused when I asked if she might join us for a drink and noted this was "funny" and had never happened before. The first inklings of what felt like "backstage" when I asked Ellie if she would go back to a Death Café. She said she loved the concept and how she "saw how it could help people", but personally "it felt a bit like being at school, the teacher looking over you". I was curious to know whether she had intentionally held anything back and described the confessional pressure I had felt to make myself "justified" to participate.

> "Oh yeah, you do feel like you have to say something deep or smart... Like, especially when someone's telling you something as personal as Kenneth did."

Once we arrived at the Wetherspoons a few steps away, the blinking lights from the fruit machine took us far from death talk.

Comfortable stories

At the eve of his final café in 2014, Bernard Crettaz suggested there was less of a need for his project as death had gone from marginal or taboo to "fashionable" – in part due to *Café Mortel*'s success. He notes that over a decade, he had "largely forgotten himself" in his devotion to listening to others, hoping retirement might allow him reflection on his own mortality. The decision was not taken lightly, however, as he had developed "something of an addiction", having lived some of the "truest" and most important moments of his life in these spaces. Considering these remarks, I found the Blighty hosts' dedication to granting the power of speech aligned admirably with ideals but was more drawn to situations where conversation was awkward, stilted, banal, or "untrue" – often left without space in death awareness literature stressing openness. The establishment of "deathy" insiders contra an unnamed "they-them" – of those who bury their heads or are unable to understand – was a pairing I had expected, following swathes of taboo literature. What I did not presage, however, was the extent to which ability or willingness to speak was thought indicative of emotional capacity or successful adjustment, as in the frustrated remark that found "talking is the hardest part" (p.77).

The recognition that other participants also bumped against boundaries of what they could say, when they might speak, or if they were justified speakers was comforting to me but provoked questions about the kinds of expectations attendees attribute to talk, or whether they came to speak at all. Why did Ellie not bring up her dad in front of the facilitator? Why was the elderly woman's nonchalance towards end-of-life planning something to change? Why did the people at my table say the event was great - or in the case of Ellie, reckon it could "help people" - if it had not necessarily "helped" her? I propose a large part of the story sits in Caroline's remarks about Death Café "not being therapy" but perhaps "better", and is hinted at by Crettaz, when "losing himself" to listening over speaking; where it was not reflection enough to think about

death in the abstract for potentially addictive decades if one was in the audience. Interviewing him, Rinny Gremaud touches upon a point I became tempted to explore in relation to Death Café as she asks whether café popularity might have something to do with an "era of psych-everything" and "public confession". Crettaz insists people are not there to make spectacles of themselves, and those who try are "put in their place" – but is this a satisfactory or relevant answer? Where does sharing end and spectacle begin?

I build on Kenneth's remarks about risking becoming a broken record to maintain that rather than a cathartic final rite of letting go or a transformation, comments I was privy to set Death Café up as a site to affirm, re-iterate, and revisit death-related thoughts. This reflexive and continuous engagement with death material is shared with other death awareness movements and activities and can be taken as a representation of broader understandings of grief as "continuing bonds" (Klass et. al 1996) rather than a state to be "worked through". In its less-flattering iterations, however, death awareness media may ironically perpetuate messages of individuated positive "affectedness" in service of authenticity to be achieved in self-expression or self-improvement, or gatekeep what death "is really" about. I suggest that the raw or confrontational potential assigned to conversation is generally placated in twofold ways:

1) through a modelling of death as something that is not morbid or unpleasant to think about, whereby feelings of discomfort result from either personal or societal fear and denial to be overcome; in many cases rhetorical tools encourage thinking of death "as a friend" (see also chapter 3). The beneficial effects of speech are not merely instrumental (eg. planning a funeral, medical treatment) but bound to aspirational improvement in the vein of both self- and mutual help.

2) in the creation of comfort, either as physical features of the space or when hosts and participants try to mitigate "uncomfortable" situations. Potentially disruptive influences and agents are removable, as when either I or the latecomer could be asked to leave; when those who are at risk of feeling (too much) discomfort are told of other resources; when speaking is predicated on volunteering as opposed to elicitation through questions or certain kinds of opinion.

The creation of safe or judgement-free spaces is a factor stressed in the introductory framings and re-framings of the café, as when glasses are clinked, and gentle reminders are given of time lapsing or death-alignment when talk veers "off topic". The ideal protected nature is evident in confidentiality (hoping nothing "leaves this room") and guidelines for avoiding conflict – express opinion or refutation of another's turn of speech – as well as the decidedly *not* "drop-in" structure, that seems to suggest each tables' participants' contribution should be afforded the same attention and time. The comfortable space is convivial and democratised in its way, as by Blighty's stated goal for a "hub for local people" and their creative expression; a similar configuration was present at a Death Café in Elephant and Castle, whose founder ran a non-profit community hub or "living room". In London, however, some realities of staffing and occupying space clashed subtly with the welcoming arms of Death Café guidelines. The Living Well Dying Well-hosted cafés eventually left Finsbury Park and Blighty in 2020 due to pandemic closures and reopened at a Wetland Centre in 2022 but before this, email newsletters frequently cited operational costs. As above, the first I received in 2018 noted they ask every attendee purchase food or drink to keep cafés free (?) in the venue that had been "kindly allowed" for our use by its owners, and as years passed the tone shifted to more of a reprimand:

> We almost lost our venue recently, due to poor sales on food and drink during the event, and no-shows (people who reserve places and don't turn up). This means that each Death Café from hereon is potentially the last one, unless the cafe make enough sales from refreshments.

Another South London café contacted newsletter subscribers for help and suggestions regarding a new meeting place, as they were "reluctant" to choose venues like church halls that could "give the wrong impression" or alienate any prospective guests, but did not want to switch to "impersonal" online meetings – Covid-19 inevitably changed this angle, too. As an aside, six of the cafés I attended were in established, "real" cafés – though often those attached to other spaces like cemeteries, libraries, or theatres – whose products we paid for, and only those at a Unitarian church and the "original" Underwoodian café at Jamyang Buddhist centre provided refreshments freely or did not require booking in advance. Though I understand this is area-sensitive, I felt this slight threshold contributed to a sense that attendees were not bound to specific groups seldom stayed in touch, exchanged contact details, or revisited specific cafés – or of course, it may have just been me. I blush as I remember an exchange at the Bath DDD (p.128) conference, where fellow doctoral researcher Solveiga Žibaitė had finished presenting on Death Cafés, and I asked what was to be my only question:

> "Do you find that you get lots of the same people? Like, a repeating group wanting to talk about the same things? Or is it mainly people who know each other already, or did they make friends in the café? It's just that in my experience, it's mostly new people each time and there's actually even a recommendation that you not come too often, so new people have the opportunity to try – I see emails that say: 'if you've already been, let newcomers book first.'"

A woman sitting in front of me, unprovoked and before I received an answer turned and addressed the room: "Or maybe it's just you, and they don't want you around!" She laughed and I tried not to look startled, bitter because I can tell my own self-deprecating jokes just fine. Solveiga remarked that she did see many "regulars" but supposes this could be to do with the size of her more rural Scottish research sites, as well as the types of spaces used; she made it sound more like a pub quiz, whereby events happened where community would gather already, "regardless".

The woman sitting in front of me, again - who I would describe as white and middle class:

> "Oh right yes, Oxford and London. Didn't you find it all quite white and incredibly middle class? They certainly always seemed that way to me."

Beyond representing my general dis-ease, this anecdote points to formality or informality of cafés' emergence or intentionality of attendance and means to stress that though comfort in venue could be about space, milieu was relatively unimportant to the Death Café work I saw. When asking people about café experiences or expectations, "warmth" and "coziness" came up frequently, and I had tried to relate this to physical proximity or commensality, as in the recognisable teacup icons (p.66, fig. 13) used for advertising events. The use of colloquial expressions inviting guests to share "a cuppa" or "a brew" and stressing sweet treats was reminiscent of the cover of Kathryn Mannix's hugely popular *With the End in Mind: Dying, Death and Wisdom in an Age of Denial* (2017) – a hand proffering a cup of tea. Interviewed about the dozens of cups mentioned in her book, Mannix remarks:

> Supplying beverages is a way of saying, "OK, so I'm here with you. We are getting the wagons in a circle here. We are thinking together with each other about what can happen, what might happen, what this person you love would want, what they wouldn't want."[41]

[41]https://www.cbc.ca/radio/whitecoat/it-s-not-what-you-see-in-the-movies-doctor-demystifies-dying-1.5496491 Dingwall, D. 2020

In a 2021 webinar on her second book, *Listen: How to Find the Words for Tender Conversations* for the Northern Devon Healthcare NHS Trust, Mannix emphasises that "having a cup of tea is my thing", and describes its brewing as ceremony, watching its steeping colours change and being mindfully aware of its warmth.[42] Crettaz and Underwood join in to maintain "nothing marks the community of the living like sharing food and drink"[43]. Yet when I brought up tea, the most I got from three participants were remarks on either how "stereotypically British" it was: "it's like whatever's happened, we go pop the kettle on!" (Kenneth), or on its role in supporting the venue: "They didn't have decaf, and I don't want to drink coffee this late… I bought it anyway because you sort of want to do your bit" (Sheila, Brompton café).

I considered "liquid time" (Bauman 2007, Koksvik and Richard 2021) and the potential ritual of drink, as reminded me of the traditional *vaalikahvit* or electoral coffee back home in Finland. There was a long history, I had been told, of offering potential voters coffee at "tents", or small covered market stall booths in public squares or near polling stations. These coffees were generally a way for candidates to appeal to the public, with the suggestion that individuals might share a moment with the candidates or discuss issues - though the coffee tradition extends to *äänestyskahvit* or vote coffees too, the beverages one might treat oneself to after doing one's civic duty. Folklorist Satu Jaatinen describes the way coffee breaks time and involves low risk to both the drinker and those offering; it is appealing enough to stop for, but it does not take too much time, and nobody's allergic to it (Jaatinen 2006). I knew of jokes surrounding grannies that floated from stand to stand for free caffeine fixes throughout the campaign season and made a note of the minimal party allegiance involved. Of course, sharing coffee might be communal atmosphere, hospitality and both literal and figurative warmth on a windy market square – but it could also be a pit-stop that involved little effort or socialising. Despite fashionable espresso houses and milky drinks cropping up, I agree with Jaatinen's assessment whereby drink quality is largely unimportant in Finland, and what matters is that it is there and that it does not run out. A second feature she notes is self-service and refill and indeed, any café or lunch buffet will offer filter coffee in thermoses or directly in their pans on chafing dishes. My grandmother typically brewed a litre and a half for three people, and weddings, funerals and graduation parties were when the nine-litre vats with taps on them came out. Self-service coffee was a fixture in each staff room I had seen, and catering or bar jobs always supplemented our £6-8 hourly with "free hot drinks!" – they sat readily in the fifteen-minute pauses between blocs of speakers at conferences, and at my college. This is all to say that in my bias and assessment, freely accessible hot drinks are often a given or staple in any setting that expected or invited attendance, whether for an hour or a day's work, and a fitting of ceremony in these proceedings would not derive from my participants' emic schemes; it was unremarkable enough to be skipped altogether, as evidenced by "poor sales".

The café was not its refreshments or space, but a duration and proximity – in evaluations or analyses after the event, people focus on the subject matter or the "outcome", and the interpersonal atmosphere three organisers told me was "always totally unique, as unique as the people attending" or "different every time" based on who spoke. "It's what you make it!" Who spoke and how, however, was not without weighed words, as in concern over justification to speak or needing to say "something deep", or the unnamed researcher's seeming dismissal of the white, middle-class commentator. The avoidance of professional titles or expertise (p. 75) and fleeting near-anonymity may have made ascertaining just what the uniqueness of each speaker consisted of harder (maybe I heard from many who did not "out" themselves in their connection to cafés), but the sense of hierarchy or authority was echoed when I met Edwin

[42] https://www.northdevonhealth.nhs.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Kathryn-Mannix-webinar-transcript_2021-10-20.pdf
[43] https://deathcafe.com/site_media/files/guide.pdf

again at Islington's Almeida Theatre Death Café. As we queued by the desk to state our names, he radiated an outgoing confidence and noted he was on his "home turf" as an actor who had done a few shows there. As I went to sit down, he set to stride between the tables to the furthest from the chair I had dropped my coat on.

> "I hope you don't think I'm being rude, it's just… I suppose I come here to hear people's stories and real experiences, and from what I understood, you don't have any?"

I steeled myself with a suspicion that he was doing some kind of character study of bereavement for a role and resigned myself to speaking less at my respective table, lest I inhibited storytelling or the "real". Peter, an avid cyclist and vegan in his early forties broke the spell in his own way as someone who described his curiosity for death as a concern about entropy that struck him once his first child was born– "the death of the planet, of its species, and a kind of future we take for granted." The oldest of our seating, Lillian, let him know that "that wasn't death". She was not beyond voicing a disappointment for how – "no offense" – there were some younger people present who did not have experience and only talked in the abstract.

> "Now, my brother, he's a philosophy lecturer at the Open University, and we have talks like this sometimes. And he says things like 'we can't know death' or that it's un… unfathomable to people, in the same way that you can't know what it was like before you were born. And I think that's rubbish, it's not the same at all – everyone whose lost someone important knows what death is."

Our facilitator, Debbie, had jumped in to encourage open minds and remind us that death was what united us all; later she acceded to me that a few participants had been "a little let down" when talks had not "met their expectations", noting that many Almeida café guests were there through involvement in the local Age UK branch. Indeed, this had been part of their motivation to start a separate "young persons'" Death Café group (ages sixteen to twenty-five; I did not attend). I was reminded of online hate-posts I had found regarding Caitlin Doughty, who had been accused of being suspiciously "excitable" about death[44] (see also critical memes, p. 146, fig. 26). Edwin was apologetic and offered to buy me "a real drink" at the bar as the crowd dispersed that afternoon and was surprisingly shy when I asked what his "story" was – apparently, he had not told anyone at his table of his issues, either. His father had been ill for many years, he stated, declining and suffering, "not able to do anything" and requiring lots of care; he felt guilty he did not go home more often to help his mother cope, but guiltier still that he occasionally thought of his father's eventual death as "not all bad."

> "It's not something you want to even say out loud. It feels awful – I don't want him to die. But at the same time, there would be some relief. And I think there would be relief for him too. So, I want to hear that what I'm feeling is normal. I have a therapist to talk about me, me, me, but to hear from people who've been in similar situations and how they're on the other side of that – I'm here to learn from them."

Once my gin was paid for, Edwin asked if we could "start fresh"; he supposed he had made a poor impression avoiding me or expressing conflicting thoughts about his father and refused any further death talk. He said it would be "uncomfortable" now that we knew each other. "Don't want to overdo it, anyway! It's best when you've got a time and place for it, like 'okay, two hours a week I think about this', otherwise it takes over."

As Death Café is outlined having no particular aim or goal and an enforced secular tone is central to conversation, I am not sure how organisers would respond to my consideration of

[44] Available at https://lolcow.farm/snow/res/1356618.html ; I cannot recommend reading lolcow forums known as a cyberbullying platform given its anonymous user-base predominantly concerned with celebrity gossip or rumours and its wide-ranging insults.

ritual healing or spiritual affliction in relation to awareness conversations, but the temporal framing made explicit by Edwin made literature in this area too enticing to overlook. I conclude this chapter with theory on narrativized transformation that runs into chapter three, proposing that the speech acts at Death Café speech events are related to what Swora calls *anamnesis* in her extensive work on Alcoholics Anonymous.

A word on speaking

Based on slogans that proposed talking about death was "healthy" or helped "make the most of life" (p.68), I had expected some emphasis on healing, catharsis, authenticity or therapeutic promise in Death Café conversation; indeed, much of the setting up of taboo and awareness meant "talking about talking", where events began with the assumption that speech had *become* detrimentally blocked or silenced. When Debbie described the youth café, she mentioned a "fun game" they had initiated, where participants were asked to come up with as many euphemistic expressions as they could regarding death, "to see just how much we're scared to call it by its real name". This theme is central to Mannix's work, as she proposes circumscribe words are an Americanism enabled by the funerary or medical industry (see also chapter four, p.148) and features as the message of a recent Marie Curie advertising campaign related to their *TalkAbout* initiative that lists phrases like "kicking the bucket" – *Whatever you call it, we should all talk about it.*[45] The top comment for one such spot on YouTube remarks that they had written this "exact same idea for a collaboration between Marie Curie and Dying Matters about 10 years ago". This is unsurprising, considering Dying Matters' clear campaign message is to "make society comfortable talking about death, dying and grief", with its distinctive speech-bubble logo (often accompanied by a caption of "Let's talk about it"), generally quantifying their work using statistics regarding how great a percentage of the population claims a willingness to speak about death, or admits to doing so already. Why should everyone speak, and what are they meant to say? An answer lies in the matter of community around postmodern complaint raised in the introduction to this piece, and the alleged societal or individuated denial of death: to name a death taboo dismantles and instates it at once in a kind of performative utterance.

[45] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yCYTQvoXQgk (2019)

Figure 14 – Examples of speech-bubble logos and media; Dying Matters and Marie Curie 'Talk About' campaign; Reach and Co-op Funeralcare grief-podcast promotion

In a verbose put-down entitled *The Use and Abuse of Speech-Act Theory in Criticism*, Gorman states that speech act theory as presented in Austin's *How To Do Things with Words* (Gorman 1999) has been co-opted by literary theorists in analyses that are "selective and arbitrary"; the application of terms is often "unreflected and unhelpful", and the applications themes derived from Austin is "genuinely surprising" in its "*sheer badness*" (*ibid*, 94, emphasis his). I hope to make something of a fair representation of speech act despite fear for a shared fault Gorman finds in much social scientific corpus that includes it, namely the insufficient familiarity with philosophers - Hegel, Nietzsche, Husserl, Wittgenstein or Heidegger – that allows "clueless amateurs" to effect their "cheap and easy" work. With minimal experience in linguistic anthropology, I largely reference Duranti's 1989 summary on ethnography of speaking, which underlines a speech act as stressing an act not merely describing the world but changing it by reliance on shared convention (Duranti in Kiesling and Paulston 2005). In contrast to structural linguistic analyses, Austin's work is credited with dealing in discussion of discourse that is not concerned with "truths" of statements insomuch as their situatedness; speaking is human labour and "ontogenetically cooperative" behaviour (*ibid* 19). Austin introduces locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary acts, roughly distinguished as a) locution, a performed utterance with a meaning in the traditional sense, eg. "it's a bit cold in here!" b) illocution, sometimes called meant intent or "function in mind", eg. "it's a bit cold in here" = perhaps you might acknowledge this and close the window, and c) perlocution, not necessarily part of the speech act at all but rather the perceived "force" or effect of illocution, eg. the listener getting up to close the window. Some of Gorman's ire stems from others' misunderstanding of Austin's hypotheses, as whilst Austin also introduces so-called constative (words that describe a state of affairs) and performative (words that incite action or result in their claim, sometimes as expressly as "I do" in a wedding vow), he ultimately dismisses these categories as reliant on subjectivities, and as such never clear-cut. "It was for too long the assumption of philosophers that the business of a 'statement' can only be to 'describe' some state of affairs, or to 'state some fact', which it must do either truly or falsely" (Austin 2018, 1), Austin notes, calling to mind the *iff.* -statements and equation-like truth trees each junior epistemologist has had to face.

Ultimately, illocution does not have to have its "effect" to have force that relates to the shared social world. Michelle Rosaldo writes to caution against the broad applicability of speech act in a critique of Searle, whose 1969 taxonomy of speech acts built on Austin's writing: the focus on "intention" in speech, she argues, over-privileges autonomous or individual, "problematic", Western asocial self. "We need not dwell on men like Searle and Austin if what we really want to know is how real people, not philosophers, manage to "do their thing" with words", she quips (Rosaldo 1982, 227) arguing primarily that the categories of illocution Searle proposed – chiefly that of "promise" is ill-fitted to the Ilongot, for whom "promising is alien to the repertory of kinds of speech". The paper is not a particularly generous reading of Searle and relies on some conjecture about truth. Searle uses "promising" as paradigmatic of "our ways" of doing things with words (and I empathise with Rosaldo's frustration over the readership as undefined "we") and presents a nine-part conditionality table or "constitutive" rule – to perform such an illocutionary act is to follow certain conventions that constitute this act. "What Searle forgets, yet seems to me clear, is that the good intentions that a promise brings are things we only offer certain kinds of people, and at certain time" *(ibid,* 211), Rosaldo posits – though I read due recognition of context in Searle when he likens convention to a game of chess, or writes:

> "[...] some philosophers ask, "How can making a promise create an obligation?" A similar question would be, "How can scoring a touchdown create six points? " As they stand both questions can only be answered by citing a rule of the form, " X counts as Y" which is, of course, not to say that the questions cannot be rephrased to ask important questions about the institution of promising—or for that matter, football." (Searle 2011 [1969], 35)

In Rosaldo, "to think of promising is, I would claim, to focus on the sincerity and integrity of the one who speaks" (Rosaldo 1982, 211) – if this is given, then indeed, her description of Ilongot personhood as lacking "something like our notion of an inner self continuous through time, a self whose actions can be judged in terms of the sincerity, integrity, and commitment actually involved in his or her bygone pronouncement" is beyond the scope. Though Searle does account for insincerity - "insincere promises are promises nonetheless" (Searle 2011, 62) and "non-felicitous" illocutions count – Rosaldo stresses interiority further. She argues that:

> "A promise would appear to come, authentically, from inside out [...] born of a need to "contract" social bonds. [...] The promise leads us to thinking of meaning as a thing derived from inner life. A world of promises appears as one where privacy, not community, is what gives rise to talk."

I understand a criticism of so-called "hydraulic" emotional models (Wilce 2009)– when Rosaldo critiques "expressive" speech act as a category – but find the arguments that have more or less dividual selves stand for something more or less like community context difficult. Here, Ilongots do not think in terms of emergent inner feelings "but rather of social contexts in which people do or do not take for granted previously asserted claims and bonds" (Rosaldo 1982, 222). How is this congruent with bygone pronouncements prior deemed irrelevant? Further, the (western, philosophical) autonomous self is critiqued as autonomous in formulae, "not significantly constrained by the relationships and expectations that define their local world" – is this the case in a characterisation whereby promising and commitment are read paradigmatic? Finally, it is stated "Ilongots lack 'our' interest in considerations like sincerity and truth; their lives lead them to concentrate, *instead*, on social bonds and interactive meanings." (*ibid* 222, emphasis mine) How meaningless are those (a)social bonds that fall under the "contractual" promise, and how is sincerity in some void of "instead"?

Rosaldo presents a categorisation of her own, dividing verbal acts into situations where norms of "sameness" prevail, contra those situations that are defined by hierarchy. The notation and attention to strategic use of language and command types in particular is very impressive, and the typology is entirely justified in her examples; I have not meant to defend speech act taxonomies from criticism so much as to point to part of its development within and parallel to anthropology and the semantic finesse it calls for when interdisciplinary transcriptions occur. Indeed, the imperative to interpret situationally is part of ethnography from its inception, as in Malinowski:

> "An expression which indicates on the one hand that the conception of context has to be broadened and on the other that the situation in which words are uttered can never be passed over as irrelevant to the linguistic expression" (Malinowski 1923, 306)

In my site, of course, the ostensible Western tendency to see illocution emerge from psychological state[46] need not be challenged in terms of speech repertoire as in the Philippines – the "rules" of indirectness and politeness that Rosaldo does not find in Ilongot community, for example, look relevant here. Overt demands or "directives" in speech are mentioned as not harsh or rude in Rosaldo's context, as the acts are "seen as less to do with actor-based prerogatives and wants than with relationships affirmed and challenged in ongoing social life" (Rosaldo 1982, 216), whereas in my Death Café and awareness movement contexts in general, the directive is antithetical to the "safety" of space or proposition that a "good death" is highly personal. Gentle hints and meaning making abound at the Death Café, with facilitators massaging tensions or making interpretations. There was the Finsbury café facilitator remarking that humour was "a way to cope" – framing grandparents' jokes about getting old as

---

[46] though Reiss (1985), for example, has modelled Austin and Searle to write state as necessarily *extrinsic*.

(personally) restorative; there was the daughter laying a hand on her mother's shoulder stating that she wanted to be certain she knew what her mother wanted (an illocutionary "so please, make a decision"?). Yet prerogative need not be in opposition to affirmation of relationships. Indeed, I will go on to argue that much of death awareness is about fostering a stance that emphasises an affirmation of interdependency – between the living, the dead, and their shared environment – and the "blockages" diagnosed in silence are less to do with an actor's internal state and dissipating fear, and more a matter of placing ourselves in the "unfathomable", virtually in reach of others. In less subtle encouragements to spend at the café or allow space for newcomers, the help provided is framed through its thoughtfulness for others: let there be opportunity, especially when the venue has "kindly" allowed us. When participants are concerned about how to say the right thing to bereaved friends; when Crettaz stresses cafés are not places for individuals to centre themselves; when expertise is minimised at risk that it might cloud our "unity" before death; when comments are omitted to make room for others' – it all leans to mapping thoughtful (caring) relationships. It is in this point that awareness bears some resemblance to Maria Gabrielle Swora's discussion on sobriety amongst alcoholics, and the difference between selves and persons. I have chosen a play on Victor Turner's concept of ritual drama as the following subheading given Swora's relation to Turner's work, as well as to broach the question of whether Death Cafés are ritual speech events.

The ritual de-drama

Over years of fieldwork in AA groups in North America, Swora is concerned with commemoration as healing; this is not as simple as suggesting that by speaking their experiences of alcohol abuse, participants are freed of its burdens. The "transformation" depicted is not as linear as a drinker becoming abstinent by virtue of confession. Rather, that which is healed is memory – and not just by a recovery of autobiography wounded by alcohol abuse, marked with its lapses and blackouts described by participants. Swora engages with memory as not in a "storage model" – located in individual minds – but a shared social concern with the past (or future), recognising memory has temporal depth beyond individual lifespan; memory is "a social resource and to remember is social, and therefore [a] moral, value-bearing act"(Swora 2001, 59). To unpack this further, autobiographies gain their meanings in a "community of memory" fostered in meetings, one that re-enacts and constitutes stories of how a community came to be, what it hopes and fears, and how its ideals are exemplified by participation ritually, ethically, or aesthetically. This term borrowed from Bellah et al. (1985 in *ibid*) is reminiscent of parts of speech ethnography, as divided into speech communities, speech events, and speech acts. The speech community can be defined as groups who share rules for interpreting and using a language, but as Hymes stresses, the sharing of the "same language" does not imply shared understanding of its use and meaning in differing contexts (Hymes 1986 in Kiesling and Paulston 2005, 6-7). The speech event – such as an AA or Death Café meeting – is comprised of multiple speech acts, and here they make for fellowship surrounding affliction, rather than a cure.

The twelve rules or tenets of AA, Swora notes, profess that alcoholism "is always there"; it is chronic and progressive, and abstinence and sobriety are not synonymous. The confession of one's alcoholism in the opening of speech act in AA is to re-present and remind the participant of their state, and the texts suggest it as a kind of maintenance: if participants did not attend meetings, they were at risk of "forgetting" their affliction or "temporalizing" it in the past, harmfully disengaging from their reasons to not drink. Citing a woman nearing five years of sobriety: "I hope to remember my powerlessness and stay in" (Swora 2001, 64). Listening is as formative as speaking, as when participants describe the storytelling of newcomers: ""I'm glad you are here. You remind me of what will happen to me if I get complacent" (65) said one

member of the relapse of another. Other members are not just cautionary tales of pain, but of the "selfishness" taken to be inherent in the "forgetful affliction": participants would recount forgetting family members' birthdays and anniversaries or social obligations, whether paying bills or picking up children from day care or visiting a parent in hospital (63) – the social obligations of fellowship could counter these antisocial traits. Swora stresses the importance of the twelfth and final step in the programme, one by which "having had a spiritual awakening as a result of these steps, we try to carry the message to alcoholics and to practice these principles in all our affairs."; carrying the message could be making the coffee for a meeting, setting up chairs, or simply shaking members' hands at meetings (Swora 2004, 205). The acts by which service is performed make "concrete" a moral community, but in the narrative of transformation allow an affliction to be valued positively, reconfigured as meaningful – resulting in "proper relations" to the world. It is here that the AA practice is nimbly related to ritual, and Victor Turner's *Drums of Affliction* among the Ndembu of Northern Zambia.

In Turner's ethnography, the drum (*ngoma*, both the type and actual performance of a ritual) is performed for persons afflicted with illness or misfortune – such as menstrual or reproductive troubles in women, or failure in the hunt – who are "caught" by sorcerers or ancestor spirits, also called "shades". Swora binds this to memory, as she suggests the Ndembu structural principles of matrilinity and virilocality have particular effects on women, who struggle to "remember" their matrilineal kin in their husbands' villages – the "forgotten" ancestor shade catches them in retaliation (2001, 71). The second point of association with AA is in the dual healing and initiation of the drums, as the therapy performed is carried out by doctor-adepts who themselves have been involved in previous iterations of a given ritual – "they form a sort of ad hoc transient cult group", just as the members of AA become their "own healers"[47]. Swora marks the healing as ritual transformation not "returning" the afflicted, but "moving" them to a new state marked by a proper relationship with the troubling shade, and membership in the drum. The medical or psychotherapeutic treatment of alcoholism, she points out, targets "the suffering or unrealised self", whereas AA doctrine targets the *person* – an embedded sociomoral agent in a network of relations damaged by drinking; a mesh that can be repaired. This consideration of ritual efficacy and religious hermeneutics allows for inconclusivity or incremental results (2004, 206) or lifestyle projects and supplants a view by which each meeting or step is "some kind of intervention" – the afflicted can be less like patients treated, and more like agents. As with Death Café facilitator's remarks, "it is what you make it (by words)". Ndembu principles in Turner I would point to in relation to my work, further, is the way healing the forgotten shade's grievance is:

> "[...] a process of what Ndembu call 'making known and visible', albeit in symbolic guise, the unknown and invisible agents of affliction"(Turner 1990, 212).

This "making known" could happen in prayer or invocation of a shade's name, and plays into empowering "memento mori as carpe diem" discussed in this section, as well as "fun games" at junior cafés that problematise "our" inability to speak, or call death by its name – it is not that speaking "heals" supposed spiritual anxiety in fear or denial of death, but is something of an illocutionary adhesion to convention: it is to say "we are the kinds of persons who talk about death (and that is the right way to be for one another)". Turner "reads" ritual act by such an interpretation too, when he adds:

---

[47] There is a slight smoothing over, as in Turner 1977 (13-4) adepts could have been patients themselves, or only close kin and affines, and despite the subversion of matrilinity central to numerous ritual crises, the appendices marking dozens of ritual cult types in a sprawling piece are not reducible to ritual affliction of women in particular.

> "It *is as though* the Ndembu said, 'it is only when a person is reduced to misery and repents of the acts that caused him to be afflicted, that ritual expressing an underlying unity in diverse things may be fittingly enacted for him'". (Turner 1968, 22)

To call death awareness "spiritual awakening" and healing is thorny, but I find echoes in Swora's description of sobriety as "a new way of consciousness and being". I doubt café attendees would consider themselves "transformed" by attendance, but the term has a place in considering death awareness in opposition to "denial"; the affliction may not be a personal spiritual pain but rather, one that states affliction in a "society" that is not (yet) in the same speech group. Swora's participants often described sobriety as humble, serene, less self-centred, and an openness to growth, yet awakening is not birth into enlightenment: awakenings are "usually gradual and forever incomplete, sometimes marked by a series of smaller awakenings along the way" (Swora 2004, 203). Members attested to wonder and gratitude or empowerment that allows "fresh and certain opportunity". These phrases remind me of Edwin's remark on the "maintenance" aspect of engaging with death at intervals, as well as the *Order of the Good Death* material that describe Death Positivity as having "no end goal". In the online community for the *Order,* I saw a handful of posts from members who worried they were not "positive" or death "accepting" enough, still reacting negatively to thoughts of their mortality. In response, our "Den Mother" or administrator Louise Hung frequently noted her own fears as no obstacle to belonging, as in an *Order* blog post:

> "It's not about being fearless, it's about finding a way into that fear and through some alchemy, turning it into something valuable in life."[48]

Awareness or positivity, just as grief, was described as "valid" in all its forms and could "look different every day" and is frequently presented as a relationship to be "worked on" – to identify as positive was simply to attest to openness for what the AA guidelines might term "fresh opportunity", or using Turner, perhaps discover "an underlying unity in diverse things". The alchemy of value or meaning is what Swora would call spiritual by its association with the third AA key – one she admits is challenging to some members, who do not want to associate with God or higher power – written in a call to "turn our lives and wills over to God as we understand Him" (2004, 207). As mentioned before, God is a Death Café no-go and foreign to death awareness rhetoric – yet the spiritual is not far off when "higher power" is interpreted as mortality itself. The alcoholic state is made out to be insular not only in its carelessness, but illusion of control; Swora describes a "paradox" whereby surrendering to a power (as in other forms of sacred healing) the supplicant recognises their limited agency or capacity – and in doing so, gains an intimate relationship to higher power. The relevance of this feels evident in a remark from a sober member, who relates relinquishment to powerlessness over fate: "After all, when the world comes to an end some day, it will do so without my permission" (195). Further, much of the criticism levelled against those who "deny" death by poor engagement frowns on "playing God", in the frequent accusation of people "living as if they aren't going to die" (see p. 99), or medical models "trying to cheat death". Ultimately, Swora finds stories told and heard are *anamnesis*, or "commemorative recall and re-presentation of the role of God in the healing of alcoholism, keeping the past alive in the present" (Swora 2001, 60). Death Café stories can certainly "keep alive" as in Kenneth's express remark about commemorative speaking presencing his late wife, but further, they recall the roles of mortals in relation to one another under the aegis of dying.

The choice of anamnesis is interesting and could have used exposition when applied to this context of group poesis – its theory originates in Plato, wherein it says certain concepts or beliefs are "in the mind from before birth". Here, learning and inquiry and resultant

[48] Note the similarity to Bloch and Parry's 1982 "alchemy by which transforms death into fertility" (p. 52).

understanding is considered recollection or "re-awakening" of the soul that has already "learnt all things" (Allen 1959). I cannot help but think on the instances where taboo literature or awareness participants' rhetoric appealed to human nature, the way "we truly are", and the separation from such a state enabled by modernity. This could take us back to alienation/authenticity concerns or "ownmost" death in philosophy: as described by Straub, for example, Heideggerian authenticity is an event of an individual living up to their potential - but such potential can only be accessed through sober assessment of the opinions one can expect from life given the finitude of human existence, and breaking up of disguises with which *Dasein* bars its own mortality (Straub 2012, 276). Is the authentic life that ceases "constant tranquilisation of death" a Death Café goal, whereby some spiritual truth is obscured by tabooing? A closer match is to be found in noticing Mannix's description of "doing death" as "our forgotten wisdom" (Mannix 2017), aligning it with Swora's work on the "forgetful affliction" and how one can fail to a specific moral, re-membering person: "we no longer feel comfortable naming death, and we've forgotten how to support the dying and bereaved"[49].The speech community and its complaint often implies "we have always known" – but more on this and how we came to forget in chapter four and funerals, and five on alternative care.

To be sure, there were instances in my fieldwork where speaking is treated as purging, "getting it all out", and a sense of becoming "lighter" by expressing feelings – as Ellie, Ben and Kenneth pointed out, this could be done with films and cinema and resulting "good cries" (p.67). Honesty is consistently paired with openness in awareness advocacy: if we cannot speak (with the "right" words) and participate in naming, some iteration of a Turnerian shade hangs overhead. At a café held in Brompton Cemetery, for example, a twenty-three-year-old woman called Erin who was beginning training to become a death doula (see chapter 5) lamented a "bad death" she had seen at home. She had an infectious smile, and her bright-eyed nods reacted to my death anthropology as we exchanged "what brings you heres":

> "If I hadn't chosen the doula thing, though, I think I'd love to do something like you do! Like, we just watched *Dark Tourist* on Netflix – it was great. And in this show this guy goes to see these funerals in Indonesia and they're just incredible; or then, you probably know about the sky burials? And all these things in Mexico, but when they actually spend time with their dead, like mummies, because they don't live in a culture where it's the big taboo. There's so much to learn from them. When I finished uni I thought okay, I want to do something that feels meaningful".

My eyes darted to the *Hamsa*-necklace glinting against her tan and apologised for not having the fieldwork stories she may expect – I never made it all that far. Though she was yet to "meet" a dead person or participate in waking that she hoped would be key to her services (being "a friend at the end"), she compared the possibility of sharing with her grandfather's death a few years prior.

> "It is just so tragic to me; it's an example of how we let each other down when we don't talk. So, he just died suddenly – I hadn't even known he was ill. As in, he'd kept that from us all – he didn't mention it to me, he didn't mention it to my mum. And I think that it shows something about that generation, how it's 'stiff upper-lip' and especially men didn't have any culture of sharing emotions. I can't imagine how lonely that is, to feel like you can't even talk."

One of the other participants, a recently retired nurse called Doreen, tried to find a hopeful angle. She had asked Erin if her grandfather had made arrangements – which he had, the will neatly in the top left drawer of his desk. Doreen surmised he may have preferred to "go quietly"

---

[49]https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/nov/30/talk-about-death-openly-dying-bereaved
Mannix, K. (2019)

or save his (grand)children some sadness; his preparation suggested he was realistic about his condition, and maybe he was just "a private man", or did not want to be treated differently at the end of his life due to illness. Erin did not subscribe to this perspective, as his secrecy by omission was considered more sad than sacrificial: how could he have "dealt" with it, she asked, if he "bottled it up"? I might relate this to Rosaldo's speech act taxonomy, as when she considered the rules of "sameness" or "hierarchy" in how to speak: did Erin know if perhaps, her grandfather had spoken to his wife about it, if not his offspring? Does the successful café event or awareness encourage attendees to "speak death" into the environing world, or just provide a bespoke space to cordon it off – like Edwin's therapist's sofa (p.82)? Doreen had asked Erin how she thought the issue could be combatted, as she felt it could be good to introduce "death education" as part of school curricula, just as they had done with sex education prior. "People thought it was inappropriate back then, but now it's totally normal – you grow up and know it's a public health issue". Erin thought Doreen had missed the point – it was not meant to be "delegated" to institutions "telling us what to do" because this had "failed already"; we had to change the way "we are as a society". Is this a place where that happens, and when could we find ourselves transformed?

When Turner describes ritual drama, he notes its detectable "telic structure", or design as a system of ends and means. "Each phase and episode has its explicitly stated aim, and the end of one stage is normally a means to the fulfilment of the next, or of the ultimate end of the ritual" (Turner 1968, 3) In a model of instilling "axiomatic truths", ritual may "redress equilibriums that have been upset" (*ibid,* 6) and enables re-entering or reconciliation for community in periodic restatement of terms in which members of a particular culture "must interact if there is to be any kind of coherent social life". The dramatic is an "undeniable form" marked by roles, exalted utterance and audience: the ritual is "a stage on which roles are enacted" and conflicts of drama are reflected (Turner 1979). But what of situations that do not have explicit aim statements or ends – what if utterances are far from exalted, but instead insisted as "de-dramatised" (as by Crettaz on his aims for cafés, p.72) and privilege comfort? The Ndembu drums describe – to name but a few acts - spilling blood, digging tree roots, cupping, smoking, medicine-making, needles pulled through sacrificial animal hearts and repetitive singing and dancing. Is Swora's adoption of this literature (or mine) for conversational clubs too far removed? If ritual requires conflict, how can it happen in conviviality or anonymity?

Recalling how Edwin noted would be "uncomfortable" to continue discussion about his feelings about his father's illness once he knew me, or his concern such speech risked making a poor impression (p.82), there is a solidified sense that stakes that could destabilise a value of unity were not for cafés. This can be parallelled further in Turner's work, wherein Ndembu have stories of people who delay consulting diviners on behalf of sick kinsmen, leading to the demise of the neglected one. The reluctance to take action derives from the way it "almost always brings to light the ill will in relationships ideally supposed to be amicable", and there are powerful inducements to procrastinate, because ritual makes structural cleavage public: "the value set on human life is in direct contradiction to the value attached to maintaining at least the appearance of social unity" (Turner 1968, 272). Ultimately, not unlike Swora's paradox of rescinding control, the first step of laying out the crisis of fissure in a consensual recognition of breach allows unity through something higher. In this framework despite its roles and legitimation, audiences, shared narratives and repetitive redundancies or teacups with swirling hues, the Death Café speech event is at best a metaritual. Indeed, when I asked Erin to elaborate on what a better death culture looked like, she homed in on ritual: "We have routines and habits, but they're not the same thing – they're the done thing, but not because it's important to us."

In Turner, ritual is a "distillation" or "refined extract" of supposed quintessential custom; people "only come together to perform ritual in terms of beliefs so powerfully held that they overcome all the forces that under other circumstances divide them from one another" (*ibid*, 8). Once a powerful belief loses efficacy, then, rituals are thought to "produce not cohesion but contention, or finally indifference". A product of its time, *Drums of Affliction* places Western culture in opposition to "the primitive" that "opts out of history": such society "does not allow itself to be clogged by the detritus of events, but periodically purges itself" (278). Unsurprisingly, when it "crops up" in 1950s Central Africa, Western individualism has tribal religion "wilt and perish" rapidly, explained as their rejection of crucial values of corporateness – "with it go many other values and obligations: frankness, comradeship in adversity, mutual generosity and reciprocity" (23). I am unconvinced of these values' scarcity, but familiar with their lament in death awareness. For a ritual *de-drama* concept, I propose a selective reading of Turner. If social drama "suspend normal every day role playing" and "interrupts the flow of social life" by forcing a group to take stock of its behaviour (Turner 1979, 83) the everydayness and attempts for accessibility at many of the events I attended is instead preoccupied with non-interrupted flow. They seat themselves gently in the lives and phone notifications of "normalcy", in urban "living rooms" and champion their painless adoption: talking about death is normal – pleasant, even – not apart from, but "a part of" life. If anything, "social flow" is augmented in places considered arid. Turner follows the remark on interruption by writing that "in other words, dramas induce and contain reflexive processes and generate cultural frames in which reflexivity can find a legitimate place" – I read no "in other words" about it. These two remarks about drama are not the same, though one might follow another; my sites may not force, compel or rupture, but they do reflect, and generate its frames. They do not tackle affliction or reference spirit as Sworda's examples do – but make room for positive valuation or "mattering" (see p.12, Puig de la Bellacasa 2017) regarding death.

I propose that a value or obligation of corporateness evidenced in café circles can be the will to care for others; the exaltation or healing of one cannot overtake unity in will for amicability or welcome, or a commitment to extend a deliverance from confrontation or discomfort. I will write of pain and loneliness and the limits of speech in the chapter that follows but want to nod to the numerous "cafés" that exist to specify that Death Café may be part of a "café movement" than existing as a death awareness offshoot. In the UK, one can attend a mood café, the wellbeing café, the climate café, the menopause café, birth café, life café[50], the breastfeeding café, dementia café – not to mention philosophy cafés. These iterations of a café look to centre themes that may be "difficult" if introduced in other spaces and at first glance suggest people have "nowhere else to go" – that challenging topics are indeed swept to the margins or excluded from conversation with friends, relatives, or neighbours, spelling a lacking intimacy (if closeness is a matter of "opening up"). Yet in much of their sloganing, there is reference to like-mindedness, or being "with someone who understands". Kenneth provides a fine example of someone who does have support elsewhere: he speaks with friends and family, but enjoys

[50] Reading a 2019 article in *The Guardian* about so-called Life Cafés, I was struck by the irony of the endeavour; https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2019/nov/02/charitys-life-cafe-kits-aim-to-help-reticent-britons-face-up-to-death

"Marie Curie, the terminal illness charity, thinks it can end this national reticence using parlour games as conversation starters. It is giving out "Life Cafe" kits […] The approach is intentionally different to death cafes, which set out to "increase awareness of death" and tend towards macabre imagery. "We don't say let's talk about death […] we talk about what's important now and in the future and what care looks like." (Booth, R.)

knowing people beyond his immediate circle “are there for you” – similarly, “showing you’re there for them” was the Death Café table’s bottom line regarding how to socialise with a suffering loved one. A line to the effect features in Dying Matters’ online pamphlet about supporting someone:

> “Remember words aren’t always needed. Sometimes it just helps to be there for someone. Let them know you’re ready to talk or not talk – whatever works for them.”

Swora points at “orientation to willingness” in her AA keys: that with it, each other door opens (Swora 2004, 195). The willingness to speak and hear is performed in an illocutionary way just by “being there”; the existence of a multitude of cafés points, if not to desire to save those near us from what is “difficult”, then to demonstrate that ethically, “deathy people” are not. When Ellie called cafés something she “loved as an idea” (p. 78), it is enough that it had the potential to help somebody else - the concept of the event stands for something more than itself. If ritual needs “powerful belief”, the one at work here sounds, at first, to be the agreement that dying matters. Cutting nearer the core, a trust in unity emerges. This unity need not be handholding, a feeling of togetherness or delightful communitas – indeed, “awkward” and stilted moments are plentiful – but a concern that we or “our society” was (at the risk of) becoming severed.

Speech may be prioritised in awareness material, but hearing is increasingly centred: during my fieldwork in 2018 The Dying Matters Awareness week festival theme hashtag was “Dying to be Heard”, which was repeated in 2020 (2019 stressed “the big conversation”). Mannix’s second book, *Listen* is about “tender conversations” (tender as a conscious step away from “challenging” or “difficult”) and as by its title, the potential for compassionate silence when “words fail us” is recognised. It is the “failed” or dissatisfying speech act or its perlocutionary aspects (effects) that interest me in the chapter that follows and allows for further consideration of different types of ritualised act performed in pursuit of mattering (good) death. Cafés make conversation the main event, but when themes shift to medical contexts, they can wilt. As a junior doctor who lived in my building confided to me after a long week on ward rounds:

> “You can talk until you’re blue in the face – it doesn’t change the fact that people die. You can say nice things about it, and it can still be terrible. I want to know, what do these people *do*?”

I do not mean to fall into a trap of “impact” or change efficacy, as in Swora’s critique of (medical) therapeutic models for treating affliction: the programme does not “end” when its steps are complete, but members do change. To present speaking as panacea should be avoided and challenged, and positive orientation towards death is (to me) meaningful when it is politicised as linked to care provision, lest it become “slacktivism” (Dennis 2019), or solipsistic “attitude fixing”, making everyone neoliberally responsible - a “good death” or “bad death” dependent on communicative competency of an age marked by emotional expressivity. All the while, involvement in a café or festival event for the public need not make hosts and attendees accountable for “doing” enough. In a cliché of being the change they want to see, members might influence others’ decision making – even if indirectly in contexts where “axes to grind” are forbidden – but they could simply have experience that they fold into narratives of having a life more enriched by virtue of being there, than not.

In this chapter, I have provided an overview of the Death Café “social franchise” and its Café Mortels predecessor to foreground the high, often primary focus placed on talking in death awareness settings. Presenting materials from three London events – two Death Cafés and one hospice-based public panel – alongside numerous examples in campaign messaging and “death

positive" popular literature and podcast media, I make observations regarding the desires or aims attached to speaking and the frictions of comfort and dis-ease in spaces dedicated to sharing talk. Drawing upon Swora's work on AA meeting groups (2001, 2004) and Victor Turner's ritual theory, I argue these speech acts make for "ritual de-drama" that posits power in a phatic expression of the will to care for others made tacit in communal space.

Vignette: silent understanding

I was reminded of the comments Erin made about her grandfather's unspoken death much later, when my father was diagnosed with cancer – two years after the fact, it came about in an unrelated conversation about therapy in the workplace. My mother mentioned to me that they had "of course" talked about what would happen if he died, and she had seen a councillor a few times: "It's not some secret; I just didn't need to put that on all of you [her three children]. I'm sure you had a lot on your mind with it too." It has not occurred to me for a moment she was "hiding" a truth from us at risk of troubling or burdening me, nor that I ought to be privy to all her feelings, if they were verbal things to begin with – rather, I felt there was a shared knowledge and world that did not need speaking.

CHAPTER 3 - MATTERING GOOD DEATH

For the first two years of my DPhil programme, my thesis title had been concerned with what the "Good Death" was, as presented by the movements I followed – by their figureheads and casual guests respectively. As established in the first two chapters of this piece, groups such as the *Order of a Good Death* suggest there are steps to be taken to ensure good death; that in Death Cafés speaking about death was "good for us"; that certain types of disposals or ceremonies are "better" than others. I had begun to give a presentation following twelve months of fieldwork to a student cohort, trying to define the death awareness umbrella and its iterations online and offline, in and against institutions, breaking down arenas in which good was found: caring treatment evidenced in both act (caring for) and attitude (caring about). I had made a sketch – that was not meant to be comparative but rather, show the intra-cultural "ostensible Western" or international appeal of awareness – by which American movements tended to stress the rights of the dead ("my corpse my choice" and legislation regarding ownership of remains and their resting places, urging followers to write to local governments about legalising novel technologies) and British work was largely supported by hospice and bereavement charities, or organisations centred on an aspect of welfare provision (Hospice UK, Age UK, Marie Curie, Cruse) – thereby marking a greater focus on the medicine, grief, or psychosomatic effects of dying. I heard my voice crack when the floor was opened for questions and the first remark from a colleague deemed the project "cute", but ineffectual. "I mean, I think we all know what a good death is, so maybe that shouldn't be the research question – there's no controversy here", he clarified.

Public estrangement

Roughly halfway through my fieldwork, I was excited (if covertly frustrated) to learn of a conference to be held at The University of Cambridge's Centre for Research in the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences entitled *A Good Death; Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Dying Well*. Through attendance at this event, I was granted the opportunity to participate in a group also called *A Good Death?*, described as a public impact project. Following a description of the awareness event the group organised, I detail some of the frequently expressed (and presumably obvious, as per the audience member above) contemporary beliefs about good death and their contextual origins in the hospice model, and pragmatic or administrative forms of writing – whether wills or other directives – as related not only as symbolic extensions of the agentive self within institutional contexts, but mitigation of pain on different levels. At public interventions for death awareness in this chapter as in the Death Café, words are the focus, though not always as overt speech acts: many of the examples presented encourage *writing* as engagement and relate to a phenomenon of performative-creative discursive ephemera largely unexplored in anthropology outside accounts of tourism and guestbooks, though it is related to Avril Maddrell's work on vernacular memorial (Maddrell 2013). I do not aim to assess the "effectiveness" of speech and writing insomuch as point to its employment and frictions or words "falling short" when participant experiences do not align with normative "good death" words, and present a "wordscape" that is "tinkered" – to employ Mol et. al's term for the maintenance work of care (Mol, Moser, and Pols 2015).

Laura and Emma had entered thanatology through the English department, with a focus on 18th century literature, and began their conference introductions with reference to their aims for finding broader vocabularies and frameworks for good death. Though they recognised

their point of view was literary, Emma stressed it "need not be done that way" and hoped for productive discrepancies between speakers' assumptions and approaches; as such, I was surprised to hear a pivot to positivity very early. The other conference aim was stated as "finding ways to talk about and represent dying and the horrible things that happen as a part of it, perhaps in a more positive way". Laura added that it seemed to them that compared to a historical understanding of death: "we've somehow lost or…. Become diminished in the range and capacity of ways of thinking about this." The positive bled into the next point regarding a shared strong belief that arts and humanities are valuable in civil society for enabling public dialogue, and that "the sense that that might be important is under threat", making our work ever the more imperative. They linked up slides about Cambridge Enterprise, a seed fund for "global innovation leaders", and announced their interest in collaborations, which I took as a cue to introduce myself. I suspect I was something of a disappointment when Laura asked me what types of activities made for "successful" death events in my fieldwork over a coffee, or asked if I had ideas about gathering audience feedback. She said assisting at the upcoming event at Cambridge Central Library would be a good opportunity to find participants to interview; all the while, I wanted to remind her the people encouraging unsuspecting strangers to talk about death were my participants more than their public.

I was tasked with formulating an audience questionnaire visitors could access via QR-code, and estimated blank text fields may elicit limited interest. Opting instead for clickable Agree-Disagree five-point Likert scales, I sent in my proposals for a total of twenty-eight questions or statements including, but not limited to:

- *We don't talk about death enough.*
- *It's better to know if you're dying, than be unaware of it.*
- *I am afraid of to die.*
- *I have talked to someone about my wishes for my funeral or end of life care.*
- *Funerals are too expensive.*
- *There is something after death.*
- *Humans have souls or essences that exist after the death of their physical bodies.*
- *I don't care what happens to my body after I die.*
- *I prefer to have physical grave or memorial site I can visit, or to have one marking my own remains that my loved ones can visit.*
- *Showing dead bodies on the news/in museums is unethical.*
- *I want to donate my organs or body to medicine or research.*
- *I have heard of Death Cafés.*
- *If my condition became terminal, I would not want to be resuscitated, or would like someone to terminate life-support.*
- *I would rather die at home than in hospital.*

Nearly all of these questions were gently rejected by Laura. "We can't really ask about stuff like… well, you understand, ethics and all", she smiled sweetly. I thought I had been quite neutral, and was unsure what I was to do at the event once my silly quiz was turned down, too – I insisted a bit of competition and the promise of a small prize was enticing, as I wrote down multiple choice trivia such as "what is the most common cause of death in the UK?" Regardless, once I arrived at the library, I was impressed at the display sprawling out in the entrance hall. There were whiteboards (Figure 15) for magnetic poetry to play with, and Emma had purchased an Edgar Allan Poe-themed set online to ensure the inclusion of deathly words. A friend of hers was setting up easels to support A2-sized printouts of literary quotes and

verses on dying and blu-tacking markers on string to their corners, hoping passers-by would write comments in the margins. I was tasked with propping up an enormous cardboard cut-out of a red post-box (Figure 16), in which people could write "letters to death" – we had glossy black envelopes, and a basket balanced behind its slot to catch any potential contributions. We wore stickers on our chests with black hearts on them, enclosing the Twitter handle for *A Good Death?* and more archaeologically versed colleagues from the Duckworth Laboratory sat nearby with models of skulls and pelvic bones. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the early afternoon visitors to the library were not immediately drawn to us.

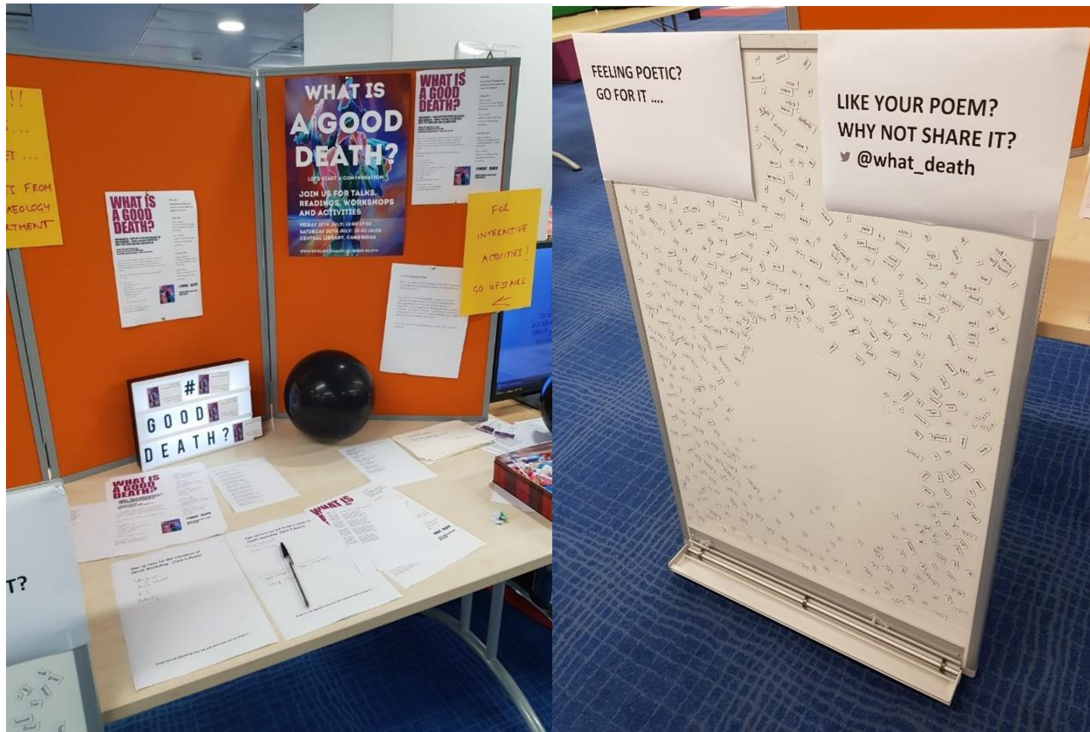
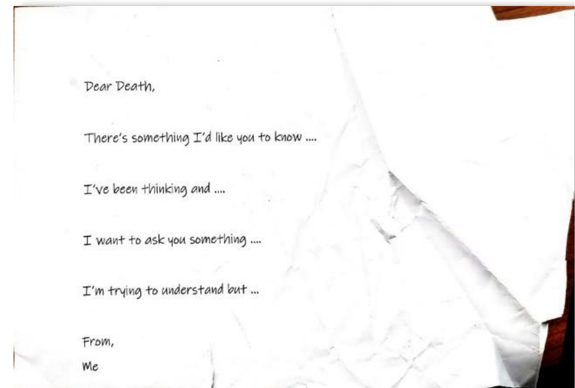


Figure 15 – The *What is a Good Death* event display stand at Cambridge Central Library, including a magnetised board for poetry and prompts to share feedback or event hashtags on social media.



Dear Death,

There's something I'd like you to know ....

I've been thinking and ....

I want to ask you something ....

I'm trying to understand but ...

From,
Me

Figure 16 – A cardboard cutout of a post box used as part of audience engagement for the pop-up, featuring a call to either share comments on sticky notes, or drop a letter through the box addressed "to death", advertising the workshop later in the afternoon.

Most visitors jostled past with their gazes fixed on the floor, though our balloons proved a hit with children. "This isn't something for euthanasia, is it?" an older lady frowned, and was "extremely happy" to hear it was not. We had not agreed on a message with which to approach visitors, and "would you like to talk about death?" or "what do you think a good death is?" was largely met with silence. I felt an ease approaching younger people, though it was not the time nor place for many of them to be about. In terms of older visitors, the question felt somehow far more of a confrontation as I nodded to greet them with the banners looming behind me, as if a suggestion that they ought to pay attention to these issues; responses of "I'm far too busy living my life, actually!" and "I'm not dead yet!" reinformed these impressions. I felt implicated in something I did not mean when another volunteer attempted to start conversation with "death is such a taboo, isn't it?" or "I understand if this is hard, I know nobody ever talks about this stuff!" Laura and Emma found recourse and acceptability in distributing more death-themed poems we had printed and collated stacks of. "Would you like a free poem?", they would ask in cheerful voices, handing pieces of paper to people as they walked away. We attempted to feign engagement ourselves to make the space less pristine, scribbling words on the posters and affixing post-it notes to our mailbox – "try to use different handwriting, so it doesn't look like the same person wrote them all", I was nudged. I cracked a smile as I watched the graphics on the small monitor nearby; Laura had opted for a few open text questions behind a scannable link where people could describe a good death, after which key words used in responses would show up in an interactive text cloud, wherein the most frequently used terms would occupy the most space. Unfortunately, many of the answers we had received were in negation, such as "I don't care as long as I'm not alone, suffering in hospital" – resultingly, words like "pain" "suffering" and "all alone" swam engorged on the screen. Only a dozen or so had bothered using their smartphones to contribute, so Laura said we could go ahead and submit people's remarks on the form ourselves: a young Muslim man told me death was heaven for believers and hell for the infidel, but this was vetoed from our display.

I did not attribute our failure to speak to more than a handful of people over three hours to subject matter, as I certainly would not stop to converse with strangers in a public space like this either. One of my teammates, however, grew discouraged with how we were ignored, and sighed after being brushed off abruptly. “Just because they don’t want to talk about it doesn’t mean it’s not going to happen to them.” Another volunteer concurred and suggested many people live in fear and denial. I wondered if I stood complicit in the propagation of another taboo, whereby afterlife and organs are no-go topics, or part of a framework by which everyone must be open to speak, lest they be accused of denial. I remember a few conversations, such as that with Becky, 24, who was sleeping rough and passed many afternoons in the library for computer access. “Sorry, I think that’s bullshit”, she said, pointing at Hamlet’s soliloquy (“perchance to dream”) on the wall. “It’s not sleeping, it’s not dreaming, and it’s not pretty and this mystery, because there’s just nothing.” I suggested she could write “not true” on the poster before she told me that she “wasn’t fussed” about good death and would not care at all if she died. “I guess the part that’s hard is to think nobody would care if I did. But I won’t do it; someone needs to look after my dog.”

I felt increasingly out of place when our workshop started that afternoon. We had invited people to sit down for an hour in a separate room upstairs for “writing letters to death”; four women between sixty and eighty had joined us and were offered another batch of quotes or poems about anthropomorphised death to discuss as a warm-up. There were poems in which death was described as a dark figure or military man, as well as some in which it was a long-familiar friend or gentle benefactor – “so maybe it doesn’t need to be a scary character!”. I was asked to offer thoughts on Neil Gaiman’s question: “how would you feel about life if Death was your older sister?”, based on a comic called *The Sandman* that I was unfamiliar with. The sample copy we had displayed downstairs featured a pretty – if very pale - young woman in a tank top wearing elaborate eyeliner. I admitted I could not capture the feeling of the quote, that “sister” makes it seem as if death is *of* the same thing you yourself are; and who were our parents? Maybe I could understand if it was “if your sister was the grim reaper” or delivered death, but to “be” death… Laura interrupted me to say that maybe I was not somebody who was able to think of death as a person or find it helpful, and that it was fine, we would move on. I left hoping she did not feel I was trying to go against the grain, as I did not know what the “correct” answer might have been, though I suspect it would have been something about kinship, or testament to how this exercise “helps” me – an aim I was not comfortable with.

Figure 17 – A picture of the What is a Good Death stand, providing an overview of some of the materials provided to the audience; this includes a sheet of black heart stickers bearing the event details and hashtags that participants could wear, a poetry flyer, and a copy of a graphic novel by Neil Gaiman that anthropomorphises death as a young woman.

Doctors and families

The most common features for good death I heard at our event and others like it were found in "bad death" examples: the negative scenarios were frightening, painful, lonely or protracted; explicit comments on the good expressed hopes for comfort, peace and serenity to be found in lack of distress – either physical, or mental. There were some instances of aversion to hospitals, accompanied with language that described the clinical, cold, sterile, impersonal, or unfamiliar. Fiona, who later attended our letter-writing group mentioned the medical apparatus and its "unnatural" or inorganic quality:

> "I think for me, the thought of being plugged up to something with needles and wires and tubes going in and out of you, surrounded by strangers or machines beeping… but unfortunately, I think that's how it is for most people now. That instead of passing naturally, we intervene a lot and don't stop to think – it's not letting them go, and it's actually quite selfish. I think that's why the right to die conversations are really important."

Angela, who was a few years older, acceded that treatment at the end of life could be undignified, but was concerned about a "slippery slope" for terminal patients.

> "Don't you think, though… that if we make these claims about when a person's life stops being 'worth living', there's going to be pressure? Like, will the elderly feel pressured to say they don't want more help to keep living anymore if they start thinking they're a burden, or taking up a bed – that they have to claim they're ready to die, because it becomes the expectation?"

Expectedly, the topic was swiftly changed; we were not here for big debates, Laura noted, but in opening conversation, we might allow everyone the opportunity to reflect on their own values. If outright statements about right to die is absent in awareness circles, however, the stress on free choice and juxtaposition of medical and desirable settings is typical in good death discussion. The 2022 theme for Awareness Week was *In a Good Place,* encouraging attendees to reflect on what constitutes a good place (which could also be interpreted as a "headspace"), and besides measuring willingness to speak about death (see p. 80) many of the publicised Dying Matters metrics pertain to choice location. A particular Guardian article on the matter was shared by numerous Deathling Den members as well as UK-based charities on Twitter and was based on a study by MacMillan Cancer Support: herein, "although only 1% of cancer patients say they would prefer to die in hospital, 38% do". The somewhat provocative headline stressed that thousands of patients are "denied their wish", and preceded the charity's head of health and social care stating that:

> "There is a stark difference between a 'good' and a 'bad' death. We want everyone, where possible, to have a death that's pain-free and in the place of their choosing."[51]

A similar survey was conducted by YouGov in 2010 commissioned by Demos and detailed in the Dying for Change report, funded by the charity Help the Hospices (now Hospice UK): according to these figures, two thirds of the UK population would prefer to die at home than in hospital.[52] Only 1% of those questioned said they would be "happy" to die in a care home, and 7% would be content with dying in hospital; as such, the report suggests hospital care

---

[51] https://www.theguardian.com/society/2017/apr/28/thousands-of-cancer-patients-denied-wish-to-die-at-home Campbell, D. (2017)
[52] https://demos.co.uk/research/dying-for-change/

increases distress and that directing roughly 2.5% of NHS spending on end-of-life care (c.a £500 million annually) could fund community services to allow nearly 50% of people to die at home. The shift in vocabulary following the Covid-19 pandemic was notable, as 2020s headlines on awareness charity sites and news outlets alike have concerned themselves with *excess* deaths at home; the Office of National Statistics records deaths at home increased by a third in 2020[53]. Hospice UK estimates more than 100,000 additional people died at home after the start of the pandemic compared to long-term rates, and in their bulletin on the matter "that's tens of thousands of families who fear that the death of their loved one wasn't as comfortable or peaceful as possible" without the "right" care plan in place [54]. The impression by which homes are perceived "good", and hospitals are undesirable is to be unpicked in relation to care, in recognition that the positive associations with the former are dependent on constructing the home as a site of comfort, which does not happen alone. In the Hospice UK statement about "pain-free and in the place of their choosing", or lacking comfort and peace, the provision of the "right" care is differentiated from intervention as in Fiona's apprehension about treatment that do not allow "passing naturally", or control exerted by professionals who "deny" wishes. The categories of home and natural are not self-evident; the provision of strong pain relief, for example, introduces the element of palliation, and speaks to the types of deaths most common, or most commonly suited to a specific good death context.

In the Dying Matters site's reflections on their "right place" theme, the author notes that only one in five (20%) adults believe they will be able to control where they are at the end of life[55]– implying that such control is not only possible, but more widely accessible than respondents realise. The research findings indicate a "worrying lack of knowledge and confidence" that could be combatted when "as a society we [...] become braver about talking about death, making sure the right plans are put in place to protect ourselves and our loved ones at the end of life." The well-meaning statistics and phrasings seem to inadvertently suggest a mistrust in treatment that occurs without planning and taking personal responsibility – are our loved ones poorly protected, if they fail to put instructions in place? How well can one predict the conditions of a potential future terminal condition and the types of relief or equipment required? How well are the best-laid plans ultimately executed? A worry that conventional medical practice subverts good dying is prevalent in literature related to the death taboo, as in participants' accounts regarding doctors who "don't know any better": in Kearl, physicians are pithily named "our culture's high priests" in their "huge secular cathedrals dedicated to battles against death" (Kearl 1989, 13) whereas many of the popular books in awareness circles and their experts profess an outsider position to the norms of their work environment.[56] Dr. Kathryn Mannix's *With the End in Mind* (p.80), for example, is based on her background in cancer care and a career change into palliative care consultancy (described as "pioneering the new discipline of palliative care" in the book's dustjacket) specialising in cognitive behavioural therapy exclusively for palliative care patients, and strengthens delineation of (medical) care from caring:

---

[53]https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/deaths/articles/deathsathomeincreasedbyathirdin2020whiledeathsinhospitalsfellexceptforcovid19/2021-05-07

[54]https://www.hospiceuk.org/our-campaigns/dying-matters/dying-home-what-happening-behind-closed-doors

[55] https://www.hospiceuk.org/latest-from-hospice-uk/thousands-dying-every-year-without-wishes-being-met-survey-reveals

[56] As Tony Walter points out, many "de-medicalising" movements to make death "once again natural" are 1) initiated by doctors and arguably extend medicalisation 2) by allied health professionals who may succeed in degree of de-medicalisation, but in the process further professionalisation. (Walter 2020, 34-5)

> "Instead of dying in a dear and familiar room with people we love around us, we now die […] our loved ones separated from us by the machinery of life preservation." (Mannix 2017,2)

Similar bestsellers from Paul Kalanithi (*When Breath Becomes Air,* 2016) and Atul Gawande (*Being Mortal*, 2014, currently being developed into a film starring Bill Murray) (both US-based surgeons, the former of whom had their work published posthumously) challenge medicalisation with suggestions that physicians engage in something akin to "primitive torture" (Gawande 2015, 15) in the protection of their egos or salvationist ethic. In Gawande's introduction, he describes the development of scientific technology as feeding medical delusion, or the association between dying and failure, proposing medics found it difficult to face their limits, citing yet another surgeon regarding arrogance:

> "The necessity of nature's final victory was expected and accepted in generations before our own. Doctors were far more willing to recognize the signs of defeat and far less arrogant about denying them." (Nuland 1993 in *ibid,* 18)

The denial-acceptance dichotomy is reminiscent of my engagement with Death Cafés and awareness spaces insofar as it seems to find its issue in system or "society", as opposed to individual attitude: just as these doctors did not represent the supposed medical desperation to prolong life at all costs, neither did the medics I spoke to over the course of my study. I met Matt and Lisa, two recently qualified doctors at a live recording of Cariad Lloyd's *Griefcast* as part of the Underbelly Festival in London, who I asked about the challenges of death in hospital.

> Matt: "I mean, as a whole, doctors aren't great at it. We don't get taught it, it's not part of the job description… I think people sadly indifferent towards it. And can be difficult to bring up, especially when you're new to it."
>
> Eveliina: "But are you? I mean, how does it make you feel? Do you think it's true what they're saying about doctors seeing death as failure?"
>
> Matt: "I mean, no, I'm not indifferent. Seeing someone die is the closest thing to a spiritual, existential experience I've had, and I don't believe in lots of things, but it's powerful. If it doesn't do anything to you on that level, you might want to think about another job. But with the keeping alive thing, absolutely not. I don't think anyone who's seen a traumatic resuscitation wants to be doing that. You're trained to know and see when there's not anything left to do – but the families aren't."

Lisa challenged Matt regarding affect and experience but echoed his remarks on where drives for extending treatment tend to originate.

> "I don't think that's fair – to say if you don't feel particularly moved every time, that you can't be a good doctor, or that you don't have enough empathy. Like anything, you do get used to it, and if you were really affected every time, it'd be too hard to do the job. We probably feel more comfortable talking about death than most, actually –I don't think taboo comes from us, if there is one. But yes, families are often more reactive than proactive. Death isn't a failure, but missing opportunities to prevent it is. I do think we are taught – there was a lot in school about respect for dead bodies and how to handle them with dignity."

The question of who initiates conversation or how it should be handled is popular in palliative care journals, (eg. Collins et. al 2018; Bergenholtz et. al 2019) with academics hypothesising that communicating plans can be difficult given time constraints, bureaucracy or staffing. A 2018 Royal College of Physicians report proposes that in England, clinicians "perceived a culture among the public to avoid discussing death and expect modern medicine to cure all ailments". The authors follow this with "however, the evidence suggests this is not the case for all patients, as 77% of the public in England stated they would want to know if they had less than a year to live".[57] The error in the statement (outside the unpredictability of "years to live") lies in the unnuanced exclusivity based in aversion and desire: people likely genuinely *do* want to know, but it still does not follow that they welcome being told. Furthermore, as elaborated in Kaufman's work on death in the American hospital, the language of decision-making or problem-solving that stresses autonomy neglects incoherence, anxiety, and irrationality: the self-determined patient may "not know what to want" (Kaufman 2006; Walter 2020a, 27). The theme of families and professional's speech and its choreography is familiar to readers of classic thanatology, as in the work of Glaser and Strauss on what they termed "open awareness" context. The "ritual drama of mutual pretence" described in their 1965 work was based on a study conducted in multiple hospitals in San Francisco, where it was noted many terminal patients would act as if life were "business as usual" (Glaser and Strauss 1965 in Williamson and Shneidman 1995, 123), engaging in conversation with staff and family members as if death were not imminent – television, the weather, or one's past holidays could be safe topics of discussion. This exchange was dependent on a shared fiction whereby a recovery was possible, that could be terminated by either patient or medical party when its maintenance proved impossible, and was strategically enacted: nurses might, for example, wait a while after knocking before entering a room to avoid walking in on a crying patient (*ibid*,124). Both the dying and their families expressed a wish for what were termed tolerable emotions, and if the patients knew they were beyond help, it was assumed to be an unnecessary stress to place on them and a removal of hope. Patients, in turn, thought admission of their imminent death could cause their loved ones premature pain, or make interaction strained.

Glaser and Strauss did record an improved serene mood amongst both staff and patients in wards where "open awareness" or explicit verbalisation of death had not yet happened (*ibid*,128), but their work represents a bygone era of paternalistic patient-practitioner relations: in the United States, the percentage of doctors who said they would tell a patient of a terminal cancer diagnosis rose from 12% to 98% between 1961 and 1979 (Walter 1994,41). Though the general note that doctors' orders are replaced with informed consent (Walter 2020, 44) could apply in contexts outside dying, the specific and sizeable shift occurring in this decade can be associated with the first "death positive" (i.e.. happy death movement) and is likely linked to the indelible popularity of psychiatrist Elizabeth Kübler-Ross's *On Death and Dying* (Kübler-Ross 1975,122)[58] and its sequel *Death: The Final Stage of Growth* (1975), which introduced audiences to the famed five stages of grief that have been interpreted as a processual model. Another point of change is Dame Cicely Saunders's origination of the modern hospice in 1967.

In his comprehensive work *Beyond the Good Death*, Green places the secular twentieth century "good" in reaction to medicalisation and commercialisation, as a means of thinking

[57] *Talking about dying: How to begin honest conversations about what lies ahead* accessed at https://www.rcplondon.ac.uk/projects/outputs/talking-about-dying-how-begin-honest-conversations-about-what-lies-ahead

[58] Kubler-Ross does appear to reference Mitford in her work, too, as she remarks on the lack of X

about death in positive and personalised registers. Behind multiple popular "pathobiologies" or illness narratives, talk shows and advice columns, workshops and seminars, promotions and advertisements of the 1980s and 90s alike, Green credits Kübler-Ross's "grandmotherly voice" and her work's imperative to "reintroduce death into our lives so that it comes not as a dreaded stranger but as an expected companion [...] then we can learn to live our lives with meaning" (Green 2012, 8). *On Death and Dying* was based on interviews and observations conducted with terminal patients over two years, and its resemblance to contemporary work is striking - including the "companionship" ideas raised in the pop-up event in Cambridge (p.95), or the stress on lack of familiarity or "forgotten wisdom", whereby "other societies have learned to cope better" (eg. Kübler-Ross 1975,5, Mannix 2017,). Just as Kathryn Mannix's work suggests families, doctors and nurses alike have been less exposed to "normal, uncomplicated death" (*ibid*, 10) and presents expected "stages" involved in dying (such as changes in breathing, appetite, and sleep; the predictability and recognition of these phenomena is promoted as making dying less frightening), Kübler-Ross proposed many patients experienced states of denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance leading to death. The five stages are often misconstrued as "steps" towards "the final stage of growth", which the author tried to avoid, suggesting instead that stages shifted, skipped, looped or reversed – albeit a reconciliation or "closure" was presented as a best circumstance. "The systemic, gentle, peaceful resolve is one modern *ars moriendi*", Green remarks when underlining the influence of the acceptance narrative in professional and popular circles alike (Green 2012, 10).

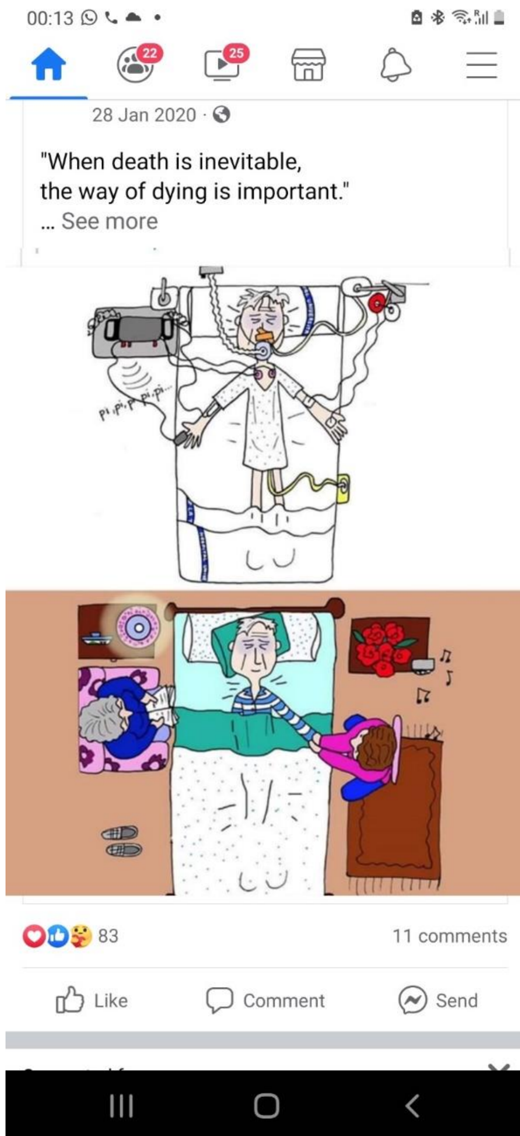
To cover much further good death literature[59] is beyond the scope of what I can achieve here, but some of the heavy lifting is achieved in reference to Christine Valentine's overview on academic constructions of bereavement, where a similar framework for concepts of both dying and grief can be recognised. Here, Valentine remarks on a tension between science and nature, where the grief (and by my addition, death) of the "modern West" is psychologised or termed in "a discipline of the therapeutic" proposing psychic unity or universalism, while the pre-modern or non-Western other is romanticised (Valentine 2006, 57). Freud's *Mourning and Melancholia*, Lindemann's 1944 "symptomology" of grief, Engel's conception of grief as "syndrome", and other psychometric scales are presented alongside a distortion of Kübler-Ross's stages in a modernist medical framework of "theories based on data obtained from white, middle-class, and predominantly female populations divorced from their social context" (*ibid,* 59), roughly reducing grief to a "goal-directed activity" rather than a state of being – "letting go" or "moving on" to reinvest in new attachments. Such simplifications have been frequently challenged since the 1990s, as in Littlewood's work, where widows expressed dissatisfaction with notions of "resolution" or complicated, chronic, and acute grief stages (62). The theme of "continuing bonds" between the living and dead enacted in diverse settings is likely best known through the work of Klass, Silverman and Nickman (1996) and is widely embraced in death studies following "a paradigm shift" still opening up new enquiry. Without a specific focus on bereavement, the recognition of "good grief" and its nuanced reading in relation to continuity and its status as *a challenging dimension of social life* (Valentine 2006,57) is relevant in assessing good dying as promoting a kind of social life and belonging, in turn. The "bad" hospital death, upon closer inspection, is set aside from more desirable models by way of its perceived interruption or suspension of care in closeness and community (family).

Froggat draws on Victor Turner's notion of liminality when proposing that hospice culture creates dynamic, flexible boundaries for life and death, as opposed to separation in mainstream approaches (Froggatt 1997): the space provided encourages an experience of

---

[59] Hart, Sainsbury, and Short (1998) provide a comprehensive overview of the sociology behind the concept

communitas for the dying and bereaved. Valentine relates such repositioning of death to meaning making in ritual, too, citing anthropologist Nadia Seremetakis's work wherein the creative cultural spaces for divination and dying ritual are "a zone of local resistance to centralising institutions" (Valentine 2006, 67) for Greek Maniat women. I understand the resistance to institution, here, as a proposal that the institution does not, or cannot unite – rather, it is thought to separate. The juxtaposition between the familiar space and its environing loved ones and "machinery" is sharp in death awareness materials, as in the images below (fig. 18).. Mannix's book joins a chorus emphasising the intimacy of a good hospice death, as she praises a family that spent a day by their dying relative: "Well done, you lovely family. You gave her the most wonderful day and peaceful evening. She has died so peacefully because she felt at peace with you here". Similar assurances are given to the doctor herself by another team member: she gave "her gift" and in doing so granted a patient "peace to lie down and cuddle her girls, after her magnificent last day" (Mannix 2017,39). The hospice is credited with enabling the vigil, "a common sight in palliative care" where there is laughter, chatter and reminiscence alongside quieter, more tearful coming together. The families gathering around death are described as attentive, analytical, and ultimately active in their presence once given space to be empowered – listening for cues, clues, breaths and sounds. In less fortuitous instances, as when a patient treated by Mannix died very suddenly of a massive gastrointestinal bleed, "the absence of farewell will be a lifetime burden for the little family of heroes" (*ibid*, 52). In all its touching storytelling, I could not help but think of network poverty, of those who die without families, or do not feel peace; the "ordinary, natural" death described here must be understood as a gradual outcome of demographic shifts, public narratives, and institutional affordances.



I really dislike pictures like this since losing my brother. He was in such excruciating pain that he couldn't stand light, sound, or physical contact. We could only sit with him in a dark, quiet room, and we couldn't touch him at all. It wasn't until we knew he was on his last breaths that we could make contact, and it was far from a serene situation.

This isn't a realistic image of death for a lot of people that experience traumatic loss. I wish the images had reflected the different ways it can play out, instead of always showing people holding the person's hand and talking to them in a pretty room.

2 h Like Reply

Figure 18 – A mobile screen capture of a digital illustration shared on Facebook, Twitter, Reddit, and LinkedIn, most frequently on pages for hospices and by nurses. The artist is uncredited, with the drawing's first use likely in 2017 by *Institute for the Study of Birth, Breath, and Death*, an American centre offering training programmes for death doulas and "grief work". The image is juxtaposed with a screen capture of a negative social media reaction, originally found below the picture in its comment section.

Planning ahead

The language of familial love is prevalent as above in materials from Hospice UK (which runs the Dying Matters Coalition); The Planning Ahead template they provide[60] can be navigated to through the NHS pages on end-of-life care, and in its first question, it invites readers to consider a situation in which they are sick enough to die[61]. The options are to favour either:

1) "the possibility of life-saving treatments [in hospital] whether or not they can save my life" or
2) "being with my loved ones is the most important thing to me. I would prefer to stay at home". The third option granted is one where
3) "staying out of hospital is the most important thing to me". That home and love are synonymous or mutually exclusive with hospitals is not entirely subtle, nor are the next pages of the questionnaire, as agitation and resuscitation are described. Agitation before death, the author notes, is common and "can be very distressing for the person and also for their companions"; to settle agitation, however, is "hard" without sedation to "peaceful sleep", as lower doses of medication could "make the person more confused but still awake", described as "often even more distressing". "What would you prefer?", prompts the text box. Once the page progresses to descriptions of DNACRP (do not attempt CPR) statements, the discomfort of medical intervention is plain to read:

> "They [health care staff] may not be aware the person is already dying, that their loved ones are aware, that their goodbyes have been said and they are hoping for that gradual, peaceful end of life. Without a DNACPR statement, they may leap into action – *loved ones out of the room*, compressions and electric shocks on the chest, the *whole works*. Most people don't want that to happen to them in their last moments. A DNACPR statement is our protection certificate [...] it *really mean*s "allow natural dying". (emphasis mine)

Pointing out the tone of these forms is not to question their accuracy or promote hospital dying. Indeed, in 2006, 55% of complaints to the NHS were regarding end-of-life treatment, and the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman's 2015 investigation of 265 complaints about end-of-life care spanning four years is harrowing reading. The *Dying Without Dignity* report's twelve case studies of anguish following poor communication and record-keeping (including lacking hospital liaison), failure to recognise symptoms, and inadequate out-of-hours services was the topic of my next discussion with Lisa, who met me for a walk around the Bunhill Fields Burial Grounds near my flat and Old Street station two weeks after the festival - a convenient spot for her to transfer to the Northern Line. I presented her with a print-out of a case of a 74-year-old "Mr C", who spent five days in hospital before his death. A few days after admission and diagnosis of an abdominal cancer that had spread to the liver, Mr C's drip came out, and three junior doctors attempted to reinsert it 14 times. Staff called for the on-call anaesthetist to help, but they did not arrive until the next day – managing to reinsert the drip after 40 minutes, shortly preceding the patient's death. Staff had failed to recognise that the drip could not be inserted as Mr C's veins were closing down as he approached death; they further attempted administration of oral pain relief despite his

[60] https://advancecareplanning.org.uk/planning-ahead
[61] The creator of the template is not disclosed on its site. However, in the Supporter Pack pdf of Awareness Week resources compiled by Dying Matters – including social media graphics and printable leaflets and bunting – it is made clear this tool was developed by Dr Kathryn Mannix

inability to swallow, also typical to patients nearing death.[62] I wanted to present examples from the report to ask whether these case studies were freak accidents, or representative of what she had seen so far. I took issue with the DNACPR as "protection certificate", as if clinical staff posed a threat, and asked if she felt distrust on either side. Her response was matter-of-fact, and expressed people did the best they could with what little they had:

> "Health care isn't trying to be sneaky or abuse patients – we get into it because we want what's best for people. General distrust is there, and it's harmful to patients, and we've seen that with things like vaccines. Yes, the environment makes it hard to get it right sometimes, but you can't dedicate time when there's no staff for it. When bad deaths happen, it's upsetting for us too, especially if there was delayed diagnosis or misdiagnosis."

I asked about whether recognising dying was hard, as when patients could not swallow medication or doctors failed to insert the drip in the report– where did the chain of communication break down? She sucked her teeth.

> "Look, I one hundred percent see that happening. Maybe not 14 times, but things become mindless tasks and series of actions – you might be trying to cannulate and think 'dehydrated, need fluids' before you step back and say 'wait, they're palliative'. But when you're junior you don't decide about palliation, you treat them a certain way until someone tells you not to. It's not about trying to find one person to blame, it's a hundred moving pieces, a situation that changes constantly, and a hundred other things to do. At the end of the day, nurses on wards are supposed to be like, one to five ratio, max one to eight. Where I work, we do one to twenty now. It's not feasible."

Lisa considered planning and advanced care helpful for her at work, not just for streamlining services or protection from liability, but as an assurance she was not doing something "wrong" – when a patient was delirious or distressed, it was very difficult to ascertain what they wanted, or if they understood the consequences of their condition. I questioned how patients could know what their condition called for until afflicted by it, and considered Tony Walter's assertion that what many people may want at the end of life is not choice, but to know they will be looked after (Walter 2020a, 44) – and whether this wish is ever the more pronounced in a death awareness conversations surrounding professionals (hospital staff, funeral homes) and their questioned "uncaring" motives and atmospheres, or scandals of social care of the vulnerable. In hospice philosophy, Walter points out, the ideal (seldom achieved) is for the dying person to regain control of the process, making informed choices about medical or spiritual techniques as they think appropriate, followed by a funeral celebrating the unique life of the deceased, followed by a period in which those who grieve are able to express and talk about how they feel (Walter 1995). In practice, however, organisational and financial constraints mean that while the system may require patients to make choices, this is only available at certain times, for certain individuals, with a limited pool of options.

Walter adds, for example, that end-of-life plans made by hospice patients with cancer have greater chances of being carried out than plans made by or for the frail elderly who have successive health crises (2020, 18), whilst Mohammed et. al. and Cook. et al. speculate that stroke patients who have DNACPR orders in place receive poorer care, and that ageism is a factor in resuscitation (2006; 2017). The good death - if related to autonomy and control - is unavailable to those with violent, traumatic, or unexpected deaths, the phasic decline or

[62] https://www.ombudsman.org.uk/sites/default/files/Dying_without_dignity.pdf p.8

“conversational” unfurling, just as the prediction or control of “in a good place” projecting dying into the adventitious and is borne of an aging population and specific health conditions. Control and decision-making alike rely on a self-determining individuated self with a degree of permanence and continuity; much of the promotion for planning both in medical and funerary contexts suggests dying in accordance with one’s living and uniqueness, the “do it your own way” thought characteristic of emergent postmodern tradition (Heessels 2016; Walter 1995). To enact agency in words and their bonds and expected outcomes as in speech act theory or to “speak for oneself” even when the capacity to do so is muted in illness and death is relevant; we can recall how at the Death Café Kenneth grieved how his wife “was no longer herself” once she became unable to communicate as they used to, with wit and wordplay evidenced in a shared crossword hobby (p.76). Yet the scripts for these words and their interpersonal nature and origins should be stressed, as in a 1995 call made by Walter for more social, negotiated understandings over psychological and therapeutic experts’ gaze on the psyche of the dying person (*ibid,* 203)

Green draws attention to the Kübler-Rossian model anew: if it did provide a formula for open and humane discussion and critiqued etiquette of avoidance or a reliance on medical technology, it did so in anecdote, and might not apply outside norms for middle-class white people interviewed (Green 2012, 10). Of course, the death aware spokespersons and their audiences I engage with do represent such a cohort: its lesser fit outside “slow, lingering deaths we associate with cancer and chronic diseases” (*ibid,* 11) does not come up often. Still, when good death is defined by health carers as such when there is awareness, acceptance, preparation, peace and comfort and the bad by “lack of acceptance and failure to actively pursue fulfilment of living” (Hart et. al 1998, 70), Walter’s note drawing on Rose and Arney and Bergen exemplifies a fair critical challenge: rather than de-medicalising, palliative care could represent a further medical colonisation with “the palliative care team now empowered to peer into not only the patient’s body, but also her very soul” (Walter 2017, 33). A holistic approach that expands a professional remit to emotional and spiritual concern means “every part of the person is now a patient” and has been critiqued as by Lyn Lofland (1978), who reads these fantasy deaths as moral imperatives placed on the dying: those failing to follow an agenda for “happy death” and transformation into triumph are pathologised. As such, the “good death” and “death denial” - as Green points out – could be more about institutional agendas for the management of dying people, than individual preferences. In reaction to death called amicable and comfortable, Lofland quips to ask “death, where is thy sting?” In a short overview of an audience event at a hospice that follows, I propose that the allegorical stinger is occluded for a convivial belonging, most predominantly in a “family” – consequently valorising an aspirational way of relating, or “virtuous circle” of de-commodified caring (Walter 2020, 45).

Left unsaid

I was racing to Clapham Common, betrayed by navigational guidance anew – the direct transit on the un-airconditioned tube took twenty-six minutes, not fourteen. Showing up flushed from the light sprint over felt inappropriate for a hospice, somehow, as did my summery top; I tugged at the material above my midriff and apologised to the receptionist for being late. “No, not to worry, we haven’t started yet, we wanted to give everyone fifteen minutes to arrive”, I was assured, and directed through a corridor to the old chapel, though the building seemed very new for the most part, the names of rooms attached by the doors on those opaque glass signs: The Gym, The Green Room. The event was free, though I had opted to donate two pounds as suggested during the online booking process. I had not kept track closely, but my

last scan of the site revealed places had been booked to maximum capacity at least four days prior. Knowing this, it was disappointing to see a number of empty seats – an email earlier that week had prompted us to call if we were indisposed, as there was a waiting list. Attendees were older than at the other Awareness Week events: of maybe thirty-five, at least a dozen appeared seventy or above. It was difficult to distinguish who may have arrived "independently", rather than through organisational allegiance: many sported blue lanyards with some kind of identification card attached, and in their brief contributions to the group discussion, it became apparent that at least four audience members worked (volunteering or otherwise) at the hospice.

The panel of three specialists – a hospice nurse, a funeral director, and a nurse-cum-professor of learning disabilities (with a focus in how death is discussed with disabled individuals) – was led by the spiritual care advisor of the hospice, Michael, who had been working at Royal Trinity for almost eight years. He congratulated us on our presence on such a beautiful evening, "where you could be out doing any number of things", as well as the courage necessitated: "it's a big thing you've done, crossing our threshold. That's something many people will not do. My gosh, when you tell people what you do, that's one way to end a dinner party!" There are polite giggles. He suggested that just as the hospice is a holistic space wherein all aspects of the human person belong – physical, psychological, social and spiritual ("in whatever way you understand that") – our conversation should be just so interdisciplinary, and not an expert lecture. "We're not here to disturb you or shock you in some way, but you may find as we go along, a *wow*, something that person has said has sparked something in me.", he starts, and I expect the kind of content warning characteristic of Death Café. Instead, he embraced what was challenging. "If you find something that's within you that's a little bit 'hmm, that's slightly outside of my comfort zone', I urge you to really pay attention to that, because I bet there is something very important in that moment of feeling." He goes on to subvert expectation by introducing, then inverting the meaning of hospice: "*hospes* are guests, but they are the hosts also. Maybe, instead of our patients and their families being the guests and our staff and volunteers being the hosts – what if it's the other way around? This isn't just some poetic idea, it's so important in terms of practicing healthcare, that they invite *us* in." Each guest at the event, at some point, went on to a statement about the privilege involved in being allowed status as witness or aide when someone is dying.

There were two pieces of paper on our chairs. The first is a smaller tag, bearing the question: "How do you live every moment?" – this would be attached to a white decorative tree at the back of a room. Our responses would be anonymous, of course, and the tree was to be displayed at different parts of the hospice. Apparently, this was something the hospice does every year for Christmas, and we could leave tags at our leisure later; first our attention was directed towards the larger sheet, embellished with logos for Poppy's, Royal Trinity Hospice, Dying Matters, and the title: *The Living Every Moment Quiz*. We spent approximately three minutes filling the page as best we could, and audience members remarked on how little time it seemed for such issues:

- How have you lived your life?
- Are there parts of my life I have wasted?
- What regrets do I have about my life?
- What would I have done differently in my life?
- What have been my priorities in life?
- Who have I hurt in life?

- Who do I need to say "sorry" to?
- Who do I hold a grudge against and why?
- Who do I need to ask forgiveness from?
- Who do I need to forgive?
- Who do I need to say "I love you" to more?

Figure 19 – A gift-tag shaped label with a ribbon, distributed to attendees at the Royal Trinity Hospice awareness event. Written responses to the question of "how do you live every moment" could be affixed to the small decorative tree displayed in the room.

Michael asked us about our experience of answering these questions before summarising and repeating volunteered audience comments. Alongside the time restraint, difficulty was result of the content being "too deep", or relating to negative feelings or memories that are unpleasant or "too private" to dwell on. I was frustrated by the notion of wasted life as a perpetuation of productivity and positivism, whereby living "fully" (or in the language of the tree-tag, "every moment") was my responsibility. I cannot fault the organisations involved, however, as the questions were indicative of people's own ethical evaluations – "these come from the kinds of questions that people, patients under the care of the hospice, have asked or thought about with us", Michael clarified. The exercise was created as one of empathising with terminal condition, but we were prompted to recognise that one did not need to be dying or diagnosed to consider these issues. There were murmurs of agreement - these questions were actually "about living". I considered the broader conceit that we were all dying, really, but that projects and traditions of "taking stock", eulogising, or putting affairs into order rely on finality and linearity for resolution. Of course, living wills are made and rewritten, but just as one would not write a film review without finishing the feature, it is difficult to "look back" when works are in process – who is to say I will not hurt more people, and harbour worse grudges?

I had encountered similar restraints in planning for care or funerals. A week prior at the Funeral Day in Birmingham (p. 138), an independent funeral provider called A Natural Undertaking had handed out detailed (though not legally binding) questionnaire forms about who we would want present or speaking at our funerals, whether we would want our remains

in certain places, or what music we would play. Running through the questions with a colleague, he echoed remarks I had made in relation to myself.

> "What, assuming like, right now? I mean, when I think about it, I think about being old and people there who don't exist yet, like ideally my kids, and I don't know if my parents would be around- I guess ideally, they wouldn't be anymore. My older sister would do a good job talking. But about place, I mean, I don't know if I have somewhere like that right now."

He went on to tell me that his father had unattainably complex demands for scattering ashes, having lived on three continents and associating with a fourth through marriage. Then he asked if we could please talk about something less morbid, and I teased him about a conservatism rarely associated with younger people: "I know, I know logically it's not like a weird thing, but there is still something about it that feels bad". I did not believe his discomfort was about death itself being bad to talk about; I believe most people can discuss disposal options, eschatology, and biomedical phenomena. The discussion of one's own musical tastes and flower preferences is not particularly difficult, either. The problem arises with and of others, and their grief, or one's grief for them. To imagine oneself dying in a "good", timely manner as an elderly person often entails the imagined preceding loss of parents or other loved ones. To imagine oneself dying at thirty, in turn, taunts the mind to create an image of the pain such a sudden loss would cause in those self-same survivors. When tasked with asking someone about death as during the Cambridge event, I felt less like I struck with a blow of mortality, but confronted strangers with an impending separation from what they valued. Similarly, more than half of the questions in the *Living Every Moment Quiz* are about other people, and the inconclusive or inflamed relationships one may leave them with in passing.

Michael proceeded to ask the panellists about times when they have felt that they did something good, that a death was good, or conviction that this was why they did this work: "when you felt satisfaction - I think that's okay to feel". The most detailed account came from the hospice nurse who I quote in length:

> "So, there was a family that I cared for recently, a young lady who was dying with two young children… had had cancer for a very long time, and she's been told several times that her prognosis was poor and that she was dying, but then she doesn't, then she moves on. This time around, she still thought she's not going to die. So, we got involved, because we were asked to help her to ensure that she spoke to her children about it at well as trying to put plans in place, sorting out the housing. And she did *not* want to talk about it. She did not want to talk about it at all, and her siblings who were her main carers were also very protective of her, and they did not want to talk about it. They felt they were failing her. I got involved and luckily, there was an aunt who wanted to talk about it, because she had an understanding.
>
> She asked to see me separately and we had a conversation, including one of the elder sisters, and that's where their values come into play and how we look at things differently. So, my initial approach was 'come on, we have to do this, we have to talk about it, it's gonna be difficult', all I could think about were the children. The children. After two hours of intense conversation with the elder sibling and the auntie, I was able to establish it was a lot about traditional and cultural norms and not overstepping boundaries, and not being accountable for making certain decisions.

> So, what was my goal? My goal was 'fine, we're not going to get her to talk about it or tell the children in the current environment', my goal was only to bring her to the hospice. I wanted her to come and die in the hospice, because that felt it was the right and appropriate setting. My task with the auntie and the sister was to try and convince them to go back and encourage her to come. After two hours, I can proudly say I was able to do that, after lots of mixed emotions, anger, frustration, questions, unanswered questions, tears, you name it, all of it, they were able to go home and say to her 'you must come. It's a good place, we've been there, and we think they're gonna be able to look after you'. She came in the following day, two days later she died. For me, it was good because then the children and the family were in an environment where they could be supported in a multidisciplinary team. That would have been totally different if it was in their home. They probably would have called the paramedics, she would not talk about do not resuscitate or allowing natural death, so they would have been obliged to resuscitate her, and it would not have been ideal or appropriate. It would have been very traumatic. For her, for her children who are very, very young, and for the rest of her family. It was well worth it, because I made a difference."

Something about this story made me quite uncomfortable, imagining the hours of wearing down of a dying woman or unravelling family norms – including her siblings' attempted protection of her privacy - in order to bring her to the "right" setting. Critiques of the increasingly institutionalised or less "alternative" hospice philosophy have existed for some decades, as in Hart et. al 1998: hospice workers, they write, routinise "a socially approved form with powerfully prescribed and normalised behaviours and choices" (72). The authors draw on Kellehear's extensive work for definitions of good death, whereby following interviews with 100 terminally ill people, he concluded the "good" occurred in two senses; the psychological individual level, given opportunity for order and control, and a social level that provides "a series of rites for appropriate disengagement and the exercise of professional power and expertise" (Kellehear 1990 in *ibid*, 71). In their reading, Kellehear finds the active role of the dying in their awareness of and preparations for death, as well as a relinquishing of roles, responsibilities and duties, and making farewells. This is joint with a mention of Kelly and May's suggestion that those who fail to conform or "fail to legitimate the roles of their caregivers" are considered "bad patients", rejecting others' power to influence their end of life. Hart et. al. stray, perhaps, too far into considering the "other" with influence to be a representative of staff or institution; they question the extent to which the dying themselves set behaviours in motion, or have behaviours shaped and constrained by professionals, without note on how - if aspirations reveal social interests or pressures *(ibid*, 71) - the moral evaluation of dying well involves pressures closer to home. Rather than relinquishing or disentangling roles and responsibilities, I find that in many cases, decision-making is bound to an altruism and care-concern for a more intimate "other" and the adherence to responsibility.

The good and worthwhile of the intervention described by the nurse at the hospice was not framed in an attitudinal shift or expressive talk from the person dying, or her peaceful comfort (indeed, manner of death was unmentioned altogether): rather, it was a matter of the family and particularly the children, mentioned five times. By virtue of simply being in the hospice environment, it was understood that the children could be supported, or left with lesser trauma of inappropriate unnatural ("not allowed" natural dying by resuscitation, p.107) death. Rather than "inviting in" the team as in Michael's etymology of hospice, the young woman was unable to "open arms" to care, thereby risking depriving her family of care seen owed to them; the siblings who felt they had failed were to participate in what was difficult, tearful or frustrating – and share it with a professional team more apt at handling it – lest they inflict

greater difficulty on those less able to weather it. The mother was to enact a protective maternal role and risked bad death in the form of compromising her children's wellbeing. The notion of continued protection is familiar to anyone exposed to enough British daytime television, with every advertisement break featuring some life-insurance policy: a safeguard for dependents or families. Pre-paid funeral plans are similar promises of lessened tribulation for an already bereaved family, to spare heartache and expenses alike. Promotion for environmentally friendlier disposal (chapter 4) stresses the undue or unnecessary ecological burden or footprint, while advance planning or organ donation are in place not only for a patient (or in some cases, those who are helped by their donation), but the comfort of their families and carers who need not make taxing decisions or live with uncertainties regarding the justifiability of their choice by forced hand. The quiz distributed at the hospice called for apology and forgiveness and opportunities to speak of love; Becky at the library did not want to die because her dog needed her (p.99).

In Annemarie Mol's discussion on patient choice and moral imperative, she points out that dependent patients are depended on – not just by partners, parents or children, but the professionals who work with them. "If patient turns passive, professionals cannot do anything [...] it is impossible to take care of people who do not take care of themselves" (Mol 2011, 82). If for Kellehear the culturally sanctioned or prescribed good death behaviours allow "death made more meaningful for all concerned and involved" (Hart et al. 1998, 72), I venture to expand this by suggesting participation in dying well is framed as an act of care towards the living and "matters" an extended meaning or belonging to relationship dynamics in and beyond dying processes.

I curtail this observation with Emily Abel's analysis (2018) of the records kept by hospice founder Florence Wald, in which early patients and their families rejected expressivity and, despite Wald's best efforts, remained embroiled in conflicts – yet pioneers like Wald "held tightly to their vision of a good death, even when their own experiences highlighted the limitations of that vision" (Green 2012). Abel reads statements from American hospice directors of the 1980s that stress the treatment of patient and family together as a "basic tenet" of hospice care, where death is "a coming together" (Abel 2018, 111), but this kinship should be understood as hewn in the space by all parties: if the good departure necessitates farewell, one must express they are leaving – if the vision requires familiar held hands at bedsides, the attendees of the vigil must not only be willing to embrace the dying, but the dead themselves are to lean into one, in reference to my understanding of Hertz's classic triangle-pyramid. To not assume an expected dying role is to sever practices by which gradual "extinguishing"[63] of the social person is achieved and could subvert categories of living/mourners and dead/world of dead or the proposal that correct rites ensure "the last word is with life" (p.49). In Walter's words, "individualist ideology can be collectivist and conformist in practice" (Walter 2020a, 123).

An example non-admission of death is present in one of Mannix's case examples too, where a young patient – Sally – had been unwilling to hear doctors' negative prognoses about her melanoma. "I've never come across anything like this", the leading doctor remarks, and

[63] Putting a pin in "extinguishing" versus "living on" in bonds, I stress the practices of caring mark the difference between a cut and a scar: to die without reconciling a painful argument, for example, is "hauntological" in its corresponding relationship suspended in irresolution. Continuing bonds theory notes relationships go on and are not extinguished, but the specific social person with magnanimity and volition to mend rifts is not similarly available: I have heard of cases of love carrying on, but not of life-time disagreements amended postmortem.

Mannix alike says though she had read of complete denial, she had not met anything of this magnitude before. Beyond the point of people perhaps not needing to be taught to not deny (if denial is this rare), Sally's mother's remarks on her daughter speak to the social role and maintenance of relationships: "She knows – she can't bear the sadness. She can't bear us to be sad" (Mannix 2017, 83-4). Rather than reading as denial of her condition, Sally seems to be making a promise of her commitment to the imagined relieved sadness of her kin by way of hope; she repeats that she could yet beat her cancer. She died dreaming of a future she would not have, naming her unborn children. Dying alone in hospice or despite family involvement is often treated in a language of sparing survivor's feelings in this way, with Mannix and the hospice panellists I heard suggesting it is quite common for patients to die as soon as their relative leaves the room for a moment – this potentially arbitrary timing of dying can be transformed into a register of meaning and care because the dying "did not want you to have to see" or "did not want to leave you". In the book's narrative, cognitive behavioural therapy is proposed as an empowerment to patients, wherein the patient is made unhappy by their *interpretation* of events, and "helping a patient to notice these thoughts and consider whether or not they are accurate and helpful is key to enabling them to change" (*ibid*, 101). Recognising the value of minimising suffering, I nevertheless advocate for the entitlement to have "unhelpful" and unhappy interpretations of one's or others' dying, an event largely unhappy for many. To be further problematised is the point raised by Gawande, after he describes a painful, lonely death in a nursing home:

> "In the main, the family has remained the primary alternative. Your chances of avoiding the nursing home are directly related to the number of children you have, and, according to what little research has been done, having at least one daughter seems to be crucial to the amount of help you will receive." (Gawande 2015, 4)

The disproportionate expectation placed on women and daughters is scantly expounded upon following an introduction that differentiates modern dying from that of Gawande's grandfather's village in India, where "as for most of human history" multigenerational care in family homes meant "the elderly were not left to cope with infirmities of old age on their own" (*ibid,* 27) Nuances due and caveats to this generalisation aside (eg. Coontz 2005 on nostalgia over familial bonds in the United States), the rhetoric of scepticism to medical or institutional care – often fleshed out in conversations about biopower, polity, and governments' involvement in defining death and who it happens to, or why (eg. on gun control, life-support, abortion and reproductive rights, war and genocide) – tends to fall back on family as antidote, as if a given natural unit and nexus for care. The lines between empowerment and labour are fine; Abel's work, for example, remarks on how many of Wald's early patients had little help from kin. Though she did not engage with the issue of gender in her records, Wald selected study participants solely from a breast cancer clinic and the majority of patients' male spouses had full-time employment; Abel suggests the widespread belief that care duties are women's duties was significant, as when some women Wald treated expressed discomfort in having to rely on their husbands – trying to lighten their burdens – and others said lack of care work from their brothers was unsurprising, as these brothers were also absent when their parents ailed (Abel 2018, 95-6). Wald is further recorded as expressing pity or concern for patients' families in situations where family-led care at home was more unpleasant: of a fourteen-year-old daughter who shared a bed with her mother, she notes the mother's "horrendous" wound and its dressing that "even doctors recoil from" *(ibid* 97) would be too difficult a demand for a family member. Similarly, she sought to ensure a younger daughter had no opportunity to witness what was predicted to be a bloody, painful death. Yet within a few years, other hospice leaders extolled home care; in a 1975 fundraising appeal by Hospice Inc, "the home is the

natural place to die" where patients could be "protected from institutional encroachments upon their dignity" and "remain part of their family" (97). Abel suggests this new emphasis was bound to finance more than patient preferences: "the passage of a hospice benefit under Medicare in 1983 rested not only on the argument that hospices offered a superior form of care [...] they saved money by relying on the free labour of families."

In an analysis in *The New England Journal of Medicine,* the home surpassed the hospital as the most common place of death in the United States in 2017, prompting publications to question potential stigma surrounding nonhome deaths. Commenting on the shift, Dr. Melissa Wachterman remarks that the ideal home is scaffolded with social pressures: the suggestion that "if you really loved this person, you'd keep them at home"[64]. In the North American examples, of course, insurers come into the picture: payment policies typically grant hospitals a lump sum based on diagnosis group regardless of length of stay, incentivising expedited discharge – home is an easy destination. Likewise, CMS (Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services) penalises high readmission rates and facilities with high 30- day mortality (from date of admission) in quality-measurement programmes related to hospital reputation. Under the Medicare hospice benefit, in turn, routine home care is reimbursed at $150 to $200 daily, and hospice agencies take full responsibility for costs related to the diagnosis that qualified hospice enrolment. Thus, hospital admission can reduce profits and in cases where patients disenroll (clearing the hospice of cost liability), agencies with high "live discharge" rates may be investigated by CMS, incentivising keeping patients enrolled – and at home (Wachterman et al. 2022).

In a UK setting, rather than engaging with the one-to-twenty nurse ratios Lisa lamented as unfeasible (p.108), the solution tends to a proposal that de-commodification is where desirable care resides, anyway. It is not unusual, Walter writes, for British hospices to have 400 or 500 local volunteers; with these resources far exceeding those available to state-funded services or for-profit residential care, hospice care quality continues to excel– generating opportunity as well as inequality in end-of-life care, given eligibility criteria (Walter 2020,45).[65] Walter draws on Titmuss's discussion of British blood donation without reimbursement (as opposed to American, compensatory procedure) as gift relationship to describe families' desire to give back to hospices, and is mindful of the subtleties between de-commodified and de-professionalised: British hospices might de-commodify, but stress high expertise, whereas the home death movement or compassionate communities project (Kellehear 2013 in *ibid)* is both de-commodification and de-professionalisation. It bears noting, however, that professionalisation and expertise are not equivalent; the family or community may not be professionals but are frequently called "the experts" (eg. p. 75). The expertise of accompanying dying is of emotional disposition, whereby the good hospice staff and family members care not "as noun", where care is a service to be delivered, but demonstrate their care is "from the right place" of compassion or reverence; it is telling that Mannix's team leader calls her treatment of a family her *gift* to them. Similarly, patients can give their gift made explicit in the 2021 BBC Ideas video on planning, made in cooperation with the Open University: "It's a true gift of love

[64] https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/26/health/hospice-death-care.html Span, P. (2022)

[65] American hospices diverge in volunteer status around the 1980s: with Medicare reimbursing hospice care for patients with prognoses of fewer than 6 months of life, for-profit companies have entered the arena with vested interest in maximising admissions (Walter 2020; Whoriskey and Keating 2014)

because you are taking away that burden. Would you consider making an end-of-life plan to help your loved ones?"[66]

I return to gender and alternative modes of care in chapter five but invite reflection on the theme of disinterested care that carries through this thesis, by which I suggest care is an amalgamation of obligation and desire. I choose desire as a term over love, for example, as the latter (in my understanding) always entails obligation; for care, the obligation to tend must be recognised, but presented as not emergent of concern for one's duty or "balance", but one's desire to live in a particular kind of society that pays mind and thus, would choose to tend "naturally" – whose members may merely (allegedly) have been made to "forget" their reciprocities by external forces. Then, as long as care is "primarily associated with tender love, it may be cast as something that is opposed to technology" (Mol 2011, 5) the impersonal or medically constructed body of tubes, wires, beeps or "whole works" is presented as living wherever loved ones are absent (p.107), overlooking technologies of palliation as something extra-natural. As in Wald's vision and aspiration for resolution, or the nurse's uncooperative patient, the dying do not necessarily always want to have families near, and families likewise may not be available or able to provide care; this does not mean people would not idealise states of affairs where we want to be there or belong to and for one another. Similarly, even if death cannot always be made peaceful, comfortable, or "helpful", a good death narrative that prioritises planning denotes that given appropriate participation, such an experience is, or ought to be attainable. The hospice quiz, text trees, online tools or word-clouds, funeral plan forms and our library event's whiteboard or post box for death letters alike become, more than contracts, particular unspoken ritual speech-acts that contribute to a landscape of words as "being there for". There is a joint assurance of the continued meaningful co-presence of the dead, and the value of participation to indicate care, "mattering" made papery matter.

Wordscape

Some of the paperwork involved with dying is more easily classifiable as bureaucratic activity. There is much rich ethnography on documentation as constitutive to how the state is imagined and how it penetrates living, and how limits imposed on circulation of these texts produce the boundaries of particular organisations; explorations in this area have expanded meanings of documents as not fixed or in stable relationships between words and the implementation of regimes. Allard and Walker remark that the forms and material of documents as textual artifacts can become tantamount to acting, and how one writes may determine the felicity or outcome of actions, but these forms should be recognised for value outside the instrumental. In their introductory summary, Goody's "well known" observation that written documents enable extended interaction across time and space is the most immediately relevant to DNACPRs, will-making, or other planning practices of "affairs in order" around dying. The permanence of the textual object forge "paths" of communication that are more than metaphoric: in Allard et al.'s context with the Venezuelan Yanomami, text traces such as censuses opened arrival of material goods and heightened mobility for rural community and their durability meant paths that fell into disuse could be "re-opened" at later

[66] The YouTube video *Should everyone have an 'end-of-life' plan?* presents a refreshing perspective in their inclusion of Sally Whitney, a researcher from the University of Sheffield. Whitney notes that in the field of disability studies and following personal experience living in a disabled body, one may feel disinclined to plan or find it unimportant when they have spent a lot of their energy and lifetime negotiating their health and diagnoses, or the kinds of support or care they receive already.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NV22a3qv3wE&t=36s (2021)

stages (Allard and Walker 2016, 405). For Veena Das, the state is elusive "spectral presence materialised in documents" (Das 2007, 187), and by inverse of this relationship, spectral presences can be granted their line to autograph: the ethical value of self-determination is widely accepted and promoted in death contexts, and with its caveats (who decides, what are their choices, are they executed?) is woven into discussions on dignity, agency, and autonomy. My prior notes on speech act and perlocution (p.85) relate to the expectation that the recorded wishes of the dead and dying do or should have outcomes in the world. What was more notable in fieldwork, however, was an ephemeral, public, or dialogic writing practice; even in writing about future wishes for the funeral plan sheet or clicking options on the planning tool, it was stressed fields we saw were not legal or contractual. What do we do when we hang notes on trees, or drop them in envelopes nobody will open? I engage with Hull's statement that documents create and modify social relationships (Hull 2012) and propose the act of writing is more fruitfully analysed in "disjunctive" disentanglement from traditional representational semantic concern.

The delicate tree – a branch painted white and affixed onto a base board – that sat on a hospice table was not the only one of its kind. I had seen two others in Wanstead library in South London, a place that had termed itself the first death positive library in the country. Their trees were much larger, with the lacquered white finish of flat-pack furniture and were planted by *Life. Death. Whatever.,* another UK-based death aware initiative ("an international community of eclectic people from many different disciplines [...] united in a commitment to doing death differently") with the genre hallmarks of organising and participating in festivals, conducting talks and cafés online and offline, being founded by young women working as an alternative (on their website, progressive) funeral director and death doula respectively, and having a popular book out on the lessons death teaches: "We are all going to die, and that's okay. Let's talk about it". The trees were equipped with pink postcards, and a sign said the contributions to the installation formed their "#Unsaid" project, collecting words people may have not gotten the chance to say to someone due to a death – or if they are still alive, and we are simply unable to communicate something, the instructions clarify. What is not made clear is whether these audience cards will be used somehow: on their pastel-tinted Instagram and sleek website, #Unsaid messages are elicited via a project email address and posted (and always anonymised, they stress) in their hundreds. The effort is explained:

> It's a collection of cathartic postcards [...] we share your words, your burden, your sorrow, your secrets and your sadness without judgement or comment. We give those words a physical presence, we give them space outside of your thoughts and we bear witness to your experience.[67]

The difference or similarity of these trees to those in hospice can be considered with reference to limited work on these objects in journals: the first mention of an exercise of this kind I am aware of is Andrew Goodhead's (2010) article in *Mortality,* wherein the author – a spiritual care lead for a London hospice, not unlike Michael – analyses a "Tree of Life" in papier mâché that paper leaves could be affixed to. In this example, the tree was displayed in the hospice chapel, and the tree was situated by a window, beside a tray of candles: the lighting of candles and tacking leaves to the paper that proved popular. Twelve months following a death a Thanksgiving and Memorial Service is held, and families are invited to write on A5 slips; Goodhead sets about to compare both sets of writing and relate them to personal, but "quasi-public" memorialisation. These memory acts are likened to memorial websites, roadside

[67] https://www.lifedeathwhatever.com/unsaid

shrines or the externalisation of "inner representation of the deceased", which is further bound to continuing bonds: writing is treated as processing remembrance or immortalisation, expressing "hopes, fears, fantasies and realities" (Goodhead 2010, 327). In line with literature on bonds, Goodhead finds the desire to be reunited with the deceased in messages posted, as well as the conceptualisation of the deceased as present, with a role in the survivors' present: most notes included declarations of love and longing for the deceased, building to a conclusion that writing is remembering, reuniting and "bringing back" the dead, offering comfort and catharsis.

Hancocks' and Lardner's research on prayer requests across NHS teaching hospitals is employed to supplement notions of writing for expression; "the open and honest way people use these prayer boards indicates that they find it a valuable opportunity to express themselves [...] perhaps in ways they may not feel able to directly with a chaplain or volunteer" (Hancocks and Lardner 2007, 20). This conjecture or "indication" is not supported by any of the authors' material, however: the pie-charts of text analysis show no words to the effect of inability to express elsewhere, and interviewing users is suggested likely "too intrusive" or impractical a task. A further hypothesis presented by Goodhead is that "perhaps composing a memorial overcomes difficulties [of conversation about grief]" or "the opportunity to compile a slip together may enable a difficult conversation around grieving to take place, as the writing provides a 'distraction' enabling people to engage with each other" (Goodhead 2010, 325). In considering the therapeutic value and help of writing after bereavement, this piece is joined by work in medicine and attachment – chiefly that of Neimeyer – or Collins et. al, who write of an interactive "Hope Tree" installed at three hospices in the metropolitan Vancouver area of Canada. They propose creative writing is a means of instilling hope, which "has been shown" to enhance patients' quality of life, minimise negative psychological consequences or "somatic distress" for families, and has staff self-report higher well-being, allowing higher quality care (Collins et al. 2018; Neimeyer 2012). At the Hope Trees, optional feedback surveys were provided alongside a locked letterbox with five-point scales about enjoyment of the tree, its benefit, and likelihood of encouraging others to participate; 80 total hopes posted yielded just 25 survey responses (with one site receiving none), and of these participants 96% of responders were female, and 80% were staff – no patients responded. Outside the limited materials of this study, the set of assumptions in the names of trees and installations is wholly undiscussed: the first shared factor is that writing is presumed to be a personal expression of (individuated, internal) emotion and reflection. The second a disregard for how "hope tree", "life tree", "#Unsaid" and "Live every moment" or imaginary readers influence participants and contributions; how significant, for example, is Goodhead's proposal that families leave thanks or mark anniversaries, when slips are collected at Thanksgiving Memorial a year after death?

Credit is due to Goodhead's recognition that at memorial service, slips are brought to a table at the front of the chapel and "all who return slips are aware that their writings will be available for scrutiny" (Goodhead 2010, 335): the personal writing shared "enables the reader to empathise with it", and Lattanzani and Hale are cited in recognition that some writing could be explicitly intended to comfort other readers. Might the understanding that those nearing death are liable to see one's writing shape its content? I suggest this reading does not go far enough in appreciation of the form or installation, its setting, and potentiate its differentiation from memorialisation elsewhere that "shows the person is missed" (eg. Maddrell 2013, (Hallam and Hockey 2001). Collins et. al surreptitiously make an interesting remark about their study structure: if one of the Hope Trees became full or crowded, "all hopes are removed and planted under a tree, thereby allowing the hopes to grow with the new green foliage of a living tree" (Collins et. al 2018, 1275). The material or visual register and metaphor of these sites, with

participatory incentives or discouragements can be discussed in relation to negotiating landscape, ritual and community, rather than (only) the presence or absence of the deceased as social person. Just as in planning for death where patients may not "know what to want", writing exercises are not necessarily transductions of desire or feeling "already there"; at our Cambridge library event, numerous passers-by asked what they were "supposed to do" with our material. To my knowledge, we did not record or save any of peoples' letters (of which only three were created), nor try to gather key words from their magnetic poetry. What mattered instead, was creating the impression of people having had participated: an attempt to make it look like others had left their marks was best exemplified in the intentional use of different handwriting of imaginary participants, whilst our stickers and balloons could hypothetically suggest we had marked visitors. Whilst "grassroots memorials" or "spontaneous shrines" have attracted considerable academic attention, I want to establish that spontaneity and convention are not mutually exclusive; how do some city bridges become overwrought with love locks? How did Oscar Wilde's gravesite come to be surrounded by protective glass kissed by thousands of lipstick-coated mouths annually? I point to Bowman's work on memorial benches and trees in Scotland as a vernacular praxis and installations as not simply expressions of a loss or shock, but place-making and staking relationality.

The tree is straightforward enough as "living memorial": in its vitality "the life and by extension the relationships associated with [it] have some sort of ongoing material presence" (Bowman 2021, 37). Besides tangibility, the tree and its branches can stand for family or extending roots; a cyclicity of nature with falling leaves and those newly turned; a protective canopy or a font and foundation of energy; even a biblical allegory. Trees or other elements of locations are often chosen through link to characteristics of the deceased, (a specific species of flower, for example), but can embody "dynamic and enduring physical manifestation" in growth and longevity (Maddrell 2013, 509). Bowman sorts trees into "incidental" and "intentional" groups, with the former usually at a site of an accident, and the latter deliberately planted for the deceased, or chosen in relation to their biography. Yet the tree is vulnerable, as in the case of seventeen-year-old Colin Latchem: following his death by vehicular collision in 1997 and years of a tree serving as a site for ribbons, flowers, and messages, his family was distraught to learn of the local council's decision to remove it in early 2012. Just as trees can die, benches can be destroyed or damaged. The mapping site Open Benches allows user uploads of memorial benches in their area, and of over 15 000 entries, the majority are in the UK; the removal of benches positioned without permission by councils or park authorities can cause considerable distress, as do disagreements over whose responsibility benches become. With benches and trees alike, Bowman summarises, it seems important for mourners that "their people" are in "their spot": these spots are then related to Maddrell on "third emotional space" and absence-presence[68] for remembrance both emotional and performative. Nevertheless, much of the physical evocation that "their spot" may entail is remarkably missing in both Bowman and Maddrell: the site of death or opportunity to sit in the perspective of the dead – sharing their preferred view or treading their path to a site – may mark a temporal dislocation or affective conviviality[69]. But are these trees and benches like

[68] Writing in geography, Maddrell tries to differentiate her term from Hallam and Hockey's influential work on material, memory and death (2001): in her reading of absence of the dead becoming a presence in the aforementioned, she stressing that "rather than being a consciousness of what is absent, the presence is a relational tension of physical not-being-there and emotional sense-of-still-being-there – not a presence in itself, but evoked in "enfolded blendings". I opt for Maddrell here simply because of its accessibility and popularity in "benchscape".

[69] (Wylie 2009) offers a more phenomenological perspective on "love" as part of memorial landscape.

engagement objects at awareness events or hospices? Hope Tree may have employed the language of growing hope under a real tree – as if catalyst and fertiliser – but are these memorials, or a different kind of address altogether?

Rather than (ideally) preserved plaques or engravings – such as metal-plated "memory trees" in hospices or public sculptures – the paper slips or word clouds are anonymous, to be removed, updated or recycled, not intended to serve as things to visit repeatedly; or if they are revisited, one hopes there would be new messages. I considered the similarity of these writings to how people engage with guest books or visitor attractions that endorse active feedback, with comment cards to be pinned to notice boards: does one really read notes others have left, or does the visual comprehension of their presence and mediation by hand simply suggest that others have been here and done something – that you are a participant by doing what they have done? I certainly felt reading the few tree-notes at Wanstead would have been rude at the time: I gathered they were not for me, when specifically intended for dead recipients of unsaid words. Likewise, the letters to death written at Cambridge were framed as highly personal, to be sealed, and there was some surprise when Angela volunteered to show hers to others at the table. Goodhead remarked that his Life Tree notes were nearly all explicitly to the deceased – I miss you, I love you – also typical of shrines or online memorials, such as common birthday wishes to the deceased on social media (see chapter six).

Instead of implying that the library or hospice guests believe the dead or other entities (gods, death) can see or read their messages, Walter's remarks on contemporary British eschatology are relevant: afterlife is recontextualised into familial soul reunion, and more recently in narratives of the dead becoming angels. Discourse need not match doctrinal belief (indeed, he proposes belief is almost certainly not "deep") and "people may 'like' rather than 'believe' these ideas (Walter 2016, 201; 2019). This does not mean disbelieving people's behaviours but avoiding false correlation: Walter uses Danforth as an example, as the Greek villagers he worked with could articulate the spirit's journey to heaven, "yet in the next breath admit that when you're dead, you're dead" (*ibid*, 11). When the topic of writing online posts on anniversaries (birthdays and deathdays) arose in a Death Café in Elephant and Castle, the group consensus was clear: "it's a tribute". This tribute swirled in my mind alongside the votive candles mentioned at the Life Tree site: I had no faith but had certainly lit candles at churches as a tourist before, as simply something to do. Yet the votive is *votum,* a vow or promise, a physical mark of pact or contract. I am yet to see ethnography on the remarkable boom of writing for "manifestation" and new Western understandings of witchcraft on social media in the 2020s, but in recognition of their embrace of writing as expressive action[70], I wondered if there was magic or ritual in making these texts and concluded that at the very least and tautologously, doing things does things – and speaks to what an ostensible "we" believes writing is.

Disjuncture and discourse

Work on guest- or comment book writing left me with remarks on how, following Foucault, the West imposes visual gaze as a pervasive way of recognising and ordering the world (da

[70] https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2022/feb/03/my-life-completely-turned-around-is-manifesting-the-key-to-happiness-or-wishful-thinking#:~:text=%E2%80%9CManifestation%20is%20attractive%20because%20it,of%20self%2Dawareness%20and%20accountability Kalia, M. (2022): most of the writing on laws of attraction and manifesting-writing is spread across popular news outlets

Silva 2010), and museum management articles' concern with inviting pro-active guests. An unlikely boon appeared in the area of ancient Chinese caves, as Duncan James Poupard investigates inscriptive power and graphic pluralism in the Naxi minority region of Lijiang, Yunnan province, at the Nepalese border. In this article, Poupard introduces limestone cliff carvings as a well-documented genre of formal text dating to the first century CE, imbuing geology with literary and ideological significance; in the border provinces traditionally home to non-Han ethnicities, inscriptions have a specific hegemonic, or "literocratic" purpose. In Lijiang, for example, an carving stating the mountain is "the jade-pillar which upholds the sky" makes not only a declaration of mythic geology, but can be "taken as a statement for a statesman that upholds the weight of the nation", given its signing by the first magistrate appointed by the state - Yang Bi - whose assumption of the role replaced local chieftains of a Naxi kingdom in 1723, and whose name is under the first inscription. Powerful writing is defined as that which "exudes power recognised by their audience as for more forceful than ordinary writing" (Poupard 2021, 211), and given the subordination of minority languages like Naxi, Poupard's inversion is interesting: he suggests instances of graphic pluralism can upturn a hierarchy, and "dominant" writing emanating from the centre of political control has lesser prestige.

In the walls of another Yunnan cave, amidst several graffiti there is a name written twice: first in larger graphs of Naxi *dongba* script, then in Chinese; the script is not "a neutral transcription tool", as though the marks are meant to represent the same sounds, the orthographic variation makes them "other" in a minority graphic usually reserved for composing sacred texts. The graffiti, Poupard argues, makes up a unique form of literary pilgrimage and possesses signifying strength beyond its phonetics or "literacy", as indeed, indigenous *dongba* script is not widely read or understood in a conventional sense in Yunnan. Instead, as with Debenport and Webster's work on Cherokee syllabary, the text is not necessarily "meant to be read *per se",* but present to "elevate nonreferential indexes of belonging" *(ibid,* 213). Herein, the author calls for an anthropology of writing that prioritises process of production and values, beliefs and behaviours associated with different forms over denotative meanings. The *dongba* carving tradition, for example, has "developed from 'woz 'ere' graffiti" (220) to marking sites of empowerment rituals for adherents to the Naxi faith, where a rite of burning incense, dancing, and inviting gods and spirits has made writing graffiti part of its tradition, and those who make pilgrimages (whether or not to enact other rites) to a lettered cave conventionally write their name and the date of their visit. Graffiti is ritual event for Poupard, when inscription performs the culmination of an event – such as the walk to a 9600-foot elevation, several hours from a village – and performs relationship between surface, text, and the presence of others. Beyond visitors' observation of community and its lithic durability in decades of dates and names, interpretation and re-decipherment (by scholars, too) "resurrects" the ritual's initial purpose as endowment of spirit power.

Without participants' evaluation of writing on trees involving spirits, pilgrimage is at first glance poorly adapted: what I want to stress in relation to *dongba* is how unlike graffiti in high-traffic public areas, writing slips is not for a general public or created with assumption that it could be "read" for its "Saussurean" representation of verbal language or communication, as is applicable to messages "to" the deceased. To consider writing as visual and material instead is valuable when they form installations or arguably decorative items and altars, and make statements about milieu: for Michael, the hospice was a "special space" as "just by crossing our threshold" (p.110) one was afforded a different habitus for reflection. Likewise, the hospices or chapel where other trees were installed could have already been "encoded" as spaces for specific proximities to death – as for Goodhead's participants who

described the anniversaries that occurred in them – or the benches and trees as something near-liminal in their echo of life lived, sat at, traversed or lost. Libraries and cafés, just as the museums that ideally “make value with guests, not for them” (Magliacani et al. 2018) can extend enlightenment salon idyls of knowledge made accessible, co-created and circulated in participatory “third space” (eg. Oldenburg 1989): dropping something in a death post box may say “libraries are places for me” or “social science research has impact” (p.95) as much as it means anything about dying. Though landscapes are polysemic and layered with multiple meanings or readings with varying observers and contexts, I hope to relate Naxi spirit power or empowerment to writing as a tribute to/of care in consideration of a controlled *surface*.

Peter Gow’s classic work on literacy amongst the Piro of Eastern Peru recounts the story of Sangama, supposed “the first Piro who could read”. The account analysed is a text recorded by a missionary in the late 1940s, wherein bilingual headman and schoolteacher Moran Zumeata describes his older cousin Sangama. The titular question of whether Sangama could “actually” read was raised in Zumaeta’s description of his cousin’s knowledge as occult: without explicit teaching, Sangama would “open a book, then read, his eyes following the letters and his mouth moving” (Gow 1990, 91), and people would bring him newspapers to ask what the paper said; his readings were, by Zumeata’s estimation, both accurate and prophetic. Sangama himself suggested he had been taught at a school downriver, but Gow proposes this explanation is improbable, as did Zumaeta who said nobody had seen him instructed (who “in nineteenth-century Belem would have wasted their time teaching a Peruvian Indian to read?”, 93) and does not account for how Sangama does not describe alphabetic writing or graphic components, but a paper that speaks:

> “[...] My eyes are not like theirs. I know how to read the paper. It speaks to me. Look at this one now. She speaks to me. The paper has a body; I always see her, cousin," he said to me. "I always see this paper. She has red lips with which she speaks. She has a body with a red mouth, a painted mouth.” (92)

Concluding a discussion on ayahuasca visions and socio-economic change in mid-century Peru, Gow finds it becomes almost irrelevant if Sangama could decode writing in newspapers: instead, it is a story of Piro epistemology. Zumaeta offers that it “was said” that Sangama was born a twin, and for the Piro, people with a twin are born shamans, requiring no training – unlike others. Gow writes the reading “originated within [Sangama] himself” (101), but the article as a whole seems to propose reading originates not just in different eyes but being Piro and having audience with their helpful spirits in curing songs, performed in languages incomprehensible to non-shamans. Thereby, the story was “perhaps more importantly” a lesson in the efficacy of shamanic power, given to the missionary Matteson by Zumaeta in the wake of literacy programmes and evangelisation. The “she” who spoke with red lips relates not only to the importance of graphic designs in Piro art, Gow explains, but tells of how Sangama interpreted literacy through a set of metaphors drawn from shamanic practice. Where the discussion is most noteworthy to me is in recognition that complex painted, woven and carved designs called *yona* (also the Piro word for writing) have been met with “considerable effort” to uncover semantic or representational dimensions for their graphics, with “little evidence that the designs ‘mean’ the name given to them” (94). Gow suggests *yona* is not concerned with (particular, semantic) content, but the act for visual control of surfaces: when interviewing Piro women, he found them with little to say about classes of design, but preoccupied with the way a design was adapted and executed on a surface, and “beautiful” or “ugly” hinged on competence to integrate a design onto an object or material.

Lending from Lévi-Strauss's theory of "split representation" where plastic and graphic components of designs have ambivalent relationships: "the requirements of decoration are imposed upon the structure and change it, hence the splitting and dislocation [...] but it is also a functional relationship." In this art practice, Gow remarks, the tension between the surface and its design has graphic applied not at random, but only to surfaces of "certain things closely associated with people" such as pottery, clothing, jewellery and skin. The specialist knowledge of design is credited as creating "real Piro things" and is reminiscent of text above on graphic pluralism and writing "indexing belonging"; the specificity of "closely associated" surfaces can hold for spontaneous memorials as it does cliff faces. I propose that in mattering the good death, applying writing to surfaces marks our close association with others, or at least a desire for such a thing via an episteme of words standing for thoughts and feelings.

Béatrice Fraenkel's 2011 piece on memorial shrines in New York following the 2001 WTC attack is exceptional in its attention to writing, as instead of literary qualities, she points to allegorical power of materiality: millions of people wrote "God bless America" or "We will always remember", and here the mere fact of writing with its sheer quantity of paper displayed "counts" more than their wording. Instead of durability commonly associated with writing, the conventional tokens were rained on and deteriorated; windswept elsewhere; their ink bled, and they were tacked over with many more messages again. It is naïve, Fraenkel suggests, to think the motive for public display of text is that it be *read* (Fraenkel 2011, 235): what of the tiny, handwritten cursive script in most messages? Some lettering hypothetically impacts passers-by to lean in and feel literally and figuratively closer to a message, but it is added that "of course, when people wrote [...] they did not choose in order to influence other people's behaviour, but because it was their usual way of writing". The "banality" of graphic is interpreted as phatically indicating that "everybody felt concerned, and everyone could participate" (*ibid*, 235): shrines were for and by "everybody". For our Good Death team to attempt visually presenting "everybody else" who had participated (or team members' frustration that people did not want to engage, since it's "going to happen to them") belies to the death aware principle that death is "what we all have in common", and that engagement spurred by feeling concerned with this mortality matters. For Fraenkel, the uniformity or formulaic repetition in contribution can make a polyphonic, polygraphic enunciation: "what emerges is a monumental subject" (237). I add that to join a kind of choir is less to enable amplification of own voice, but an assurance that we do, or could world-make dialogically and interdependently. The "bad death" is characterised by incapacity to dialogue or perform one's empowerment to do so: the physician or patient who does not speak in their "denial", the reviled falsehood or euphemism of language or technology keeping people "locked" in solitude or at a distance, opposing the celebrated held hands of comfort (p.182, fig. 31). Planning documents (though often about togetherness) is an extension of agency – my choices matter – but also about willingness to participate in an ethics of sparing suffering to self and others by being active.

The dedication of time and attention that material activity takes as well as the individual shape of a hand and marks left is taken as strong evidence of a self and personhood, where writing is interpreted as expressing, purging or representing existing thoughts and feelings, as in therapeutic models of creative writing (Neimeyer 2012). Returning to the statement by #Unsaid creators of people's burden, sorrow, secrets, or sadness: "we give them a space outside of your thoughts and we bear witness to your experience". Where this bridges to Gow's article is in reflection that if the paper can speak, it does so to those with certain eyes, granted by perception (death awareness?) of relationality. The relation authored is not just of continued

memory and association with the deceased, but a "tinkering" that performs maintenance aspects of care and proposes we are marked enough by others to tribute marks or gestures that avow involvement: one may or may not believe in a specific reader, but believe writing "helps", acts, or that experience can be externalised and witnessed, overlain on a surface to control its beauty and "goodness". An authoring self seems at first on the opposite end of a graphic-plastic split to examples given: if for Piro the surface chosen is tantamount and "content" of graphs applied is secondary and the Naxi work is in sacred temples, how does it relate to humdrum printer paper or Facebook walls? Consider the source of Sangama's skill: he can read, because he has acted to open willingly, allowing himself to be touched by spirits – and because he has been born a twin. This gift is a matter of giving oneself over as much as it is in the grace of whichever relations between persons made him (able). The power or aesthetic appeal of *yano* is in their acting on certain things intimately connected to persons, but when writing itself indicates person or persons' as in Fraenkel's observation on quantity of voices, to participate is valorisation of co-authorship: trees, events, landscapes and deaths are what "we" make them. An all-in-this-together romance for ritual is to be heavily guarded against; as I have suggested, making the "good death" popularly understood in hospice heritage is often a privileged, limited endeavour that neoliberally responsibilises suffering and caring. The words and deathways that do not fit a positive or comfortable narrative – Angela on euthanasia, the Muslim guest on hell for infidels, my rejected questionnaire, or doubts regarding death as a comic book character – are omitted from display or massaged away. Yet the good and its rituals thrive in tension.

I want to introduce a final theoretical point on ritual embedding ideal care relations in good death narratives by way of Michael Puett's work in an edited volume on anthropological engagements with philosophy, where he introduces the "disjunctive" world of an early (fifth to first century BCE) Chinese burial ritual. In this example, as a ruler passed away, his son was to become the new ruler, performing sacrifices to his deceased father. In this performance, someone would play the part of the deceased – receiving sacrifice – and the other offer it; more specifically, the new king's own son would act as his own grandfather (or ghost thereof). The stated goal is to solidify proper filial dispositions, yet participants did not simply act out "their" proper role of son and father but performed specifically in role reversal: the ruler as a proper son to his own son [...] in turn as a proper father to his own father" (Puett 2014, 218). If the goal of the ritual is thought to be the creation of harmonious, hierarchic relations between ancestors, fathers, and sons, there is an underpinning of "the clear knowledge that this is not the way the world operates". Puett proposes the ritual works precisely because participants, by definition, do not play these roles in a non-ritual space, and amidst real-world power-struggles or antagonistic facets of succession, "rituals inevitably fail to produce this kind of person or keep strife in the real world at bay" (Das 2018, 545). In Das's analysis, the ritual theory presented "knows" its space offers at best temporary refuge, not lasting disposition but an *"as if" place* one could not, or perhaps would not want to inhabit for long. Puett challenges harmony and continuity or "domesticated" ritual models of catharsis, favouring the tensions between ritual and "world of experience" as its efficacy. If over resolution, "the fear and hopes of constant emergences and ruptures, and the degree to which those emergences and ruptures are then actively worked upon in turn" (Puett 2014, 231) is prioritised, beside a richer vocabulary for more complex ritual forms, it could also:

> "Help us to envision an ethics that would be based on embodiment, not simply in the sense of embodying a particular role and set of values but, more important, by doing so with the full understanding that such an embodiment is by definition impossible to achieve fully." (*ibid*, 230)

Perhaps rather than good or bad deaths, the lauded hospice death is one “as if” death were pleasant, or the notes written to the dead are “as if” they could read; like the temporal disjuncture at memorials can feel “as if” they were there, the sense of impossible achievement is what keeps a work of actively working upon meaningful or powerful. I do not suggest that those who purport continued relationships with the dead “pretend” their experience is the way things are but rather, as in absence-presence, the non-embodiment of the role is what begets the condition. Can we ever feel the pain of another or “be there” and share in a death as families, or do we communicate that optimally as in the ritual place, this is what we would be; that in good outcomes, it is “as if” families mean what we like to believe they mean? Can we achieve awareness, closure, ascendancy? I venture that the impossibility of being able to write to death is what makes this writing ritually meaningful, just as the disembodiment of good death makes it a perpetually reiterable ethic; those who have one cannot vouch it was such. The powerful writing is such because it is powerless or futile in a sense, doing little “against” death, but making virtual reaches at unfathomable spaces between.

Figure 20 – A Hospice UK and Dying Matters participant flyer available at multiple Awareness Week 2019 events encouraging writing numbered lists.

In this chapter, I have engaged with the research question of what “good death” means in a discussion that begins at a pop-up event in Cambridge dedicated to garnering reflections from the public. Here as in the hybrid forum (p.21) that makes up death awareness online and offline, medical themes rose to the fore, with participants describing the “badness” of dying in hospital or a concern about standards for end-of-life care, further denoted in interview with clinicians. I review death positive guidance to document choices to highlight central themes of family and autonomy and share an account of a Death Awareness Week event at a London hospice, which in tandem with prior examples frames the importance of “wordscapes” in materialising both memory, and social involvement.

I build the ineffable or unfathomable quality of dying into conversation on “good funerals” and their practitioners in chapter five, but shift from an esoteric, inquisitive mode to a stronger historical grounding in the next section. As with the definition of good death, a discussion of what makes good postmortem ceremony necessitates attention to its “bad” status quo or counterpart first; in an overview of Anglo-American funeral direction and public criticism levelled its way in death positivity, I hope to establish the scene that prompts counterculture, environmentalist rhetoric, DIY projects, or community care aspirations surrounding dead bodies.

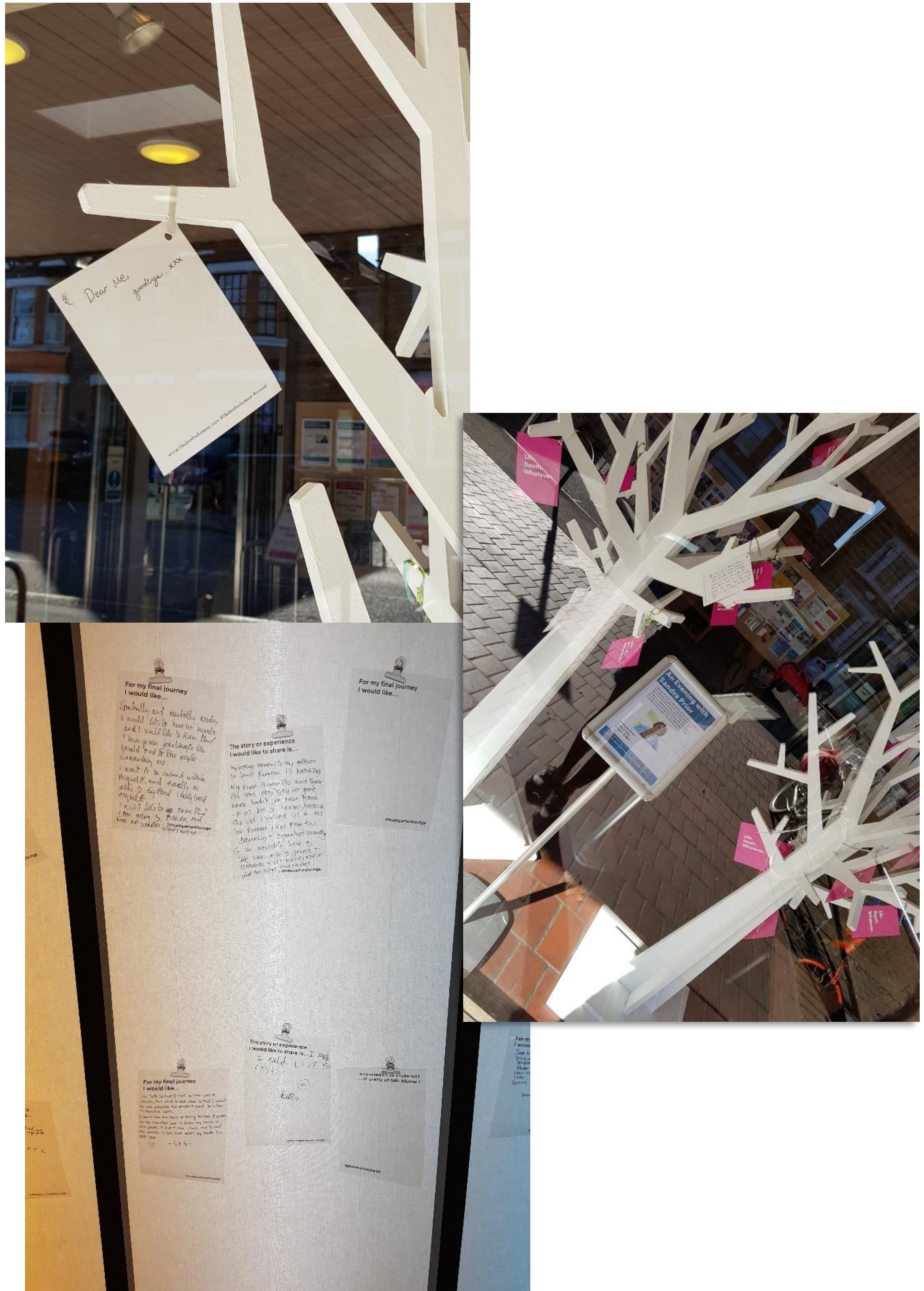


Figure 21 – Examples of participatory writing for public display, including large plywood trees at Wanstead Library to add written notes to (see also fig. 19) organised by *Life.Death.Whatever* and a lightbox-style bulletin board at *The Departure Lounge* installation by the Academy of Medical Sciences at Lewisham Shopping Centre, both part of Dying Matters Awareness Week in May 2019.

PART II CARPE DIEM

The bones of the dead
can do more than living flesh.
Even disjointed, they make mighty chains,
keeping us submissive and captive. – Gabriela Mistral (Enright 1983)

CHAPTER 4 – BRINGING UP THE BODIES

This chapter transitions into part two in presenting what has been termed the "funeral industrial complex" to examine of the contentious relationship between death awareness advocacy and a "traditional" professional funerary sector. As in the case of Caitlin Doughty, many practitioners – funeral directors, morticians or undertakers - involved in the awareness/positivity movements I follow present their services as socially and environmentally aware alternatives to a ceremonial status quo found either wanting, or actively harmful. I begin this chapter as onlooker to an argument that erupted at an academic conference, where a representative of a large national funeral provider came under scrutiny from the audience for uncaring or cynical corporate approaches to the dead and bereaved. This is contrasted with a panel presentation given by an independent funeral director who describes their "meaningful" practice.

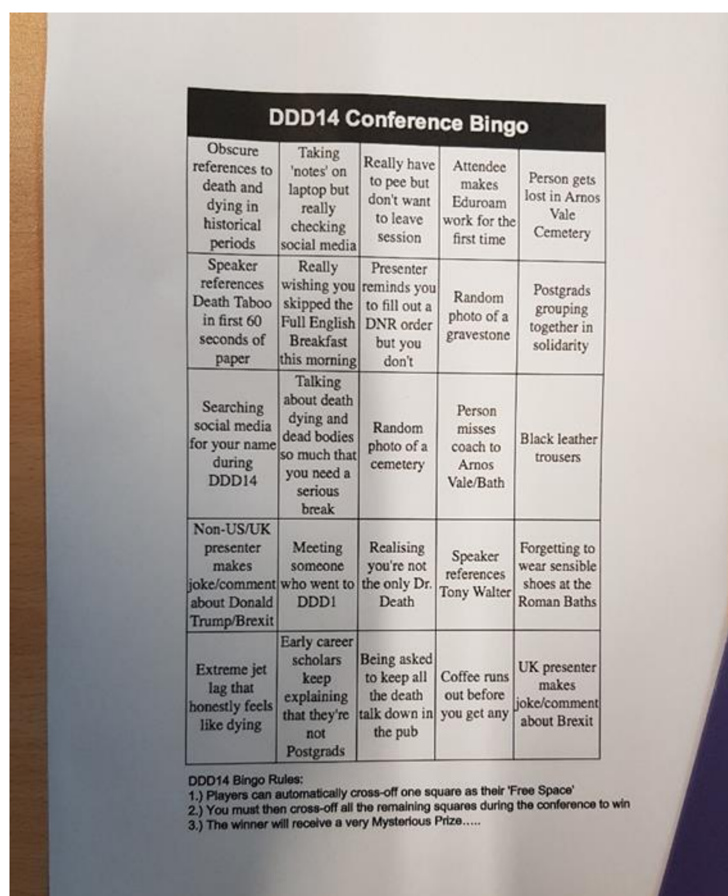
Whilst a distrust of modern funeral directors can be found in written sources since the growth and development of the trade in the early 19th century, I provide a brief overview of parallel developments in British and American funerary practices, building to Jessica Mitford's 1963 exposé on the American funeral home for its role in death positive movement today and arguably, in preceding civic organisation around memorial associations and consumer alliances. Mitford's work is especially committed to ridiculing undue expense and embalming for display; both are critiques that persist in death awareness messages against certain types of material trappings for disposal. In discussing alternatives, such as "natural" or green burial (eg. Davies & Rumble 2012), I am interested in the negotiation of what is necessary, meaningful or superfluous. Returning to Robert Hertz's classic tripartite model of actors involved in the production of death culture, I suggest death positive narratives surrounding the dead body frame its materiality as an opportunity for engendering care on a political and ecological level.

DDD14

Attending the 14th *International Conference on the Social Context of Death, Dying, and Disposal* (DDD) in September of 2019 was in an unsettling way, the culmination of a year's fieldwork. Not only did the timing of the event represent a final fling in the field as traditionally understood – marked by a return to term-dates and student accommodation at its close – but an induction into the circle of death scholars who I was supposed to number amongst. I flipped through a programme of 70 parallel sessions and a list of over 200 delegates representing institutions in 32 countries, circling names of interdisciplinary thanatologists whose work I had cited for years. Inspiration yielded to uncertainty as I questioned who I was to speak to those who had literally written the book on contemporary understandings of death in the West. This unease was

undoubtedly not mere inexperience, but a result of work that felt more conspiratory than usual; as if in making notes on presenters' speeches, I was far more observer than participant, even if my nametag said otherwise. I worried my professional goals would be misconstrued as they were after the first round of introductions. After explaining my work looked at death awareness groups, I had been approached by a representative from *Dying Matters*. With a broad smile, he told me he "couldn't wait to pick my brain" to hear how I thought their events could be more impactful and engaging, or whether they were enjoyed by my interlocuters. I wanted to tell him I didn't have a dog in this fight. "I guess the issue is that people who come to things are already in the movement, so you end up preaching to the choir. Like people who work in death care, or are training to be doulas... recruiting through hospices, and bereavement charities, it might not be that general public you want?" I said in an attempt to address his question on popularity, as the heavy doors to an auditorium were opened.

Figure 22 – The DDD14 Conference Bingo Sheet for participants



DDD14 Conference Bingo

Obscure references to death and dying in historical periods	Taking 'notes' on laptop but really checking social media	Really have to pee but don't want to leave session	Attendee makes Eduroam work for the first time	Person gets lost in Arnos Vale Cemetery
Speaker references Death Taboo in first 60 seconds of paper	Really wishing you skipped the Full English Breakfast this morning	Presenter reminds you to fill out a DNR order but you don't	Random photo of a gravestone	Postgrads grouping together in solidarity
Searching social media for your name during DDD14	Talking about death dying and dead bodies so much that you need a serious break	Random photo of a cemetery	Person misses coach to Arnos Vale/Bath	Black leather trousers
Non-US/UK presenter makes joke/comment about Donald Trump/Brexit	Meeting someone who went to DDD1	Realising you're not the only Dr. Death	Speaker references Tony Walter	Forgetting to wear sensible shoes at the Roman Baths
Extreme jet lag that honestly feels like dying	Early career scholars keep explaining that they're not Postgrads	Being asked to keep all the death talk down in the pub	Coffee runs out before you get any	UK presenter makes joke/comment about Brexit

DDD14 Bingo Rules:
1.) Players can automatically cross-off one square as their 'Free Space'
2.) You must then cross-off all the remaining squares during the conference to win
3.) The winner will receive a very Mysterious Prize.....

As the welcome speech ended and the masses rolled into a windowless multi-purpose space at the University of Bath, I took in its coffee spread enclosed in non-descript blue carpet, popcorn ceilings and the posters we glanced at with inattentive politeness. It was not my first conference that year, nor my first cardboard cup of too-hot coffee from a thermos that must have been filled hours earlier. There was a comfort in the triangle sandwiches, even if the vegetarian option tended to be dry falafel or something else that saw grated carrot shedding onto the napkin. I ate quickly, my arms half-crossed, waiting for another event to start in hopes that I might look less alone. The crowd clustered, and there was an impression of everyone being familiar with someone else, some smiling knowingly at the DDD-bingo sheet we were given with a university-branded tote-bag to consolidate their belonging.

I was to be the one who forgot to wear sensible shoes (bingo square 20!) to the cocktail reception at the Roman Baths that night. I hobbled around in what I had thought were smart patent pumps before leaning against a wall and helping myself to more complimentary merlot in preparation for the welcome speech by the Dying Matters spokesperson I had spoken to earlier.

> "When I told my friends I was off to Bath for four days to talk about death, and that I was really looking forward to it, there was a lot of eye rolling. Why would anybody want to talk about that?"

He began, pausing for titters of acknowledgement from the audience. The water of the great basin was floodlit and seemed almost fluorescent with its green algae reflecting a chartreuse tinge onto the man's chin as he stood by it, speaking of how we break taboo. I marked this down as the eighth instance of a speech beginning with the recognition of the audience as remarkable for discussing death, as if society at large does not squeeze into these spaces. It was amusing to recognise the self-awareness of the space, in immediate appeals to "death taboo" occupying a slot on my bingo sheet, too. I balanced the glass of wine in the crook of my elbow as I braced for applause as his turn came to a close.

> "But it's also important we don't become the *death ghetto*, that it's not just us as the death experts. Because death is universal. Our work is important, but it needs to be spreading out to everyone else to work."

I looked to a colleague next to me to confirm if I had, in fact, heard his choice of words correctly, and could not help but fear I had encouraged this addendum.

In a vignette, Billaud and Halme- Tuomisaari make an example of an unnamed conference and its PowerPoint slides, "an anthropology of boredom", in which they describe a collective "intellectual inertia" that pervades a predictable, safe room (Billaud and Halme-Tuomisaari 2014) For Larkin, whose work examines the origins and potentialities of a (Western) concept of boredom in organisational and institutional contexts, the state invites potentialities and imperatives to meaning. I would problematise any description of my field sites as boring, or a devaluation of many fantastic presentations I audited. I did, however, find myself attempting to pay more attention to the "boring" if only to "challenge analytic separations of formal and informal, structure and agency, technical and emotional" (Larkin 2013).

Figure 23 – A promotional water bottle for a funeral provider distributed to conference guests

The predictability of proceedings that could furnish a playful bingo sheet looked to communicate conviviality and convention: if death awareness was "a revolution" (p.10), it wore silk gloves.

As in Malinowski's call to observe the "imponderabilia of actual life" that supposedly cloak deeper bonds, I took photographs of sponsor-branded pens and sports bottles and tried to pay attention to upholstery, to find "objects that hide in plain sight" (Lampland and Star 2009) overlooked in a field valorising human experience. Despite training I had undertaken for handling vicarious trauma and methodological disclaimers made for potentially vulnerable or emotionally wrought encounters – both advised and presumed inevitable for my chosen topic of death – I found staidness. Whether it was tea or coffee at a Death Café or a panel discussion at a university, there were stacking chairs, soft voices in turns, individually wrapped biscuits, and semi-formal introductions with people keeping time. Gellner and Hirsch point to the importance of the "after hours" when working with people in organisations, echoed by Van Maanen as the difference between "operational" and "presentational" data (Maanen 1979, 537) where roles dissolve, and meetings end. Yet relational formality scarcely lapsed in my experience, as when following a movement of how ideas are circulated and verbalised, content to be considered is largely that – very considered.

I might listen to a funeral director speak at an event at a cemetery, then find the text nearly word-for-word on their *TED*-talk the following week. I may have had the opportunity to speak to a playwright about a protest piece for burial grounds, then find greater accuracy referring to their recent *Guardian* op-ed instead of my notes. It was understandable that the most vocal participants would be vocal elsewhere too, as self-described activists wanting to give an accurate representation of a cause, or as faces of their professional brands, as in the case of many practitioners or "death entrepreneurs" (Walter 2017, 1)- celebrants, hospice nurses, death doulas, funeral directors - contributing at the DDD conference. "You can find out more on my

website, or by following our Twitter" was a helpful response for some kinds of data collection. Still, to know a paper was already published may have provoked boredom in my attendance if, by following Johnsen's description, it meant a "perceived loss of meaning inferred by the lived experience of a discrepancy between the involvement with transient means in everyday life and their value in a larger vision of existence"(Johnsen 2016, 1403). My surprise could not have been greater when whilst furtively eking my sore toes out of the tips of my ill-fated heels during the keynote speech on the second morning of the conference, something wholly unexpected happened. As murmurs of discord swelled to a cacophony in the auditorium, the chair was forced to step in and ask for order. "What was that?" asked a colleague next to me. I had propped my voice recorder at my auditorium desk for keynote contributions and was able to refer to erupting tensions neatly.

The talk delivered by Simon Cox, Head of Insight and Affairs at *Dignity PLC* – the Funeral Directors sponsoring the conference – had matched his introduction in the programme booklet to what in my mind had been an inoffensive tee:

> Traditionally, the funeral sector has perceived itself to be an exceptional sector which doesn't necessarily conform to the norms of other consumer markets. The funeral is typically seen as a one-off, and unique event. While elements of exceptionalism remain and will continue to do so, the evidence suggests that the funeral sector is increasingly becoming a consumer market in the same way as other parts of the economy. Individuals are increasingly acting like and being treated like consumers making more rational choices.

The slides projected delineated differing demands UK citizens have of funerals, and shorthand to accompany typified consumer profiles; there were the "traditionalists" with their hymns and hearses, and a shift to so-called "celebrationals" that emphasise celebration or memorialising a life, what Cox described as a secular equivalent in a religious template. Demanding more personalisation of music, location, or tributes, this category is the most prevalent, I take this to match what Tony Walter (1994) has described as the "secularish" British funeral of the 1990s, borne of an unwillingness to choose either a clergy-led funeral or decidedly atheistic BHA (British Humanist Association) ceremony. Finally, David Bowie's face popped up on a screen about "rebels", those omitting services altogether in pursuit of direct cremation or alternative disposal methods. Rebellion is not presented as disruptive, as Cox rolled a tape about a satisfied client who wants "no flowers, no fuss" – indeed, the testimony is extremely similar to the television spots *Simplicity Cremations* (a branch of *Dignity*) is running each morning as I write. "Over three thousand pound for a funeral? That does sound like *dearly* departed", an elderly man with a lovable accent says to the viewer. "I don't like funerals, so I'm not going to mine!", another winks with heavily-lidded eyes.

A host of challenges – "or opportunities!", as Cox laughs, are listed. Just as in other sectors, there is a loss of deference to authority, and we rattle through comparisons to medicine and a GP app or online searches overtaking a family physician, the Highstreet travel agent bowing before bespoke holidaymaking, and record labels falling before *Spotify*.

> "These aren't some vulnerable consumers who need their hand held or are okay with being led – they're shopping around for stuff. Like in the last twenty years, the average time from death to burial has gone up from 10 to 23 days in the UK!"

He describes the convenience of people scheduling funerals for Fridays, because they want to make sure travel does not disrupt a return to work.

> "How far will this go, will there be everything happening over a mobile or a tablet without the funeral director, or will we see digital giants enter the field, with *Amazon* or *Google* Funerals? Now, that last example was deliberately flippant, but you know what I mean."

Beyond secularism, he notes cultural change in environmentalist concerns meaning fleets of diesel hearses and limousines to be replaced, and the condemnation of formaldehyde. What then, of the predicted sustained rise in deaths in an aging demographic? The presentation finished on a positive note, whereby the *Dignity*'s official stance is of "evolution, not revolution". "Disruptors" would not endanger that which is "one of the most trusted professions of all – despite fair challenges to industry opacity", Cox nodded.

The round of applause was brief as numerous hands shot up. A woman to my left stood to speak next to someone I recognised from previous events as an independent funeral director by her signature, a bright shade of red lipstick. "No, no, I'm happy to shout, I'm very used to it!" she bellowed as the chair apologised for a lacking microphone.

> "So, I'd just like to say, as a true rebel, I'd like to put the case for a revolution. I find it amazing that you can deliver what you did without mention of gender. The funeral industry is a total patriarchal dinosaur and men have done that – they got a bad rap for ripping people off, and the revolution is that baby boomers actually include a whole lot of feminists and home-birthers. *They're* the ones revolutionising the funeral industry now as they come in and *care* about people. They're not profit driven. I invite you to put something like that into your presentation, to acknowledge that actually, that's what's happening on the ground in many countries already."

I see scarlet out of the corner of my eye as the funeral director nods fervently at each word, and there is applause that doesn't stop until the next question is raised. The man in the front row has pulled out his phone as if to read off the screen.

> "I feel quite stunned by your presentation. I think it's a very rose-tinted view of *Dignity*. What I'd like to do today is say - that given that you know lots of people don't have more than one quote for a funeral - I'd like you to explain why your company's funerals are roughly 70 to 100 percent more expensive and how you can justify this, and why you are the main focus of *the Competition and Markets Authority* report. Because what you're describing is something that many people in this country are already providing, and we've been doing it for twenty years now. And here you are, thinking 'oh, this is all new'. It's not new *at all*, and there is very little of the humane, or humanity in your presentation. You're talking about 'how are we going to sell to the next generation?', and that is what's wrong with the funeral industry. You are *devolution*, not evolution. I have just pulled this up on my phone, a quote for a funeral in Bath, £5800, when most people are providing them for three, three and a half. And that is today's prices."

Cox never had the chance to answer in full, as the overlapping voices took over. I shuffled in my seat, questioning who was telling the truth and how little we knew when *Dignity's* Fair Fund scheme to combat the devaluation of funeral benefits (as enacted by the government in 2003) was painted as whitewash. "No, that's a misrepresentation, you're misrepresenting our prices for over £1000, and with all respect..." he started, before yet another interruption. "The commercial sector *wants* to collaborate, both with the academic community and I am sorry to say, with the commercial research agencies too. Working together we can all act as change agents!" There are articulate efforts to claim his company and industry have "woken up" to change, and that the

presentation and a decade of development have been about democratisation instead of sales strategy, but his defences fall on ears not merely deaf, but firmly enclosing what was already between them. The chair intervened with a firm remark about how we had to move on; an academic conference was not a shouting match. "But this is about honesty", the man in the front row said shaking his head, nearly pleading. The dust settled for a beat, before the next question came from a celebrant with the most acoustically efficient voice I had heard.

> "I'm interested in the cyclicity of funerals. Like how in this country cremation was introduced in the 1880s and it was sold as direct, almost always without any ceremony. Now it is somehow territory reclaimed as your new invention. There is something interesting about how you make a funeral a consumer... *product*, instead of a ritual at the end of a life, there's nothing to it except that we're selling something else. I am faced with all that choice, like a row of bottles of water, dehydrated, not knowing which one to choose."

I was impressed by the gravitas with which he curled his mouth around "product", as well as the bottles of water – I was not even disappointed to hear them feature in his own presentation the following afternoon. There is no time to do more than nod before the next challenge:

> "I want to pick up on that, what you say about quality and standards – aren't you someone who got here from *financial* services? Because I became a celebrant through psychotherapy. So, the world of advertising regulation or the NEFD is a pretty different idea of quality and standards compared to those who are actually on the frontlines looking after people. The things you're qualifying and regulating aren't necessarily the most important things. On the role of the funeral director and the company, I want to stress that it's the larger companies that act like this: as a funeral director I pick up the body, I do the preparation of the funeral, I attend and host the ceremony, and I deal with the therapy afterwards. There is *continuity of care*. What I feel is that with regulation you'll be worried more about your ratios of the deceased to refrigeration unit space – one to fifty in Scotland, I remember – so they'll attend to hardware instead of making sure people have been trained in active listening. These regulations will be burdening the independent funeral director, because larger companies have economy of scale – of *course* you want regulation, because you'll be putting the independents out of business. The last point I want to make is that you need to ask who's the expert. Who's the expert? The family's the expert. But with your regulation you say this is a job for the experts, and you take all the power away from the family. A funeral director that doesn't know family knows best is devolution."

I almost feel sorry for Cox as he takes a deep, raspy breath.

> "I mean, anyone who knows me will know that that's what I've always been about. What I put up here is honest, and good stuff. I mean, I have taken a real personal interest in this, and recently put forward a paper about conducting some meaningful research acknowledging vulnerable customers and payment support, and that is something where the sector is failing, and I must say, not everyone in the sector was supportive of that."

In failing to beat them, he joins his detractors in his way, pointing at the exploitative executive and powers that be – though I am not sure the conference will receive as generous a stipend from the company in question in the future.

In these lengthy examples of antipathy towards a "dinosaur" in a suit, I seek to introduce a conservative combatant of death awareness or positivity. In both UK and US contexts, to insist death is "done badly" is to a great extent founded on the perceived villainy of the funeral

industry, or as it is popularly derided, “the Funeral Industrial Complex”. The claims levelled against industry conventions by speakers in the excerpts above communicate a divide between ritual in opposition to product; the industry sells a commodity while independents care. Cox began by attempting to dispel an image of vulnerable consumers – presenting funerals as something “shopped” as any other good – before calling for “meaningful research” to acknowledge client vulnerability: the funeral is not to be treated as a “regular” exchange. The language of “our customers” and their preferences is set in stark contrast with “our families” in the care of providers. There is on the one hand a dismissal of professional expertise and control (“the family are the experts”), and a call for a distinct expertise that does not pertain to the world of finance but is borne from what is “actually important”: active listening, psychotherapy, and led by “those who care”. In the desire to keep death from a niche “ghetto” (p. 72,130), information about death care alternatives is to be disseminated to a broader audience, there is a shadow of doubt following the allegory of water bottles; is the only alternative to simply “sell something else”? A primary frustration of those responding to the keynote speech was a recognition that work had long since been underway, following decades of “rebellion” from the margins of the complex – rather than celebrating an industry giant’s recognition of consumer demands, there is ire towards the Johnny-come-lately aboard a sinking ship, safeguarding their pieces of proverbial pie. To ground this subtext of oppositions, it is necessary to trace the heritage of “fair challenges to industry opacity” and their centrality to contemporary death awareness advocacy.

Dismal Trade

In arguments aligning with the sequestration/denial thesis or Western “narrative of the fall” discussed in chapters two and three, it has been suggested the dying or dead body “had to be removed” as it challenges or reviles current values of youth, fertility, beauty, or productivity, and represents shame or failure in relation to a modernist mission of overcoming nature (eg. Filitz and Saris 2013; Blaine 2016, 157). In Philippe Ariès’ oft-cited chronicle of generalised western death cultures[71], for example, the Medieval “tamed death” mutates into *la morte inversée* by the end of the 19th century - death forbidden and concealed – by promotion of “the lie” to which “everyone becomes an accomplice” (1981, 562). By way of a lengthy chapter on “death denied”, Ariès’ work summarises a popular narrative by which death “omnipresent in the past” is shameful, hidden, and “retreated” from both discourse and nature in the Global North once its presentation is distorted at the hands of service providers “rather than intimates” (Aaron 2013, 1). The extent to which any of the aforementioned values are necessarily current or its presumed manifestations typically modern or accurate is debatable; some authors would go so far, instead, to suggest that the removal of the dead body in terms of disposal is what defines humanity. Literary critic David Sherman, for one, reminds us that “*humanitas* in Latin comes from *humando*, burying”, whereby be human is to tend to or remove one another’s corpses - he notes that Levinas subscribes to a similar belief in delineating where human becomes more than *homo sapiens* (Sherman 2014, 10). Reading removal without a fine-toothed semantic comb, the alleged rift between the living and their dead is generally associated with a specific professionalisation, medicalisation and industrialisation of care and funerary practice occurring in the last 300 years, often called the sequestration thesis. Given the Anglo-American interplay of death awareness advocacy – and academic trends by which the amorphous

[71] As discussed, Ariès makes no reference to countries outside England, France and Italy, and omits Jewish and Islamic customs, among others; as Carse remarks, there is nothing of the a-bomb, of the French Revolution, the world wars; of the Holocaust or of colonisers (Carse 1982).

“Western” is conflated - I present concurrent developments in the UK and USA to underline that if a society is caricatured as detrimentally separated from death or nature, it is unsurprising that those who ceremonially stand between living and dead bodies should become contentious figures. If “humanity” is sought in its corpse care, that which subverts its obligations can be perceived as inhumane, as in the audience critique of Cox’s conference presentation.

The term funeral typically refers to a ceremony at which a body or its remains are present without which it cannot be performed as opposed to a memorial service (O’Rourke et al. 2011, 730), though colloquially the distinction does not always apply. Thorough histories of the development of funerals in the United States and United Kingdom have been published in volumes by historians and death scholars including Habenstein and Lamers (1963), Laderman (2005), Litten (1991), Jupp and Howarth (eds. 1997), and most recently Parsons (2014; 2018; 2018 with Rugg), and their content is woefully beyond my scope. Generally, pre-modern historical accounts of European practices emphasise Christian doctrinal shifts, such as Charlemagne’s interdiction of cremation (seen as disbelief in resurrection) or the obsolescence of a viaticum or intercessory prayer for the dead in the liminal phase as salvation became a matter of grace. The emergence of undertaking tends to be placed in the seventeenth century (consequently, the point at which Ariès’s “tame death” vanished), with salesmen initially supplying coffins and transportation to the place of burial; Parsons dates the first business in London to have opened around 1675 (2018). Litten’s work on the common English funeral since 1450 was designed to complement the V&A exhibition *The Art of Death* and as such, provides detailed images of the developing accoutrements of a “decent” funeral, including heraldry and art, sepulchres and coffin types, inscribed memorials, funeral invitation cards, shrouds and their fabrics, hearses and their lavish processions, and tokens of remembrance given as gifts between attendees. It is with this rich material culture and the rapid expansion of urban population in the early 1800s that the types of services provided by undertaking firms were expanded and demonstrably critiqued. Later dubbed a “Victorian Celebration of Death” (Parsons 2018) or a gothic-romantic obsession, Ariès numbers among those who associate the “pomp and parade” of Victoriana with a sense of “thy death” – a novel early modern sense of irreplaceability of “loved ones” and a sentimentalisation of grief that overtook previous religious or spiritual motives for funerals (Ariès 1974, 56-8). Houlbrooke challenges a reductive view on a charged emotional turn compellingly, suggesting “typical” Victorian elements of investment in coffin furniture, the development of grand cemeteries, and elaborate mourning etiquette all existed a century prior and “evidence” of a hereunto serene acceptance of death overlooks a mass of intimate testimony regarding experiences of loss (Houlbrooke 2000, 11). Regardless, the sale of paraphernalia became a major facet of the undertaker’s operations, and a transition from “carpenters to commodities” (Garces-Foley 2006, 212) saw commentators bristle.

Charles Dickens was among the vocal intelligentsia denouncing the port-quaffing “ghoulish vulture” of an undertaker, writing four unflattering characterisations of these professionals in novels (Waters 2003, 313) as well as addressing funerals in multiple issues of his journal, *Household Worlds*. Herein, the essay “Trading in Death” attacks the ostentatious state funeral for the Duke of Wellington in 1852, detailing “barbarous” showmanship and “dishonest debt, profuse waste” (*ibid*, 315) exercised in the name of “respectability”; funerals of the time have habitually been described as sites ripe for exploitative business practices given aspirations, desire, and competition between social classes desperate to evade the shame and stigma of a pauper’s burial (eg. Parsons 2018). Catherine Waters’ analysis of *Household Words* points to its

appearance in the 1850s as uncoincidental, matching a cultural "key moment"; here the 1851 Great Exhibition in London is taken to mark a watershed for a "specifically capitalist form of representation" that centred on the commodity and as such has been labelled "the first outburst of the phantasmagoria of commodity culture" (Waters 2003,314). Beyond keeping up appearances, however, practices must be understood as commodifications and re-negotiated concepts of the corpse and its management, in kind.

I return to burial grounds as spaces of continued absent presence or structuring absence (Hallam et al 1999, Hockey et al 2012, Horne 2013) and development of so-called garden cemeteries in chapter six's discussion of a large-scale exhumation project in England (p.196) but for context, Dickens's *Bleak House* serves as another point of entry. As in the *Household Worlds* essay, there is a description of a monstrously over-populated burial site or "hemmed-in churchyard, pestiferous and obscene", communicating "malignant disease" to the living (Dickens 1852; Dickens 1853, 151). Traditional practices of churchyard burial became untenable given the doubling of London's population between 1801 and 1851, with high mortality and changing understandings of public health or hygiene[72] disrupting prior cyclicity of grounds. While the re-use of graves had been common throughout Europe (Walter 2017,73), urban rates of turnaround increased to herald disturbing accounts of bodies broken or dismembered to maximise space (Hwang 2018, 121–23) intramural burial, charnel or "carnary" houses and corrupt private burial grounds harbouring "pyramids" made up of thousands of bodies and their hazardous "effluvia" throughout the city (Wallduck 2017). An atmosphere of distrust and professional collusion in neglect of bodies is further exemplified in the prevalence of body snatching or "resurrectionism": though a market for corpses had existed for centuries (Hutton 2015 suggesting that it was "tolerated" in the eyes of the law as corpses were not considered property), high demand in a growing medico-surgical sector meant traditional sources for "anatomization" fell short - Richardson suggests a wide-spread fear of snatching across social strata (2000). The 1832 Anatomy Act was conceived partly in response to public concerns about illegal cadaver trade, allowing licensed anatomists to collect unclaimed bodies from workhouses, prisons, and hospitals – albeit it has been demonstrated that the anatomy inspectorate was often inefficient (MacDonald 2009) and that by the 1850s, undertakers had become central to the supply of corpses to London's schools (*ibid*,391). [73] Whilst 1832 also saw the parliamentary bill for the establishment of seven large cemeteries on the outskirts of the city, it was not until the 1850s and a series of Burial Acts (annually from 1852 to 1857) that burials within the city limits were made largely illegal, and the disturbance of a grave plot was made an offence. In the wake of widespread closures and repurposing of burial sites across London and resultant relocation of bodies, a modern ideal of eternal rest in private plots purchased for perpetuity was normalised; in a way, it is with this inert or preserved body and its unsustainability that twenty-first century funeral developers find issue.

---

[72] Following two major cholera outbreaks between 1838 and 1849, the foundation of the General Board of Health occurred: the General Board could appoint officials to create local boards of health whose remit included powers relating to the disposal of the dead, see Wallduck, R. 2017 : https://naturalhistorymuseum.blog/2017/05/31/death-corruption-and-sanitation-londons-graveyards-in-the-19th-century-human anthropology/#:~:text=While%20studying%20these%20remains%2C%20one,conditions%2C%20and%20significant%20social%20reforms.

[73] Historian John Knott underlines the revulsion felt towards anatomists and resurrectionists from the late 18th century and continued popular fears among poor following the act, which in claiming the bodies of the disenfranchised: "a symbol of class oppression" (Knott 1985,2)

Coffin works

My greatest exposure to British funerals over the course of fieldwork occurred in Birmingham, at an event entitled "Funeral Day". I had never been to the city and tried googling around for things to do, as I had booked to stay a day and a night before the event – the tenth of May, right in the middle of *Dying Matters'* Death Awareness Week. *Tripadvisor* had ranked the venue at which my event was to happen to be the second-best thing to do in the metropolitan area. Oddly, I had not realised the place called *Coffin Works* was a genuine public attraction – the name seemed too fitting, and I had assumed it was a pop-up café rather than a museum of coffin manufacture. More precisely, as museum director Rachel told us in her introductory talk, it was a factory of coffin furniture or fittings: brass handles, screws, ornamental plates, cushions and shrouds – "everything but the box" – as manufactured by the Newman Brothers from 1894 onwards. I did not have expectations for the day, as the title did not give much away, though the 30-40-pound entry fee and seven-hour duration suggested it was closest to another conference.

"Here's your delegates pack, there's a little name sticker in there if you want to use it. And here's a *Coffin Works* pen!" said the woman at the reception. She looked to be in her early twenties and was dressed in black and grey clothes that read as gothic, with their frills and corseted waist. She directed us to the red-bricked factory courtyard, pointing at a small room to the side of it. The room was set up with a PowerPoint projected on the wall, and twenty-five seats, one short if everyone in attendance were to sit, but fittingly considering some left after giving their presentations. We were twenty-four women and one man, which was briefly alluded to in the director Rachel's initial housekeeping instructions: "so, the loos are left, then left again, and I think there's one man with us here today? Typical for museum or heritage settings! There's the disabled just opposite that you can use". I found it interesting that she associated female majority with the milieu more than the morbid theme and pointed it out to my neighbour – no name sticker - to break the ice. "Absolutely, I mean, I've just done six days of a Death Doula course back home in the Welsh Borders and we're just twenty-two women there", she said, though could not speculate as to why. "I mean, what drew you to it then?" I asked, trying to squeeze in something of an interview as new slides were being clicked up. "I suppose I just heard about it somewhere a while ago, and got very interested in all of it, the rituals and history of death". I tried to differentiate between the conference and the doula work. "But I mean the position… it must be very hard? I can see how it could be rewarding, but I don't know if I'd be cut out for it?", I pried.

> "Oh, I don't know if I have it in me yet either! But I wanted to try and see. I think there's something very beautiful about the idea of being there for someone. I mean, not everyone does that part– there are ways to be involved before with the family, with planning, and there are things you can do afterwards to make it easier. Though for me, yes, the part I'm interested in is the vigil and being there. I think it's interesting to look back at these things we used to do."

She asked me how my studies were coming, and I admitted that the solitary nature of the research and the lack of schedule can make things difficult. She told me I needed a network, "because all people do", to share my thoughts and meet frequently to keep as a constant "to hold onto in life"; she encouraged me, and I do not know if she had intentionally matched that which she idealises for death.

The museum director spoke very engagingly about the site, and the loss of coffin manufacture as an artisanal practice in which: “Britain was the world capital, Birmingham was the centre of the trade, and the Newman Brothers were the Rolls Royce”. The factory had, after all, produced the coffin handles for Churchill, Diana, two Georges, and likely for Queen Victoria, “though it’s contested”, she sighed. It was difficult to not become invested in the story of the mighty falling, as the company continued to do until its ultimate dissolution in 1996. Rachel suggested Victorians may not have been obsessed with death, but with the status and lucrative market and fashions surrounding it – 1894 was far from the best time to have entered it, however.

> “The market was completely saturated at that point; there were fifteen other master coffin manufacturers in Birmingham, and there were cries for funerary reform as early as the 1840s! They’d missed the apex.”

Rachel’s point is illustrated effectively with a chart tracking average funeral expenditure, whereby if in the 1840s a gentleman’s funeral cost between 200 and 400 pounds, a “respectable funeral” in 1894 – by estimate of the *Lancet* – was to cost between 10 and 15. Nevertheless, the average labourer still only made around £36 annually, and satirical cartoons of greedy undertakers flashed on the screen beside Dickens quotes. “He was not a fan at all, but it’s said he was a bit of a socialist”, Rachel added. The portrait of etiquette-bound arrivistes and duped working classes was appropriately diluted and nuanced with a call to consider people’s fear and personhood: to be buried well could take away “being erased, being nameless without a headstone, there being no sign of you as a part of your society”. Zooming through more history, the World Wars are presented as “hugely” shifting attitudes – the suggestion that practical, austere, and silent ceremony was only fitting as a response to the violence and the scale of shared loss is frequently repeated in literature (Davies 2015; Cannadine 1981; Rosenow 2015). Mourning clothes, for example, are described as impractical for women entering the work force en masse as well as harmful for public morale, as if a suspension of grief for returning soldiers. To avoid any clear-cut shift, however, one must acknowledge the UK has never had a single style of “burial culture” (Powell et al. 2011, 2) and its repertoire of possibilities does not look like cause and effect: the interwar years were the most profitable in the Newman Brothers’ history, even if as early as 1909 a London undertaker is cited in *The Sunday Times* declaring:

> “The flashiness of funerals… is now a thing of the past. It only survives among the very poor, who still clamour for velvet palls. Black fringe and tassels, and other signs of mournful ostentation. The better class of tradesman… have done their best to dissuade their customers from indulging in these needless displays of finery, and they have in a large measure succeeded.” (Parsons 2018, 146)

Beyond consumer tastes, moments that appear to sway the firm were force majeure: in 1940 Malta was besieged, and shipping to many other commonwealth countries was suspended – New Zealand was amongst their biggest buyers. The bombing of Birmingham in the second World War led local councils to urge people to use cardboard coffins and sheets for shrouding, “as you never knew when another strike could come”. London MPs, Rachel explained, would push mottos such as “playgrounds or burial grounds”, implying scarce resources for rebuilding should be spent on the newly living, opposed to the dying. Perhaps the reason UK cremation rates shot from 3.5% at the start of World War II to 51% by 1968 was partly a reflection of afterlife beliefs and the papal relaxation of the Catholic cremation ban in 1963 – or as Rugg and Parsons point out, a matter of the welfare state and affordability, as cremation fees remained

relatively static between roughly £5 in 1885 (a decade after the first UK crematorium opened) and £6 in 1948. Cremation, they add, could mean a kind of privacy – if low-cost burial was associated with public reading time or communal chapel services for several families, crematorium services were held for a single family who could be offered choice on music and readings (Rugg and Parsons 2018, 27). Furthermore, the adoption of cremation could stem from municipalities simply attempting to restore profits by building crematoria, "not because mid-twentieth century Britons particularly wanted it or believed in it" (Jupp 2006 in Walter 2017,76) but because the cemeteries they inherited were unsustainable or unsellable in terms of plots. The impact of the 1942 Beveridge Report and its groundwork for an institutional embrace of the populace "from cradle to grave"[74] cannot be understated, as not only were the first National Insurance death grants paid out in 1948, and the likelihood of death taking place in a medical or care facility increased (Rugg and Parsons 2018, 28) following the founding of the National Health Service in 1943, but the face of death also changed rapidly:

> "At the very beginning of the twentieth century infants in their first year accounted for some 25 per cent of all deaths, while by the end of the century mortality affected less than 1 per cent. Then, in terms of older people, the century began with 12 per cent of deaths being of those aged 75 or older, and it ended with a figure of over 59 per cent for that age group". (Davies 2015,21)

Rachel started a short video for us, which was to feature historian Julian Litten ("though of course, you all know who that is") in support of a presentation of cremation as the semi-literal nail in the coffin, as images of catalogues featuring up to 300 unique coffin fitting products float their wares to the narrator's voice: "it's ridiculous, putting expensive brass fittings on a coffin that's going to end up cremated", Rachel noted. I wondered whether it was much more ridiculous than putting the self-same items underground. "The popularity of cremation makes a nonsense of these", video-Litten joined in, gesturing at a set of coffin handles. Of course, the mechanics of cremation are sufficient to prohibit such items, as matter in retorts is cremulated (or cremolated) and foreign pieces can both slow the bone-picking or break machinery. Both speakers' emphasis on meaning was as interesting as their somewhat downbeat conclusions regarding the march of history. Rachel suggested burial was "making a comeback" with green or natural burial and a public recognition that cremation may be "less than good" for the environment, but lingered on the horrific circumstances of many "unnatural" deaths around the First World War:

> "I suppose people had to get on and did what they could, and many didn't come home… but maybe with funerals, they pushed it to one side with the trauma, instead of embracing it like Victorians had."

Ranking or correlating lived trauma and ceremony aside, the introduction to Litten's book makes clear his assessment of "nonsense" coffin handles was not representative of personal ideals:

[74] A phrase coined by Churchill, W. in a March 1943 radio broadcast referring to a need for social insurance.

'The secularisation of society has diminished the pomp and panoply of the English funeral: they have become cold, clinical rituals - almost harsh one might say - and it is not difficult in such a climate to envisage the introduction of a Municipal Funeral Service when, in response to a notification of a death, operatives will remove the body [...] It is a sad indictment of a society which has made every effort to simplify ail ritual to its lowest common denominator." (Litten 1991, 3)

Figure 24 – Examples of decorative metal plates and handles on display at the Coffin Works museum.

Over our lunchbreak, one of the *Coffin Works* volunteers gave us a tour of what they called "our mercantile Marie-Celeste". The grade-two listed site was left as if at the end of a shift, down to a kettle and teacup on a stovetop; our guide reanimated the Arts and Crafts building in its dual ghostliness, a dead place of death, with its lifestyles past. "That wheel there, it turned all day – it would have made this THUD THUD THUD" he exclaimed, clapping a clipboard for effect. The romance of tiny tin crosses and silk ribbon entwines with the gloom of 19th century industry and a note about long hours, bans on talking at work, and unsafe conditions: "yes, lots of the ladies in that polishing room would get cancer and lung stuff from how bad the air was.". Still, the tone of our guide's tale rued the enormous unemployment rates after production stopped and lost local skill as "people got plastic handles in way cheaper from abroad – nobody cared how good craftsmanship was after that." An artisan who showed us the stamping machines was introduced as one of the last people who can operate certain presses, and we were urged to visit his workshop for a souvenir: "we're trying to bottle the smell of the stamping room for our giftshop", he smiled as we formed a semicircle around the machinery. "So many people tell us it smells amazing – I think because it smells so much like people's dads' or grandads' sheds. Or so I hear." While the sense of my grandfather's tarry workshop and turkey coop is present, I am most uncannily transported to annual summer rides on Helsinki wooden rollercoaster, built in 1951. Our exit through the gift shop was followed by another few hours of presentations that shook off these cobwebs of nostalgia.

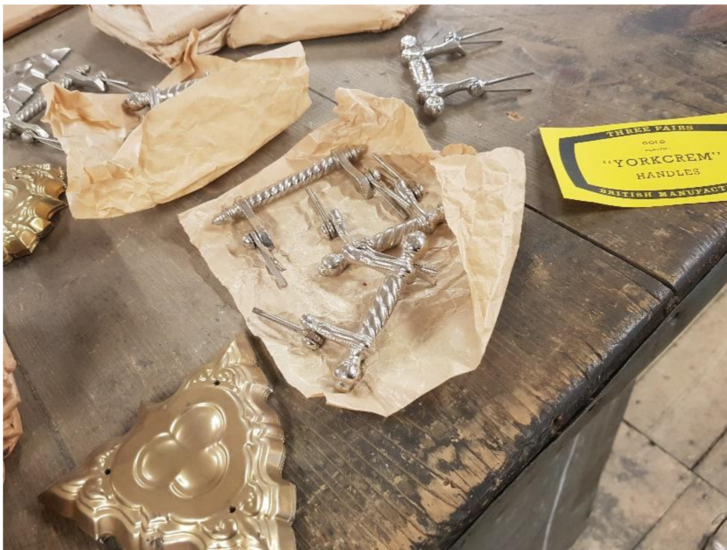


Figure 25 – Coffin Works paraphernalia, including ring plates, handles, an assembled display coffin, and a jaw support or "collar" for posing the chin for display.

“Eco-death takeover”

In discussing some facets of British funerary history and manufacture in the section above, I mean to draw attention to shared themes at two public-academic events and their orientations towards the funeral industry and its professionals. Chiefly, I underline the issue of (unnecessary) commodification or excessive expense – “selling people things they don’t need” – or treating the funeral as a *product* (as balked by the conference audience) as engendering antipathy towards professionals who stand to profit. Another issue that will be made more explicit below is that of (dis)empowerment and lost skill, hinted at in the coffin workshops and my seat-neighbour’s fascination for “what we used to do”: there is a suggestion that just as burial sites were relocated, engagement with death or bodies were “pushed to one side” in the perceived delegation of obligations of care. If Rachel and Julian Litten hinted at cold, clinical or traumatically suppressive ritual impoverishment, so did the commentators who accused *Dignity PLC* of being unlike those who “actually care” – the independent directors speaking of “my families” or those “in their care” and the analyst describing his “customer base”. This introduces a third, hereunto unelaborated historical role of the undertaker or funeral director as custodian or guardian, which extends into reflection on death awareness/positivity emphases on ecological, altruistic motives informing end-of-life or disposal choices. I foreground a link to extended or stymied relations of caretaking, preservation and responsabilisation by way of describing current “alternative” funeral directing and its media.

The title of this subheading lends from Caitlin Doughty’s YouTube video of the same name, which at its release in 2017 was the longest produced the *AskAMortician* channel, at a twenty-eight-minute run-time. The popular online persona, mortician, and *Order of the Good Death*-founder described the piece as their first documentary, and its content centred on the environmental toll of “traditional” burial customs and its potential alternatives. The video was ideally to be shared with family and friends – who may find the linked, downloadable discussion guide and its questions helpful. “Do you think your values, beliefs, and interests should be incorporated into your death? Why or why not? If yes, how could that be done?”, reads the fourth prompt down. Information Doughty recounts here is familiar, summarising points made over five years of videos, tweets, *Instagram*- or blog posts, and is delivered in a characteristically humorous, accessible style: dressed in a black cloak and holding a plastic costume scythe, she asks viewers to contemplate our guaranteed “100 percent mortality rate” and the state of the dead body in its wake. The early successes of her channel revolved around physical attributes and processes of mortuary work, too, in a question-and-answer format its name points to. People wanted to know how soon decomposition set in and what its stages were like; what happened to breast implants or hip replacements after death; how eyes or mouths were “set” for viewing – with jagged plastic socket caps or mouth formers, as it turned out.[75] Doughty’s branding as an “alternative mortician” contra North American industry standards is perhaps most explicit in attempts for “death revolution” through curtailing the processes or manipulations of the dead body effected by professional practitioners – primarily, in a call against embalming for viewings and lawn cemeteries. In *Why are you SO MEAN to embalming* (2017) Doughty elaborates that her ire lies with those who would co-opt something people “can do themselves” and insist they are not allowed to ([0:01:15-21]) or convince them an expensive or invasive procedure is the default: many Americans, she exclaims, still believe embalming is

[75] See the 35-video playlist ‘Classic Ask a Mortician’ including titles such as *Ask A Mortician- Hip, Knee, & Breast Implant*s (2014) and *CLOSING MOUTHS POSTMORTEM (Ask a Mortician)* (2016) https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLiZM8Q-JIpGxL09EcDVBoXM1jpykyJHi4

legally required and are not aware of its harm. *Eco-death Takeover* sets up the problem:

> "[...] fill your circulatory system and body cavity with a carcinogenic cocktail of preservative chemicals called embalming fluid – the formaldehyde in embalming fluid is considered to be in the top ten percent of the Environmental Protection Agency's most hazardous and damaging chemicals. A known cancer causer, embalmers must wear full body protection [... 00:02:43-00:03:00]"[76]

Doughty goes on to describe the typical American cemetery as "not just you in the ground", but a casket within a casket, as the manicured memorial garden requires wholly flat grown to allow the use of large, high-area lawnmowers: additional liners or burial vaults are constructed to prevent the soil sinking or warping around a plot. Recorded figures for waste buried with bodies vary, but estimates suggest the United States buries between 3 and 4.5 million litres of embalming fluid, 94.000 metric tonnes of steel, 2450 metric tonnes of copper and bronze, tens of millions of feet of wood and 1.6 million metric tonnes of concrete annually (Walter 2017) over thousands of acres of land. Research on groundwater saturation, soil seepage and contaminant effects is difficult to summarise, as beside production of organic and heavy metals, bacteria or trace particle gases, ground maintenance involves pesticides, herbicides, and concerted irrigation (Clayden and Dixon 2007). Crematoria are similarly problematised in many funeral advocacy resources, as though the Environmental Protection Act required minimised cremation emissions and filtration systems have been introduced to reduce the release of mercury (primarily from dental fillings), incinerators reaching temperatures in excess of 800 Celsius release and require vast quantities of energy. The US Green Burial Council's media package expresses consumption in a splashy calculation of mortality rates, thermal energy and vehicle petrol mileage to suggest an equivalence to space travel: a "round trip to the moon about 1307 times in a year"[77].

It is against this backdrop that "more conscious" options are presented, including natural or green burial ("simply bury a body and let it decompose!"), conservation burial, and alkaline hydrolysis – also called resomation, aquamation or flameless "water cremation". In the latter method, a mixture of water and lye is used at a high temperature in a pressurised vessel to break a body down to its chemical components and porous bone "ash" over the course of a few hours, producing less than a quarter of emissions compared to conventional cremation, expending an eighth of the energy. Doughty urges viewers to contact local representatives in states where disposition by hydrolysis is not yet legal, or to speak to funeral directors about wishes for natural burial, as "the industry is a business – they have to keep up with what customers want to stay in business" ([0:26:20-32). This is not to say that Doughty wants to ensure colleagues' livelihoods, as elsewhere she suggests her work would culminate in "educating herself out of a job", making the bereaved virtually independent or self-sufficient – taking all this into account, the juxtaposition of "big funeral" and death positivity is unsurprising, as is a frequent suggestion that the funeral industry "hates" advocacy groups like the *Order*. A recent survey of 542 funeral directors conducted by an Australian death awareness YouTuber (*TabooEducation*) in the video *Does the Funeral Industry really hate Caitlin Doughty?*[78] proposes results are mixed – of US-based respondents, 108 reported positive associations with her work, 84 negative, and

---

[76] Exposure to formaldehyde in embalming fluid is associated with significant increases of risk for myeloid leukaemia in particular ()

[77] Talley, S. (2001) https://www.greenburialcouncil.org/media_packet.html

[78] Published the 10th of March 2023; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KIilyIH7yk&

16 were unfamiliar – but it is easy enough to find hateful rhetoric and online memes made for and by mortuary professionals about Doughty, and easier still to find commentary on *the Deathling Den* regarding "industry brainwash" and manipulation tactics. On the Facebook group, complaints about local businesses resemble a post by Andrea in Florida.

> "Does anyone know any ethical providers in North Central? When my godmother died, her husband called the local funeral home and they tried to sell him a package with an embalming… I called them back to help, because they wanted a cremation so there was literally no reason to do it, and he tried to say it has to be done. He didn't know I'd been watching Caitlin!!"

Two respondents clarified that as a private enterprise, the home did have right to decline clients, but any appeal to legal requirement was against the Federal Trade Commission's Funeral Law. "This is why I hate living in a conservative state… let's hope people being more educated about their rights and what we're doing can stop shady operations like this", remarked a sympathetic reader. A fourth commentator said that it was at times like these they were relieved to be European, because "though we're far from perfect, at least we don't have a powerful lobby for literally pumping poison into the ground". Whilst at Death Café conversations about disposal were rare – perhaps out of respect or concern about breaking guidelines – I suspect the presumed shared understanding of best practice, paired with the expectation of some expert readers or moderators ready with advice led to weekly threads on the topic. Teresa, for example, was upset about her service provider having changed her mind on funeral plans after finding new information:

> "My Dignity-owned FD is refusing to let me downgrade my prepaid plan. I asked to remove the embalming, change the metal casket for an unsealed wooden one, and change the vault out […] he said Texas laws say less expensive can't be substituted? Is that possible?"

Six conversations I documented in 2018 were about the pain of family members making unsustainable "traditional" choices, or advice on how to "help them understand", while three reacted in distress over violation of presumed desires of the deceased, such as when Emma was worried about starting an argument with her father-in-law regarding her mother-in-law's burial; she had been a massive nature-lover and interested in conservation, Emma began – was there a way to tell her husband about options that would align with her values? Some upsetting testimony concerned unwritten wishes and family rupture over contested ethical treatment, as in two less conventional examples: one group member expressed her disgust at a transgender friend being "deadnamed" at a memorial service she attended[79], while another said her sister and nieces had stopped talking to her once they discovered she had opted to not embalm her mother. She posted a screenshot of venomous text messages: "What is happening to her body

[79] Trans and queer identities in death are discussed primarily in offshoots of *the Order*; mortuary science student Toni-King Rose founded advocacy organisation *Trans Death Care* in 2020 which was publicised heavily on the *Order's* social media. While the original *Order* tenets specify death positivity to mean commitment to ensuring "a person's wishes are honoured, regardless of sexual, gender, racial or religious identity" minority rights are stressed by the *Collective for Radical Death Studies* CRDS for whom death work is decolonisation – goals include study of "how death, mourning, burial, and death investigations have changed over time along the lines of race, class, gender, ability/disability, sexuality".

will always be a nightmare to me. You told me Mom would be treated the same as Pops. She will haunt you for doing this to her."

The interplay led me to thoughts of prior trends in American funeral reform and the preservation-centric critiques spearheaded by Jessica Mitford, whose 1963 book *The American Way of Death* has been credited as "calling an entire service industry to ethical heel"(Long 1999), urging journalists and funeral directors to speak of "being Mitfordized" (*ibid*, 498) in reference to bad publicity and resultant trade regulation. Often known simply as "the Book", *American Way of Death* is a muckraking condemnation of 1950s funeral care, sometimes reflecting a thesis by which commodification and consumer culture is Americanised; the British Mitford proposes the practices she observed could not catch back home due to "relentless English common sense" (Mitford 1998 [1963], 164). In the revised 1998 edition of the book, the chapter 'Funerals in England Then and Now' implies a troubling "invasion" was near as an American chain showed up, (Service Corporation Incorporated) buying out locally owned funeral homes. Indeed, some alleged foreign inventions including "chapels of rest" - or specialised rooms for holding bodies before the time of a funeral - were catching on. Collating citations from popular- and trade media in 1990s Britain, Mitford records derision for incoming "yuppie undertakers" and their "high-pressure sales method" with their import coffins marked up 900 percent over (*ibid*, 209). Ultimately, there was no demand for open casket service, embalming for viewing, and by this token, the "euphemistic" death customary in America was unlikely to follow. Whilst Dickens might take issue with the portrait of Britain being a font of restrained tradition, where mourners "prefer donate money to charity over buying more floral arrangements" (162) and UK figures for embalming are unclear (sometimes sold as "sanitising", Canning and Szmigin 2010 estimate up to fifty percent of bodies may be treated) there is a distinct belief that in the USA, funeral ceremonies and its industry are predicated on (yet again), aesthetics or technologies of "death denial". Through a sketch of UK and US ritual divergence I propose that despite differences, the transcontinental appeal of death positive messages that delegitimate facets of funeral trade belie similar sentiments about what the undertaker, as a service provider, can or cannot sell.

Figure 26 – "Anti"-death positive rhetoric in 2019 via memes deriding Doughty and NOR innovations via "conventional" morticians' meme pages *@opencasketculture* and *@mortician_memes* on Instagram

Memory pictures

Though embalming was practiced in 18th century England and techniques for a modern, arterial method were published by the French Jean Gannal in 1838 (Parsons 2018, 85), its professional standardisation is bound to the United States and more specifically, the American Civil War and Abraham Lincoln. Associations between Lincoln and embalming are so standard in literature, some have erroneously suggested he decreed it; following his assassination in 1865, his body was embalmed for transportation from Washington DC to Springfield, Ohio, embarking on a 180-city tour by train, frequently loaded onto a coach and displayed in locations such as city halls for public viewings. Historian Gary Laderman notes this parade "ensured embalming – an unacceptable treatment before the war – would change American deathways" (Laderman 2003, 163). But what prompted this event? Here as in the presentation regarding the Newman Brothers' meeting a cultural shift in the 1910s, the ravages of war are pointed to for an explanation: as over 600,000 died on battlefields between 1861 and 1865, the newly constructed railroads could be used for transporting bodies to bereaved families. It has been suggested the first American embalmers were field medics, "opportunists" experimenting with arsenic and mercury, selling soldiers pre-pay cards for their own postmortem transport or holding fallen bodies hostage[80]. In parallel, much has been written on collective national identity, cenotaphisation or icon-making (Walter 2018, Robben 2017), and the specific relationship between the incorruptible body and ideals of the Union - perpetual and figuratively hewn by its martyrdom (eg. Byock 2007 and its edited volume of *Dying and Death: Inter-Disciplinary Perspectives*).

Following a vow to have those giving "the last full measure of devotion" a death "not in vain" in the Gettysburg Address, to call for a soldier's preparation for oneself is at once democratising and heroic; it makes sense for the narrative of the body as locus for a socio-political cause, or symbolic reuniting of a divided country alike in its period of mourning.[81] Yet Lincoln's initial adoption of embalming was in relation to the death of his eleven-year-old son, a 1862 death by typhoid fever that is remarked to have changed his parents dramatically through an inconsolable grief – according to Lindsey Fitzharris, Lincoln would visit his child's grave often, requesting his coffin be reopened at least twice, and spent hours at a time in the family vault feeling pity for the lonely body[82]. All this is to say that technological, logistic, ethico-politically ideological affordances or motives as well as affectionate personal attachments were and are involved in negotiations of the corpse at any given time, but in this context the introduction of embalming greatly strengthened the hand of a budding professional caste. Huntingon and Metcalf note that the introduction of state licensing "designed no doubt to protect the public from charlatans" meant an elite could emerge, whilst its technical manipulation necessitated the body be at their premises (1991,194) – custody and embalming in tandem mean the expertise sold is not that of wares, but a specific image or experience of death expertly applied. Regarding the American viewing custom Laderman notes " [...] the corpse, an irreducible object [...] evoked feelings of dread, fear, and resignation, as well as reverence, respect and hope"

---

[80] https://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/how-lincolns-embrace-embalming-birthed-american-funeral-industry-180967038/ Walsh, B. (2017)

[81] https://www.raabcollection.com/presidential-autographs/lincoln-embalmers A write-up regarding an 1865 order from Abraham Lincoln in protection for Civil War embalmers' trade.

[82] https://www.abrahamlincolnonline.org/lincoln/education/williedeath.htm and https://drlindseyfitzharris.com/abraham-lincoln-conversations-with-the-dead/ Fitzharris, L. (2012)

(1996, 26). He could be mistaken for Malinowski, whose introduction to rituals of death suggests in Melanesia and Australia reads:

> It is often stated by anthropologists that the dominant feeling of the survivors is that of horror at the corpse and of fear of the ghost [...] Yet this assertion is only a half-truth, which means no truth at all. The emotions are extremely complex and even contradictory; the dominant elements, love of the dead and loathing of the corpse, passionate attachment to the personality still lingering about the body and a shattering fear of the gruesome thing that has been left over, these two elements seem to mingle and play into each other (Malinowski 1955, 30)

Mitford stakes her revulsion in the swing of a pendulum further into reverence and hope; an emotional manipulation by which the "thing left over" is not fearsome or gruesome but "a well-oiled performance in which the concept of death [...] plays no part whatsoever" (Mitford 1998,60). *The American Way of Death* was written at the encouragement of Mitford's husband, attorney Robert Treuhaft, who worked with trade unions on death benefit programmes and had noticed a trend of funeral expenses exhausting benefits "whether they were small or large" (West and McKerns 2009, 32). Treuhaft's frustration for the greed of funeral homes led to his leadership of the Bay Area Memorial Association and access to funeral trade publications Mitford would wield in her investigations, frequently using quotes verbatim to expose corporate ethic:

> "A funeral is not an occasion for a display of cheapness. It is, in fact, an opportunity for the display of a status symbol which, by bolstering family pride, does much to assuage grief. A funeral is also an occasion when feelings of guilt and remorse are satisfied to a large extent by the purchase of a fine funeral. It seems highly probable that the most satisfactory funeral service for the average family is one in which the cost has necessitated some degree of sacrifice. This permits the survivors to atone for any real or fancied neglect of the deceased prior to his death." (Mitford 1998,33 – credited simply as 'National Funeral Service Journal')

Detailing the often-obscured costs and guilt-based methods, Mitford's best-seller sold out its first printing of 200,000 units on the day of its publication and resulted in subsequent coverage and investigations in *The New York Times*, to almost immediate legislative effect. In November 1963, the federal government reported it would include cost of dying in the cost-of-living index starting in 1964, and the Senate Anti-Trust and Monopoly Subcommittee responded to a flood of public complaints by announcing an inquiry. A front-page headline later in the same month reported New York's attorney general had begun investigation on "price gouging, bill-padding, and fraudulent selling" prompted by mounting concern over "the disclosures in the Book". The state inquiry led to a bill signed into law in 1964 that required funeral directors to provide itemised estimates of funeral costs; the Federal Trade Commission followed suit with a 1968 consent decree to be signed by the National Funeral Directors Association on pricing transparency. These rules were further amended in 1975, with requirements for family permission before embalming and having to display inexpensive caskets or accoutrements in the same room as others. West and McKerns' fascinating analysis of "apoplectic" industry response to Mitford describes the Cold War era rhetoric and "reddening" of their adversary; both she and her husband were branded "known communists" and counter-pamphlets for *The Communist Way of Death* bedecked in grey skulls and pink hammers and sickles were

circulated to dam the flood[83] – but the damage was done, and Mitford has been characterised as authoring not only pricing law, but the preface to not-for-profit funerals and broad interest in memorial societies.

Mitford was not the lone voice, however, as Ruth Harmer's *High Cost of Dying* was released six months later. Outside the remit of death media, West and McKerns relate Mitford's success to a general, "galvanised" literary activism behind social movements of the decade; Betty Friedan's *Feminine Mystique* in 1963 and Rachel Carson's 1962 *The Silent Spring*.[84] Lynn Lofland's description of the first "death positive" or "happy death" movement in the 1970s traces the preceding "decade of non-stop talking about death" (Lofland 2019 [1978], 73) - including its popular books and newspapers (eg. Kubler-Ross' 1970 *On death and dying*, and its "stages" model; Becker's *Denial of Death* in 1973, death themes in *Newsweek*, *Readers Digest*, *Family Circle* and *People*- magazines) and university courses on "alternative death systems" or the arrival of "dying companions" - similarly associating a piqued interest in death with general, diffuse ideological movements. The sixties and seventies saw the development of hospice ideology and the first hospice opened in London, living wills and life-support technologies, right-to-die debates, and the first Natural Death Act in California – in 1976, individuals gained the right to legally refuse medical treatment even if refusal resulted in death (Troyer in Lodland 2019, xi-xii). The amusing flair in Lofland's writing has echoes of Mitford, however, in its attention to messages of psychological satisfaction or "happiness" to be sought in realignment towards death: both books criticise the contemporary understandings by which through effort death could become a "beautiful" or "authentic" experience.

The Mitfordian funeral director undeniably charged disproportionately, but as in the excerpt above, they often did so in accordance with local understandings of grief and its mitigation: pride could assuage, and guilt could be "satisfied" in a "satisfactory" service. More specifically, embalming was promoted not as mere tradition (harkening back to ancient Egypt, some funeral directors appealed to a link to pharaohs and future archaeological value (Williamson and Shneidman 1995), but as healthy and sane following a processual or cathartic model, allowing mourners to bid farewell. Whilst a body bearing signs of illness, violence or decay could "destabilise" viewers or mar their memories of the deceased, a curated "memory picture" might pacify death (Mitford 1998, 147-150, Cahill 1995). Whether taken as a cynical sales ploy or not, the suggestion of "relief" and "coming to terms" a cosmetically enhanced viewing could afford was taken seriously by many in the Book: Mitford is at her most searing describing how corpses are "sprayed, sliced, pierced, pickled, trussed, trimmed, creamed, waxed, painted, rouged and dressed" (Mitford 1998,53-4) for display. The materials used and effects sought – from *Lyf-Lyk Pink* tint fluid for velvety finishes on the skin of women and children, to wires and needles for reforming jaws – are regaled for pages upon pages as Mitford reaches the central message of evasion and immortality. When professional guidelines suggest one is to "lay out the body so that there will be as little suggestion of death as possible" and features were to be composed with looks of "quiet resignation" or "Christian hope" (Farrell 1980, 160–61), Mitford's

[83] West and McKerns elaborate: the pamphlet recounted the testimony of the Reverend Shihping Wang, a member of the East Asia Baptist Evangelization Society International. After fleeing Beijing, Wang testified in Washington D.C in 1959 "painting gruesome pictures of the murders of old people as a means for reducing the dependent population, and their disposal as hosts for maggots bred for chicken feed" (*ibid*,48)

[84] Carson's exposé on the chemical industry and its disinformation regarding pesticide use informed public opinion and is associated with a nationwide ban on DDT and the creation of the Environmental Protection Agency.

mockery of polite language fits the theme, and there are glossary examples of words to avoid and their customer-friendly alternatives (among many others, body/corpse = remains/name; funeral = service; coffin = casket; dead = deceased; hearse = car; dig = open; bury = inter) to protect "sensitive feelings" from what is "harsh" – the use of "avoidant" language is still presented as evidence of death denial or "harmful" in awareness literature today.

In a curious overlap and reversal of narratives regarding "facing the truth" of death, then, Mitford's detractors – often in theological and mortuary settings – accuse her words of the very same flight from mortality. Cahill's unique 1995 analysis of the rhetorical construction of funeral direction, based on five months of participant observation in a community college mortuary science programme, found students largely dismissed Mitford's commentary as "unfair and symptomatic of death denial" (1995, 117). Interviewed participants suggested "misguided families" selecting bare-bones services were trying to bypass or eliminate pain "to the detriment of their future psychological health"; one sadly recounted a failed attempt to dissuade an extended family member from using a closed casket, saying they knew "she'll be sorry later on" (*ibid*,121). The similarity between this and concerns expressed by online participants regarding disposal arrangements was obvious and raises questions as to whether – in presenting death "as not death" (and what does that look like, anyway?) – the display of the viewable body was more so its ironic concealment than its omission. The arguments for therapeutic properties are reversed, too, as by *The Natural Death Handbook:* Parsons charges the handbook with "making a number of unreferenced assumptions" and sensationalist embalming detail when they claim: "contrary to what some funeral directors believe, viewing experiences of these altered bodies and sometimes leave damaging last impressions" (Callender et al. 2012 in Parsons 2018,100).

Criticism towards Mitford generally conflates her admonishment of professionals with an austere paucity of ritual: vocal Presbyterian minister and "death educator" (Garces-Foley & Holcomb 2006,208) Thomas Long suggests that just like Evelyn Waugh's satirical novel on American funerals (*The Loved One,* 1948), Mitford revels in "tut-tutting over the shallowness and vulgarity of American culture" (Long 1999,500); it was less a matter of deathways than a sense of superiority over "American folkways". The argument is unconvincing given its disregard for the fiscal aspects precipitating *The American Way of Death* – Mitford is presented as coldly reducing the body to "just a shell" in the name of rationalism. A body is not "just" anything, Long goes on, proposing that "in awe of empirical science [she is] simply doing in the 1960s what nineteenth century undertakers, with their dubious claims of sanitation and hygiene, were doing in the 1860s" (i*bid*,501). I fail to grasp how a 1960s anti-consumerist credo really lines up with the brass handles at Newman Brothers; how a funeral director and his staunch critic drive the same plough. Yet if Mitford throws the baby of ritual out with the bathwater, current "alternative" morticians cannot be accused of doing the same. If instead by this line on "doing the same as undertakers" Long meant that experts of differing backgrounds participate in telling the public what is best for them, what they ought to want or not, it is very relevant to my study of the death awareness movement - albeit lacking some self-awareness.

Satisfactory; beautiful The excerpts above have introduced embalming as a mainstay of American deathways, albeit one in decline - the NFDA projections for cremation rate in 2022 stood at 59.3 percent vs 35.7 percent burials (compared to a just under ten percent of disposal by cremation in 1980) and of these burials, information of how many include embalming is

unavailable[85]. Further, they described the mounting public concern and reform from the 1960s, largely in and through the work of Jessica Mitford, touching on the way a binary attribution of denial/acceptance or avoidance/adjustment are grist for the mill of practitioners "on either side" of professional allegiance. As such, the notion that funerary ritual is the site for attendees' adjustment is made primary; an ill-conceived ceremony or disposal can "haunt" (p. 150) or cause certain regret. Against a conception of funerals or death "avoided" in minimised or altered fashions for proceedings, I look to outline the way "death positive" advocates look to centre ritual care and speak to the "natural" or "instinctive" means of involvement with the dead. I summarise increasingly popular funeral customs and their narratives as "involvement over intervention"; if death being "a natural part of life" is central to death awareness, that which can be formulated as delaying or deposing mortality is inappropriate.

Embalming fluids and "forever corpses" are an easy target, but interestingly that which removes death from life can be that which begets its excess elsewhere – environmentally unsustainable human death practices are "unnatural" in flouting the organic matter of the body, and bring death as absence or disequilibrium elsewhere, as in the description of polluted or spent resources; the "sterile" manicured lawn and its mercury clouds. Greener aspirations lean into "returning" to the earth and care in custodianship, as do subversions of care as paying mind or attention, as "bad" funeral directing is not merely uncaring – by third-party intervention and delegation, it promotes the opportunity to be less involved, resonant with Giddens's "transformation of intimacy" (Giddens 1990). Chapter six, in its focus on feminine and spiritualist emphasis in death awareness will delve further into promises for "authentic" mortal affect as a sensuous "return" in kind, to an imagined pre-modern state of woman-led community care. For now, I describe a British funeral director's summary of their work and aspirations to inform a preliminary contribution on care as commodity. In Robbins' analysis on transcendence in relation to ethics, he notes that for Turner "rituals make values an object of desire for their participants" building on Durkheim on moral facts - social imperatives could be at once "obligatory" and "desirable" (Robbins 2016, 780) contrasting a rational imperative and its demanding normativity, as in Kant's work. Robbins' challenging piece drives for taking religious ethics seriously alongside "ordinary ethics" (eg. Lambek 2010, Das 2015), suggesting "the representations of values produced by ritual" inform ethical life in ways "that do not traduce its everyday qualities" (Robbins 2016,771). Though I am not going to delve into whether death awareness is religion, I take from this topic Robbins' attention to Schutz's phenomenological take on transcendence: he argues transcendence is inescapable "for there are always things that are important to us that are outside our immediate perceptual experience, but that we represent to ourselves by means of various kinds of signs" (Schutz & Luckmann 1989,105 in *ibid*). Reading this alongside Puig de la Bellacasa on the way a kind of affect and sign can make the "important to us" matters of care out of matters of fact (2017) – I propose that care is obligation plus desire. The awareness movement's task, then, is to keep the pieces together.

At the Funeral Day afternoon session, Carrie smiled before us in a flurry of leopard print and established herself quickly as an outsider – "an alternative to the giants". *Dignity PLC* has over 720 branches, 40+ crematoria and 28 cemeteries and represented 12 percent of the UK market share in 2016 – a close second to The Cooperative Funeralcare with around 25 percent – and

[85] https://nfda.org/news/media-center/nfda-news-releases/id/6519/data-shows-covid-19-impact-on-funeral-service-is-significant

there were only twelve societies offering funerals left in 2015 (Parsons 2018, 196-7). With a turnover of around £2.5 billion, the APPG (All Party Parliamentary Group) report of 2020/1 describes the funeral sector as "dominated by small, independent and family businesses"[86], a stark contrast to the state of affairs I had grown accustomed to reading and hearing about. Seeking clarity in Parsons' thorough account of North American and British industry developments, I found that Chamberlain and Pearson's argument (with Mitford) that the American Service Corporation International (SCI) introduced aggressive business styles and expensive "hygienic" practice was slightly inaccurate, as whilst embalming was introduced in the UK by North American embalmers, those extolling its value were home-grown operators and SCI was the amalgamation of "many companies that have been carrying out embalming for a considerable number of years" (*ibid*, 99-100). More surprisingly, I understood SCI *was* Dignity PLC: formed in the merger of two large groups acquired by SCI in 1994, subject to a management buyout in 2002 and acquired by a consortium of firms in 2023. Parsons challenges statements by which embalming is "virtually unheard of in this country" (Davies 1996, 60) as well as reverse claims that *Co-op* or *Dignity* carry out embalming as "standard practice" without express client permission. This is in tandem with themes of distrust and pointed fingers as well as international vagueness I had seen in conferences and forums – it is unclear who the "we" of death awareness are, which media or legislation applies to the reader or viewer, or "whose" death style is chicken or egg. In an appeal to heritage and small operations, most "giant-owned" operations hold onto names – particularly of the "and sons" variety, and the influence of competition and local reputation are difficult to quantify; Parsons quotes funeral director Howard Hodgson's CEO-autobiography to exemplify a further "we" of decent and indecent providers.

> "I never visited a funeral director in order to acquire him, without having to listen to the 'disgusting behaviour' of his competitor down the road for at least two hours [...] the vast majority of funeral directors are wonderful with their clients, but if they bit their tongues while talking about competitors they would probably die from septicaemia (Hodgson 1992 in *ibid*,185)."

I was reminded of each time I had heard someone in fieldwork circles call the *Co-operative* "the crap-operative"; in the *Good Funeral Guide*, they are credited as "unintentionally breeding some of our best born-again independent funeral directors" (Cowling 2010, 154). Caitlin Doughty was a shining example of changing the system from within – training in a traditional mortuary school, finding it lacking. Carrie was doubly outsider, then, in entering the field from seemingly unrelated work with development trusts; triply, perhaps, in distancing herself from the research papers presented before her slides popped up.

> "I'm gonna start at the very beginning of this conversation by saying that this isn't an academic exercise. I'm not an *academic*, I'm a funeral director. I set up a company almost five years ago with a friend of mine to help people. We look after dead people, and we help living people to create a ceremony and a service. But what we did, is we came to it as outsiders. One of the things that was really important to us was to question all of those tropes and traditions and the rituals that we do. We've learnt a huge amount about the history of those rituals and the importance of some of them… as well as the *utter* irrelevance of some of the others.

[86] https://www.iccm-uk.com/iccm/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/APPG-2020-2021-Annual-Report.pdf

> Today, I'm going to ask a question. What are we going to do with all the dead people? Not the ones that were buried in the past, but as a growing, changing population. As I've found out more and seen patterns emerge over the hundreds of funerals that we've taken in the past few years, it started to worry me a little bit. Is what we're currently doing – which is based on trends that worked for Victorian times or post-war trends – is what are we going to do in the future? Because I don't think we're thinking hard enough. I'm not saying I have the answers, but I can present what there is now.
>
> Unless we're having those conversations, the industry itself is going to control the narrative, and we are not gonna to have any control over how we dispose of our dead, how we commemorate or memorialise our dead, and how we celebrate them. Because a lot of those spaces are tightly managed, tightly controlled, and under threat."

Carrie had been involved in setting up BrumYODO in 2016 (YODO as acronym for "you only die once"), another death awareness initiative in Birmingham – "to change the culture in which our business operates", whose events I had attended as part of Awareness Week. I thought of the disused factory we sat in and Litten's conviction that British funerals had changed wholly from Victorian standards, "cold and clinical" without pomp, as well as how starkly different Victorian and post-war trends had been set up as. What was their bearing on "what we're currently doing"? In an American setting, Garces-Foley and Holcomb define the traditional funeral as occurring in a home, accompanied by a minister, floral arrangements, hymnal music and prayers, sorrow and tears; the untraditional marked by shared eulogy, negligible clerical roles, popular music, and a celebratory theme – sometimes presented as "a triumph of individualism". They attempt to blur the divide by acceding contemporary funerals generally align with other social features and values of family-focus, personalisation, pluralism, and spiritual seeking (2006, 207). Over three decades of thanatological work in the UK, Tony Walter has in turn modelled funerals in three parts:

I) the traditional funeral guided by religious tradition, where theological discourse interprets death and the ritual centres on the soul as it travels.
II) the modern death led by medical and funerary professionals whose expertise outweighs that of community or clergy, and materials take precedence over eschatology.
III) postmodern death, reacting to both tradition and industry expertise; authority is with individual and family, and a dominant psychological discourse examines the therapeutic function of ritual.

Herein, Walter immediately states the groups as sociological "ideal types" – abstractions that "rarely if ever" present in "pure form" in the world (Walter 1995, 194): types co-exist and inform each other and do not work in an obvious chronology. Further archetypes of religious, municipal and commercial models Walter develops later (2005) are likewise not fixed to a place or time exclusively. As an example, Garces-Foley and Holcomb mention American liturgical renewal in the 1980s and 1990s, whereby many religious institutions revised rites to draw on shifting popular understandings on grief (2006,217). Similarly, Pajari provides a thoughtful review of professional publications in Finnish funeral care through the twentieth century to demonstrate the "modern" director's adaptability. Mid-century funeral directors' guidelines in the journal *Tiimalasi* (transl. hourglass) emphasised the need to provide peace and space "to concentrate on their feelings", with an assumption that grief could shock survivors to inaction – for empathetic arrangements, "the main point is that customers do not need to exert effort". Rather than being massaged, friction was to be minimised, and silent restraint – both in emotional expression and ritual – was "more authentic" than outward display. By the mid-seventies, however, subheadings and article titles changed, and the eighties saw expressions such as "the funeral home listens" or "the funeral home journeys with you, hearing you with our

hearts" (Pajari 2014, 68–69). Garces-Foley notes that literature on grief therapy has been used by the funeral industry to legitimate its role in "the so-called grief process", making their product a public service to counteract "denial" since the 1960s (2006,217). The question Carrie posed, however, is a concern more specific to 2010s awareness[87]: where will the dead people go?

> "In terms of my job, we've seen some really beautiful, ambitious garden cemeteries. You know, these big visions, when there's not space in the church grounds in the city, so we can build these beautiful places on the outskirts. But I think the visions of those have really been scaled down in modern times. Let me show you a picture – this is Birmingham's latest, new cemetery. And it's a *really* uninspiring place. I apologise if anybody's been there or is associated with it. Essentially, it's a service road with some green paths. There's no space for ceremony. They haven't built anything that enables you to have any kind of ceremony or service. There's an office and watering cans and lawn-mowing going on. It feels to me, a lack of vision. It's not beautiful, it's just not good enough. They do have a woodland burial site there… it's the bit they don't mow."

Some audience members tutted; one remarked that the new cemetery looked "like filing cabinets".

> "Oh, but it's not their- it's nobody's – I mean, whose fault is it? Why are we not creating those beautiful spaces? Once that's full, it'll become unloved and unmanaged, and it doesn't feel that it's one of those cemeteries that people would go to, to promenade, you know? Then the idea of the procession, the funeral cortege. If you're a funeral director and you need to get a coffin and a family from A to B on a *ring road*? Bloody nightmare. So, the procession element is reduced to maybe two minutes. This thing of a community coming together or walking alongside or that spectacle, it's really hard to do."

Carrie noted the price of graves in the uninspiring cemetery and nationwide internment fee rises and clicked ahead to natural burial, which she presented in a positive, but not rosy light:

> "The return to nature! No gravestones, you can have trees… it's a beautiful, potentially sustainable model. We've done loads of these natural burials, and they're much cheaper than a city burial and they provide a beautiful place to go back to. My nan's there, I like it. It's a really nice thing. But in terms of sustainability, there's a bit of me that wonders – and this is citing a research project called *Corpse Project,* I highly recommend their website[88] is that it's all very well having a natural burial, but it's out of town. Often quite a long way out of town too, and I've got an electric hearse, but most people don't. So, the average burials in places like that end up being less environmentally friendly than just going to the local crematorium. So, swings and roundabouts! But with 270 of these in the country, it's genuinely a proper option for lots of people, and I think when you've been to a service like that, and seen this, you start to think about "hmm, is that King's Norton cemetery good enough?"

Cremation gets a less-than-stellar assessment next on our list, and exemplifies the balancing act between environmental, "Mitfordized" rationale and a lament for mourning:

> "A lot of people here, now, just go to the crematoria for the cremation and the service. We try to encourage people to separate the two things, because in this space, you get *twenty*

[87] Less in terms of faith or popular current concepts of soul reunion (Walter 2020, 1996); rather, how can disposal of corpses be navigated in light of new understandings of global resources and their limitations.

[88] She later explains she collaborated on making it

> minutes. You've come in here, coffin goes on there, everyone sits down, blah blah blah, bit of music, blah, they go out of there, curtains close, and the next lot come in. It is, I feel, *unsatisfactory*. I mean, you could book a double slot, or you could do things to the space, or move the chairs, but maybe you can't. There are some that are better than others, but I feel it's not giving it the time and space that it deserves."

The audience nods. "There's not the respect, either.", my seat-neighbour adds.

> "Yes! So, I think with cremation, that disposal bit of it has gotten to a point where it's so efficient, we might be losing something. I would really like us to start thinking about the spaces we use for ceremony and not just, you know, how to dispose. We have to connect these things better in the future. More crematoria, of course, is a simple and efficient solution to limited space, but we need to think really carefully about the ritualistic elements, so we're not just reduced to something that is not good enough. You know, they're lovely there, and it's clean, they're efficient – but it's not satisfactory."

The ritual importance and dimensions of scattering ashes has been discussed in ethnography set in the UK by Jupp (2005), Davies (2005) and Hockey (with Prendergast in 2006; Prendergast and Kellaher in 2007) among others, with Davies and Rumble stressing the "idealistic aspect" of ashes: a person's cremated remains could be buried in gardens, at shared locations of holidays, hobbies or interests – as a symbol of the deceased person, they could participate in an "idealised form" of the person's image (Davies and Rumble 2012). This virtual reality of ability, whether to visit a place "one more time" or stake an intermingling with a meaningful location can afford intent, interiority and posthumous distributed personhood. As such, in Williams and Wessman's discussion, it fosters great variance in Hertzian "secondary burial" (p.42) and cenotaphic media: the same environments can be successively used, and people removed from their places of birth can avoid "abandoning" family gravesites (Williams and Wessman 2017). Quoting Howarth's work on anecdotes and "mythologies" around independent ash disposal, the authors assert ash is "part of the rebirth of mortuary commemoration in the later twentieth century" (Howarth 2010 in *ibid*, 268) and to stereotype cremation as pragmatically "static antithesis to Victorian celebration" is to overlook its evolving and complex strategies; an approach by which cremation is consistent and controlled further overlooks the agency of mourners to adapt choices available to them. This literature on cremation is beyond the scope of this chapter, but the contestable exclusivity of efficient disposal and ceremony is recognised and accounted for in commercial media, too: the website for *Simplicity Cremations* stresses mourners could "reminisce in their own way" with "beautiful memorial" or celebration of life "at a later date", while one of their tv spots suggests one could use the money a direct cremation saved them to donate to a charitable cause the deceased appreciated.

Carrie's speech drew on space: specifically beautiful, inspiring space; enough room for the cortege, for privacy exceeding a curtain – the kind of space one wants to "promenade" and "go back to". In equal parts, there was time: twenty minutes and rote "blah blah" would not do, nor did the "two-minute" procession. Why might the efficacy of crematory disposal be suboptimal, if it afforded a wider array of spaces and, arguably, all the time one could want before secondary disposal by scattering, or a memorial service? I propose a large part of the "beautiful" stressed in death awareness is bound to co-presence with the body that echoes care as discussed in chapter three and the first paragraph under this subheading: care and convenience are somewhat incompatible, because without obligation associated with degrees of reciprocity, desire does amount to care.

As the presentation drew to its close, alkaline hydrolysis was covered in its basics with a suggestion that people "could come around to it" like they did with cremation – I suspect the limited time spent on this alternative was result of its unavailability at the time[89] and reduction of ceremony, akin to combustion by flame. The *Recompose* project, or "human composting" also known as NOR (Natural Organic Reduction) garners more visible enthusiasm from Carrie.

> "It's a whole space which has got these pods where human bodies go – and it takes about thirty days – but it's a place where there are people walking around, where there are plants growing, where it's a communal space where we're accepting that death happens, but it's beautiful. It's a place we can come to and get at the end of it – instead of some useless ashes – you get some compost. And people love the idea of becoming a tree, like that suit thing. I think this one will be a legal thing in Washington state at the start of next year. And in the UK, all the legislation's changed to allow the water cremation. So, I'm really excited about these two things."

Recompose was founded in 2017 in Washington by designer Katrina Spade building on her 2014 non-profit organisation Urban Death Project; Spade was a founding member of the *Order* in 2011, and her project featured frequently in death advocacy circles. The facility's work on reduction led to the first facility opening at the end of 2020, and further legalisation in Colorado and Oregon in 2021. The suit Carrie referenced was the Mushroom Burial Suit or *Infinity Suit*, invented and developed by another founding *Order* member Jae Rhim Lee, whose 2011 *TED*-talk on a shroud she made up "of mushrooms and micro-organisms" boasts two million views on *YouTube* and the *TED*-site. Feeding fungi her hair and nail clippings, Lee sought to "teach" strains to precipitate decomposition and "transfer nutrients" from the dead body; mycelium feature in headlines about "living coffin" experiments of the 2020s and are – in my estimation and professional aims – the next frontier in thanatological academia in a post-Tsing age. Conceived by an artists and designer, the 2011 suit was likely more of a conversation point than marketable technique, however, and as such I was struck by Carrie's dismissal. "I'm sure you all saw that video online – but it doesn't actually work!" All the while, beauty is back in the recomposition ground, as in an introduction video I found for Carrie's undertaking business online: beautiful things can happen at funerals with beautifully decorated coffins and beautiful flowers. Many similar remarks are found throughout Rumble and Davies' work on natural burial grounds and their life-giving metaphors, as they quote a founder of an eco-coffin company and a civil celebrant:

> "You don't think oh gosh, I better go and clip round the grave and lay some flowers; it's not a chore, it's actually somewhere you want to go!"
>
> [...]
>
> "I've been up to [named ground} and just walked around the grounds because they're so beautiful, and I've seen families just sitting at graves! [...] that continuity of life, that people can feel comfortable to go into a cemetery and have a picnic with their relatives;

[89] To become available in the UK by the end of 2023, its "arrival" was heralded in click-bait headlines about 'Boil in the Bag Funerals' in July, such as Booth, R. in *The Guardian*: https://www.theguardian.com/society/2023/jul/02/boil-in-the-bag-environmentally-friendly-funerals-arrive-in-uk-resomation-acquamation#:~:text=The%20practice%20is%20legal%20in,release%20into%20the%20drainage%20system.

> how beautiful, and you never see that at municipal cemeteries!" (Rumble and Davies 2012,52)

There is a pronounced contrast between the "ugly beautiful" of preserved, "pretty" bodies and the transcendent beautiful: one was accused of removing death, the other concerned with promoting life of another kind – the obligation met desire when attention and attendance to material trappings stopped "being a chore". But does positivity pushed far enough loop through to the other side, negating its losses? In Davies' work, "ecological immortality" (2005) is considered as a source of green burial's appeal: the deceased can "live on" through the environment they decompose in. This is reminiscent of Davies' previous writing on "words against death", by which memorial, with its art, music and liturgy, seeks to adapt and overcome to regain "a sense of power" following awareness of death (Davies 2002, 4) – through such ventures, tragedy can have meaning. I am prone to caution with theory that foregrounds evolutionary elements – the "human animal" surviving the societal blows of death by ritual – lest terror management reign (p.54), but with respect for Davies' scholarship I subscribe to meaning-making and propose "words despite/alongside death" might be more fitting. Immortality is a grand concept to unpick here, but those backing social psychiatrist Robert Lifton's theory (1979) of five pathways for symbolic immortality (biologic, creative, religious, natural and experiential – two of these fit "ecological") underline the author meant its conquest was not about "absolute immortality" but "a sense of ties". Lifton did not conflate "a need to transcend death" with denial of death, Davies and Rumble stress (2012,72). Instead, the supposed need represented "a compelling universal urge to maintain inner sense of continuous symbolic relationship [...] with the various elements of life." Why immortality and transcendence, then, instead of something altogether simpler: just engaging in living? All the same, the most obvious cyclicity of surviving energy or matter as in the American Centre for Natural Burial's materials the authors recorded ("perhaps a molecule from your body will end up in a berry that a bird eats" – i*bid*,63) was absent at Funeral Day and the conference. Instead, the "elements of life" valorised were of continued relating and obliging; of gifts of time and space in the caring attention and maintenance of the corpse worth ritualising.

Postmodern and post-scarce

> "Did anyone see Game of Thrones last week? Well, I won't spoil it too much, but there's war and lots of death, and at the end they dispose of the bodies with this mass funeral, these big, open pyres. And I hope obviously that we're never in a situation where we need to do things like that. But there was something so simple and beautiful about it, and it made me think, maybe we should just go back to some real, simple basics around this. Without all the fuss and paraphernalia and handles! This is life-and-death stuff, and it's fundamental, and I don't think there should be this many little bits of stupid rules, some of them. This is the real bit-by-bit stuff: me, here, talking to you. You, going on and talking to someone else. Looking back at our histories and saying "why have we stopped doing that?"

Carrie finished her speech to much applause as she handed out funeral planning sheets – they were not legally binding, but "fun questions" to help us get thinking about future wishes. I began to think about "fuss" and its limits: Jupp introduces "no fuss" as cultural idiom in 1993, and Rumble and Davies suggest it was a polite, British way to say "expense" (2012, 83), while in an advertisement for *Pure Cremation* (founded in 2015; a glance at Google trends shows a graph

spiking at 2020) the actor says "fuss" four times in all of fifty seconds[90]. I began to feel bad for anyone beside me who may have abided by "stupid rules" or had family or plans in the "uninspiring" filing cabinets; I think about my father buying flowers for the tidy churchyard plot we only make the drive to a few times a year and the gardener raking leaves, and feel for him, too. I hope to have begun to capture how the basic or fundamental to which one "goes back" is made up of any multitude of practices and that "looking back" at our histories, we may not know what we see. What were the mnemonic or ontological functions of select grave goods in sixth and seventh century Britain (Williams 2004)? Is making a pyre simpler than a hole in the ground? What of all the secondary or multiphasic burials described by Evans-Pritchard or Hertz? Offering a fantasy series like *Game of Thrones* as an example for shared histories is fitting, given its reliance on categories that may be largely modern or postmodern conception: the nostalgic gloss is akin to work by Stephanie Coontz regarding "the way we never were" (Coontz 2005) and Lofland's observations on 1970s iterations of death awareness as "humanistic counterculture", denouncing Western society as dehumanising, technologized, and inauthentic (Lofland 2019,73). In a glance to the battlefields of Westeros, British death activists may be underselling their hand in spearheading what simplicity means and – as in their push for cremation or hospice - the gentle or "humane" poured into technology and institution.

In Walter's most recent monograph (2020), the death awareness movement is named and recognised as embracing "post-scarcity" death; by this, there is a suggestion that economic stability and security enables the emotional dimension to take precedence, championed as "what grief is 'really' about". As in the proliferation of grief psychology and counselling, exploring emotions is not only culturally possible around death, but normative in the West (Walter 2020). Walter contrasts this with situations "where survival dominates, so too do practical concerns", often paired with culturally expectations for stoicism – likely referencing wartime junctures discussed above (p.140). I would venture to suggest that the very opposite can be true in cases of perceived injustice and inflicted death: whether *Extinction Rebellion*, *Black Lives Matter*, protests about Mexican femicide, instances of global terror or martyrdom, the practicality of survival stands hand-in-hand with emotional extremes, appeals, and ritual performance. Still, there is a clear difference in such causes and the individualised emphasis on end-of-life as an adventitious, self-reflexive concept for emotional revelation or depth of experience accessible when layers of "fuss" are peeled. As an anecdotal example on survival and security, a close friend and course mate found out his estranged mother had died during our programme. Following years of abuse, he had cut ties years prior and was ultimately advised by his solicitor to not go home to New York to recognise or claim the body, lest he become liable for her substantial debt.

> "It's a crazy privileged position, this 'talk about it' crowd you study. I could think about how she's buried in a potter's ground on Rikers Island, but I'm not going to touch that: these people have support networks and the luxury of space to break down. A big part of how I'm doing well, why I'm able to live with everything that's happened to me, is that I'm not pulling out everything that would crash the Jenga tower."

Could this death have been closer to the real with wildflowers? In the discussion of scarcity, Walter characterises death awareness further as a "post-material" movement akin to the green movement as protest against post-war affluence (*ibid,*97). To this too, I add a caveat to propose, perhaps, post-material*ist* used interchangeably and in 2017 fits better. The expressive values of

[90] Examples of advertising include https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_XlsguBW1JA

the economically secure differ vastly from those struggling - Walter points out with a nod to Inglehart's sociological framing from the 1970s - with immigrant and working-class funerals displaying personal character and lavish expenditure. This is reminiscent of Parsons' quote from a 1909 director above (p. 139) regarding "the poor, clinging to their black tassels", Doss's work on personalised gifts such as teddies at graves (2008), or Fletcher on printed memorial or "RIP t-shirts" popular in urban African American communities(Fletcher in Thamann and Christodoulaki 2022). Fashions for minimalism feature in the vastly successful 2017 *Dödstädning* or "death cleaning" book by Margareta Magnusson (in the slipstream of Marie Kondo's 2010 *Joy of Tidying* and now a reality-tv production hosted by comedian Amy Poehler) in a blend of mindfulness with supposed Scandinavian folk wisdom à la *Hygge*[91]: never mind nobody I knew had heard of "the gentle Swedish art" – it was selfish to fail to notice "someone will have to clean up after you, and they will find it a burden" (Magnusson 2017, 118). In the conference comments on David Bowie's "rebel" funeral in 2016 – a direct cremation at $700 – I was drawn to thoughts of potlatch and desire: those with status in life would not need to establish it in death and by the same token those struggling to pay £4000 for a funeral are unlikely to opt for radical means for cost reduction (Walter 2017, 65). The dissolution of identity or property could be desirable and caring if it was elective, rather than "ended up with"; the rich practice intermittent fasting, the poor go hungry. Whilst green burial sites have rules about not leaving markers or gifts by graves (Powell et. al 2011,2) and traditional coffins are ridiculed for their waste, I suggest many death-positive ideals are highly concerned with material, as long as it is of an ilk that suggests the porosity, permeability, or interdependence of our matter – both physically as in green grounds that live with our nutrients once the body is not a site of specific intervention, or psychically as desirable intimacies or vulnerability and capacity to care relationally. It is in this mesh that the contested funeral professional at the core of this chapter can cause a blockage.

Given an additional narrative of control in an advocacy for pre-emptive planning through care directives and wills, it is unsurprising that the most popular piece of merchandise on sale through the *Order* in 2020 was a t-shirt bearing the slogan *My Corpse My Choice*, an intentional nod to a popular feminist motto on self-determination. But beyond the notion of (re)claiming control, in the case of the intentional, often prolonged presence of the corpse – such as at the wake – what becomes more relevant is the method by which the corpse becomes "our dead". Though the ultimate DIY is far from the agenda of many involved in death awareness or the funeral industry, haptic engagement with the dying person, resulting corpse, and other ritual elements – be they flowers, shrouds, candles, or held hands of other mourners - is ubiquitously encouraged. I take this to exemplify not only a desire to reclaim bodies or their "truth" in opposition to denial, but a Malinowskian phatic communion and desire to feel figuratively touched in return.

Terhi Utriainen uses Grace Davie's term of "de-differentiation" impressively in a piece on alternative well-being practices and discourses and their introduction in contemporary care of the dying. De-differentiation is presented as a sociological or analytic spin on holism: it captures phenomena "whereby modernity turns actively and critically towards its own tendency to differentiate spheres of life" (Utriainen 2010, 437). In a specific modern context, de-differentiation is "part of its inherent self-criticism" that aims to bridge such divides and forge aspects of being-in-the-world "back" together; what is characteristic is a reflexive articulation

[91] Another international bestseller, the 2016 *The Little Book of Hygge: Danish Secrets to Happy Living* introduced the Danish-Norwegian term for coziness into the English vernacular as solidified by its inclusion in the OED the following year and is part of what I term a "folk philosophy" genre in self-help.

against situations and discourses of modernity, secularisation or supposed disenchantment - and often medicalisation. The human body – the female body in particular – is described as alienated from its "original", "sacred", or "natural" in "segmenting" frameworks (*ibid,*448), just as in literature on care where those considered traditional carers are moralised for not caring enough, "anymore", or removed from a "natural" capacity to care (eg. Puig de la Bellacasa 2017,5-7). As such, health care contexts (alternative and "secular" medicine alike) become in-between spaces where that formulated as driven apart – life and death, sacred and profane, self and other – are stitched together. It is no great feat to expand Utriainen's arguments to the care of the dead and their mourners, too. Pointing at criticism regarding medicalised dying, Walter notes that the issues people have tend to be about institutions, rather than medicine; to cite Zimmerman and Rodin, the containment of dying or dead bodies is "not the result of a selective conspiracy against the dying or a conscious intent to deny death", but representative of a bureaucratization that characterises social structure in general (Zimmermann and Rodin 2004, 126). As Walter asks how institutional settings of dying "could become more porous" family events, or inclusive of one's own social network and wider communities (Walter 2017,55), I wonder what happens when the dying don't have families; why our nurses are not constitutive of our community.

To draw on the three "ideal types" for funerals, I find the postmodern category to react not in rejection of traditional-modern, but in embrace, too: it admires authority and expertise and seeks solutions, but its legitimation is key. The listening heart is "in the right place"; the authoritative speaker does not appeal to prestige, status quo, money or a belief that one is more knowledgeable – indeed, Carrie feels the need to underline she is not part of the industry who co-opts the narrative, and that we are brainstorming together. She "doesn't have the answers". Instead, the most appropriate voices express their emotional candour and imply answers and desires gestate as if on their own: the family is thought to know how they want to meet the dead, just as the dying body "knows what to do" (Mannix 2017). I wish to conclude by drawing attention to time featuring in descriptions of "bad" care (conveyor belts, twenty minutes, the toxic body "frozen" in false time) and good funerals (continuity of care "throughout" by alternative providers, "beautiful" decay, willingness to visit and share space with the dead) to bind differentiation to Hertz's "triangular" ritual model I expanded into a pyramid in chapter two. If in this view of death ritual, the nodes of I) body II) the mourners and III) the place of the dead inform and constitute the state of each point, each is enacted in time, distending the abstract "distance" between each. It follows that the funeral director or their industry can be cast as negating or warping these interdependencies of care: one could pay money instead of engaging in an emotional sacrifice or short-cut "what is difficult, but right" (p. 187) – or in the death denial school, expend resources to dress death "happy". To make each consumer responsible for meaningful ritual, however, is to overlook the exigencies of capitalist time and in some cases, fetishise a Gemeinschaft-to-Gesellschaft story that presents economy as "a mere solvent" in face of idyllic (often unattainable) community and sociality (Danby 2004, 4).

Though the stark sell-share split that sees capitalism diminishing family or community, and purchase making "each party more independent and free of obligations to others" (Godelier 1999 in *ibid*) has been challenged, the sacrifice of time and space is presented as means of displaying devotion more aligned with "pure" relationships (Giddens 1992, 6) and care than exchange, death aware funeral activism does best when it recognises obstacles to access and states its moral imperative without alienating its audience. Davies points out that the correlation between "green" and "political activism" is a challenge for the uptake of green burials in the UK and indeed, I met a pinstriped city banker or two as I moonlighted in London pubs and bars during fieldwork that illustrated this aspect. After telling Archie, 58, about my PhD, he guffawed:

> "It's never enough now, is it? Not even when your dead are you off the hook. You get hounded about not being allowed to go on holiday, or drive your car, about needing to offset your carbon emissions and switch all your bulbs – and then what your people have been doing for centuries is wrong, and your dead body needs to be put to use to heat a swimming pool?"[92]

All the while, disposal *is* political: to (re)frame it as such aligns with Lawson's commentary on the public character of care activities, whereby care ethics needs to call attention to ways in which neoliberal discourse and policy have "effectively privatised responsibility" (Lawson 2007). Placing the onus on individuals and specifically the nuclear family unit to enact "real" care or find its vendors sets it in the margins, discounting broader scales of implication in institutional failures or global crises. Following Puig de la Bellacasa's understanding of Latour, the death-aware death culture engages in a *dingpolitik* (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017,55-6) that designates the ways in which things – here, matters of dying and disposal - come to matter, can become "issues", and "matters of care" over matters of fact, and are treated accordingly. To make matters, "politics appears as a process of progressive inclusions into the cosmos of democratic society". Successively, "the machinery of the government tries to turn the problem of the public into a clearly articulated question of common good or common will" (*ibid,*46) – and often fails. In this conception, some things are "metabolised" or absorbed enough to stop being political, "entering the domain of daily routine". What the author abbreviates as making "MoC" is an intervention or problematisation of the neglect of caring relationalities in a given assemblage (*ibid*,56) – as in promoting different kinds of rituals around death. But how does one rouse care – as paying mind[93] – for care?

Looking back to Pajari's record of funeral industry journals, one finds a matter-of-fact statement of its public's motives for purchasing services: "As standards of living improve, the citizens' desire for comfort grows and they want to get through this often very unpleasant event as easily as possible" (Pajari 2014,67). Remarks relating to this comfort are presented in Parsons' work as he summarises multiple studies on the introduction of Chapels of Rest at undertakers' premises in 1930s Britain; the body could be removed from the house, aligning with the growing desire for privacy among the working classes and is suspected to have been "a relief" to most people. Regarding viewings in the home versus the parlour, Nicholson quotes funeral director William Dodgson on the change in living conditions in turn: "you try getting a coffin up seventeen storeys!" (Nicholson 1974 in Parsons 2018,72) If the funeral home "upset conventional boundaries between religious and profane, commerce and spirit, private and public" (Laderman 2003,24) in their consolidation, it was likely not an *upsetting* upset for many grieving households. As Parsons points out, most of the tasks carried out by funeral directors are unseen because "effectively, they are paying the funeral director to not be exposed to these functions" (Parsons 2018,271) – the dead were not straightforwardly "wrested" from their homes. Similarly, the removal of a body from a city is not reducible to waning regard or squeamishness around death; the growing duration between death and burial or vanishing mourning period may not

---

[92] He makes reference to headlines common in the early 2010s about UK councils' plans to use waste heat diverted from crematoria: see, for example https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-hereford-worcester-13372702

[93] Puig de la Bellacasa draws on philosopher John Dewey's theory of the mind to propose "mind is care": the relational character of thought (as "minding" or "heeding" in the original) is rendered as care. "But thinking and knowing are often not caring, or even mindful, nor is caring through knowing and thinking an unproblematic endeavour" (13).

be an indication of unwillingness to yield to the temporal demands of the dead and their environing grief, but a matter of how much time people can take off work. Despite talk of "revolution" and rebellion and anecdotal evidence about changing tastes, British funerals are still relatively safe in conventional directors' pockets: a Y*ouGov* survey carried out in 2014 revealed only 8 percent of those answering were likely to arrange a funeral themselves[94] and of the 73,500 funerals arranged by *Dignity PLC* that year, 92 percent of clients only approached one funeral director (*ibid*,270) – "shopping around" is not the done thing.
In Edward Fischer's work on wellbeing, he spends a chapter discussing middle-class German supermarket shoppers' reports of buying organic or free-range eggs, remarking on how large a percentage of participants explicitly links their purchase choice to social ideals. The crux of this aside is not simply to evaluate how consumers have absorbed certain environmentalist messages or their individual motives, but rather to recognise anthropology's role in reading and valuing what people say the good life "should look like" before building an understanding of wellbeing through its dialectic engagement in fieldwork (Fischer 2014, 4). Quoting Appadurai, cultural systems combine as norms, dispositions, practices and histories to frame the good (Appadurai 2013, 292) – but good living happens in the landscape of discernible ends to attain it, and agency is limited by available structures of opportunity. Fischer homes in on his shoppers' confrontation with the label: "nowhere is the effect on moral values on consumer choices so clear as with eggs" (Fischer 2014, 37), he suggests, given each legally carries a coded message of how the chickens were treated. Yet instead of guilt or shame over being led to bio-eggs, people he spoke to explained how good they felt; the eggs were better, and they were "good people" in a moral project they looked to enjoy participating in. A helpful note to bear in mind, of course, is that the shoppers were "among the world's most affluent" (40). With this and the paragraph above, I curtsey to Tronto's idea of care ethics being the "as well as possible" and try to dismantle the juxtaposition whereby industry and society are abstracted or depersonalised, or forever in a denial binary. I suggest that in making death part of wellbeing, the promise of good funerals makes constellations about where obligation and desirability meet in care that is "unfussed", but not disengaged – it takes time, just as an organic egg claims its premium - and is felt "beautiful" by virtue of this token. If indeed, "living up to the expectations of particular values […] gives meaning to much of what we do" (6) alongside alleviating concerns over environmental damage and funeral poverty, the death movement's moral rhetoric around disposal can meaning-make and effect structural change, as in historical reform examples covered here. In its less exemplary iterations death movement messaging has been accused of bashing those who resort to "conventional" burial[95] and romanticising "exotic" death practices with the help of anthropology (see chapter one). Further, it can adulate individualised capacity for care or heightened awareness – beautiful death the privy of beautiful people - as in an example from a self-help book (*Living your Death*) provided by Lofland:

> "The most beautiful people we have known are those who have known defeat, known suffering, known struggle, known loss, and have found their way out of the depths. These

---

[94] The NAFD (National Association of Funeral Directors) and Cruse Bereavement Care carried out the 2015 survey *Funerals Matter. How the British Public Views the Funeral Profession in 2016'* accessible at https://nafdeducation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Funerals_Matter._-_NAFD_Report_on_how_the_british_public_views_the_Funeral_Profession.pdf

[95] In 2018 a *Twitter* user was circulating a screenshot of Doughty calling a family "thoughtless" for using an online cremation service; an excerpt from her first book *Smoke Gets in Your Eyes* (2014) described parents that had "left their 9-year old's body at the hospital" and gone home to await a parcel of ashes in an unflattering light – those sharing the image suggested "new age directors" could bully or pressure families.

> persons have an appreciation, a sensitivity, and an understanding of life that fills them with compassion, gentleness, and a deep loving concern. Beautiful people do not just happen". (Lofland 2019,79 quoting a Jane Nichols, 1975, 96)

Beautiful funerals, similarly, do not just happen, and seldom mean the same thing for long: In his early anthropological work, Kroeber was struck by the irregularity of burial amongst Californian groups, remarking that there was not necessarily a relation between the intensity of emotion and its duration or representation in behaviour – he surmised disposal of the dead "falls into a class with fashions of clothing or etiquette than with folkways or intuitions" (Kroeber 1927, 314). He seems to undermine the class of fashion, however, by suggesting that disposals are relatively isolated from "the remainder of culture" and "from both the basic type of activities which mostly regulate themselves unconsciously, and from those which largely involve relations of person" (*ibid*,314-5). The treatment of dead bodies is undoubtedly about relations of persons, and even if these activities do not regulate themselves *un*consciously, they certainly do and have done so consciously, not merely in advocacy for natural burial or emission control at crematoriums, but in public discourse or "mattering" around the caring, authentic, and dignified.

In this chapter, I have outlined a history of British and North American undertaking with express attention paid to reform - from Victorian relocations of burial sites and reducing ostentation in the nineteenth century and anti-embalming critiques of the mid-twentieth, to "death aware", green, or de-differential ideals and their developing technologies most noted from the 2010s onward. I have sought to establish the postmodern or anti-material as porous analytic categories for defining current funerary cultures I study, avoiding the "mirror" by which funerals neatly represent a time, populace, or ideology. I begin to engage with aspirations found in an emphasis on interdependence, introducing the ways caring is made a desirable obligation, with appeal to beauty and satisfaction as well as community "return" and natural time - this will be developed in discussion on doula work and the haptic or sensuous. As in chapter three, I problematise stark divisions of exchange and sociality that exclude those already disenfranchised when predicating care on individual love and sacrifice, or communities that are not there.

Vignette: cardboard coffin

We had no live flowers at Funeral Day, but a cardboard coffin had been provided, strewn with colourful pieces of paper we could cut into shapes; decorating could be a way to "actually participate in a funeral" rather than simply watch and stand by. Unfortunately, we had run past 4pm and by the time the tables and chairs were rearranged to hoist the box somewhere accessible, most attendees were packing up to leave. My train was not for an hour, so I steeled myself and grabbed a few felt-tip pens and a glue stick; I folded some yellow paper flowers to give them some dimension on the lid and waited for someone to join me. Two women who had come together started work on the foot end of the coffin and talked amongst themselves for a moment: something about the traffic and a mutual acquaintance. It felt too small a surface to be working on together wordlessly and I tried to break the ice by sharing the scissors. I felt like a

child when they blinked in surprise and told me my flowers were “very clever!” and “what a good job!”

Figure 27 – Paper flowers atop a cardboard coffin lid

CHAPTER 5 – TOUCHING COMMUNITY

Joanne was sitting with the audience on the steps that separate the rows, crouching behind seatbacks and breathing heavily as a sole spotlight appeared on the otherwise darkened stage.

> "But… I'm not sure I want to go there. Couldn't I just stay here with you? I don't know what there is over there and I'm scared to go on my own. I don't think I'm ready yet. Oh please, please don't make me" –

Figure 28 – Flyer for *The Birth of Death* at Tara Theatre

She shouted at the theatre, as if imploring us to save her from this fate, stage fright masquerading as death anxiety, or vice versa. Her bright red dress was already stained with sweat as she argued with invisible voices that seem to tell her it is time, and that negotiation would not help. I was sitting in the second row at the Tara-Arts theatre in Earlsfield – it was another new venue and part of town for me, one that kept its promise of being a mere ten minutes from Waterloo. The *Dying Matters* Awareness Festival had seen me travel extensively in the span of two weeks, with Cambridge, Birmingham, Stratford-Upon-Avon and Manchester in my calendar, and fresh off the heels of seeing another play the previous night. Resultingly, I remember feeling tired on the 18th of May and dragging my feet about seeing Joanne's performance. It was called *The Birth of Death*, and it was to be performed by a doula trained in both delivering new-borns and the dying. The blurb on the website said something about imagining oneself with two bodies, and her bio was available on a website for a spiritualist yurt-village resort. Maybe it was a bit out there – not quite death awareness - given the performer also wrote and starred in a feminist solo romp entitled *Women Who Wank*, dressed as an enormous vulva?

I glanced at the elderly couple sitting to my right as Joanne began moaning loudly on stage, clutching her stomach and crotch in turn, spreading her legs as she sat down. "She's giving *birth*", the tightly permed lady stage-whispered to her partner as the noise of effort grew to

climax. I admit, I worried the play was being a bit too literal at first, but the evening proved exceptionally rewarding and impressive. Joanne's energy was explosive and bombastic through relentless physical action that heralded abruptly changing scenes, accompanied by a non-linear narration of the death of her mother, for whom she became a carer in her last weeks. She spoke in turn to tell a story, and in turn directly to death, which materialises as a moment of pitch blackness on the stage – she is off to meet and face death, hoping her torch has enough battery-life – and towards the end of the play, as thick canvas wound into a limp, heavy figure of a shrouded corpse.

The most memorable scenes proved to be those in which she describes her attempts to overcome the grief and its anticipation: "I was going to be super-daughter – I would cure my mother, I would stay strong, and I would single-handedly rescue her!" She flourished an imaginary cape as music befitting a cartoon hero played before running in circles with wide eyes and coolly strutting along like a runway model flaunting a medical bag to bass-heavy electronic beats. Later, she began to muse on the journey of the spirit away from earth, and how she was not ready to free it to travel. The spirit was represented by her mother's favourite song, one that kept on being summoned back onto earth, ringing through the speakers in short recurring bursts every time a different family member Joanne played did something to remember her. In the penultimate scene, she was tethered to wall of the stage, her entire body wound tightly in a wide, reddish ribbon. "How can I do anything when I'm here?"

These scenes were participatory, and I expect any given audience would markedly influence the flow of the staging, as she did not seem to filter feedback too rigorously. "Have you ever felt like you were going to die? Would someone please share their story?", she asked. "Oh yeah, one time when I was shagging this guy's wife and he walked in on us!", a woman in front of me cackled. Joanne did not look phased. Three others volunteered experiences of riding bicycles or walking into traffic in South-East Asia. Next, we were to describe an ideal death, and act it out on stage if at all possible: I expected a gentle death-bed scene, but one of the cyclists, Ian, proved an avid rock climber and performed falling from a great height, soaring through the air. What carried through in Joanne's questions was a willingness to humour participants' humour, paired with hinting at shared or promoted belief. "But where do you think the spirit goes?", she asked us, and nobody seemed too eager to ruin the moment by proposing there are no such things, given she had gone to the trouble of miming to a voiceover of an airline Tannoy-system that described planet earth as a layover. "But how can I start to let go?", she wept in her silky tangles. This engulfing grief was presented as unsustainable, as was the performance of musical chairs with a restless spirit that blared its song. "Well, you can't let go", someone to my left shrugged, but Joanne was not satisfied. "Go see a medium!" row five suggested. "Talk to someone!" said another. "Be grateful for the time you had with them!" With each response, she unwound her limbs further. When she asked me for advice, and I told her to not feel guilty about letting go; I think it was close enough to a good answer for her to drop the symbolic umbilical cord.

Raucous applause was to be accompanied by a group song – again, something I had just seen (chapter 6) – though this time the lyrics were not provided on a sheet: *You'll Never Walk Alone* was deemed, I suppose, one that everyone knows. Joanne told us we could all reconvene after a loo break, and I ordered a glass of wine at the box office before coming back inside. I was surprised to see most viewers had stayed on, and that we looked to be an even mix of men and women, with many in couples. Then I reminded myself that plays on Saturday nights are not unlikely choices for dates, and that I may have looked the odd one out, coming on my own. Did this physical theatre qualify as a death awareness event because Joanne had performed it

as part of the festival? It had, after all, been performed at the Brighton and Edinburgh Fringes just as it had been for BrumYODO; it was available to view at physical theatre festivals and at Embercombe, home to the abovementioned yurt retreats. Does content override intent in this case? My suspicion was that audience here was more to do with fortuitous timing or location and connection to the venue than a dedication to *Dying Matters* newsletters, supported by some of the audience members (including "shagging someone's wife", Saf) who went up to hug and congratulate Joanne on her efforts – one of her numerous fellow artists temporarily obscured my view with a flamboyant top hat with feathers tucked into its band.

As people settled back into seats abutting the stage, Joanne was joined by her director, Yael, who thanked us and welcomed feedback. One of the first appreciated themes was that of retaining or releasing, with somebody asking Joanne if she truly felt one could be freed, as in the scene with the ribbon or whether "it" (grief?) is "always underneath", in the "unconscious": "I suppose it's always there; then you wonder how much it should be there, or let go of, or held onto."

> An audience member raised her hand to contribute, and Joanne said there was no need to ask permission to speak. She went on to share an example of holding on being potentially beneficial and respectful, and not something to be "worked away" in relation to a friend who lost a daughter:
>
> "I mean, I'll send her a card on her birthday, but I don't think anybody else does. And actually, if I didn't think they [the parents] liked it I wouldn't do it, but I think they do like it, and it means a lot."

A woman in her thirties held the hand of the man next to her, and concurred:

> "A good friend of mine lost her baby, and we all do exactly that for her. And it's really important in all our lives, an acknowledgement to them.

Joanne nodded understandingly, and her eyebrows spell deep sympathy as she points out that for some mothers, the life – whether a born child, or a life miscarried earlier in gestation - may have been their only child, for whom such remembrance could "give them their moment of being a mother." Yet another woman chimed in:

> "What you're saying, it reminds me of my mother, whose sister died when they were in their early twenties. Joy, she died a pill death. This was in the sixties. Throughout my life, my mother's never been able to mention it without breaking down, and then becoming quite ashamed about being so upset. Then she'll remove herself. So little bits, you'd find out. You find out about things - like her visiting the grave every year, but never letting everyone else know she's doing it. It's only last year she's been able to talk about Joy. She's talking much more openly, and she's 75 now – it's taken her that long."

There were mournful nods as the audience leant in, though a hopeful tone emerged as one half of the older couple who had sat near me during the performance pointed there had been a "slow, but steady evolution" of a social climate that made art like Joanne's possible and might have helped Joy's sister speak in older age. "They even do these things called Death Cafés now; I've seen signs up for those. I've never been, but I suspect that's part of the change." I snapped into action when Joanne asked if anyone of us had attended and tried not to sound too positive or negative as I described the last few I had been to. I worried I had been speaking too long and made a segue to suggest that what was happening here tonight was similar. The feedback session was café-like in its preoccupation with encouraging talk, but the stories were

frankly more emotional and revealing of details: perhaps it was the wine in place of tea, the theatre over a meeting room, or the lack of convention marking formality in the timing, grouping, and directing involved at café visits. Participants asked questions of each other more directly, as when Saf asked Ian if he truly did not fear death as he alleged when miming his great fall on stage. When he reiterated that it did not worry him because "he wouldn't be around for it", she related it to her parents and gendered attitudes.

> S: "I talked to my dad a week ago, and I never knew him until I was 37 – I'm 48 now- and he's 87. And I asked him, because you know, his mobility's changing and he's approaching this stage, I said 'how do you feel about death?'. And he has no, I mean, he's two-dimensional, totally, like a piece of paper. Not my cup of tea, to be honest. But he has no spirit or third dimension *at all,* all mind and body, that's it. And he ironically has absolutely no fear of death whatsoever! Then my mum, who's spiritual and godly and magical and all that, three-dimensional to her core, is terrified of death! But she's the one who believes in god, while my dad who doesn't is just laissez-faire!"
>
> Saf suggested that she took after her mother, with many "great spiritual and existential journeys" under her belt, because she embraced ambiguity. "Men, I think, are more prone to try for rationality. They come up against something difficult and say how can I order this and reduce it to black and white. But maybe that's unfair to you?", she offered Ian.
>
> I: "We have to remember it's generational. Because if you're British, definitely with British people, we've got this stiff upper lip thing[96] that comes more so with men, because of, obviously, how we've traditionally been with sexes. But I feel that in my father and stepfather, that they have a mechanism where they can just [he clapped his hands as if cleaning them of dust] cut it off, shut it off. When I say ignorance is bliss, it's that they can compartmentalise it so much. I suppose I've experienced loss and death, but I still don't… I don't know. I think maybe I'm guilty of shutting off grief, too."

Yael stepped in to insist Ian was not guilty of anything; there was nothing to be guilty about, and different expressions of experience around death were not "good" or "bad", but Saf had another thought on the matter:

> "Yeah, no, you're guilty – because we're all guilty! But grief is right next to passion, and the greatest gift of love is grief: the more you love, the more you grieve. That's the first line of a novel, but I can't remember what it's called, now."

Women, walkers, friends

The first task encouraged by Joanne's play is the definition of (death) doula work, which incidentally sits neatly with the twinning of birth and death in her work's title and visual metaphor, as well as some of the audience feedback regarding maternity and babies. The dilemma of letting go and writing of cards to deceased children mentioned by two participants relates to my third chapter's themes of continuing bonds and writing as "tinkering" for memorial and materialising care towards others, while the idea of cultural shift or evolution in public fora relate to the denial-taboo thesis familiar at cafés and other awareness spaces, albeit

[96] As an amusing aside, the OED (Oxford English Dictionary) notes all the earliest uses of the expression- dating to 1815 – were in the United States.

with a thoughtful inversion; rather than "our attitude towards death" set in linear decline, it is presented as undoing traditional, more repressive Britishness or family hierarchy. As gendered "male" or "female" reactions to ambiguity and spirituality emerge in Saf and Ian's repartee, however, I return to Café Mortels founder Bernard Crettaz, and the interview given to Rinny Gremaud following his decision to end his café activity (2014, p.71). Herein, Crettaz proposes 90% of his guests were women, and that one of the discoveries of his café work was how because women preside over natality, there is for them an "intense physical rapport between life and death that men cannot know". He goes on to note that he had recently been invited to Quebec by a group of women who pioneered the creation of maternity homes ("houses of birth") forty years prior and were now opening their first palliative care homes ("houses of death"), claiming: "these women are true feminists: they believe in the original place of women, at the beginning and at the end of life". However essentialising these remarks, the proposition that birth and death are equivalent or that death, "originally" the remit of women's domestic duties was "colonised" by men and their industry is a frequent death awareness theme. After evaluating these claims, I engage more heavily in theoretical speculation to sketch an emergent haptic ritual register that blends valorisation of emotional expressivity and touch for its time-bound affective experience that parallels a split in caring about/caring for prevalent in care literature, introducing my "fathom" in line with Puig de la Bellacasa and time work. When my project began, literature on death doula work was limited: Fuzukawa and Kondo's 2017 piece for the *International Journal of Palliative Care*; Corporon's study on a doula programme implemented as part of a palliative care service in Dallas; psychic-medium Deborah Diamond's 2018 how-to guide for non-academic audiences entitled *Diary of a Death Doula: 25 Lessons the Dying Teach Us About the Afterlife.* Setting a search in this decade, however, publications become difficult to keep up with: outside academic theses (eg. (Tumber 2020) and palliative care or medical journals (the productive Rawlings et al. 2023, 2022a, 2022b, 2021a, 2021b, 2020, 2018; Lentz 2023, Alfano et. al 2023, Richards 2022, Yoong et. al 2022, Krawzych et al 2023, Krawzych and Rush 2020), there is a glut in death studies (in *Omega*, Hahn et al. 2023, Hahn and Ogle 2022, Garces-Foley 2022), religious and feminist work (Hull 2023, Lewis 2022, Westendorp and Gould 2021) and some interest in anthropology, too (Francis 2021, Dawdy and Kneese 2021; autoethnography from Incorvaia 2023, 2022). I refer readers with a more specific interest in intricacies of doula work to any of these specialised pieces and do not make an attempt to summarise their content beyond a provision of how death doula work is conventionally introduced.

Krawczyk and Rush attempt the first "detailed taxonomy" of the role based on interviews conducted in Australia, Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom. Here, EOLD (end of life doulas) are understood to be an important new form of community-based caregiving in the global North, or a rising profession (Krawczyk and Rush 2020) frequently considered under-studied in academia, even if increasingly well-known in pop culture and media (Incorvaia 2023)[97]. Rawlings and her co-authors are among those who hypothesise the EOLD role emerges as a result on overwhelming demand on carers or healthcare professionals, or bridges a gap that became apparent in my third chapter – namely that of good death understood as being with and cared for by intimate others who may not be available, or based in choice one may not be freely able (literally or figuratively) to make. More recently, *TIME* magazine proposed the once rare doula has been embraced en-masse due to the Covid-19

[97] Surprisingly, the media visibility is not discussed in relation to celebrity figures who have expressed interest in or have undertaken death doula training, including Nigella Lawson, Sinéad O'Connor, and Riley Keough (daughter of Priscilla Presley)

pandemic[98], and the first International End-of-Life Doula Symposium was held in April 2022 – the fact that this symposium was co-produced by EOLD and the University of Glasgow End of Life Studies programme aligns with my previous remarks on academic involvement in constituting "Western death". The tasks of EOLD are flexible, but the title is generally used of "lay people" – primarily women – who provide nonmedical support for those nearing death and those close to them. The practitioners interviewed by Krawczyk and Rush framed activity in acts of support, education, and empowerment and in practice, this could mean responsibility ranging from but not limited to: advance care planning, liaison with other health care workers, facilitation of legal paperwork, providing information about dying to "normalise" its process, listening, speaking, reading and vigil as companionship, tending to pets or changing sheets, organising or conducting funerals and ritual, and body care for the dying, and occasionally, the postmortem body. The term "doula" itself comes from a Greek word for a female slave or servant, popularised by the natural or home birth movement of the 1970s in reference to expert assistants without medical training; as such, it is contentious to some practitioners. Of the 21 interviewed by Krawczyk and Rush, approximately half used EOLD of themselves: other titles presented included death doula, death midwife, death carer, end-of-life consultant/guide/coach/educator, death walker, soul midwife (midwife is a controlled term in Canada, making this term obsolete there), thanadoula, and circle of life practitioner.

EOLD work is explicitly linked to death positivity or awareness advocacy by Incorvaia, who calls it a manifestation of death positivity (2023, 639). American doulas often feature on the *Order* videos and blogs, and in the UK doulas frequently organise Death Cafés and awareness week events; the Finsbury Park café, for example, was associated with the organisation *Living Well Dying Well* (LWDW), that trained its facilitator. The formalisation of these roles and training cohorts is recent: the first EOLD training I am aware of was developed in 2010 by Dr Hermione Elliott, LWDW founder, with a background in nursing, midwifery, counselling, and palliative care. Elliott's work leading up to LWDW is expressly in line with death awareness content, as the organisation's website describes her group's origins in a series of public workshops between 2007 and 2009: at events called *Death Matters* and *What is a Good Death*? (indeed, the same title used by the Cambridge group over a decade later, see chapter 3) she is said to have noticed a need to "encourage people to consider death and dying an inevitable part of life, and an important subject for everyone"[99]. Participants are described as having lost confidence or skills to support friends and family in death, while "others expressed regret at the lack of opportunity to encounter it in a natural and normal way, as one of life's most profound events." The tension between normal and profound - death both demystified and re-enchanted – is typical of death awareness, as is the simultaneous de- and re-professionalising; in doula training, LWDW suggests the person trained is one who "holds the wisdom" - presumably, their wisdom corresponding to a public's "lost" confidence and skill. The LWDW course promotes itself as the *only certificated* EOLD training in the UK, and *End of Life Doula UK* was established as a membership association for those they had taught. This certification is awarded by the Crossfields Institute, a charity promoting "holistic, integrative education" for "vision-based organisations" and is regulated in turn by Ofqual (the Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation). Groups offering training and title outside this specific certification are, of course, plentiful and international.

Rawlings et. al. focus largely on death doula training organisations' views and promotion in relation to business models and how their trainees' roles are integrated into other existing models of care: their survey covers the anglophone countries mentioned in Krawczyk and

---

[98] https://time.com/6128469/death-doulas-covid-19-pandemic/ Chan, M (2022)
[99] https://lwdwtraining.uk/about/our-story/

Rush, adding New Zealand and Sweden to the list (2023). *The International End-of-Life Doula Association* (INELDA) was formed in the United States in 2015 but reads to me a misnomer – an individual training provider, rather than a broader umbrella association for doulas, its website houses a directory for INELDA-certified women based in Czechia, Germany, Ireland, Italy and Japan alongside the most active EOLD countries above. Numbers of doulas working globally are unknown, as Rawlings et. al. suggest it is "more likely" doula work is a part-time occupation, and the role is unregistered, without standardised education or criteria: their respondents reported great variety in length and type of training, with 63% saying they did not think all doulas received comparable instruction (2022, 16). Some programmes are entirely virtual, as a selection provided by LWDW, INELDA, *The Conscious Dying Institute*, or the Welsh *Soul Companions* – accredited by the *Institute of Training and Occupational Learning*, ITOL. Some appear free of charge, including the trademarked *CareDoula®* programme based in the United States, which looks to match LWDW in its 2010 start date; the web domain for this free course has expired, however, making the cheapest option on the first page generated by search engine a *Udemy* class for £15. The founder of *CareDoula,* Deanna Flores Cochran, went on to co-found a *National End-of-Life Doula Alliance* (NEDA) in 2017 and serve as chair of the *End-of-Life Doula Advisory Council* (no acronym of its own, but within the *National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization* or NHPCO) for two years.

It remains unclear to a casual shopper or would-be doula how in-house proficiency assessments, or "micro-credentialing" titles compare. The NEDA information page does accede that anyone can call themself a doula, but for consumer comfort, they have established guidelines for standards of practice and code of ethical conduct, as well as "a proficiency assessment process" test: this 90-minute multiple choice exam online can grant either a NEDA EOL badge to feature on your profile, or an After Death Care Educator (ADCE) badge – given a $115 test fee, and prior paid registration.[100] The majority of course programmes are still in-person retreats: LWDW breaks up ten sessions into either a five-day on-site programme or a blended three days on-site with four classes online for those not interested in a package of ten three-hour Zoom blocks, and charges £750 for foundations, and a further four diploma courses (consisting of 8 classes) or "modules" at £560 each, with £75 fees for missed classes. International retreats are held in Spain, South Africa, and Ireland by *Sacred Circle Training Co*., while *Doorway into Light* "nourishes life" as their trainee cohort tends to a "garden farm eco retreat" in sunny Maui over their course visit. Some organisations place costs behind hoops, such as needing to write a course application, but available figures suggest £1000 to £3000 for certification is standard: five-day stays can, however, reach $6000 as for the *Going with Grace* programme featured on Caitlin Doughty's channel. Outside of speaking to the "privileged, white, middle-class" profile associated with death awareness (p. 13, 81), the expertise involved in doula-making should not be framed as decommodifed, even when services offered are free.

Though LWDW notes that some doulas may offer services on a volunteer basis and in the United States, some align with charities such as the *No One Dies Alone* programme[101], when doulas are self-employed individuals who may charge by the hour or in flat rates and spend months or mere days with a client, pricing services is highly variable and necessitates consult and enquiry. In Rawlings et. al's survey of 13 training organisations, six representatives rejected both standardisation and volunteering outright as devaluing the effort or specialist knowledge involved, and posited that practitioners risked making themselves or their field "worthless", exploited, or "not taken seriously" if working pro bono (2023, 6); an unnamed Canadian

---

[100] https://www.nedalliance.org/proficiency-assessment.html

[101] Begun in the United States in 2001, it was founded by nurse Sandra Clarke, citing her unfortunate inability to fulfil a patient's request to be with him as he died.

responder suggested "compassionate, gendered care" is often detrimentally designated to the volunteer sector, raising a fairly problematised recognition of poor compensation for "feminised" work. Even if doulas do not seek compensation, their (para)professional expertise is inextricably linked to training directors' interests, as well as those of environing families and infrastructures when their proliferation is treated as potentially alleviating medical services' end-of-life care quotient (Howard 2022).

Curiously, given general EOLD enthusiasm in awareness circles now, I remember conversation on the justifiability of charging for doula services in 2017 and 2018: on the /*deathpositive* subreddit, for example, an anonymous young woman expressed her interest in the role and was cautioned against such "distasteful" work.[102] Responses suggested:

> "[...] it is very easy to take advantage of those grieving and in pain, and for every one person with truly good intentions, there are 10 waiting to scavenge on human frailty [...] the pursuit is something that brings fulfilment and is worth more than financial gain. If you must make money while helping people grieve, consider a more legitimate route like hospice care or working in funeral services. Another route would be a certified grief counsellor."
>
> "Charging for this would be unethical. You have no training in psychology and can potentially do more damage than good [...]. The financial burden leading up to and after the time of death is already exorbitant, charging for this service (especially without any degree) is just wrong."

The exploitative death professional stereotyped in chapter four is echoed in a concern for "scavenging" but seems to seek legitimation in the authority of the very institutions whose understandings of mortality doula ideals are thought to challenge; it is pertinent to ask what doulas are selling in lieu of psychological counselling. The nonmedical or "naturalised" view is exemplified on the INELDA homepage, where it is stressed that "dying isn't a medical event. It is a human one". The call to distance doula work from medical or clinical intervention and assessment was explicit in the two doula programmes attended by Incorvaia: if trainees had existing professional licensure in other fields such as nursing and counselling, they were encouraged to "not commingle those two things". Of the doulas listed in the LWDW directory, many use a term favoured by founder Hermione Elliott, the *amicus mortis* or friend in death – friend at the end yields many more doula search results online, suggesting that rather than guidance or expertise, "human" companionship and constancy is at the heart of their practice. When I had the opportunity to ask Erin, a 23 year-old hoping to become a doula at a Death Café about the training she was applying for (p.91) I dared ask about how it aligned with her belief that matters of death should, or could not be taught by institutions, but were questions of human nature.

> "I guess what I say to that - and I don't need to tell an anthropologist this - is that yes, our connection to each other and our need for friendship and ritual is innate, and you don't need training to be a friend. But you can learn to be a better friend to a specific kind of person by learning what's happening to them, and what needs to be done."

[102] Less surprising was that on subreddits for morticians - who are caricatured as gatekeeping and undermining any who would challenge their professional status – there has been more explicit talk of doulas being "money grubbing charlatans", holding their qualifications aloft in turn.

The friction between friendship, service and disinterest is piqued interestingly by one of the organisational responses, in Rawlings et al., where the Swedish representative suggested a nominal fee of "even one dollar" could serve in situations where care is volunteered, as a kind of protection: to "draw up a contract" by exchange can help either party "get out" of this relationship if desired (2023, 6).

Most of the doula-related publications listed in the opening of this subheading include participants' appeal to "reclaiming" death or its dying trajectory as community tradition – usually citing Rundblad's 1995 examination of women's historical, pre-market duties in caring for the dead in the United States. This article, based on mid-18th to early 20th century diaries, memoirs, correspondences, and early funeral trade publications is likely the paraphrased foundation for many death-aware blog posts' claims or comment sections, or the remarks made by female independent undertakers in my previous chapter regarding men "taking over": Rundblad does write that caring tasks related to the dead were "wrested from" women (1995). In 2015, the ex-executive director of the *Order* (and Facebook group "Den Mother") Sarah Chavez co-founded the site Death & the Maiden[103], with a specific feminist focus and later a suggestion that "death work and death activism in all its forms is a feminist act"[104]. Caitlin Doughty is cited on Ernest Becker's foundation blog augmenting and softening this proposal slightly, as though it [death work] is not an inherently feminist act, "the historical context of death care in the United States makes it one. Men took death from women."[105] How and to what extent this applies to the United Kingdom aside, it is striking that even in studies that recognise nearly solely female participation in doula training, gender seldom invites attention: only Francis, Westendorp and Gould set their focus on gender and occupational legitimacy in caring service roles. More surprising – even eerie - to me, however, was that in discovering Westendorp and Gould's article in the journal *Religion* halfway through writing this chapter, I found the authors opened discussion with the very same 2019 Bath DDD conference argument I framed my fourth chapter with.

Terming the death positive or awareness umbrella as a varied socio-spiritual New Death Movement (also relying on movement content online) Westendorp and Gould picked up on an audience comment I missed when recounting the strong reaction to *Dignity* representative Cox's presentation: "Will you recognise that it is the patriarchal take-over of the funeral industry that has destroyed our culture's relationship to death and created these problems?", asked doula or death walker Zenith Virago (Westendorp and Gould 2021, 1). Whilst this question does not differ greatly from others decrying the male or patriarchal I mentioned[106] (p. 133), it does well to introduce Virago - an Australian death educator and celebrant who calls herself a "death walker", or someone who "walks with people through dying", and founded the *Natural Death Centre* in Byron Bay. The authors state Virago is an internationally renowned New Death Movement figure and go on to describe proceedings at one of her Death Walking trainings. My familiarity with Zenith was limited – outside of her Ted talks or *Zen and the Art*

[103] Time of inception is hazy, with no explicit founding date and some results for the page name in early 2014; I go by the launch of the blog in 2015. Chavez's partner here was Dr Lucy Coleman Talbot, who was at the time completing a PhD at the University of Winchester on Crossbones Graveyard in Southwark, London (2022) and now serves as a visiting fellow at the University of Bath's Centre for Death & Society (CDAS); I underline these connections, as ever, to stress death positivity's effect on death studies and vice versa.
[104] https://deadmaidens.com/2016/08/15/death-the-maidens-why-women-are-working-with-death/ Chavez, S. (2016)
[105] https://ernestbecker.org/this-mortal-life/feminism/caitlin-doughty/
[106] Indeed, it may be an amalgamation of what I recorded: the authors point out "this is paraphrased from the memory of author two (Gould), who was in the audience at the event. Verification of the exact wording has proved impossible; however, the author has confirmed this general sense with three other attendees" (14).

of Dying film– to a presentation she gave at the conference on the day after the ill-fated Dignity plenary, that left another tension floating in the air. With her flowing white linen shirt, rustic turquoise stone jewellery, deep tan and broad, sun-bleached smile, Virago stood out after a British funeral celebrant's more critical presentation on the "tyranny of choice" contemporary consumers faced surrounding death. Her angle was quickly established in the chosen title: *Why a good ceremony is pivotal as the beginning of healing.*

These good ceremonies depicted in a PowerPoint of photographs and Papyrus-font were not only those that honour and celebrate the dead, but "allow people to walk away with wisdom gifts" and ultimately, granted families their healing: ceremony is a step to "much healthier bereavement", because it "turned grief back into love, its original form". Outside usual remarks on death as nature and cyclicity and death as sacred birth-right, the stress that "dying well is one of our greatest gifts to those we love and leave behind" is presented in the depth, "opportunity to be transformed", or authenticity that those willing to make (pay for?) "truthful and beautiful" ceremony can achieve. This contrasted somewhat with her earlier remarks about how because death is "an internal experience", the circumstances or external dressings were irrelevant: "if you've got your shit together on the inside, it doesn't matter – if you have that inside, you can die anywhere, on the side of the road in two minutes, and that will support your family and friends." She went on to suggest that if she died, her friends and family would find it "impossible" to grieve. Backup for this assessment is provided in reference to the Dalai Lama; Virago states that when she conversed with his holiness, he agreed it was nearly impossible to be very sad if a person lived a good life. The media, the professionals, "the big industry" of funerals, she elaborates, is "funnelling everyone into that grief funnel, as if that's the natural response." It is difficult to tell meaningful ceremonial crafting entails, as Virago mentions her training includes "at least 38 purposes" for the organising celebrant, and she distances herself from ritual: "ceremony is *not* ritual – it's rite of passage, with the well-known three elements of separation, challenge, and return". The ghost of Victor Turner whispers something as a woman in the front row mustered up the courage to ask a question, after much charitable "maybe I heard you wrong", "please correct me if this isn't what you meant", or "maybe I'm just confused":

> "You said that a good life or a life well lived lead to no grieving. And to me… I was um, quite shocked and upset? Like work we've heard here on BLM: a young person, dying as a result of street crime, that- "

Virago cut her off and backpedalled, suggesting these were more political cases, and some deaths do invite grief, anger, or sadness; that she was not trying to "make everything nice". The impression of resolution, health and enlightenment for sale remained difficult for me to shake after one of the other celebrants in the audience asked about rates, suggesting UK celebrants working for eight or nine pounds an hour might find it difficult to implement all the "walking with" guidance hundreds of hourly dollars afforded our speaker. "But nobody asks me what my rates are now, that's the change we've seen - because they know what I have to contribute is the most important thing that can happen", she responded. The two primary contributions that emerge are, in fact, elicitations of participants' inner transformation – not only the dying who have "sorted out" internal experience - but the bereaved who are tasked with writing obituaries for the dead themselves as key to processing in each ceremony and encouraged to stay in the presence of the body. Virago favours open caskets and viewing, as well as supplying cooling plates or other equipment that can enable the bereaved to keep the dead body at home for up to five days, as "those days with a dead body is the equivalent of ten years of therapy". Healing speech act and writing as ritual (even if this term is not favoured)

was discussed in chapters two and three, but the championed materiality of the body is a key theme left to explore here, in new death movement work.

Affected wellbeing

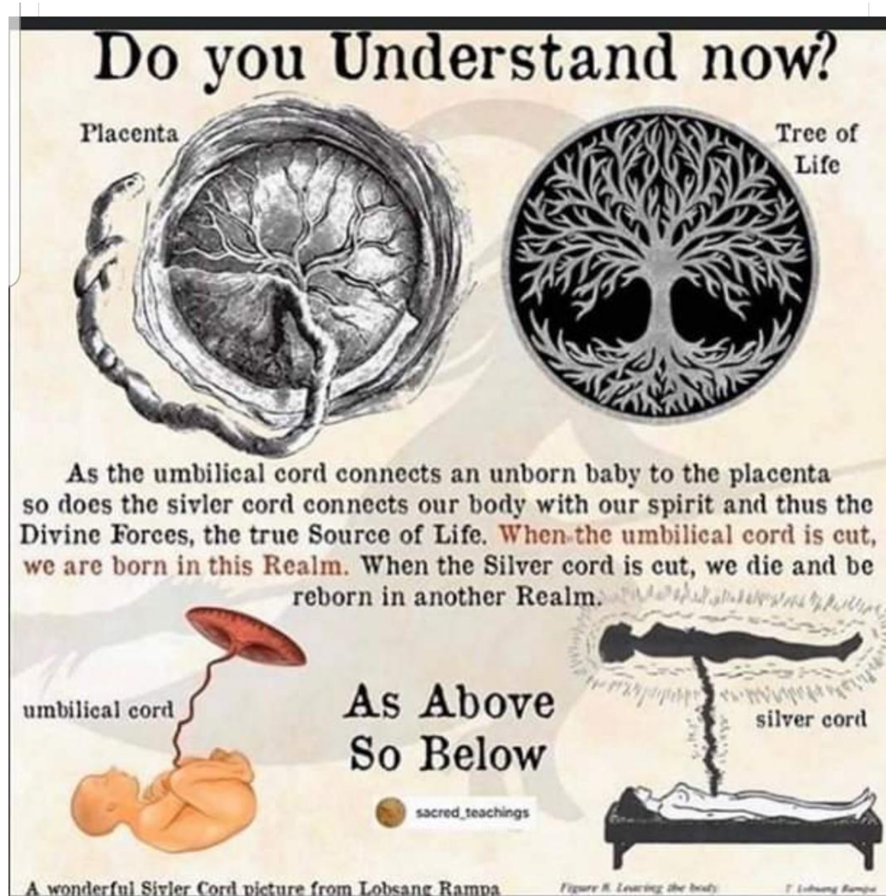


Figure 29 – An image likening death and birth via allusion to an umbilical cord or spiritual rebirth, circulated in the *Deathling Den* in 2021.

The embodied association of femininity to death linked in birth (as by Crettaz) is symbolically enforced in suggestions that in originating life, women bring death into the world – but more historically grounded by Rundblad, who points out that given the risk associated with pregnancy and labour, women were more likely to have seen or experienced death. Joanne's performance was granted a corresponding poignancy later, as we spoke about relationships in the back of a van as Saf offered to drive us back into the city once the trains stopped running; she rejoiced in a recent reconciliation with her husband after a period of insecurity but laughed bitterly at her "fool's life". Joanne calls herself a fool in the tradition of the Nomadic Academy for Fools she attended: the type of performer moulded in its practice is described as "an elusive part of self" that challenges taboos that inhibit self and reflects or improvises fearlessly in their promotional material[107]. On this ride, however, she hinted at the irony of living with her mother's presence in the play and birth/death doula work that embraced life at

[107] https://nomadicacademy.org/about/

its beginning and end when she could not "live it all". I understood this better once she began posting on her public social media profiles about fertility. Screenshots from calendars and cycle-tracking apps lamented "another bleed", and the inchoate grief of imagined life or eggs lost at unsuccessful IVF. She pointed out how funny her "obsession" with birth was in light of all this, posting self-portraits painted with menstrual blood, a pigment she suggested was "original" in the existential predicate the shedding lining made tangible: "we all share this relationship with the mystery". She went on to host online blood painting ceremonies and continues with treatment, and her profiles contended that art saved her life and continues to do so, whether through painting, sharing poetry, or crafting clitoris-shaped festive ornaments ("cliteltoe") for sex positivity and against FGM.

Leaving birth-death and cyclicity of nature or blood to stand in as sufficiently prefacing women's material "original" involvement is a missed opportunity in light of the parallels between birth and death doula work: beyond mentioning they use the same Greek word, I have not met doulas who see similarity between the home birth movement and the DIY of death awareness, both coming to the fore in the 1960s and 70s. Philip Olson underlines the analogous social and political position of these movements in their educated middle-class female voices' appeal to freedom from state-sanctioned medical or funerary professions as a matter of custody and authority: "while doctors appealed to the authority of medical science to justify their jurisdiction […] funeral directors and embalmers have cited public health as validation for their professional custody of the corpse" (Olson 2018, 197). Though the assignation of corpse care to women is not universal - Olson points out that Hindu women are traditionally not allowed to touch dead bodies, and that in Cantonese societies, corpse handlers are male – in the United States and United Kingdom the industrial shift is arguably associated with war or mass death, or more cynically in the words of two anonymised conference commentators, "when they realised there was a lot of money in it". As with the American civil war embalmers (p.147), Howarth writes that until World War II, women were commonly responsible for laying-out in Britain (Howarth 1996, 56). Trompette and Lemonier in turn suggest that in France, undertakers did not substantially minimise the caretaking roles of nuns, nurses and midwives until the local professionalisation of embalmers in the 1960s (Olson 2018, 196). Of course, this timeline can be taken much further: Binski suggests that women were "gradually phased out" in medieval European contexts, too, as the largely male-dominated Church was able to take over the practices", formerly carried out by family or laity (Binski 1996).

In a setting where men "take" death once the corpse is reconfigured as "contaminating" and polluting – to be neutralised in professional or scientific handling – or too emotionally or psychically confronting for stereotyped feminine nature (Rundblad 1995, 174) the insistence on body care can indeed be thought empowering, and result in a promoting participation that grounds touch and witness. Nevertheless, women's past death work should be understood as informed and enforced in past cultural norms and expectations on female "nature" in turn: their assumed greater intuition, emotionality, and nurturing drives (Olson 2018, 210, Francis 20) as well as religious understandings of their greater piety or devotion. Rawlings et al. acknowledge that family care-giving responsibilities fall disproportionately on women (2019, 82), and as such their proposal that doulas may fulfil roles of "eldest daughters" in their absence scarcely disrupts this dynamic; examining care and ageing, Buch stresses that orientalism and nostalgia veil arrangements that depended on gender socialisation and coercion "in previous eras, as now" (Buch 2015, 278). The call to reclaim position by the dead for and by women may indeed stem from the fact that they *are already* largely more closely aligned: in the *Den* Facebook group, for example, when a male user asked where all the "other men were", a commentor suggested the demographic is predominantly female because women

provided this care anyway: not only were they “more likely raised with caretaking as a priority”, but potentially drawn to the movement following “disappointing” past experiences with deaths in the family they oversaw. Professionally, of the 622 consultants in palliative medicine considered in the UK RCP census, 147 were male and 475 were female, and of 212 palliative medicine StRs (Specialty Trainee Registrars) considered, 85% were female (compared to 51% female presence in all specialties combined) and a 2021 census suggests 59% of unpaid carers are women[108]. A further note on the femininity of the online awareness space comes from a user who suggested the female leadership and spokespersons of death positivity beget feminine participation – “men are less likely to value women’s work, so they don’t want to engage with content made by women”, which a third poster extended to gendered interest in charitable causes and crowdfunding activism in general.

Pruitt’s study on the way essentialised traits are reappropriated and reinforced by women in the United States entering the funeral industry in “a paradox of participation” – justifying their role by that which temporarily acted as barrier – is interesting in this regard. One participant described funeral directing as “very maternal [...] something a man will never feel” (Pruitt 2018, 152), where another believed women were more suited because they were more attentive to the appearance of the body and emotions of the bereaved; men were not as emotionally forthcoming. Some darker viral iterations on male and female aptitude emerged online in March 2023, when American author Roxane Gay tweeted to imply she knew morgues or mortuaries were averse to hiring male technicians due to concern over necrophilia. Though the post was removed (and it is unclear whether it was the author or platform that chose to do so), over 22 million viewers have watched a handful of TikTok videos featuring an image of the Tweet, under the suggested topic tag “why morgues prefer women”[109]

One of the many responses to Gay expresses doubts about such a policy; the commentor said she funerals and had not heard such rumours, but suggested that if even men were not outright violent or violating:

> “We’ve seen evidence that people have better outcomes when they have female doctors. We’ve seen that men are hundreds of times more likely to leave their dying spouses. In a situation where you need someone taking care of you, I don’t blame anyone for choosing a woman whenever they can.”

Articles written for popular media outlets discussing the increasing presence of women in the death sphere that note how United States mortuary programmes are now made up of mostly female attendees tend to resort to stereotype in their interviewees’ accounts, too. New England funeral director Kim Perry, for example, proposes that women are not only more nurturing, they “understand the tremendous importance of details like having exactly the right flower arrangements”. For Perry, the $16-billion-a-year industry is “about relationships”, and event planning which women are “great at”[110]. Similar testimony comes from the website of a British funeral home, whose 2022 Women’s Day post (from a female employee, ironically about breaking biases) suggests women are true multitaskers: “inviting people, feeding them, picking those perfect photographs [...] these are all things which women are often just better at.” The unnamed author goes on to suggest men are fragile because of emotional retention;

[108] https://apmonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/palliative-medicine-workforce-report-2019-2.pdf, Census note via Carers UK https://www.carersuk.org/policy-and-research/key-facts-and-figures/

[109] The app’s view-counts are increasingly difficult to track; unlike on YouTube, usually only the number of times a post has been liked or shared is visible. The most popular clip on this topic by user @nimay.ndolo has around half a million likes.

[110] https://fortune.com/2015/08/20/funeral-directors-women/ Fischer, A. (2015)

because they are “not in touch” with their emotions, they could find it “hard to get involved with the detail of a funeral.” Mourning is about family, she suggests, which often have a “strong woman at their heart”[111]. Instead of debating how men or women “do death wrong”, work must be conducted in an understanding that the “right” product of good death service provided largely pertains to expectations for emotional, spiritual, relational or psychological fulfilment or wellbeing - as developed in a complex, gendered network.

Roxane gay morgue

3.2M views

Discover videos related to Roxane gay morgue on TikTok.

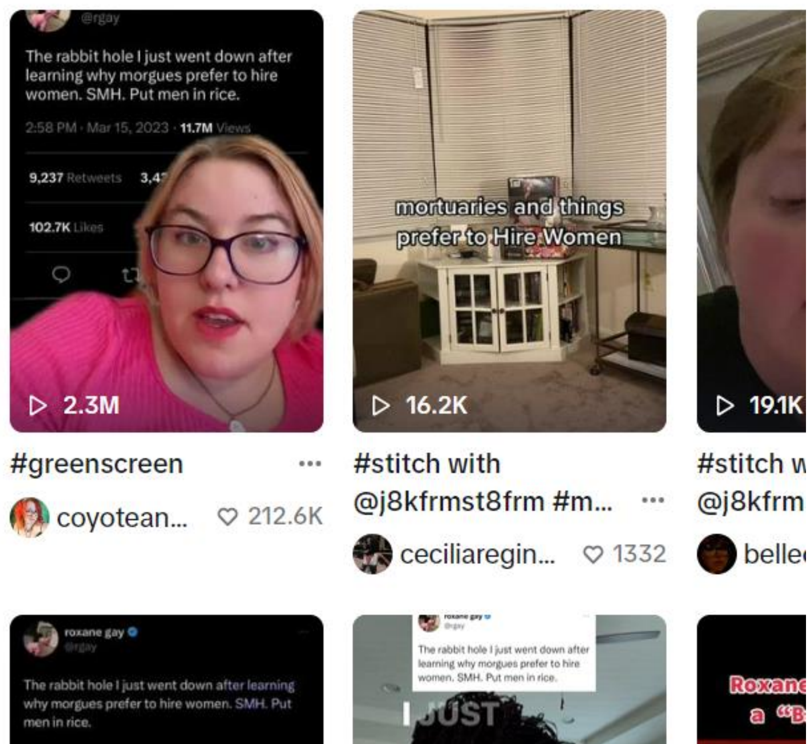


Figure 30 – A screenshot example generated via TikTok in September 2023 under the search term ‘Roxane Gay Morgue’. ‘Morgues prefer women’ yields three times as many views, but this image is chosen for its inclusion of Gay’s original tweet (upper left) dated March 2023. Though the tweet is deleted, and stills are unavailable, it circulates freely in video formats.

Hazen notes the dis- and re-empowering qualities of care provision in the home birth movement, as though scholars present the shift from home to hospital in childbirth as male effort to occupy domain (Hazen 2017, 557), early 20th century birth activism in women’s groups tended to stake claim or seek access to hospitals for both the safety and comfort of mothers. Rather than suggesting mothers were tricked to want what they never needed, the home as site of control over one’s own body defies simplification: one’s empowering house may be a site of patriarchal control or evidence poor access to medical care for another; the hospital birth may enable power over pain, but transfer power to clinical teams. Outside of shared concerns for choice and pain or the opposition between homeyness and modern biomedicine (“childbirth is not a disease” parallel to “dying is not a medical event, p.172”) the good death overlaps enticingly in birth activists’ rhetoric when supposed enriching, transformative or

[111]https://www.integrityfuneralcare.co.uk/women-and-death-a-funeral-directors-perspective-for-international-womens-day (2022)

aware experience is sullied by a technology of mediation. Davis-Floyd describes a dinner party for birth activists in Seattle, where a doula raised a glass for "all the women who don't know [better]": the participants in her work express sadness and pity for mothers who "miss out on birth" (Davis-Floyd 2005, 37) because they did not "understand" to ask for midwives instead of doctors. The experience to be lived in or *missed* is reminiscent of Lofland's critique of the "happy death" rendering death something to "get off on" (Lofland 2019, 92) and is not without judgement, as in Hazen's quote from a home birther: "When people are in the hospital, the idea that the epidural is available around the corner [...] I don't want to say it's an 'easy out' because that sounds shaming..." (Hazen 2017, 561). The process of birthing becomes nearly as significant as its outcome when the risk in hospital care is defined as "the potential threat to the mother-child bond associated with excessive technological intervention" (Buitendijk 2011 in *ibid*, 557). The direct skin-to-skin contact between mother and infant recommended immediately following birth put me in mind of the "good death" images featured in chapter three, where cold "wires and tubes" are antithetical to held hands and family cuddles (see eg. p. 105 for Mannix 2017, and figs.18 and 31), as well as Outi Hakola's work on advertising for palliative care facilities.

Outi Hakola, in an examination of 104 short advertisement spots for hospices based in 43 states of the United States, relates the audiovisual register of these video clips to affective capitalism and Illouz's concept of "emodities", or commodifaction of emotional life. A typical effect she observes is the inversion of negative impressions or feelings associated with dying to positives of good, dignified living until the end, and a promise of support and comfort. Rather than the material evoking hopes and desires in viewers (as generally posited in work on affect in advertising), however, Hakola offers nuance in noting the negative feeling becomes its powerful resource, efficiently creating a need, anxiety or problem that is not only desirable to solve, but necessary to rectify (Hakola 2018, 46). The videos stress the holistic physical, psychological, spiritual, and social service provided by hospices, but in this study, care is not "the product", but the instrument by which the opportunity for experiencing good death is made available to guests: the author categorises 29 of the spots under "stories of salvation" (interestingly, only 4 instances of patient narration appear across all advertisements reviewed – the "rescue" is more frequently that of the guilty or burdened family member). The mobilisation of negative feeling is similarly present when doula educators like Virago suggest opting out of transformative ceremony leaves the bereaved "unhealthy", bereft of the most "important gift", or destined to a grief that is "almost impossible" in good execution (p.174). The intricacies of affective capitalist scholarship are far too rich to assess with due attention in this text, but in a nod to Illouz and Berlant, I propose good death services are as culturally predictable as they are countercultural or rebellious.

In Illouz's sociohistorical discussion, modern capitalism develops alongside a specific emotive culture or style, and the two mutually shape each other: claims to conditions for emotional or personal fulfilment should not be assumed to be those which modern actors "naturally" demand but are consistent with a general logic of capitalism. The transformation of criteria for evaluation of work or workplace to terms of emotional satisfaction, management or expressiveness afforded are part of the centrality of emotions to general economic processes (Karppi et al. 2016, 5), and in emodity, emotions are not just motives for consumption or assigned meanings for commodities, but *are* the very thing purchased or manufactured (Illouz 2019, 11). A 20th century Western European and North American selfhood, in this reading - following the rise of industry and transformations of the public, private, and role of family – is one endowed with interiority to express, manage and achieve (*ibid*, 15), and whose "truth" or core is emotionally or psychologically defined. The parallel to death studies is present in

Walter's classic *Revival of Death*, wherein a previously religiously oriented goal for death ritual (eg. intercessory prayer, deliverance from damnation) transforms in the last century: "a spiritual journey became a physical one, which in turn is becoming emotional" (Walter 1994, 56). The expressivist ideal underlined in death revival, he writes, is not so much a "permission" to express emotions than a prescription of less ambiguous sets of legitimate emotional reactions, allied with appeals to natural death against "artificial" settings that alienate or dehumanise (de-emotionalise?). If prevalent Western cultural templates for ideas of selfhood are as in Illouz's work:

1) emotional liberation and authenticity
2) intimacy, friendship, expressivity and
3) emotional self-knowledge, self-control and improvement conductive to current understandings of mental health,

and goods produced in correspondence are products for:
a) emotional experience or mood
b) relational emotion and
c) emotional transformation of the self,

the good death concept ("lived", truthful, "accepted"), friendship relation of doulas (and association of good dying with caring companionship), and "gift" of healing ceremony are not difficult to map here (Illouz 2019, 17).

Femininity, in turn, takes centre stage in Berlant's *Female Complaint,* whereby a "mass-cultural intimate public" of American women is solicited in popular therapeutic discourses and self-help commodities that impel the expression or confession of intimate thoughts on greater platforms, hinging on "need" for both revelatory and intimate conversations. This collectivity is loosely organised, but based on an attachment that supposes there is "a common emotional world available to those individuals who have been marked by the historical burden" (Berlant 2008, 10). Critiques of current aesthetic, emotive or spiritual moral schema include suggestions that a neoliberal "retreat into the fortress of the self" (Cabanas and Illouz 2019, 64) can be narcissistic and depoliticised, with self-help undermining collective struggle, or "strong feeling" serving as refuge from conditions of a life, or a world at large: is loss or grief a personal, psychological matter, or more social and economic? Yet Illouz provides a caveat to suggestions that the therapeutic ethos is anti-institutional in some way: on the contrary, it has enormous cachet because "it has been enacted within and through the main institutions of modernity", and is a quintessentially modern, powerful institutionalisation of the self (Illouz 2008, 173). She goes on to cite Berlant in approbation:

> "We will see women generate an affective and intimate public sphere that seeks to harness the power of emotion to change what is structural in the world. We will see a culture of 'true feeling' emerge that sanctifies suffering as a relay to universality in a way that includes women in the universal while attaching the universal more fully to a generally lived experience; we will see commodities help to distribute and to enable the building of this intimate public; [...] we will ask how transformed subjectivity can make and change worlds" (Berlant 2008, 12).

The transformation of death by its pathway to true feeling and the resultant advocacy or care in the hands of women is an interesting expansion on this theory of a public. In Hakola's materials, for example, there is a similar divide of male and female speakers in testimony from staff and patients, yet she finds 76% of loved ones or family members contributing to be

women speaking of care provided to their fathers, husbands, or brothers. The emphasis on how the care *felt* and how it comforted them and their loved ones suggests not only that caring remains more feminised than the professional or practical angles manifest in male staff accounts, but joins a proposal that the affective power of care is about authenticity. "Sometimes it is really rough, but I get through it by knowing that I have helped them [...] see, you have made me cry", says an Oklahoman hospice worker, whose tears are taken as evidence of "true" care motivating or emerging in care work (Hakola 2018, 57). I might hypothesise these accounts further provide assurance that this is "calling" for staff, or that in soliciting their care one is not delegating to demand too much of others, but rewarding hearts suited for such tasks; as the consumer can be strengthened in their identity as a family member who cares appropriately for their own (53), or the dignified patient is promised agentive personhood in dying well, the identity of carers for whom care is "more than" work is fortified. The potential sanctified suffering mentioned in Berlant's work recalls balking the epidural (174) and denial/taboo arguments once more, implying that confronting discomfort versus cowardice for comfort and convenience are a binomial of sorts. Rather than leaning into physical elements dying, Hakola suggests the advertisements' "archiving" storytelling or memorialisation of self and others in continuous experiential journeying that reinstates vitality "by any means necessary" (Hakola 2018, 56) pushes images of the failing dead or dying body ever further into the margins – which encouraged me to consider how the dead and dying are depicted in death positive material, primarily in their continuing capacity to touch, or be touched.

To ground back into my ethnography, I recognise that many of the people involved in death awareness or independent and alternative death care solutions do not emphasise their femininity: just as in chapter four female attendees suggested they had not thought about how or why the event audience or a doula training had just one man participating (p.138) even if Virago did suggest men destroyed "our" death relationship, she never professed her expertise emerging from femininity. But does the discussion of ceremonial healing or presence "equivalent" to therapy simply acknowledge its public's familiarity with the vocabulary of psychologists and use it as a shorthand for a different genre of experience, or does it subscribe to a similar selfhood of emotional processing – i.e.. is ceremony "therapeutic", or is psychology a pale imitation of some rite-of-passage affect? Virago was certainly not the only speaker I had recorded praising retaining the body at home, or juxtaposing corpse and medical healing. I had taken to listening to several death awareness podcasts at the start of my fieldwork and, though it was soon apparent to me that there were too many to transcribe or take note of, journalist Kevin Toolis' 2019 appearance on the *Dying Matters Podcast* stayed in my mind[112], likely due to how his words seemed both unsubstantiated and unwavering:

> "You learn more in that hour in the presence of a dead person than you do in years of a degree in death studies. We don't need another professional caste of councillors, degrees and more academics. If you breathe, then you are just as qualified to understand mortality [...]
>
> I'm a great believer in the physicality of the dead. We have this awful notion that we don't want to see them, but that transition state where they're no longer warm-blooded, the first time you touch a corpse ... you learn more than in 5000 books, 5000 lectures, in that five minutes with them. [...] Closed box, small, short funeral, there's a gnawing,

[112] https://audioboom.com/posts/7311314-if-death-was-a-marathon-you-had-to-run-you-d-do-a-few-practise-laps-kevin-toolis

> common psychological *wound.* No wonder the brain struggles to realise that they've gone."

I took some issue in Toolis' way of bludgeoning academics, given his frequent quotes from Ariès and references to a familiar Becker-style timeline of denial; his ironic insistence on an organic or emic, ancestral knowledge paired with the medical language of a dreaded "caste of counsellors" as he cites the way "physical enforcements *psychologically* legitimate death". I found it funny that 5000 books wouldn't do, but his book about bereavement deserved a promotion at the end of the interview (soon accompanied by another 2020 volume, *Nine Rules to Conquer Death*). But of course, there was a substantiation: not only was he "one of those who breathes", he had been present, up close and personal with death in a way many cannot share "in phobic society" by virtue of being Irish and attending wakes. Before, "you would've seen dozens, even hundreds of bodies!" he remarks, as if this were desirable and part of why "people didn't need therapy back then". What happened to him when he touched the corpse; which are the lessons I cannot reach from my academic ivory tower? Rather than focusing on the physical as treating a cognitive dissonance to "realise they are gone" facing absent-present and subject-object ambiguity, I suggest the proposition that the dead body as visually indexing mortality or psychic "somatic spasm" (Korsmeyer 2008, 375) would be reductive. Though I only met five Death Café attendees who had seen corpses at wakes, none professed a "realisation" or novel relation to mortality as a result. As Connor at Somerset House put it:

> "Of course you know they're dead – you wouldn't be having a funeral in the first place if they weren't. The body's there because they're the guest of honour at their party, and you get to say goodbye in person."

Taking cue from this goodbye in person and Death Café or doula ideas of "being there for" and with (someone) I suggest presencing the body is valuable not only as part of a reclaiming gesture contra (masculine) industry or concern over alienation in modernity but enables some haptic ritual acts of participatory valence.

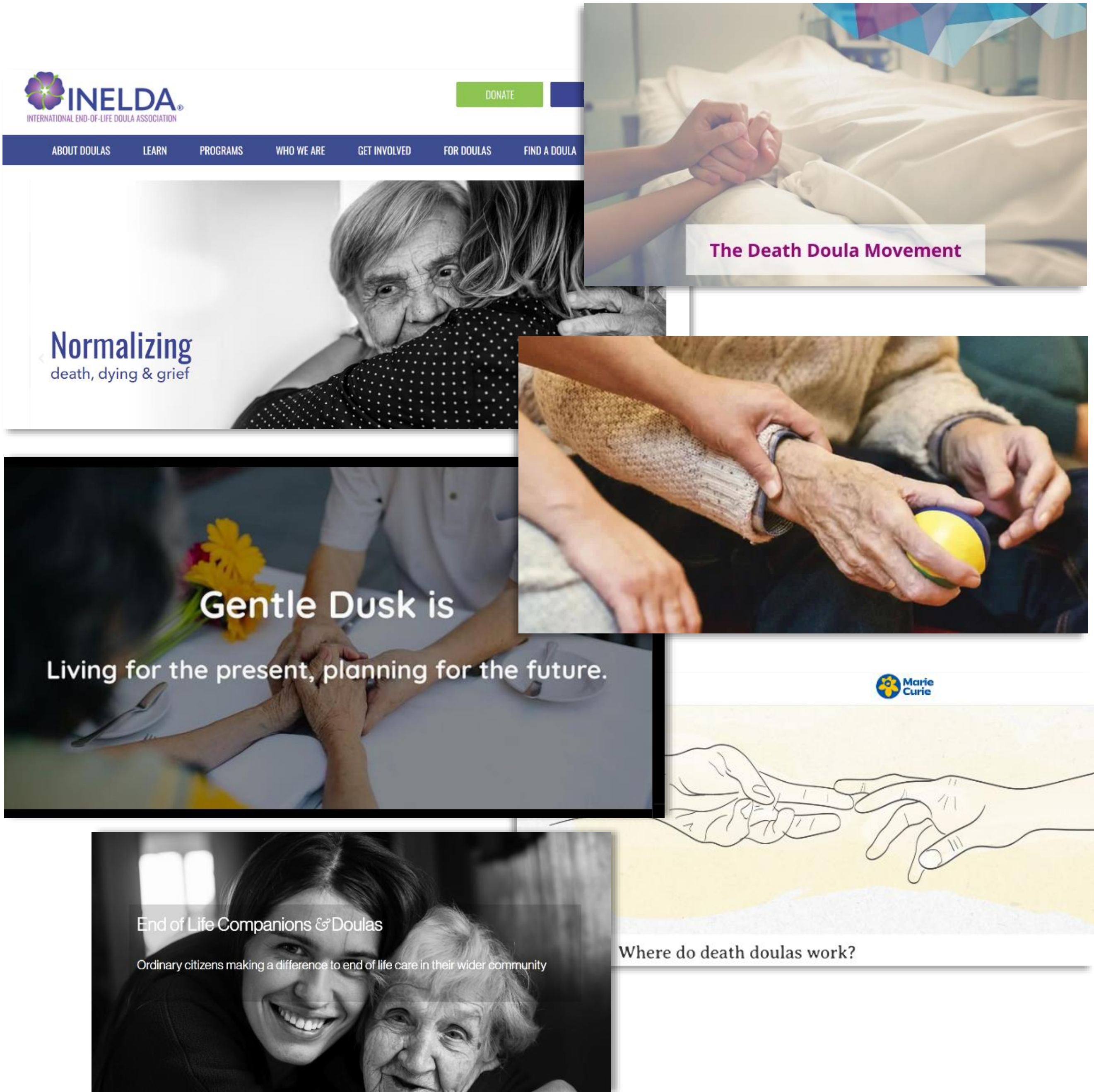


Figure 31 – A small collage of embracing and touching imagery; screenshots via INELDA, LWDW, Gentle Dusk, and Marie Curie.

Touching work, time work

Hakola makes a note about the image of joined hands being the prime, well-established symbol of hospice care and dying in general (Hakola 2018, 61) – and it is one I grew very familiar with over my fieldwork. Over half of the advertisements she analysed featured active touch where families and staff alike held patients, or staff enacted compassion to families in hugs and touches, while a third featured smiling - less often to imagined viewers behind the camera but more explicitly between persons depicted in the videos: a bodily relation between people thus enacting "mediations of an experience of being near". The importance of touching care is similarly emphasised in Terhi Utriainen's work around end-of-life carers, wherein she introduces the title of "deadener" or "death maker" (*kuolettaja*), suggesting that the (usually female) body of a deadener themselves is "a mythological text or ritual place" as it symbolically removes the rupture caused by dying (Utriainen 1996, 43). Drawing on texts produced for a Good Death writing project organised by the Finnish Ministry of Health between 1993 and 1994, Utriainen features testimony from carers who stress presence, often in feminine tropes: she records instances of women writing about "mothering" the dying; even that attending a death was "similar to expecting my first child" in one case. This leads to abstraction on professional deadeners representing an "intersection" of feminine figures – nurses, nuns, mothers, keeners, sex workers – that "broker" or liaise a relation and interchange between biology and culture, or life and the unseen "beyond": "after all, the child in the womb is invisible before it is outside of it" *(ibid,* 45), she posits to exemplify the genre of role.

The overarching theme in respondents' writing, however, is one of presence and touch being the main elements of palliative care, where "doing 'tricks', know-how or achievements" is secondary, and "work cannot be done without touching" (45-6). Especially when communication falters at the end of life, Utriainen stresses, language is generally reduced to speaking and sound that establishes a shared world and therefore, "it begins to resemble touch in its materiality" (48). Touch is addressed similarly in the American Natural Death Care movement, Olson remarks, when practitioners emphasise "the personal, intimate skill of practiced hands rather than a skill with instruments" (2018, 204), or claim that in caressing, washing and dressing, they are "breaking physical barriers [which] makes possible a deeper and more fulfilling form of grief". The reciprocity afforded by twofold touch as phatic communion is one I wish to complicate with a consideration on temporality or the time-taking or making involved in tactility. In my understanding, the likening of the dying to the expected baby above is not a comment on a woman whose body guides someone into or out of consciousness or shared lifeworld, insomuch as it is a reflection on passivity and activity of care that consciously lives by the "clock" of someone, or something else.

In later work in English, Utriainen discusses these Finnish deadeners again in relation to Simone de Beauvoir's *Second Sex*, and its proposal that womanliness is associated with passivity in contrast to masculine activity, building on carer's claims on their "relatively passive agency" (Utriainen 2010, 442-3): in the face of death, there was "nothing left to be done", yet these people carried on doing. Though actions had aims and actors, it was differentiated from "active activity" based on writers' remarks that certain actions that tried to "do" too much would be inappropriate, insufficient, or inauthentic at deathbeds. Instead, the qualities prized were endurance alongside suffering, patience, reflexivity, relating or empathising, and *conformity* to the needs and rhythms of another. In a discussion on behaviour at British funerals Tony Walter points out that "ritual action says what discourse cannot – laying a flower could be 'I love you'" (Walter 1996, 34); I propose that the ritual actions involved in death awareness-related deaths and funerals "say" things about honouring

or sanctifying a kind of "staying with the trouble" (Haraway 2016), or reverence to the mystery or challenging "three-dimensionality" of mortals both Joanne and Saf placed out of reach of rationalistic control and compartmentalisation at the theatre (p.168). Utriainen suggests that if doctors sustain life and become unnecessary at times of death and priests meet death as afterlife and ascension to which dying is merely a stepping stone – thus, neither confront death as it unfolds; this process requires remaining alongside a fragile and deteriorating body, in a way the "antithesis of modernist positivism"[113]. Something like this was exemplified in Joanne's work where her becoming "super-daughter" in attempt to save her mother was futile, and the play's climax was her cradling the fabric body as it became limp. Of course, "the dying" is itself debatably a modern category or life stage informed by medicine – conditions, treatments, and their predictability – but there is a particular kind of zig-zagging observance of time in this remaining involved when, for example, Dying Matters resources suggest dying should be treated like birthing because in both instances, "the body knows what it's doing"[114].

Consider the "bad funeral" or "bad death" sketched by commentators in preceding chapters: besides concern of pain and separation that make people fearful or lonely, there was also the suggestion that anxiety and tabooing engendered such separation; people who did not "accept" or want to speak or express risked being "locked in a conspiracy of solitude", were accused of imagining themselves immortal, or thought to forego valuable opportunities to "live well until the end" by not establishing plans that afforded "the right" care (at home, with family.) Poor funerals, in turn, could oppress consumers by selling them "not beautiful" things, harm the environment, or result in people "losing something" (p.155) intangible that a better ceremony brought about. In each of these critiques, there is a tug-of-war between control and vulnerability, present and futurity: to do nothing in preparation or acknowledgement of adventitious mortality was denialist and uncaring, as were the "doctors who play god"; Virago's ceremony package was presented as healing rite-de-passage, and Joanne acted out a number of tasks to disentangle herself from grief, yet popular continuing bonds ideologies largely reject "closure", the goal-oriented "working through" of grief work, or the funeral as an event of finality. In these frictions, time reappeared as a call to seize the precious time left, and in complaint that there was not enough of it: Lisa proposed there were not enough people on staff at the hospitals to spend enough time communicating difficult topics or provide continuity, aligning with Ehrenstein's remarks on how both paid and unpaid carers more often ask not for reimbursement, but "more time to care well" (in Puig de la Bellacasa 2017, 208). While at Funeral Day, Carrie said the fifteen minutes at the crematorium was "not good enough" – so did podcaster Kevin, lamenting the "short, small funeral". In Abel's book on hospice leaders, she notes that hospice helped make death "a coming together" because it did not time its ties- unlike hospitals, where most intensive care units limited visits to five minutes per hour, and patients often died with "the family banished to the waiting room" (Abel 2018, 111). Hazen's description on proponents of birth doula care, in turn, sees participants celebrate temporal affordances of good care: almost all respondents noted that homebirth or midwife appointments were considerably longer than the 20 minutes allotted by hospital-based services, and some midwives were available to call or text any time of day (Hazen 2017, 563).

---

[113] https://www.hs.fi/kulttuuri/art-2000009148193.html *Helsingin Sanomat* Terhi Utriainen in interview with Helin, V. (2022)

[114] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Skf0X8ErPMI *Why Don't We Talk About Dying?* TEDx talk from Mannix, K. (2022); https://www.hospiceuk.org/latest-from-hospice-uk/dying-not-bad-youre-expecting (2023)

In the theoretical cornucopia, *Matters of Care*, Maria Puig de la Bellacasa addresses touch and its unique reversibility as representing a core of thinking and living with care: she theorises the haptic sensorial universe is best suited to explore "the ambivalences of conceiving caring knowledge as an intensification of involvement and proximity" (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017, 18). Touch is presented as an expression of material-embodied relationality that becomes knowing-touching or "onto-epistemology", bound to Donna Haraway's theories of kin-making, whereby the "intra-active" nature of the act demands attentiveness, and thickens a present with its situatedness and immediacy, instead of a "view from nowhere". Surprisingly, where *Matters of Care* most reminded me of death care was in a reflection of temporalities of soil and compost, where its author elaborates on the pace of mundane maintenance acts surrounding earth. The observation that "what soil is thought to be affects the ways in which it is cared for, and vice versa, modes of care have effects in what soils become" (*ibid,* 170) that can apply to death or the dying (or many other things made "matters of care" in the book's model), is augmented in recognition that time is not something one "has" or not, but is also made or afforded in practices – not "just imposed" by dominant paradigms, but everyday sociotechnical arrangements. To unpick this slightly, Puig de la Bellacasa notes that soil has its ecological "deep time" – a combination of geological durations and rocks breaking down – and shorter ecological cycles of organisms and plants growing food, decomposing material, and renewal. These "micro and macro" timescales defined as framed very differently to human lifespans or histories, with lived time drawing attention to "ruptures in ecological time". This temporal diversity has ethical implications for ecology and how aligning (if not harmonising) slippages between scapes, they could be made "liveable for humans and non-humans alike" (176).

Practically, Puig de la Bellacasa criticises productionist-oriented practices that remain linear or future-oriented in "output" in agricultural investments: a view that subordinates or suspends the experienced present in soil exploitation of compressed, industrious "speeded-up time". When soil is understood as technoscientific promise of yield, care is reduced to managerial conduct of its matter; an object of care controlled, as opposed to care as a co-constructed interdependence. In response, she engages in the work of "Queen of compost", soil scientist Elaine Ingham, who specialises in foodwebs and permaculture and encourages freedom from industrial fertilisers. Ingham's projects include taking soil samples with approachable techniques – in an online lecture, she shows viewers how to collect compost with an apple corer, look at it under an affordable second-hand microscope, and "see" its biology or vitality as something other than dirt by counting its bacteria, assessing its health or the kind of "help" or feeding it needs. Why would a busy gardener preoccupied with output make time for slow or laborious tasks instead of sending soil off to a testing company, Puig de la Bellacasa asks (200), before proposing that such alternative engagements with time evoke a different mode of production and therein, a different mode of life. She recalls a training day she attended that sparked her research interest, where she learnt to make "compost tea" to feed her garden soil's inhabitants, and discovered an enjoyment of composting; though it did not make her a successful gardener, it resulted in "chatting with her worms", and a concern about how to touch them, or turn the compost heap without disturbing or tearing them. "I didn't 'choose' to become affected by soils [...] but I do sense this happened through *an embodied immersion in collective doings* that enacted an ethics, and by continuously cultivating this experienced obligation as a joy", she writes (159).

To clarify, in remarking on the vitality of soils and worms, I do not mean to move the dead or dying into a similar nonhuman group, nor call for their (re)consideration as actors who invite affect or care – indeed, I maintain that clearly, they already do so. Instead, I refer to the suggestion that "making time for care time appears as a disruption of anthropocentered

temporalities" (23) to suggest an appeal to make time for death care time disrupts "living time". I remembered Cox and Virago both pointing to how in planning funerals, the time between death and ceremony is getting longer as people planned for convenience and work schedules; the extreme example of this was Cox's comment about Amazon Prime funerals. I harkened back to Carrie's worry that cremation was "too efficient", and Caitlin Doughty's novel, where she implied parents who had used an online cremation service were uncaring (p. 162); I considered the Death Café complaint about people expecting you to "get over it" over time, and death advocacy groups' work on establishing greater allowances for the bereaved, including time off work or leave of absence; the way some public bereavements are marked in timed minutes of silence that suspend everyday rhythms. Most evocatively, there was the language of "bad funerals" from their critics that reviled the symbolic distortion of time involved with embalming: corpses were poked and prodded, "sprayed, sliced, pierced, pickled, trussed, trimmed, creamed, waxed, painted, rouged and dressed" to "freeze" them in time, while death was "whisked" or "shipped off" out of sight by sequestration theory or burial reform (p.135,137). At first glance, the vocabulary of clinical or funerary discomfort looked to be vilifying objectification or depersonalisation, where "filing cabinet", "cookie cutter" or "assembly line" funerals – just as unwanted medical interventions – did something *to* the body in biopowered submission rather than *with* it; I found parallels in birth doula complaints about hospitals, whereby "they shave you, they expose you, they cut you, they leave you alone to suffer and don't let your family members be with you" (Davis-Floyd 2005, 38). When touching is called upon as experience where boundaries between self and other are blurred (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017, 96) – and I add, can dually reinstate the otherness of other, though akin to self – it can serve well to fortify the continuing personhood, agency, or relationship with the dead or dying body. Beyond a stress on control and autonomy, however, I want to draw attention to how the "good" alternative services involve touching words that are indefinite or infinite against the abrupt staccato: staying, holding, caressing, and watching instead of subjecting to and act or gaze.

In *Matters of Care*, care time is understood as irreducible to productionist time, because it does not transform materials "from a less valued to a more valued state" (208) – as such, it can become devalued as unproductive or "merely reproductive" maintenance. Recognising feminist care scholars' contributions, Puig de la Bellacasa notes the "speeded up" time of production is only possible because some are "able to ignore biological and ecological time or embeddedness at the expense of women and other carers" (Mellor 1997 in *ibid*, 209). To nuance the proposal of whether death care "transforms" (materials from less into more valued states), I consider its insistence on recognition for embeddedness returning to the note from Howarth in the *Encyclopaedia of Death and Dying* reframing the body in modern western death: "the dead body, *once a symbol of natural order*, now has a destabilising effect on social order"(Howarth and Leaman 2001, 120) - and must therefore be modified. The prepared, cleaned, and correctly presented dead body becomes an extension of the self rather than a "disordered and dangerous object" (Hallam et al. 1999, 132) in the "traditional" arrangements that relinquish custody of the corpse to professionals. In my fieldwork contexts, I suggest that symbolic naturality and destabilisation can, and do coexist. It is precisely the status of naturality – perceived to have been previously ignored or embalmed beyond recognition – and its capacity to disrupt that are celebrated and can then become extensions of a more natural or authentic, and therefore "right(eous)" self.

The website of The *Order* points out that "taking care of someone you love after they have died is not the easy option [...] but it is *right*", whilst a supplementary page on green burial resources encourages us to accept decomposition, since only thus "we can begin to see it as

something beautiful. *More than* beautiful— ecstatic.[115]" In her 2015 autobiographical debut, Caitlin Doughty further describes her early work as a crematory operator, and the law in California that mandated cremated bone remnants had to be processed and ground by a "cremulator" to fluffy white ash, lest chunks of bone in an urn remained a "harsh reminder" that it contained "not just an abstract concept, but an actual former human" (Doughty 2015, 23). In a reflection on how arresting the sight of a burning corpse was, she began to picture her own father dying and suggested that if she were still alive when it happened, she "would be there to watch him become that beautiful fire" (*ibid,* 65). It is through rejecting beauty as aesthetic agreeability and applying it as an ethical value that it becomes most telling. Beauty clings to the beatific when we think, for example, of its Christian usage – the dominion over matter signifying, as in disgust theorist August Kolnai's estimation, a more profound love towards humanity and that which represents culture (Korsmeyer 2003,88). Doughty's "beautiful fire" (the expression borrowed from George Bernad Shaw's description of his mother's cremation) is about taboo and acceptance – "it would not be beautiful because death was hidden or denied; it would be beautiful because death would be embraced: it would be a place of experience". It is also, however, an endorsement based on relational obligation and desire to care: "I didn't want anyone else to do it", she writes, before adding a sting of industry anxiety akin to Hakola's mobilised negative affect, where the more she learnt about the funerary status quo in her country, "the thought of anyone else taking care of my family's corpses terrified me" (Doughty 2015, 23). The ambivalent "passive-active" control and vulnerability in planning for and treating the body is arguably one where the corpse is worked upon to let it become "our dead", with whom we assert kinship. Davies helpfully cites Ernesto de Martino, whose 1948 Primitive Magic is translated as "the deceased is transformed in a bond" (Davies 2015, 15); I might suggest further, in*to* a bond, as voice reduces to touch; or distils to embodied immersion in doings (p.184). Is this a care work reproduction and maintenance of personhood, or productive "transformation" of material to a more valued state? Perhaps most specifically, I read it as a call to valorise transformation *itself,* in living by or "staying in" the timescapes of decay, microbes or fire, and experiential immediacy sought in conscious ritualised surrender by making or taking time for such processes.

Spiritual and fathomable

On her blog, Dr Hannah Rumble - who has written extensively on green and "alternative" funeral practices – describes a 2017 art installation in Bristol called *Woodland*, part of a broader *Afterlife* project by Rebecca French and Andrew Mottershead.[116] In this piece, guests are invited to lay on the forest floor as an audio narration and headphones are provided: the narration describes the five stages of a human corpse's decomposition in such woodland and is a "gentle collapse into soil and one's erasure through the seasons". The narrator details multi-species becomings that arise from a corpse as it hosts liveliness of creatures, plants, and spores of the environment and is considered by the artists as poetically and viscerally "connecting you deeply to your body and considers the biological and chemical processes that continue long after you are conscious". Rumble describes the peculiar restfulness and immersion of being enveloped in the leafy ground, and I considered the death positive slogan of "it's okay to decay" featured on many pieces of *The Order's* merchandise, and the inclusion of an illustration of a corresponding five-staged decaying body in the title leaf of Doughty's second

[115] https://www.orderofthegooddeath.com/resources/green-burial/

[116] https://drhannahrumble.com/2017/02/ Rumble, H. (2017) *A multi-sensory meditation on settling into the soil.*

book, *From Here to Eternity.* Doughty had, indeed, walked readers through a similar woodland transformation in her 2015 debut as she describes a visit to the redwoods, and the types of scavengers that might consume her body on the forest floor, suggesting her body would become "the finest acknowledgment that I was but one tiny cog in the ecosystem's wheel" (Doughty 2015, 196). I am not suggesting these meditations on material decay[117] represent the work of death doulas that foregrounded this chapter but offer them in response to Walter's note that the "only fully natural way for a large mammal to be disposed of is for it to lie on the ground and there be eaten [...] no natural burial fans are advocating that!" (Walter 2020a, 96). Whilst (for now?) only a select few voices advocate for NOR (or "direct" composting) for consumers, the symbolic communion or cohesion (here, to earth) is a large part of death positivity, not just regarding ecological concerns or necessarily manifest in disposal, but as it stands to mirror the kinds of spiritualities and time work of experiential, tactile immersion and embrace with death and desired community.

Few of the doulas I spoke to had any involvement with the funeral or disposal at all – or if they did, it never came up. What did appear ubiquitously, however, was an involvement in other spiritual care practices or beliefs. Most of the doulas listed in the LWDW directory mention the cyclicity of life, but a handful note experience or qualifications in holistic "healing modalities" or energy work, such as reiki and neopagan mysticism; unsurprisingly once one broadens a search to soul midwives, the transit of the soul garners greater attention. Founder of *Soul Midwives UK* Felicity Warner, for one - who frequently lectures at London's Royal Marsden hospital and was in a 2017 tabloid listicle about the most inspirational women of the year - claims to have "invented" soul midwifery in the early 2000s, and describes herself as "a *myrrhophore",* or "lineage holder" of myrrh-healing women, teaching "sacred essential oils" in her course package[118]. Joanne was also active with reiki and past-life journeying, posted on Instagram about observing Wiccan annual cycles as well natural remedy by way of a guest blog for the "coven" of *Seed Sistas*, or "sensory herbalists" who "bridge the gap between magic and medicine". The language of spirits or the sacred is never far in international doula resources that centre "transformative loss as part of our soul's larger evolutionary journey"[119] or propose spiritual death service from kindred mortals could result in "an Earth hospice".[120] Westendorp and Gould describe the spiritual syncretism of doula practitioners in similar terms, noting their free blending of Buddhist corpse meditation, crystal healing, essential oils, and candle lighting to "call in spirits" (2021, 7), and I have found such amorphous spirituality is in doula biographies, in both subtle suggestions that they are "spiritual, not religious" or "open to all faiths", and explicit presentations of a range of praxis, as in the information page for *The Red Tent Doula*, an organisation whose courses are held online and across the UK. Their course facilitator identifies as an EOLD as well as "birthkeeper", citing learnings of many kinds:

> "Intuitively, Alexandra knew how to midwife his [her father's] soul; this early encounter with death and the reassurance of what she experienced beyond the veil sparked her spiritual quest through Buddhism, past life regression, Reiki, imagework, training as a yoga and meditation teacher, yoga scripture, Sufism, shamanic practice and working

[117] The imagining of oneself through decay is not unique to novel death movements, but – as one of the attendees at Jamyang centre's death café reminded us – a Buddhist practice. *Marasanati*, sometimes translated as death awareness, is a memento mori practice of presencing or keeping-in-mind of death that counters neglect of the moment; in some *suttas* involves the "carnary" or contemplation of nine stages of a decaying corpse.

[118] https://www.soulmidwives.co.uk/sacred-oils/

[119] https://sacreddeathcare.com/program/the-souls-journey/

[120] https://www.journeywithdeath.com/

with ancestral voices and soul clearance before training as an interfaith minister and spiritual counsellor."[121]

Red Tent muddles its vague commitment further by suggesting their practices herald "the age of the Divine Feminine" and are grounded in "ancient archetype", introducing neologisms such as "motherblessing". I cannot begin to unpack these diverse activities, speculate on the shared beliefs of EOLDs or assess how many subscribe to others' statements about the work, but suggest by personal impressions and materials available, just as death is "original", shared, and more accessible in death awareness, so is "spirituality, considered primordial, universal – unlike religion, which only some people embrace" (Walter 2020, 95). In this sense, the death positive 1960s and 70s align in time with the emergence of Western holistic, New Age spiritualities that have been characterised as "cultic milieu" due to their comprising of varied, expansive organisations, courses, workshops, and therapies (Noomen et al. 2011, 22). Noomen et al. describe the milieu as unlike a religious corpus in its "perennialism", based on a notion that man-made religious constructions ultimately refer to "the same underlying spiritual core" and therefore, individuals have freedom to choose how they journey to such a core. Considering the titles of "lineage holder" for keeping oils, or "birthkeeper", for example: they belie not only an ancestral intuition and sacred sought in a connection to such a perennial thing, but suggest what is not proverbially claimed, kept, or held, can be or has been "taken" and lost. The biographies where doulaing is related to journeying or practicing assert not just "ongoingness" I read in the "staying" touches of ritual but propose their practitioner's lasting openness or orientation to transformation: they are not authorities because they have "transformed" in an experience, but in appealing to an intuition that predated them, that one could invite in by exercise of plasticity or permeability of a self. I find great parallels to the "death tabooing society" complaint in Paul Heelas's work on New Age religiosity, fruitful in its recognition of self-spirituality with "the great refrain […] that we malfunction because we have been indoctrinated by mainstream society and culture" (Heelas 1996, 18–19), and the perceived "obscuring" or crippling of the power of "real" self this indoctrination leads to. The experience of the "self itself", he adds, is made synonymous with experiencing "the God, Goddess, the Source, Christ Consciousness, the inner child, the way of the heart" – one can throw mortality into the mix.

Peter Pels's description of New Age materialism and spirituality, where "the modern world" is perceived as threat to authentic spiritual experience or development is similar - he suggests "the subject fears to become enslaved to the machines of industry and bureaucracy, or to be turned into a mere effect of commodified desires" (Pels 2008, 272), where the "natural organism" of a human subject is juxtaposed with "the alienating objectifications of culture" – harkening back to the barrier machinery and technology presented in undesirable care situations. Where I find this text's great intrigue is in the author's description of how spiritual is or is not materialised, in "the (im)possibility of discerning the invisible structures or causes of the human or natural world with the human eye or its prostheses." The spiritual is described as supersensory, emergent as "fact" only by conjecture: "by treating the material as a mere effect of something invisible yet more fundamental" (*ibid*, 270) The opposition of spiritual and material facets ultimately implies the possibility of gnosis, or a mode of reasoning towards a hidden or esoteric realm "in which materiality [is] never really real." Where this relates to more experimental death care spiritualisms and more secular, everyday calls to find that dying matters alike is in the invisibility or unfathomability of death itself, and the way the sensuous is, counterintuitively, a reach to the supersensory. Of touch, Puig de la

[121] https://redtentdoulas.co.uk/end-of-life-doula/

Bellacasa says that yearning for touching or being *in* touch is at the heart of caring involvement; I daresay carers as read in Hakola, Utriainen, Westendorp and Gould would agree. Yet she warns that there is no point "idealising" the possibilities of touch, as if it extends, it can also be a reminder of one's finitude. But why not consider this the very ideal in itself? Might this yearning and leaning toward that (which) cannot be bridged or apprehended be the meaningful, "experienced" or "ecstatic" - *what the sacred feels like*?

I have previously mentioned the unfathomable as etymologically related to touch and reach: the "fathom" originally standing for a unit of measure equivalent to an outstretched human arm. The poignancy of this metaphor comes in a recognition that death awareness initiatives or rewordings that seek to "make death matter" assert that this connectivity or meaningfulness was already, always there, fallen out of touch in time. In consideration for soil, Puig de la Bellacasa suggests: "the purpose of exposing how things are assembled, constructed, is not to debunk and dismantle [...] instead, to exhibit the concerns that attach and hold together matters of fact is to enrich and affirm reality by contributing further articulations (2017, 39). The enrichment of the reality of dying and its unfathomability sits in the unfulfillable promise that we could reach one another, would we but extend imagined arms to fathom – but the meaningfulness or power vested in death as experience is dependent on the touch not quite reciprocated, harkening to Puett's discussion on ritual making a "disjunctive" world (p.121), or subjunctive "as if"; as if by being alongside the dying, we could "walk with death"; as if when saying goodbye, the dead might notice our farewell. Death, like a breeze, is nearly there in the conjecture of its fact, and the in-betweens of transformation: the meditation on decay "sees" death, but more so observes an abundance of life of a different kind participating and becoming. To state this differently: the desires involved in natural burial may be a removal from "the unnatural interference of commercial ventures" (Westendorp and Gould 2021, 10) for "alliance with the organic world" (Davies and Rumble 2012, 1). However, instead of projecting the acts or narratives involved in such burial to hopes for a lasting futured self, I look to consider an angle whereby celebrating transformation, the *doing* supersedes what is done – just like in the birthing scenario where process "meant" more than result, when the unfolding event stood for a maternal bond. In Utriainen's discussion of alternative spiritual practices, she notes their capacity to engage people in their fragility, as both embodied subject that are "being subjected to events", and agents in a sense of "being capable of making things happen" (Utriainen 2011, 425). The recognition of submission or self as subject to finitude and biological temporality empowers agency insomuch as it substantiates or materialises a transformation of something that is not met with ambivalence, *because* it does not claim a detachment from roles of implication, obligation, and desire in turn, but reaches to embrace them.

The complexities of spiritual, meaning-making networkedness with living and dying time are difficult to express, and I hope to synthesise what I understand by its relation to death care in the concluding chapter that follows. For risk of veering too far into a hypothetical loftiness, I return to constructions of the ritual on a less metaphysical plane: to doulas or funeral carers who do not invite woodland beetles, but simply suggest current arrangements are lacking or unsatisfactory compared to possible alternatives. Rather than stressing essential oils, DIY body treatment, home wakes or the ideological merging into nature, funeral directors like Carrie (147-152) who I heard over the course of fieldwork tended most often to a conclusion that meaningful ritual was "what we make it", and that their job was to accommodate whatever "meant something" to families. The consensus that mainstream funerals are "meaningless", or undesirable seems bashfully acknowledged in even the most "traditional" industry rhetoric, including the 2022 *Dignity Funerals* advertising campaign and posters: "Forget everything you

think you know about funerals”. In some of his work on modern and postmodern funerals, Tony Walter describes the sense of vacuity in protestant Christian tradition that marks a modern West with its multiplicity of voluntary association and intimacies; indeed, if protestant configurations are read to ban attempts to call to or pray for the dead and reduce exchange with the dead to a reflection on memory (Walter 2019 in Panagiotopoulos and Espirito Santo 2019)– instead of its channels’ authority regulating relationships – there is little “doing” to be done in the funeral. The dead, already secured in *fide and gratia* do not need a congregation to deliver and transform them, and the body of the deceased, previously addressed in direct speech, was sidelined in a 16th century liturgical reform that had “thy body” appear in third person, now “our brother” or sister whose deliverance was confirmed and praised.

Figure 32 – A photograph of a Dignity Funerals poster in a funeral home window urging readers to “forget everything you think you know about funerals”.

Much has been written on the novel traditions of “untraditional” funerals, including shared eulogy and group commemoration, the negligible role of a (religious) figurehead, the choice of popular music instead of prayer or scripture, or a call to celebratory theme (Garces-Foley and Holcomb 2006; Walter 2005) – generally, the new form is associated with personalisation or a personhood of the deceased, with their prior preferences (eg. favourite songs or flowers, novelty coffins or environmental interests) and relationships at the foreground. Garces-Foley and Holcomb write that while some commentators equate these choices to a triumph of individualism or loss of common sacred story, they might instead be interpreted as “religious sensibilities in new forms” (2006, 208) and recognised for their communal function in execution. Quoting Davies, they suggest that death style matches lifestyle (Davies X in *ibid,* 308), and if Western (in her context, American) religiosity or spirituality is built around scepticism of compulsory behaviour, the newly common personal, family-led funeral aligns

with broader societal features of spiritual seeking and pluralism and decline of ties outside the family. Yet I stress that even if compulsory behaviour is undesirable or thought inauthentic, there must be *behaviour* all the same. Instead of focus on the "*what*" or form of "what we make it", I understand the due emphasis on "we make": just as in Death Café the "right words" mattered less than "being there", or in memorial tree writing that I argued has its texts secondary to the fact that they had been made (119-20), I find the endorsed good funerals – as good deaths – to be ones participated in, in line with their suggestion that meaningfulness is an *experience in and of* doings.

When Carrie described her undertaking business, she mentioned the way she "came up" with meaningful rituals with families, including writing notes or letters to the dead, lighting candles, folding paper flowers and coffin decorating – as offered as an audience activity the end of her talk. These practices, alongside family-written eulogies, coffin clubs or coffin weaving workshops[122], "living funerals", corpse meditations, and varied calls for writing-planning, speaking, and acting I observed in fieldwork could be seen as mirrors to the individuated personality and wishes of the deceased or bereaved, as physical manifestations of their emotions, or as symbols of natural cycles. I understand these activities and participations to stand not as means to an end, for instance as methods of fostering connection or closures or establishing a personhood, but ends themselves – assertions of the fathoming, reaching, passive-active agency of "staying with the trouble" that have activity itself communicate a belief in underlying alliances or belongings. There is a claim to kinship, care, or biological time that makes or undoes a person that persons in turn have or had part in making, whether the constituent parts or participants are framed as worm food, or "keepers" of a memory, or imagined tradition.

To stress practice over synthesis, I might point to how Virago shirked the use of "ritual" in favour of "rite" as a term for the types of ceremonies she conducted (p. 174); I took this to mean an antipathy towards ritual as often presented in common parlance, associated with repetitive or prescribed acts. The reference to the healing or therapy accessible instead in *rite* aligns well with Hornborg's analyses of New Age spiritual therapies' activities in Sweden. Whereas in the context of her work, what are understood to be "religions" are kept apart from services of social institutions such as schools or the public health sector, other rites – usually emanating from Asian religious tradition – are reduced to "pure technique", allowing their proliferation in institution and market alike, moving their efficacy from a demand to perform liturgical acts correctly, to their perceived enabling of "experiencing the right effects" (or perhaps, affects?) that transform the individual who participates intentionally or mindfully (Hornborg 2012, 404). The funeral directors' endorsement of their services paired with disavowal of their expertise (p.135) speaks to this participatory norm, where the service is framed as helping clients to help themselves: and just as "shutting out" emotion (p.168) or death is considered a barrier to transformation, to not embed oneself in doing risks denying or neglecting relational powers at play. The consideration of soil time articulated a relation of actions – not just between humans and ecology, but Puig de la Bellacasa and her compost heap she became affected by. Caitlin's reflection on bones had them be not just signs of father-daughter care and affection or industry failure, but "not abstractly" death; a dead person. Joanne's play may have been about caring for her mother and birthing dying, but as a piece of

[122] The first coffin club I am aware of was a 2010 voluntary association, where members of a community group for seniors in New Zealand set up an activity for crafting one's own coffin, see. https://www.kiwicoffinclub.co.nz/our-story/. Records of UK clubs exist since 2017 and in 2022 UK-wide efforts were formalised at https://coffinclub.co.uk/, a site run by Sussex-based celebrants Kate Tym and Kate Dyer, who also provide training courses for celebrants; celebrity patrons include Miriam Margolyes.

art, it would not have existed without its audience, that gave its prompts or joined in song. In this regard, the Hertzian pyramid of three actors that co-constitute – the dead/soul, the corpse, the mourner – is returned to the fore. In his text on the often-indeterminate intermediary period between primary and secondary burials, understanding each actor in the tripartite model is to "understand their expression of the same idea of transition" (Hertz 1960, 15); the souls, corpses, and mourners do as is done unto them. When the dying, corpse, and "where they go" are examined in or with a caring touch, they can in turn be understood, if not to "care" about the living – to at least engender such an affect. The onto-epistemology enacted "restages things in ways that generate possibility for other ways of relating" and transforms the perception of things by involvement in the mattering of worlds, and in Puig de la Bellacasa's words, can "connect things that were not supposed to be connecting across the bifurcation of consciousness" (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017, 65). Yet in fathoming death, I find participants' sense that these things were (to be) connected. Obligations of care are often asymmetrical and nonreciprocal, with worms, for example, who may "have no power to enforce this obligation upon us" and can take care of waste without intentional commitment. So, how does death obligate?

In this chapter, I discuss a landscape of corporeality, spirituality, and gender characteristic of the death awareness movement following the description of a theatre performance and a conference presentation given by practitioners of alternative end-of-life ceremony. Describing the work of death doulas and the association of women to mortality, natality and care, I review Terhi Utriainen's work on carers' proximity to dying alongside Puig de la Bellacasa's *Matters of Care* (2017) for their contributions on embodied knowing and touching as a reciprocal metaphor that intensifies involvement. I argue that the exigencies of care time are celebrated and endorsed in an aspiration to feel touched, and meaningfulness in death ritual is framed as *experience in and of* doings.

I will consider sharing time and space in a death-tinged lifeworld through another play in my next chapter, but hope to have illuminated some ways in which doulas, funeral practitioners, and lay participants in death awareness endorse doings and stayings with death and dying as enriching - not only as a means of alleviating suffering or grief for the dying and bereaved, but in appeal to often gendered roles and spiritualities that purport to enrich as they transform. The emodities produced in these narratives stake meaning in an *experience* of death, which is dually both natural and uncontrollable, and processually "done" in acts consumers are encouraged to find in hands-on, touching care. Davies describes the participation in death and funerals in terms of Mauss's gift, and the "force" inherent in both alienable and inalienable gifts – if in Mauss and Durkheim's theoretical world the "force" is characteristic of society as a moral community of interactive obligation, the non-participation on the part of many yields anomie (Douglas James Davies 2015, 45–46). To take this a step further and underline how caring for or about death makes obligation desirable, I regard the power purported in the "mystery" of death to be, in some awareness adherents' words, something that can make life gift-like, if not eternal, and close with ruminations to that effect from Yael and Saf, shared at the theatre.

Vignette: Socrates in Earlsfield

Yael: I wonder, since death is so unknown, that – borrowing your expression- the two-dimensional person just takes it as it is? That you know, I cease to exist, so what's the problem? It's *known* to him, but to your mother it's still unknown. If you think "that's it, I'm finished, my body's finished, *ciao bambino* sorry", it's easy. Maybe.

So, my question is whether it's important to think about what there is after, or if it's important to think about the fact that we do die. But I believe when you know everything ends, you make the best of what you have. I make sure I make the absolute most of what I have, because that's the *only thing* we have. Only thing. Not a God, not an afterlife, but I have possibilities, and I love these possibilities of mind, of imagination. This show, for me, is about inviting people to think about death and maybe making their life better. The show is a gift, in that way. We need death to understand… life is all about contrast, and we can inhabit and celebrate the contrast. We're all good and evil, we're all simple and complicated, we're all happy and sad. We have such facets, oh my god, human beings! We love our planet, but we kill it! So, death is to remember life, and life is to remember death, and they go yin and yang.

Ian: Have you read Socrates' *Phaedo*, his death dialogue? It's pretty much exactly what you said, before he takes the poison.

Saf: Well, I believe in God, wholeheartedly. At least as far as it is possible to believe - wholeheartedly. And then I'm not always that happy to be alive, as I mentioned. But I feel what you're recommending is to believe in fatality and the ephemeral "now."

Yael: Yes, because in my opinion and experience, eternity is just the moments that we create, every moment. The moments are the only things that can be eternal.

Saf: Alright, I'll try harder. Sod it, why not.

CHAPTER 6 - NETWORKED NECROBIOGRAPHIES

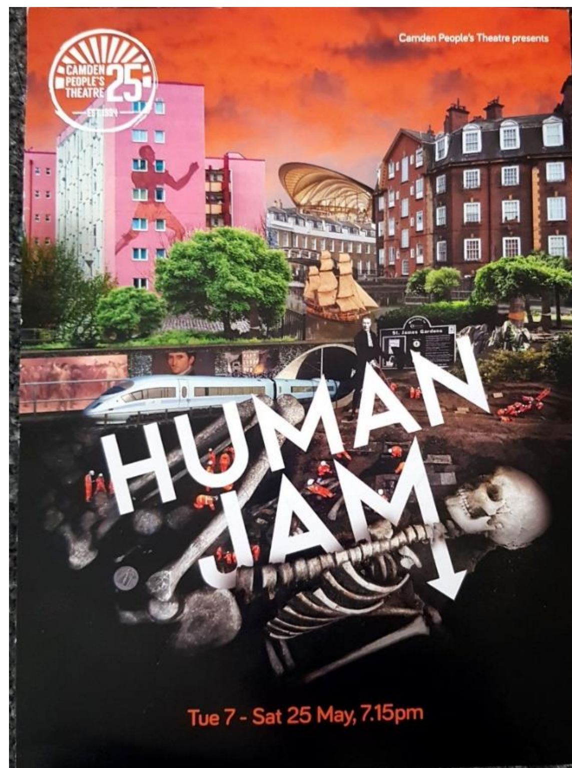


Figure 33 – Flyer for the play *Human Jam,* performed at Camden People's Theatre in 2019

At the time of initial fieldwork in 2019, around 63,000 sets of skeletal remains (dating primarily to the 18th and 19th century) were in the process of being excavated in London, with another 7,000 or so in Birmingham. Or rather, some are being archeologically excavated - meticulously studied for clues about pathology and the lives of Britons past- while others are simply exhumed for relocation, without the demand that the teams comprising over 1000 specialists record every detail of their frames. These projects set in motion to make space for the HS2 high-speed rail from London's Euston Station to Park Street in Birmingham represent the largest archaeological digs ever undertaken in the country, commencing in 2017 following the train projects' 2009 proposal, approval in 2012, and now comprising over 60 sites over the 150-mile stretch, continuing as HS2 remains a hot-button news story throughout 2023. The London-Midlands range of track is now referred to as "phase 1", with proposed phases 2a and 2b extending into a "Y-shaped" plan forking at Birmingham, to Leeds, Sheffield, and Manchester, whose network would further serve the so-called NPR, or Northern Powerhouse Rail. At time of writing, the East-West connectivity of the track is contentious and precarious; in September 2023 there has been near-daily speculation regarding the cancellation of NPR routes including Liverpool-Hull, expected to be announced in the prime minister's autumn statement in November. On the 29th of September, it was written that two £40m tunnel boring machines were to be buried underground unused at Old Oak Common in West London, as the six-mile stretch to Euston may not be executed following "unpredictable" bureaucratic expense.[123] In the northern half of the country, mayors and representatives of

[123]https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2023/sep/29/we-are-a-political-project-how-hs2s-costs-have-spiralled-out-of-control and https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2023/mar/27/revised-plans-hs2-london-euston-terminus-cost-5bn , Topham, G. (2023)

Liverpool and Manchester city regions have lamented "tens of billions" of lost investment and area growth based on calculations that HS2/NPR would deliver 24 000 jobs for the region; in Leeds, *The Guardian* states land evaluated at £5.6bn has been "safeguarded" for a Hs2 station since 2013.[124] At Euston station, HS2 trains are not expected to run until 2041-43, despite original scheduling estimates for 2026, and £1.5bn has been spent in land purchase and preparation costs in the Camden area alone. Total estimates are ambiguous and highly dependent on sources, with numerous redesigns and re-workings changing station layouts including former prime minister Boris Johnson's 2021 removal of a midlands-Leeds leg; phase one has been marked as moving from £16bn to £44.6bn; 2012 designs proposed £32.7bn for the entire Y-shape, whereby the 2019 Department for Transport update suggested £71bn without a northeasterly phase; tabloids have their "reliable sources" estimate £150bn. Outside the considerations of Covid-19 and inflation, "legal complications" in land acquisition have been cited as delaying, costly factors[125]; it is unclear how much and whether the excavations hold infrastructural sway here. The train project has been lauded as an opportunity for net-zero carbon goals and as "bringing Britain closer" in bridging a North-South or London-centric divide, and the archaeological digs themselves as an unprecedented source to gather information over some 10 000 years of history, spanning artefacts from prehistoric, Roman, Anglo-Saxon and 19th century industrial periods alike. Opposition to HS2 is rife, but I had not seen much reaction to the dig before another Awareness Week theatre excursion.

Figure 34 – Map of HS2 Plans in 2023 following line cancellations.

The distaste felt for the project by Brian Logan, the artistic director of the Camden People's Theatre by Euston Station, was evident enough in his feature article for [126]the stage section of *The Guardian* that begins with a veiled allusion to genocide:

> "'We've found four times more headstones than expected,' the archaeologist tells me. What, I ask, are they going to do with them? 'Some people have suggested we turn them into paving stones,' she says. 'Which we don't want to do, because we all know when

[124] https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2023/sep/27/pulling-plug-on-hs2-would-be-final-nail-in-coffin-for-levelling-up Halliday, J. & Murray, J. (2023)
[125] https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/how-much-hs2-cost-so-far-ckdnf2mpv
[126] https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2019/may/06/human-jam-hs2-euston-station-brian-logan-camden-peoples-theatre-london Logan, B. (2019)

headstones were last used as paving stones, don't we?' What is she referring to? Auschwitz."[127]

Logan spent the summer of 2018 volunteering on a gravestone recording project at St James' Gardens, a short walk away from his theatre, washing and deciphering tombstones or grave inscriptions before logging their information, and attending community information sessions hosted by MOLA (Museum of London Archaeology). This experience would inspire a play, "docu-theatre and beyond-the-grave fantasy" entitled *Human Jam*, that the second half of his article was centred on promoting. If the title of the play wasn't enough to relay Logan's sentiment regarding the project, one need only notice how "hair-raising" the displacement, or "gruesome upheaval" is described as in the text. The article was published nearly a week before I was booked in to see a performance, and I was glad I decided to save reading it for after the show, as some of the proverbial punches that proved effective during the play are spent or repeated. Sitting at a desk donning the hardhat and hi-vis of an archaeologist, Logan – the writer and star of the production – presented a slideshow of photos from the site: "it's the biggest archaeological project in Europe right now, with thousands of people employed. Someone there told me it was a bonanza. But is archaeology something that should be practiced on a *bonanza*-basis?" He went on to describe the way disinterred remains were placed in "shoe boxes no larger than the length of a human femur, with the words 'human skeleton' scribbled on them. Yet the volunteers were asked to not take photographs… out of *respect*". I suspect the impact he is after in the juxtaposition is well communicated, as I heard scoffs and saw violently shaking heads near myself in the audience as he repeated MOLA's "alleged" commitment to ethical treatment of remains founded on principles of "deserved dignity and respect". He wagged his fingers in air quotes, and we were urged to think about how dignity could fit in a shoebox. In his article, he had similarly described his gravestone project as " an oddly moving experience, a rubber-gloved act of communion with the dead – cut short when the headstones were then bundled off on forklift trucks"; this is similar to commentary I have made on touching communion by hands frequently contrasted with technology and speeded "doing to" verbs, the bonanzic "bundling", "scribbling" and "boxing" akin to other objectifying words (p.187)

The beyond-the-grave fantasy begins as another actor, Shamira Turner, appears on stage following a blackout: cycling through characters of different ages with different accents, she embodies the deceased of St James' Gardens, disturbed by the activities overhead and woken by the banging, drilling, and digging. As Logan lists names of the departed who are prevented from resting in peace, including Bill Richmond, a US slave who became "Britain's first black sporting superstar" and James Christie, founder of the auction house, I wonder if their feats would be commemorated or known around this small stage were they not literally dug up – I regret to say I was familiar with none of the characters mentioned. Turner ultimately settled

[127] This image may have been popularised in media by *Schindler's List* (1993), but the looting and desecration of Jewish burial grounds in Europe is and has been rediscovered and readdressed in both Poland the Czechia in 2017 and 2020 respectively: in Prague, stones paving Wenceslas Square were laid in preparation for Michael Gorbachev's 1987 visit, and were reformed in the form of a commemorative monument in 2022 – placing "last used" into more recent history. For discussion on wartime of destruction of Jewish death heritage, see eg. Cecil Roth on Thessaloniki, where he recounted "a quarry for the entire city: tombstones of inestimable historic value, as well as those erected by persons still alive, were removed regardless of age or associations, and can still be seen all over the city used as paving stones, or even to line latrines" (Roth 1950: 5) https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/sep/07/broken-jewish-tombstones-used-to-pave-czech-square-made-into-memorialTait, P. (2022)

into a thick (occasionally thinning) Geordie affectation as Thomas Spence, an 18th century Quayside radical known for his manifesto on the rights of man, at the forefront of which was advocation for common suffrage and statements against private ownership of land – the abolishment of aristocracy and landlords framed his pamphlets for a "Spence Plan" of publicly owned, self-governing democratic parishes. "It's an outrage!", Thomas bellows once Logan tells him what has happened in Euston. "What kind of world is it if a man does not have the right to his final resting place? Isn't that what every man is owed, whatever his background?" Spence's ghost or spirit becomes restless, without a place to call home, and though the act of removing the dead is unthinkable to him, it is not too far divorced from the greater issue of privatisation, presented in an overview of his life's work. Spence is commemorated in engraving on the Reformer's Memorial at Kensal Green Cemetery, erected in 1885 just over 70 years following his death, but this is not mentioned in the piece – stressing that rather than preservation of memory, the concern is around the literal land and one's claim to it by bodily presence, involvement or co-constitution as if a continuation of the Spencean proposition that parish land is and should be social dividend.

In my mind, the final scenes of the play - during which local businessowners and residents who had volunteered joint hands on stage to perform a protest song written by Spence during his imprisonment in 1804 - did not need the anger of the reanimated to render them effective. These contemporary people's stories delivered in relay as they stepped out from the curtains were also featured in the play's flyer on each of the audience seats and detailed livelihoods threatened, roads that shuddered with the noise of construction, and broken promises about budgets and timeframes. "This has been my home, my community, and my business for decades, and they've told me no, it's not", a restaurateur shared. As at Joanne's play a few days later (p.166), the audience was prompted to stand and join in song to make our demand for "the rights of people". But what of the unearthed bodies? St James' Gardens had not been much of a cemetery for a long time, as after it had served as a burial ground for the parish of St. James Piccadilly between 1790 and 1853, most grave markers were removed in 1887 when the site was converted into a public garden – likely resulting in the abovementioned memorial to Spence elsewhere. Indeed, there are suggestions St James' was not a decent burial site even as it operated: 1878 records describe it as "dreary" and "ill-kept" (Walford 2022), in line with the kinds of city burial complaints that supported the 1830s garden cemetery movement (p.137) and 1850s burial acts that decreed corpses be relocated further from overladen, overpopulated grounds, partly over concerns about cholera. There is a sweet cyclicity in social commentary as one considers the poem that lends its title to Logan's play, *The Levelled Churchground* by Thomas Hardy:

"We late-lamented, resting here,
Are mixed to human jam,
And each to each exclaims in fear,
'I know not which I am!'

The Rights of the People

by Thomas Spence

This World for the poor they say never was made.
Their portion in the Heavens be,
And say that they envy them their happy Lot,
So certain's their Felicity.
But thank them for nought if the Heavens they could let,
Few Joys there the Poor would e'er see,
For Rents they must toil and for Taxes to boot,
The Rights of the People for me.

Then cheer up all you who have long been oppress'd
Aspire unto sweet Liberty;
No Fetters were form'd for a Nation to bind
Who have the brave Wish to be free.
To Gallia then look, and blush at your Chains,
And throw off all vile Slavery,
And let each Man sing till loud Echoes ring.
The Rights of the People for me.

As for me though in Prison I oft have been cast
Because I would dare to be free,
And though in black Newgate I did pen this Song
My Theme I've not alter'd you see.
In jail or abroad whatever betide
My Struggles for Freedom shall be
Whatever Fate bring I will think, speak and sing,
The Rights of the People for me.

Human Jam is part of CPT's three-week, 25th anniversary festival 'The Camden Roar' that's by, for and about Camden and its people. For full listings visit **www.cptheatre.co.uk**

Figure 35 – Lyrics to *The Rights of the People* by Thomas Spence, distributed to the audience at Human Jam to allow joining in song.

The human jam noted by Logan and Hardy is, at face value, a critique on the perceived obscenity of the treatment of remains that leads to their reduction to "jam" or a dissolution of their embodied characteristics or dismantled resting places, brought about by later intervention. Yet according to an uncredited file on the Thomas Hardy Society website, Hardy wrote, in 1881, inspired by a memory from twenty years prior. Noticing the Wimborne Minster churchyard's tombstones had been redistributed, he met with an architect friend with whom he had once worked, co-supervising the removal of hundreds of jumbled coffins from the Old St Pancras Churchyard. "Do you remember", his friend is recorded saying, "how we found the man with two heads at St Pancras?"[128] The poem thereby reads as a critique not on the mid-to-late century removal works of remains, but the state of (neglectful) treatment that had pre-empted their redistribution work in the first place: its stanzas go on to describe the mistaken identities of the bodies, including a drunkard who "sports the text Teetotal Tommy should!", or a virtuous maiden who dreads the (reckoning) trumpet, lest she be confused in judgement with "the local strumpet".

Just as with the Auschwitz remark that opened his *Guardian* article, Logan started the play with a strong suggestion that part of what makes HS2 morally untenable in its relationship with and to corpses. There was something of a contradiction when two audience members I spoke to after the performance exhibited both a disapproval of the exposure of the dead represented by the project, and a shock that the work was not more publicised: "I just had no idea there were that many – it's unbelievable that more people aren't aware this is happening", a woman in her sixties told me. Perhaps this knowledge gap has since been rectified by the three-part 2021 BBC docu-series, *Britain's Biggest Dig*. Or maybe instead of a joint wish for the privacy and celebrity of these bodies, her remark was a condemnation of the way non-consenting corpses, just as living neighbours, can be acted upon with impunity, with the public denied sufficient information by which to scrutinise or sway actors involved? I admit my scepticism when I saw the dead mobilised as if ventriloquist's dummies in the theatre,

[128]https://www.hardysociety.org/media/bin/commentaries/1532428889.pdf

possibly owing to my meeting earlier that week with Stuart Milby, the head architect for MOLA Headland Infrastructure on the Birmingham Bullring end of excavations. I did not want to see the interesting work of friendly researchers reduced to destruction or defilement. This knee-jerk indication of dehumanisation and final rest and peace, however, points to shared and renegotiated Western (sometimes, expressly English and metropolitan) values regarding the body and its autonomy or sanctity, posing interesting questions about the necrogeographic, spectral, or death-laden shared landscape and the dead as thoroughly contemporary, malleable spokespersons therein.

Milby and I had met at an Awareness Week event called Funeral Day in Birmingham's Coffin works, discussed in more detail in chapter four. He arrived a few hours late before giving the last morning session presentation preceding our tour of the Victorian coffin goods factory. Some of the other talks had been academic, such as a paper presentation of an MA thesis on infant mortality in Derbyshire at the turn of the 20th century, while others were given by death entrepreneurs voicing suggestions for elevating visitor numbers at cemeteries in need of tourists' support or promoting their environmentally conscious hearses. Milby's PowerPoints themselves heralded a different professional protocol, as first slide featured a heavy disclaimer about the audience sanctioning of lectures and archaeological sites, whereby taking pictures of the presentation or its slides was strictly prohibited, given they contained images of skeletal remains; contemporary ethical codes as detailed by the MOLA script delineate that at dig sites, remains are covered from public view at every stage of processing - so this was sensitive. It felt almost silly to hear the guarantee that he would notify us in advance before the slides featuring such images showed up, in case someone needed a content warning for a chance to leave the room – as if we had not viewed five presentations resplendent with such material already (and given these images would repeat on the televised series). After Milby had presented a map of the Birmingham dig zone, he shared a slide with an innocuous photograph; they had unearthed a small, stained dessert wine glass in the field. By its inclusion, it became evident that the bodies uncovered on site could scarcely be interpreted as (only) recently disturbed. "We've seen a few cases like this, with something hidden in the corpse. Usually in the skull. We reckon it's just medical students having a laugh", Milby explained; there was once an anatomy school opposite the burial site.

The most desirable, expensive plots on the southern side of the grounds may meet modern standards for dignified occupation with their vaulted chambers, but the bodies of the poor were densely stacked and interlocked up to twenty feet deep further north in the 18th century Park Street burial ground, abutting the HS2 junction. Legislation regarding the desecration of dead bodies is relatively recent and vague – or non-existent – such as in the case of the offence of "preventing a decent burial", whilst the disinterment of bodies to make space for newcomers is, and has been, normal practice in many parts of Europe for the past millennium (Houlbrooke 2000). Without evaluating how (un)ethical the archaeological disruptions are surrounding corpses, it can certainly not be passed off as a novel disregard for some parishioners' remains, nor does one type of disposal over another spell unconditional value or valorisation. The satisfying irony was not lost on me as we discovered that due to textural variations of the soil and its moisture in different parts of Park Street, the "disadvantaged" bodies that occupy the crowded graves on the northern side and its arid sand are rendered newly archaeologically "valuable" at 85-90% materially preserved, as opposed to 25-50% rates of preservation at the exclusive or expensive southernmost plots with loamier "fertile" soil that corroded remains and grave goods alike. Milby and his team stressed the works' insight potential regarding "those previously silent" and cultural heritages and legacies of "regular people, like us", including a clearer image of the kinds of diets they subsisted on, or the

illnesses they contracted before death – as he walked me to the muddled Birmingham station, he expressed interest in my work because "that's what archaeology is too; we come to know life because we look at death, and see the humanity we have in common". In doing so, as the *Human Jam* play did, he made a statement about continuity of communities of persons and their claim to a common land, even if working for the "other side".

Cohabiting death

The asymmetric and reworked relationships of the agentive and animated dead have proven a site of academic interest for archaeologists, historians, sociologists, anthropologists, and geographers alike, forming what has been termed study of necrogeography or necroscape. Semple and Brookes provide a helpful summary of the concept, by which "the dead are used to punctuate, mark out and reinforce taskscapes of the living"(2020), and describe its centrality to archaeologists who find locales "invested with meaning, literally, by those that have come before", thereby allowing for meanings that can be adopted or re-examined by the living for later identity- or ideology signalling, or development. As older places of burial are "cited" (re-used) by later communities, they stress, disposal has potential for spatial proximity and powerful intimacy, as when spaces are used for pilgrimage or veneration, or dead bodies are fragmented, circulated, or made relics; similarly, scape can "set apart" and alienate, as in the general sequestration argument. In line with recent death studies scholars' discussions, I consider the (in)adequacy of disposal of the dead as a conceptual frame and suggest that dispersal (Rumble et al. 2014) and pervasiveness (Walter 2019) are closer to the core of new death media ideologies around death. A choice of necrobiography over geography in the chapter title nods to how – while the dead and their remains can be unpredictable, or "act" in unforeseen ways – when organisations or social initiatives around death awareness/positivity attribute meanings in narrativising or "doings", they vest *bios* or life by telling it or listening to its imagined story or sound; the landscape is necrotic-agentive only so far as it is enlivened or "grapehemed" as such a bio-thing.

Another catalyst for this analysis is Avril Maddrell's statement that "mourning is an inherently spatial as well as temporal phenomenon"(Maddrell 2010, 123). The looping or re-setting temporalities of the living and dead were intriguingly evident in consideration of biological time in meditation on decay and eternity (chapter five) as in Milby's description of the soil, whose comparative "liveliness" spelt a kind of entropy for less preserved corpses, but most of all in two artefacts uncovered in Euston in 2017. When the derelict National Temperance Hospital – deserted by the NHS in 1990 – was demolished for HS2 expansion, MOLA workers discovered and documented two glass jars left as intentional time capsules for future generations: the two foundation stones dating to 1879 and 1884 respectively were inscribed commemorating the opening of the first wings of the facility and contained a number of newspapers, hospital rules, temperance pamphlets and journals, and letters and business cards detailing the attendees of the hospital's opening ceremony[129]. Founded by professionals reacting to and questioning a then-widespread use of alcohol as medical treatment or fortifying therapy, the hospital was run charitably and voluntarily, largely through fundraising and endowments from temperance figureheads.

The MOLA blogs on the forgotten space conveniently disregard the community regeneration project *Camden Collective's* use of the space as a co-working hub and retail pop-up space for local creatives between 2015 and 2017 following news of planned demolition, but underline the academic curiosity involved in finding something deliberately conceived for posterity. Just as

[129] https://molaheadland.com/temperance-time-capsules-reveal-history-uks-first-sober-hospital/

the flagstones marked expansion – that continued into an additional block by 1904 – and the hospital's resources were redirected towards cholera patients and children in the 1890s, or servicemen in the two World Wars[130], the creators of this capsule seemed to recognise their city and its denizens were, and would be changing alongside their industry; their contributions razed, levelled, and built up, and perhaps commemorated as influential. The intentionality of remains and what is left behind is briefly discussed in relation to virtuality following an awareness event on digital afterlife, asking if Maddrell's temporal and spatial phenomena of mourning is less or *more* spatial in light of ongoing changes around death behaviour. Virtuality is chosen not merely for reference to a growing online or digital deathscape, but in relation to Bruce Kapferer's virtual ritual theory by which I hope to tie the threads of Hertz, Puig de la Bellacasa and "fathoming" death.

Buttons and boxes

Tony Walter's 2019 discussion on the pervasive death of 21st century western societies is a development on and against sequestration theory, suggesting we are witnessing new integrations of the dead into everyday life; it builds previous work on the revival of death (1994)and observations regarding the public interest in death and spaces where it can be met or discussed. Citing Howarth, Kellaher and Worpole amongst others, Walter identifies a shift of the dead "coming to live alongside us" in pervasive presence – whether in popular landscaped memorialisations such as benches, trees and spontaneous shrines discussed in chapter three, or green and natural burial tenets of wishes and beliefs regarding "giving back" or "joining with" the earth, and liveliness therein. Writing with Rumble et. al., the promoters of burial innovations are recognised as appealing to a blurring boundary between living and the dead as the corpse is positioned as a gift to the living or a shared environment, most evidently in natural burial settings that prioritise the fertility of body matter, but applicable to an extent for cremation and studies on the ritualised scattering or dispersal of ashes in Britain. Pervasiveness is interesting not only in its potential to reference the dead "everywhere", but "throughout", as durationally involved; as in ongoing doings described in preceding chapters, innovations like organic reduction and resomation or recycled crematory heat "physically and linguistically highlight 'process' over finality (Rumble et al. 2014, 251); the issues addressed are not of how waste is disposed of, but what it is transformed into, and where it is relocated" – and in my understanding, they address the value of and desire for transformation itself (184-5) as participatory poesis. Augmenting the Ariesian mentalité of epochs' respective adjustments or attitudes to death, Walter distinguishes the pervasive model somewhat from Jacobsen's 2016 suggestion that death is newly "spectacular death" in the west, remarking on differences of scale: where Jacobsen referred to mass mediated death as at a distance, Walter focused on discursive practices around the dead "known either intimately or through social networks" (11). In a 2020 reworking of the "spectacular", Jacobsen outlined five dimensions of death culture to be:

1) new mediation/mediatisation of death and dying

2) commercialisation of death

[130] https://ezitis.myzen.co.uk/nationaltemperance.html; provided by a mysterious site collecting 'Lost Hospitals for London', the sources for information are unclear

3) re-ritualisation of death (whereby in the wake of de-tabooing impetus, we have witnessed an intensified quest for inventing new memorial ways/rediscover old ones)

4) palliative care revolution (with new death professions gaining foothold), and

5) specialisation of death (as an object of intense scientific scrutiny and interest within humanities and social sciences (M. H. Jacobsen 2020, 7)

These points are all entirely relevant to and extensively prevalent in all of the death awareness and positivity endeavours I have recorded and attended and seem at least by-products or predicates to "pervasive" living-with - but reading the 2016 introduction of "spectacular", the emphasis on witnessing makes it a more difficult term to integrate. Lending from Guy Debord's society of the spectacle, Jacobsen has death become:

> "[...] something that we witness at a safe distance, but hardly ever experience upfront [...] spectacular death inaugurates an obsessive interest that simultaneously draws death near and keeps it at arm's length [...] we want to know about it without getting too close to it" (Jacobsen 2016, 10)

The suggestion of de-tabooing and that death is "no longer a secret" has been debated proficiently for decades: Tradii and Roberts (2019, see p.62) provide a helpful overview, in which they use examples of popular media and public policy that could be supported by Lofland or Smilie on the last "death boom" in both cultural and educational institutions' curricula in the United States (Smilie 2022 places it around 1968-77). Jacobsen provides a list of box office hit films as well as the examples of celebrity death and museum display and art (including mention of public mourning for Princess Diana, (Walter 1999) and Gunter Von Hagens' *Bodyworks*, (Walter 2004) that I could extend ad nauseam with pop phenomena like live *Post Mortem Live* (an immersive dissection experience across the UK since 2023), titles of novels, films, tv-programmes, or trending death-related (sometimes explicitly "death positive") videogames and virtual reality projects including *Spiritfarer* (2020), *A Mortician's Tale* (2018) or Dying Matters-backed *1000 Conversations about Death* (2020).[131] This is all to say that in pervasiveness, "evidence" for exteriorised (in)visibility or accepted presence or refuting rejection is placed on hold, and the spectacle's proposal that "we hardly ever experience upfront" is secondary to efforts to look at the upfront experiences that *are* there. For Jacobsen, by mediation and mediatization death is "more intrusive and invasive" than ever, lending from a suggestion from Bauman that "the impact of death is at its most powerful when death does not appear under its own name" (Bauman 1992 in Jacobsen 2016, 9), or is "everywhere and nowhere" – ultimately, it ends in echoing some of Gorer's 1950s arguments about "pornography of death", suggesting media serves as an outlet or sublimation of repression, and makes a platonic form of death "under its own name". Rather than suggesting mediated or mediatised death is "removed", I would invert the idea of "not getting too close to it" to say virtuality is indeed, about trying to fathom and undo arm's length.

Pervasiveness is exemplified with consideration to online space and social networks' users' messages or posts to or for the dead, as Walter notes continuing bonds between the living and dead are enacted with what is often direct address, implying they exist, somewhere – that the dead may see or hear what is expressed by the living users. Even in secular(ising) countries, Walter finds the plane or place of existence is often heaven (2019, 7), where the deceased are described as having status as "angels", especially guardian angels with intimation that they can

[131] https://www.hospiceuk.org/latest-from-hospice-uk/1000-conversations-about-death-video-game-revolution

“watch over” and accompany the living: he observes a tabloid’s online memorial to celebrity Jade Goody in 2009 and tributes pertaining to angels more frequently than to souls, with their suggestions that Goody was either with angels, or could continue to care for her children as one. The newly normative second-person address is related to romantic notions of post-mortem personhood, whereby the bond with the dead continues, as do their abilities to relate: Walter also mentions “soul-reunion”, or memorial narratives that suggest the deceased are with other deceased persons. To this set, I might add the widespread concept of “the Rainbow Bridge”, originated by Scottish author Edna Clyne-Rekhy and popularised since the 1990s in mourning for pets or animals, of which the Order of the Good Death’s Paul Koudounaris suggests: “It is probably impossible, at least in the English-speaking world, to have lost a cherished pet and have never heard of the Rainbow Bridge”[132]. The Bridge is a kind of limbo or vestibule to heaven, where dead pets are thought to “wait” for their owners, whom they miss, so that they might be reunited before “crossing the bridge together”, often mentioned in groups I followed. Further analysis of condolence texts can provide interesting angles on the manner in which the dead act on the world or the state they inhabit: writing of queer, black and trans resistance and activism, Che Gossett challenges the notion of “resting in peace”(Gossett 2014), and particularly in commemoration for persons whose death is considered wrongful or wrought by systemic oppression, “rest in power” is increasingly preferred (the parents of Trayvon Martin, for example, entitled his biography *Rest in Power*). Likewise, a message that I saw in a few American commentators’ posts in 2018 was more frequently and internationally used in the *Deathling Den* by 2021: “may his/her/their memory be a blessing” was primarily a Hebrew-based Jewish honorific but appears to have transcended faith.

The way social media dead are present and active, Walter adds, is partly to do with the way users can encounter deceased acquaintances “unannounced, at any time” (Walter 2019,7) given their -or their loved ones’ - belonging to the same network: just as news or memorial posts can “pop up”, so too can users “visit” or speak to the dead by opening their profile pages or engaging with past posts and messages. In this sense, the “space” of spatiotemporal mourning is, if not “everywhere and nowhere”, at least one easily travelled to, and the regulation of this journeying becomes an issue with parallels to grief theory. I often heard and read participants’ thoughts about grief being a consequence of love (p.168) or “love with nowhere else to go”, and in preference for continuation over closure, the way grief had “a life of its own” or non-linear expression was sometimes modelled as a button, or “ball and box”. The earliest iterations of a ball and box analogy I know of are via Twitter user Lauren Herschel, who shared an idea she credited to her doctor: essentially, grief was modelled as a bouncing ball in a box, whose inside wall had a “pain button” on it; as grief was new and acute, it pressed against this button constantly, but as “life grew” around grief in time so did the size of the box (or alternately, the ball “shrinks”), giving the ball more space around itself to move. Ricocheting, the ball might still “hit” the pain button at full pelt “randomly, when you least expect it”, but largely spend more of its time careening through painless life.

[132]https://www.orderofthegooddeath.com/article/the-rainbow-bridge-the-true-story-behind-historys-most-influential-piece-of-animal-mourning-literature/ Koudounaris, P. (2023)

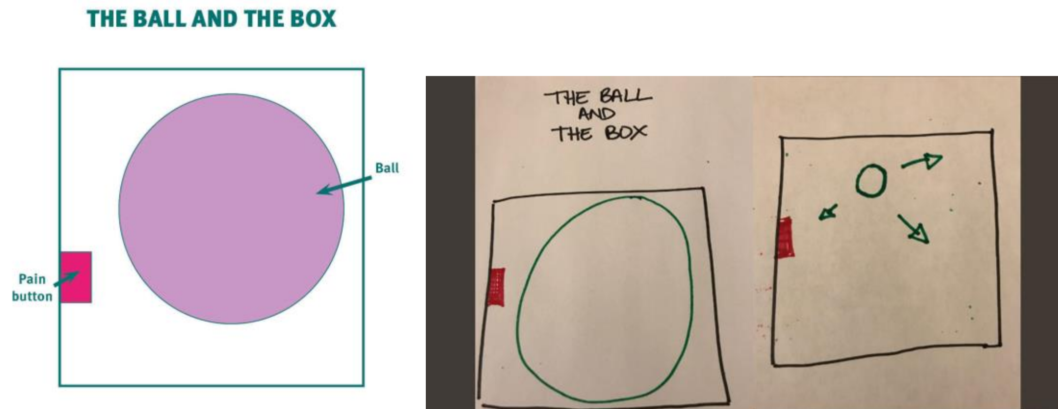


Figure 36 – The "ball and box" model of grief as presented by hospicecare.uk (left) and Lauren Herschel (right)

The analogy is repeated on North American and UK-based hospice websites, and health or bereavement resources like *The Good Grief Trust* or *What's your Grief* as well as popular news outlets; it is likely a variation on counsellor Lois Tonkin's 1996 article on growing around grief (Tonkin 1996). Yet the button as trigger point points interestingly to affordances of online bereavement and bonds; by activating in a tap or click, once could reaffirm and revisit - whether intentionally or by chance – but perhaps more problematically, see some postmortem personhoods and their traces co-opted or removed entirely when access to the proverbial button is removed, as became apparent in a death positive event around the work of Dr Elaine Kasket.

When I visited Wanstead Library for the 2019 Dying Matters festival it had been establishing itself (under Redbridge Borough libraries) as the first death positive library in the UK for some eighteen months. After further trials in Kirklees and Newcastle, *Libraries Connected* are rolling the project out over numerous hubs, with 58 libraries noted as expressing interest in the scheme in 2021 and at least five death positive launches in Hampshire in spring 2022 [133]. In practice, these libraries feature "activities, art and literature to remove taboo" or barriers surrounding death, with frequent Death Cafés or grief cafés: I noticed a poster for one of them alongside the word-trees that adorned the entryway (122-3) as I settled in for a two-hour event about digital death precipitated by the publication of Kasket's new book, *All the Ghosts in the Machine* (2019). Kasket, a psychologist, was to appear in conversation with Dr Stacey Pitsilides, who with a focus on design had been one of the academics behind the death positive library scheme. I was the first to arrive, and opted for the third row in a small cluster of around twenty chairs that had been cleared between bookshelves, as the library's head of services introduced our speakers and their aims in an entirely unsurprising way:

> "In our culture, we're all very frightened about talking about death, and that's just not good for our mental health at all. And it's mental health awareness week this week, too! So, we've had cafés, author events, workshops… all of this to get people thinking and talking, because it affects all of us at some point in our lives, let's face it."

Stacey settled into her chair opposite Elaine's, and continued with examples of the work they had done at Redbridge to date: in collaboration with creatives, funeral directors, academics, Death Café, and a Day of the Dead festival, she had created an installation (*The Final Party*,

[133] https://www.theguardian.com/books/2021/jul/25/uk-libraries-become-death-positive-with-books-and-art-on-dying Bryant, M. (2021)

2018) where members of the public could enter a cocooning pod for guided consultation with "a death expert", in order to meditate on either creative bereavement or their future dead bodies. In a 2023 publication on the subject, Pitsilides et al. go on to mention the users were asked to examine themselves through varied speculative modes: in active decomposition (see p.188for another installation to this effect) or as a 3D printout with cremated ashes; a "blending of DNA with a tree", or a technological assemblage "by downloading your brain into a robotic body or using the energy produced from your body to power cities" (Pitsillides et al. 2023, 391). The installation's pale geodesic domes lined in layers of tulle described and photographed were regrettably not there anymore when I visited, but Pitsilides. et als. description of "tickets for the afterlife" provided as part of the installation - to be taken by visitors wishing to enter - reminded me of an offering called *The Departure Lounge* at a shopping centre unit in Lewisham, produced by the Academy of Medical Sciences with support from the Wellcome Trust for the very same Awareness Week: the space had been set up as an airport departures area, with stacks of luggage and neon lights that proposed in regards to death, "my gate had been called".

Figure 37 – *The Departure Lounge* installation at Lewisham Shopping Centre

Elaine began, in turn, with a material encounter with death that kickstarted her book. Following her grandmother's death, she described her family's uncovering of a cardboard box that contained voluminous correspondence between her grandparents from an earlier part of their relationship.

> "My mother didn't have any thoughts about 'oh, is this too private, should I be reading these, is it my place' – on the contrary, she sat down and devoured all of the letters. She put them all into binders and organised them [...] they were extraordinarily healing for her, because my grandmother had a reputation of being a very cold kind of woman, who wasn't very affectionate... In his later years, my grandfather would say 'I loved Elizabeth my whole life, but she never loved me'. So, when my mother found this extremely loving relationship - these letters made it absolutely clear – it was revelatory. But other members of the family were like "don't they have a right to their privacy?"

She noted that the same letters that were comforting to her mother were painful or "too emotional" for her uncle to read or look at, segueing smoothly into the way online spaces made for their own kinds of "cardboard boxes", or button-boxes: the same Facebook profile

page that could be one mourner's saving grace could be "something that rips their heart out" for another. There was no right or wrong way, Elaine added – "but how do you decide who has the right to the letters"? Elaborating on online profiles, she described how Facebook introduced the memorialisation feature in 2010: to remove someone else's account due to death is historically exceptionally difficult (Tero Karppi proposes that Facebook may not want dead user accounts removed Karppi 2013; 2018), with provision of legal documentation such as birth or death certificates required, whereas "memorialising" a page could be enacted by other users via request form that includes a proof of death – obituaries or news articles suffice. Memorialised profiles provide the dead a new role or user category (*ibid*, 13), as some of the functions associated with user accounts become limited; only confirmed friends can see or find the person's profile, and the memorialised do not feature on birthday reminders or timeline memories, and for further protection nobody can log in to said account again. In 2013, Karppi wrote that Facebook had recently allowed friends to keep writing on the memorialised account wall, as well as preserving what was already on said wall – but the social network sites' response to dying was found lacking and irresponsible at the library. Elaine described instances where users were "blindsided" by the platform; they may have been re-reading old private message conversations one day and found the profile frozen or removed; or their access to photos barred; or been hurt by the lack of birthday or anniversary notifications, as if these events were henceforth "erased". A more difficult legal situation was described in a story of Hollie Gazzard:

> Stacey: A young woman, Hollie, she had pictures on Facebook, pictures of her life, pictures of herself with her boyfriend… and unfortunately, one evening, her boyfriend came to the hair salon she was working at and –
>
> Elaine: She had only just managed to sever this relationship, where she was a victim of coercive control throughout and-
>
> S: He came to her place of work and killed her. So suddenly, all these images of her and her murderer are there.
>
> E: And the page was memorialised by someone. They contacted Facebook and said there are 72 pictures of Hollie with her murderer, can we have them taken down please, and Facebook said 'oh no, see, that wouldn't be protecting her privacy interests – that's how she left it, that's how we must presume she would have wanted it. This can be problematic in other cases too, not just homicides."

Our speakers went on to remind us that the dead do not have rights as natural persons, or legal personalities – a right to privacy as in the U.N declaration of human rights is dissolute in death. Yet the digital footprints, identities and interactions archived in these sites challenge a privacy in ways traditional laws of succession and contracts might not have answers to.

> E: High court said it was no different to a box of letters, that just as you can bequeath a box of letters in a will, accounts are the same. I question that very strongly. It involves the privacy of so many other people, and it's so extraordinarily comprehensive. You know all those emails you got about gdpr, gdpr – but gdpr doesn't say anything about the data of the dead. They say "we'll leave this to the member states to figure out." It's just shuffling off responsibility, and into that legal void, big tech companies will step.
>
> Facebook is making the most visible effort to do something about this, but it's complicated. Two weeks before the book came out, they came out with the latest press release – and I thought "that'll make something in the book a little inaccurate, thank you

> very much" – but they came out with this headline, *A Better Way to Honour your Loved Ones*. Basically, they're saying, "here's all the ways that we have decided to make things better so that you don't experience this pain" or "we're giving people the right way" and I'm thinking "how did we get to the point where a big tech company like Facebook is telling us the healthy or unhealthy, the good or bad ways to grieve our loved ones. Who is Facebook to tell you, or me, or anybody what's good for you? That's stepping over the line a lot, for me."

The audience responded in a mix of heavy heads and laughter when Elaine noted Facebook did have a "compassion team" trying to optimise user experience; when the presentation ended with applause and nearly an hour opened to the floor, a significant majority of audience questions were concerned with data or hopes for practical advice to "safeguard" oneself. "It's designed for money, isn't it… they don't care how well we grieve, they're mining us, our friends, our families – and the dead. Once you sign on, they own you", a woman in the front row stated icily. The ethical and legal complications of online afterlife as managed by tech companies and social media are to be further discussed by Tamara Kneese and Carl Öhman in their upcoming monographs, *Death Glitch* (2023) and *The Afterlife of Data* (2024). Without delving into this growing research niche further, I suggest that in many of these conversations, the "pervasive" nature of dead data is both hauntological – the dead that can be "mined" or zombified (eg. as false voters or artificial renderings, as in cases of celebrity avatars) as they linger or float unexpectedly into feeds as if pressing the imagined "pain button" – yet worryingly finite. Öhman and Watson make projections about how few decades it might take before the number of dead Facebook users supersedes that of the living, and suggest the power of companies - whether by human or artificial entities - to delete users' material, given the limits of data storage, is akin to the ability to erase, or (re)write human history (Öhman and Watson 2019). By the end of Elaine's event, she was back to the cardboard box, suggesting that instead of the adages of "online is forever", without vulnerable pieces of paper there may be nothing at all left, given possible changes in hardware, software, code, or companies' remit.

The event on the virtual dead bore resemblance to other death positive events in their appeal to protecting and enabling people to grieve or die in their own way, or according to what felt right personally, as well as an explicit critique of an industry (as of medical, or funerary) that is presented as uncaring or imposing norms – who was Facebook to dictate good or bad, or Hs2 to say which routes positively united or separated the nation? Where I saw its most explicit link to the trainline for HS2 and the model of pervasive death, however, was in the way relinquished control over spaces or places where the dead could "live" would in turn, make the environment less liveable for other entities; claiming the agency and vitality of death and the dead, in turn, is a means of creating or asserting community with its dependencies, associations, and responsibilities. In critiquing big tech, Elaine and Stacey introduced the concept of a decentralised web, where the internet might be reorganised in peer-to-peer infrastructure, rather than via large hosting services: the very creator of the world wide web, Tim Berners-Lee, was cited as passionately disavowing the current state of online presence as giving away control or data, "not consistent with his vision for what the web was". Just as "giving away" the body to conventional industry was made out to be alienating or threatening to interpersonal bonds, so too was the signing on that had virtual bodies "owned" by someone or something that might be indifferent to how meaningful haptic, clicky care engagements with them might be. Just as in the object-making language around bodies that was unsavoury, the Euston and Birmingham bodies were, as virtual persons, were mineable, diggable, and fragile.

Virtual community, redux

In relation to the trainline, the land stood for more than a resting place stripped of its constituent persons; after St James' burial ground was converted to a public garden in 1887, it had been planted with over 100 plane trees over a half hectare, celebrated in director Brian Logan's performance as "pollution busting". Once Hs2 announced the garden's closure ahead of excavation, they included word on the felling of 80% of mature trees in Euston Square Gardens, as well as the street-lining trees on Cardington Street – and each one growing in St James', some 500 in total[134]. *Human Jam's* slides included images of trees that had been yarn bombed, or decorated with crocheted loops of string by locals, with a special consideration for Reverend Anne Stevens of the neighbouring St Pancras Church, who joined a local resident, Jo Hurford, in chaining themselves to one such tree in protest. Other protesting bodies include the Woodland Trust, who state 108 ancient woodlands (defined as constantly forested since 1600) will be damaged in the wake of Hs2, alongside 33 sites of special scientific interest, and 21 nature reserves destroyed over 56 hectares in phases 1 and 2, threatening rare aquatic species – though Hs2 have refuted these numbers[135]. As the environmental facets of surviving or continuing life overlap with continued domicile or business for residents, or relate to online persons risking erasure, I find Julieta Aranda and Eben Kirksey's work on ocean life offers a valuable ontological term. In their article, the authors suggest life and nonlife usually exist in dynamic relationships, with gifts of energy and matter shared across time; this fits with both pervasive death, and Walter's matching of his model to Robert Hertz's "triangular" system, where death is made up by the living, the corpse, and the afterlife that reveal each other, and Hertz's proposition that death rituals allow the "last word" to be with life. Yet as fungicides, biocides, petrochemical by-products and plastics spin and plume in oceans, their waters become sites of "double death": double death processes are described as those which uncouple life and death and diminish death's capacity to "turn back toward the living" (Aranda and Kirksey 2020). Considering the privatised or occupied land in Thomas Spence's complaint, paired with the privatised interests of online data, engagement with the dead can be seen as biopolitical or necropolitical, whereby acts of labour are attempts to assert the creativity of human work against forces of decline (Bear 2012, 185), or such a "doubled" inertia.

In necropolitics as generally attributed to Achille Mbembe, Foucauldian biopower is expanded in an argument whereby the inscription of death and especially the wounded or slain body into orders of power are central; the politics of death examined by who has the right to kill (Mbembe 2019 [2003]) or the "dark side" of democracy with its racist, fascist, and nationalist forces discussed, but is frankly often difficult to plot onto boring (p.130) comfortable (p.78) or hopeful public engagement projects I followed. Karppi's discussions of Facebook afterlife, however, proposes a third noopolitical, which I understand to better suit death positive or aware advocacy. Following Terranova, noopolitics are those that "address the economic, biological, and spiritual life of a population and politics that address ways of living, feeling, thinking and acting through mediated technologies" (Karppi 2013, 2), and move subtly from technologies of governing the body to technologies that gather publics together, and influence their actions (*ibid,* 12). I have previously discussed the way making time to live "in" the temporalities of dead and dying are explicit in narratives of good dying, and the fact that there are festivals, May awareness weeks, mental health weeks, or days of remembrance (in addition

---

[134] https://www.camdennewjournal.co.uk/article/look-its-the-final-spring-in-st-james-gardens Travers, J. (2017); sadly, the HS2 info page regarding these landscape changes has been removed in 2023.
[135] https://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/media/43632/hs2-community-toolkit.pdf

to the #IRemember week launched by Hospice UK for November, there is a National Grief Awareness Week in December, Hospice Week in October, as well as Celebration Day, started in the UK in June 2022), can organise temporal orientation for gathering. Yet in the libraries, museums, lecture theatres and coffee shops that marked my fieldwork, the way place and space is made for death and life alike are commentaries on the value or capaciousness of public endeavour and belonging to such a landscape: reflecting on the design of cocoons, Pitsilides et. al. expressly state their interest in how publics are made with things (Pitsillides et al. 2023, 390), in semi-permeable three-dimensional space. The matter introduced in the library in their installation's meditations could encourage viewers to see the world as "full of active, animate things, rather than passive objects" (391) in an alterbiopolitical vein, by their own matter merging with agents of decomposition or robotic assemblage – but more expressly, I supposed that guests, as living and mortal, were made "to matter" non-passively in a space that ideally fosters and mediates knowledge. "Stories interweave themselves into the social fabric, and libraries are the custodians of these narratives", Pitsilides. et al. begin (389), and parallel both noological influence and necrobiographising: the custodianship involved says that if there is indeed an arms' length to death, the hands or arms that reach out to it must be "ours".

As they develop, I have seen The Order of the Good Death and Dying Matters make more concerted political efforts to effect change in their regions. Dying Matters and Hospice UK news updates have kept me abreast of successes – including the government's £200 million of hospice funding in 2020 – and participatory projects such as charity runs or research focus groups readers might contribute to (such as a 2022 piece by the University of York, on improving EOL-services for families and carers). Occasionally, newsletters list ongoing calls to write to local members of parliament: following the covid pandemic, for example, over 1000 Dying Matters members wrote to MPs to request they sign a letter to the prime minister regarding a Covid-19 public inquiry penned by Maureen Anderson, who shared her story of caring for her dying parents at home in 2020 on their website and social media. Dying Matters' new policy and influencing page includes resources on both direct and indirect influencing, with an overview of health service contracting guidance and stakeholder analysis to identify relevant parties and an online "innovation chat" enabling linking to an "ECHO hub" (standing for Extension of Community Healthcare Outcomes). I have seen death networks circulate letters and parliamentary pages about rewriting outdated disposal laws in attempt to ensure desired burial outcomes for the dead[136] or criminalising corpse desecration, and advocate for bereavement leave in cases of pregnancy loss; I have read jubilant posts about the 2020 order from CMA (Competition and Markets Authority) that funeral directors and crematory operators must make pricing clearer[137].

For the Order, the calls to action once mentioned in YouTube video descriptions boxes have their own page since 2022, with the most pressing or recent calls featured in a red banner overlain throughout the website: at the time of writing, updates to the Federal Trade Commission's (FTC) Funeral Rule takes priority, as the FTC is considering strengthening the Funeral Rule devised in the 1980s. The Funeral Rule, similarly to the CMA order above, was set up as federal regulation to protect consumers required funeral homes to provide prices if requested in-person or by telephone, but has not explicitly been extended to email communications, texts, or website listings; the 2020 FTC review found over 60% of American

[136] https://www.lawcom.gov.uk/project/a-modern-framework-for-disposing-of-the-dead/ (2022)
[137] https://www.gov.uk/government/news/funeral-costs-lower-for-bereaved-families-following-cma-order (2023)

funeral homes did not provide such information online. Outside of price disclosure, updates are being considered surrounding clarifying language and presenting options to embalming. Other active calls in 2023 are often state-specific and include resisting foetal tissue burial laws, and writing for legalising aquamation/alkaline hydrolysis (Massachusetts, Texas), open air funeral pyres (Vermont, Maine, Minnesota) and human composting rights (currently attempted for Massachusetts; the great popularity of the *Order* has been credited with introducing bills to legalise to local delegates in Minnesota, Rhode Island, Maine, Connecticut, Nevada, New Jersey, Maryland and New Mexico all in 2023). As the objectives and shared achievements of activists and advocates grow and change daily, these few examples aim to present how literally some factions of death awareness influence life- and death-space, in noopolitical dissemination of information and public-gathering.

The manner is which death advocacy makes ideated community is explicit in a 2022 addition to the *Order,* wherein a website subheading directs audiences to a landing page about becoming part of their "Social Ecosystem Project". The Social Change Ecosystem framework, they explain, was created by Deepa Iyer, a senior director at strategic initiatives for something called the Building Movement Project. The Building Movement Project is described in turn as a nonprofit organisation specialising in "examining movement building", ultimately facilitating or supporting other groups in the non-profit sector. Iyer's map was published in her 2018 training materials and features a starburst-like image; a graph that has equity, liberation, justice and solidarity in a ball at its centre, seemingly constituted by (or resulting in?) actors with various titles in the bubbles that orbit and connect to the central node. Storytellers, weavers, healers, disruptors, visionaries, guides, and caregivers number among those that make up this ecosystem of value in action, and the *Order* suggests death positivity can integrate - or benefit from the contributions of - each of these types of person.

Figure 38 – Graphs modelling the Social Change Ecosystem and the Death Positive Library scheme via orderofthegooddeath.com and LibrariesConnected.org.uk

Without much consideration for the parts of this potential personality test, I suggest the social ecosystem bears some resemblance to Kellehear's caring/compassionate cities or caring communities, grounded further in the World Health Organization's concepts of "healthy cities" or "healthy communities". Healthy communities, Kellehear writes, are predicated on a 1970s and 1980s understanding of public health, whereby health was "everyone's

responsibility": government and workplace policies, schools, media and the law alike were encouraged to be involved in supporting health-promoting behaviours. Just as education and public service came to discourage people from harmful substances or circumstances – including but not limited to promotion of seatbelts, healthy diets, stress avoidance, safe sex, physical activity – palliative care and EOL-issues have and can become further areas of health promotion via community involvement. Now a patron for LWDW doulas, (p.170) Kellehear has elaborated on the opportunity death education affords in limiting "co-morbidities" of dying, such as loneliness, depression, and lost workdays, and for its integration into:

> "Not only schools, workplaces, or churches/temples, but a community's social media—television, newspapers, radio, and websites. Public health education is not solely about attempting to change behaviour to make people healthy but also about selling people on the idea that being healthy has real benefits." (Kellehear 2015, 227)

One such benefit of education is considered the way participants are freed of "passive circumstance of being victim" (*ibid*, 226). While a survey of over 200 UK palliative care services contended most of them were prioritising "community engagement" or "compassionate community" (Kellehear 2013, 1071) suggests the idea is widely popular and accepted, community risks reading like a pre-existing condition or utopia, and care and compassion hang ambiguously. Are they used as nouns for a service provided, or should all carers be expected to not simply care for, but care about – and if so, who is one's community? Do I have one, or is making it another responsibility – is loneliness victimhood?

Here, I reassert my fathoming, as a metaphor amongst these hive-like morphologies. When Haraway attempts to counter visually dominated or anthropomorphic thinking, she introduces tentacles – from the Latin for "to try" or "irritate", as well as in reference to cephalopods – to suggest the world is to be perceived not in observation, but by touching, feeling, and trying out (Haraway 2016, 31). Including the other or non-human by introducing a "many-armed, many-brained" positionality, tentacles seem at first appropriate enough for use in my contexts, which I have described as involve literal and figurative touching engagements or doings with death and dying, the corpse and afterlife, or other persons. Yet tentacles or "social change ecosystems" do not seem to look like mortally man-made, noopolitically desired, cared about constellations: they do not remind me of the always held hands of hospice advertisements. If people can be "sold on the idea" that being healthy has benefits, they are here "sold on" (perfect and passive present tense) the idea that certain attitudes to death and to other persons, dead or alive, are aspirational – if only ever that. To present the image of outstretched arms as "fathoming" does not simply try to mimic a state of affairs: "these are people, corpses, places; this is how they connect". Instead, it represents a yearning, orientation, and intent: "these are how we would connect with people, corpses, and places, if we could reach", or an ethical statement therein: "I reach my arms out so that I may be touched, because I care". That death is unfathomable – untouchable or incomprehensible on some level – makes for a sensorial journeying not dissimilar to Nadia Seremetakis's definition of nostalgia, taken to be a "pain to journey" (Seremetakis 2007, 300), to counter exile or estrangement. In fathoming as an attempt to grasp, it applies not only to "death literacy", such as *comprehension* of medical or bureaucratic phenomena that education may provide, but the sought proximity to something – as lofty as authenticity, or solid as a neighbourly embrace - that participation seems to promise.

Walter's discussion of Hertz states it intentionally leaves out the element of double burial or secondary rites he introduced in 1907; indeed, the proposition that death rites might be "completed" in a later dry disposal of remains is contrary to continuing agencies or relations.

Yet as Hertz himself floundered in trying to account for indeterminate or incomplete secondary processes, I maintain time is important in new death movements for its virtuality or metaphor. When the *Camden Collective* staked their use of the old Temperance Hospital as a regeneration or revitalisation project, or taboo arguments hinge on "de-" or "re-" taboo, often with strong arguments about a past where people were more capable of care or adhered to community, collectiveness is itself an atemporal or spiritual perennialism (p.190) that is journeyed to. Daniel Miller numbers among those who write on imagined decline of Western sociality, examining a British public's assumption of "grand narrative", whereby traditional or rural societies retain a sense of community, while contemporary or urban settings spell individualism, isolation, and fragmentation (Miller 2015, 336). Tracing historical sources, Miller finds cases of a nostalgia for neighbourly intimacy in the UK dating back to the 1880s, and proposes prior interaction between neighbours was "likely to do with mutual dependence based on poverty, more than sentiment"(*ibid,* 348). Interviewing villagers in an anonymised English setting, testimony regarding felt neighbourliness was ambivalent, but does this not threaten the virtual community when virtuality is taken as no "less real" or simply alternate to actuality. In making the agora, community theatre, salon, café, conference, decentralised web or library - that could be discussed at length with scholars of third space - or the corpse and afterlife itself, with their speech acts or dimensional things, there is an insistence on human agency to act on and in time, when and if ritually collected under caring for and about.

I credit Maija Butters with pointing me towards Bruce Kapferer's notion of virtuality, which she uses in her 2021 thesis on hospice care and in a 2023 article: lending from Deleuze and Guattari, she elaborates that the fantastical imageries painted in stories at deathbeds by the dying helped them explore and express feelings about death or empowered them to encounter their situations. Virtuality, she explains, is neither simulacrum nor alternative reality, but is "depth to the surface" of lived, ordinary realness, where dynamics as a field of force achieve intense concentration. When Oiva, a retired artist, described himself climbing atop a mountain and throwing himself into the abyss to die (Butters 2023, 7) his virtual vision was distanced from reality, but its effectiveness was in this very distance: rather than "merely" a fiction, the virtual as a dimension of the real has potential to allow those involved to enter life's processes and adjust its dynamics by its *techne*. Virtuality is termed as that which does not lack reality, but engages in a process of actualisation following a plane of immanence that grants it this particular reality; in Deleuze and Guattari, the virtual is chaotic, containing "all possible particles, all possible forms, which spring up only to disappear immediately"(Handelman 2013, 34), whereas everyday conditions or "states of affairs" relate to this chaos by taking from the virtual its actualisable potential. The virtual potential, nonetheless, exceeds what is actualised or can be given form in the everyday. Where Kapferer diverges, however, is his description of actuality as "chaotic in the indeterminacies of its multiple forces and contradictory trajectories of living" (*ibid*, 34) – he argues that virtuality can be consistent, determinate, and repeatable. Marrying continental philosophy with an anthropological encounter with a Buddhist Sinhalese healing rite called *Suniyama*, he suggests the ritual at hand is virtual in twofold, as an imaginal space and a technical site for entry to dynamics of the reality formation of actuality (Kapferer 2006, 375): actuality can "meet itself" without "interfering in itself".

To unpack - recognising my limitations in summarising Suniyama – the rite is an intervention explicitly about adjusting the coordinates of a victim of sorcery to act in space and time. The ensorcelled "is cut off from the social, robbed of speech, trapped within oneself, with consciousness dimming and intentionality losing its purchase in the world" (Handelman 2013, 33); over twenty-four hours, the ritual action focuses on a building known as the Mahasamatta

Palace, which Kapferer describes as a “virtual reality machine”. The palace is described as the instrument through which the victim descends into virtuality, based on a foundational myth by which human life and its orderings were imagined into existence; the palace “encloses the axial and cosmic centre of existence” (Kapferer 2006, 379) as a place the victim progresses towards and enters, seated on the mandala, to become completed as a world-maker capable of self-actualisation, or activities of human construction. Essentially, Kapferer’s construction dilutes oppositionality of mundane time-space and sacred ritual time-space, as though the ritual involves “primordial slowing down”, splitting time, or the creation of “presentness of the present”, the virtual and actual time-spaces are consonant or mutual. “In the virtual time-space of the rite, they reset their patients within the time-space of reality construction” (Kapferer 1997, 180). The state of victimhood vis sorcery is, in my reading, similar to the “doubly dead” of non-integrated death, that is thought stripped of its potentiality to world-make, or “robbed of speech” in its unheard voices or unseen features. While I am not arguing that death positive events or their everyday spaces are virtual reality palaces, I recognise their attempts at techne for reality construction: in calls for speaking, planning, or controlling, they “enliven” audiences in relation to time – either suggesting adventitious agency (advanced care, funeral plans, becoming earth) or thickened present accomplished by “inviting” these speculations and other entities: to embrace life or its constituent bonds in one’s past and future as immanent *carpe diem*.

In this chapter, I utilise an ongoing large-scale exhumation project and a protest play it inspired to synthesise an overarching theme of interconnectedness in my research, outlining how the “necrobiographies” and spaces inhabited or “enlivened” by their connections to the dead inform living contribute to politicised, non-linear alliances. Pairing this account of uprooted remains with a visit to an outreach event aimed at informing consumers about their data at the time of death, I evaluate recent arguments about the “pervasive” dead (Walter 2019) and their virtuality. The community theatre and library as sites serve as a final segue into the “noological “(Karppi 2013) influence of death awareness as it seeks to gather publics and engender change and depth of entry into processes of living and relating, reinforcing my conceptualisation of “fathoming”.

POSTSCRIPT

I divided my work into two parts due to a general thematic resemblance. In part one – *memento mori* – I take a literal translation of *remember you die* to frame three chapters about worded, spoken and written re-minders. The presentation of death studies history with detailed discussion on Robert Hertz, the Death Café, and the literary inspirations of a volunteer event were about how and where we speak and write about death; how words are prized tools for bringing to mind or making mindful participation in the production of death.

In part two – *carpe diem* – I concentrated on more corporeal or haptic themes befitting the Latin verb for seize or pluck, as encounters describe the work and obligations of care towards bodies as well as the temporal element (as represented by *diem)* involved in relating at sites of fleeting affects. I present some of the rituals promoted by new actors in end-of-life services and an analogy for caring predisposition that references a call to touch before describing theatrical productions about the types of bodies we hold on to or relinquish.

The two parts come together in a play on the frequent death awareness claim that deliberately orienting oneself towards death is "death positive", life-affirming, or makes living "better": I call it memento mori as carpe diem.

Chapter 1 is an overview of context by means of literature review, presenting foundational texts for both the anthropology of death, and an intellectual tradition in social sciences that undergirds arguments about death denied, "tabooed", or sequestered. This material is often sociological, psychological, historical, or philosophical, as not only is death studies or thanatology an interdisciplinary field, the earliest instances of dedicated work regarding death in Europe and North America (or "the West") originates in or refers to these fields. Similarly, such academic literature informs popular resources and messages shared by death awareness groups in my site and research either directly – when, for example, a specific book like Ernest Becker's *Denial of Death* is recommended to audiences - or indirectly. Examples of recourse to social science or its themes may be an avowal of anxious modernity (p.35) or the citing of an "obvious" historical decline of sociality and ritual, necessitating intervention.

In this chapter, I opened with Robert Hertz's 1907 essay on death rituals in Borneo owing to its lasting influence following renewed popularity from the 1970s, and its illustration of specific interconnected areas or themes within death studies as it examines practices of relation between corpses, survivors, and the spiritual or relocated category of "the dead". Rather than evidencing a tidy structure associated with the Durkheimian *Année Sociologique* school, I posit that the irregular or inconclusive cases in Hertz's work flood the bounds of binary or tripartite models later debates have sought to establish. These conversations introduce the association of death with both regeneration and fear in literature and point to a habit in death anthropology that parallels one of death awareness; namely, the suggestion that anthropologists have not spoken on death enough. This provides a segue into a short presentation and problematisation of persistent claims regarding universal death denial or anxiety in so-called Terror Management Theory.
Chapter 2 built on ethnographic research conducted at Death Cafés and introduces this "social franchise" by an overview of its operation in the United Kingdom from the 2010s, as well as presenting intellectual predecessors and later variations on the ephemeral community café space as a kind of "third space" (eg. Putnam 2000). In a description of three distinct café events and a review of materials circulated to engender group conversation, a theme of

"talking about talking" emerges. Beyond communicating thoughts about death, there is a discourse of how speech is to be conducted (removing euphemism, for example) and corresponding desired phatic, therapeutic, or restorative effects for the living. I elaborate on the use of taboo in these spaces, including debates following the work of historian Philippe Ariès (eg. Walter) and suggest death anxiety is often closer to complaint about uncaring or fragmented individualism. I introduced and question messaging and promotions that suggest talking about death enables "happier", healthier, or more meaningful living with reference to critical theorists working on the commodification of emotion predicated on examined, self-managed living.

Chapter 3 expanded themes of communication and positivity in pressing up to their limitations or misgivings. The three encounters detailed here are examples of advocacy for death awareness enacted at pop-up events, of one which was co-hosted by the author. These cases – at decorated stalls whose volunteers organised around prompts such as "what is a good death?", or activities like writing exercises - provide sites to examine the reception of awareness campaigning by the general public presumed unfamiliar with its goals and rhetoric. Sitting at once on either side of my own "expertise", matters of ethical or undesirable professional involvement came to the fore in predominantly medical themes. The antipathy towards death and dying in hospitals prevalent in death aware content (as opposed to its ties to hospice) is central to this chapter. Rather than dwelling on biopower or standing a generalised "medical mindset" in opposition to "natural" death, I reviewed death positive guidance to document choices to highlight preoccupations with family and autonomy.

Chapter 4 marks a transition into part two in presenting what has been termed the "funeral industrial complex" to examine of the contentious relationship between death awareness advocacy and a traditional professional funerary sector. As in the case of Caitlin Doughty, many practitioners – funeral directors, morticians or undertakers - involved in the movements I follow present their services as socially and environmentally aware alternatives to a ceremonial status quo found either wanting, or actively harmful. I began this chapter as onlooker to an argument that erupted at an academic conference, where a representative of the nation's largest funeral provider came under scrutiny from the audience for uncaring or opportunistic corporate approaches to the dead and bereaved. This is contrasted with a panel presentation given by an independent funeral director who describes their "meaningful" practice.

Whilst a distrust of modern funeral directors can be found in written sources since the growth and development of the trade in the early 19th century, I provide an overview of Jessica Mitford's 1963 exposé on the American funeral home for its role in death positive movement today and arguably, in preceding civic organisation around memorial associations and consumer alliances. Mitford's work is especially committed to ridiculing undue expense and embalming for display; both are critiques that persist in death awareness messages against certain types of material trappings for disposal. In discussing alternatives, such as "natural" or green burial, I am interested in the negotiation of what is meaningful and beautiful or evidences care.

Chapter 5 engaged with topics broached in the preceding in a more theoretical and reflective register, as sensuous themes of informed/aware, viewing/seeing, touching/feeling are analysed following an account of a theatre performance. In conversations on the unspeakable dead, the undesirable medical death and the unnatural preserved corpse alike, sequestration is articulated through what I call *unfathomability;* there is a failure to extend a reach to

effectuate a desirable co-presence or rather, an urge to fathom by keeping one's arms stretched out in embrace despite a recognition that one cannot be held in return. I review Puig de la Bellacasa's *Matters of Care* (2017) for its contribution on touching as a reciprocal metaphor that conceives of caring knowledge as intensification of involvement and proximity to explain my perspective more thoroughly. Furthermore, I discuss the assertion that the exigencies of care time are disruptive to anthropocentered temporalities – presented by Puig de la Bellacasa in relation to soil care – in tandem with Kapferer (2004) on ritual virtuality, which creates its own time-space or dimension in actuality.

The ethnographic grounding for this chapter is in both the expression of embodied grief and longing in a physically rigorous one-woman play, and its relation to maternity. The creator of this piece was one of five death- and/or birth doulas I spoke to as I learnt of the growing popularity of training programmes for such roles – whether termed end-of-life doulas, death midwives, or "friend at the end". It is the "hands on" of companionship and its influence in changing expectations for duration and place for care (such when as championing dying at home, organising wakes, or D.I.Y home funerals) that death awareness finds its spiritual component. Whilst some of the death cafés I attended had been organised by doula organisations, the event above and an additional speech given by a long-time alternative deathcare provider emphasised femininity and journeying. This repeats throughout my field site; not only are the majority of death awareness activists and enthusiasts women, the funeral industry has seen a rapid relative increase in women joining its professions over the last decade in the UK and United States alike. I present some of my participants' speculations on this aspect and critically evaluate frequent calls to "treat death like we do birth", and arguments about empowerment in death care work.

Chapter 6 closed the thesis as it began, with social media sites. Yet here the virtual is discussed in relation to post-mortem personhood and afterlife in an introduction to current concepts of necrographic imaginaries, or necrobiography. I discuss a community outreach event aimed at informing consumers about their data and user rights and emergent concerns and opportunities for memorialisation in a space increasingly saturated by dead profiles. I evaluate claims from Jacobsen (2020) and Walter (2019) regarding a potential "partial re-reversal" of Western attitudes towards death (presented in chapters one and two, characterised by distance or negation) in a new death era described as "spectacular" or "pervasive" respectively. The pervasive dead were related to a protest performance in response to the HS2 train line project between London and Birmingham, allowing reflection on how the lost and found exhumed dead at its construction sites are animated and politicised. I return to questions in traditional anthropology of death and Hertz's essay detailed in my opening chapter to ask what kinds of places the dead go - if they ever do take leave.

The digital dead and exhumed present the dead as conceptually and materially confronting at once and allows a final word on care as affectively or ethically charged "caring about" as well as a matter of "maintenance" involved in caring for, brought about in virtual doings. Through this thesis, I have tried to demonstrate care in different guises: making people care about their communities; the loneliness of care in bereavement; providing adequate or appropriate care at the end of life; the extent to which moralised carers or professionals and their industries supposedly do or cannot care about individuals and their bodies; the care for the environment and stewardship of its dead, and so on. In my reading care is both desire and obligation, and parallels Puig de la Bellacasa's proposition that making matters of "should-care" necessitates a transformation of ethos to privilege interdependency. I find that in relation to mortality, to be concerned and complicit is compatible with scholarship on alterontologies or other possible

worlds whereby what death is thought to be affects its care - and in turn effects what death becomes.

I conclude with a suggestion that death awareness is an appeal to notice or *fathom* death and its prepersonal and unconscious entanglement in care. This makes it an interesting ally to texts typically associated with other-than-human being, given its starting point in human lifespan. I speculated on the trends and shifts in death awareness content over the past five years and its potential or fragmentation in recognition of multitudes as an academic, anti-consumerist ecofeminist or decolonial, secular and middle-class, ambitiously policy-making and entrepreneurial, or a spiritual and mindful wellness movement alike.

Post-taboo

In the final stretches of the writing project, in 2023, I was taken aback by a message from BrumYODO; an email for recruiting new staff.

> "We used to say death and dying were taboo subjects in society – not anymore."

In weariness over taboo that likely coloured this thesis, I have not meant to invalidate peoples' claims to a sense of difficulty surrounding the topic of death or loneliness in lacking conversation: Maija Butters's collection of conversations with hospice patients in Finland is one of many rich ethnographies whose participants state the struggle or pain of speaking of death or experienced "unspeakability", and the death café guests I met often expressed relief about being granted an audience that felt "safe" or amenable to the subject. Instead, I might revisit taboo to establish it as not synonymous with "forbidden" or "not allowed", by way of classic anthropologists' arguments. Radcliffe-Browne wrote against the use of "taboo" for world customs and rituals that only loosely resembled early Polynesian examples (Radcliffe-Brown 2014 [1939], 8), as "*tabu* has a much wider meaning"; he suggested tabu was indeed equivalent to "our own word, forbidden", but given different contextual uses of the same word, literature on Polynesia had produced "a good deal of confusion". Instead of exporting the word, he proposed the types of customs enveloped by anglicised "taboo" that were habitually analysed as ritual avoidances or prohibitions should best be defined in terms of "ritual status" and "ritual value".

Explaining through James Frazer's observations of the Maori, Radcliffe-Browne notes that the same term, *kapu*, is used for the sanctity of a chief and the uncleanliness of a person sentenced to death for incest; they "are the same thing". Holiness and uncleanness, he notes, had both been grouped under "sacred" as an inclusive umbrella, justified by the Latin *sacer* applying to gods and accursed things alike, "but there is certainly a tendency in English to identify sacred with holy" (*ibid,* 123) – value is his attempt to divorce *kapu, tabu*, or sanctity from either negative or positive connotation. A special day, a material thing, a name or word or event could all be said to have ritual value, exhibited in behaviour towards the object or occasion – this value could be treated "negatively" as avoidance, and in "positive" rites that sacralise or endow objects with said value, whereby "in general anything that has value in positive ritual is *also* the object of some sort of ritual avoidance" (139, emphasis mine). In a way, then, I am suggesting the "de-tabooing" of death positive work can be "re-tabooing" by the same token: Troyer notes that re-stating a societal death denial or taboo can give movements their "opponent" or countercultural impetus and excitement, but alongside this construction of a mission, the narratives I trace seem concerned with the (ritual) value of death; that "dying matters". In positivity narratives, death may be iterated normal and natural, universal and everyday; but its constitutive phenomena are certainly not treated as quotidian, not-special, or "just" death. Looking and reaching for death, virtually, can make it ritually valuable.

In Radcliffe-Browne, value is a relation between a subject and object that can be stated by either the object having value for the subject, or that the subject itself has an interest in the object. Of the Maori case, he writes that breaches would lead to punishment by *atua*, a ghost or spirit, making it a matter of religion in Frazerian terms; Radcliffe-Browne suggests instead that "in general" status change is immediate in instances such as touching a corpse, making it somehow preter-religious – it is only when the person committing an infraction "proceeds to rationalise the whole system" that they think of gods, spirits, or *atua*, as being concerned (137). I choose to read concern, here, not as "they think it *applicable to atua*", but that in reflecting on the rules of *tabu*, a power or relation can be considered to concern themselves or care, just as in Puig de la Bellacasa's contemplation about soil, wherein the worms could be understood as "caring" for the soil, the earth, or for persons engaged with them in turn. Similarly, when the HS2 digs upturned Euston, Thomas Spence and his deceased contemporaries were thought to be concerned, or "still care" about what happened to their bodies and cities. Death may be indifferent, but its parts – the dead body, mourners, afterlife – come into being as an outcome of social relations through which the categories are negotiated (Hallam et. al 1999, 69). Certainly, some of the actions involved in death awareness are intended to have effect on outside realities and a shared, crafted public. As Facebook groups close and Twitter – now "X" – is looking to become a paid subscription site and projects for land and our dispersal in it run off figurative and literal tracks, the activism of death is a means of stating how communities can gather and materialise noopolitically, to survive alongside the other-than-living, not "doubly dead". Yet to become "death aware" need not have "effect" to change a world conventionally, "through a discourse of representing quotidian realities or modelling them as much anthropological analysis might have it" (Kapferer 2006, 681). Instead, like Kapferer's rite, it may be enough that it acts on "victims" to orient towards a capacity to action; persons involved may restore potency to "insist on a trajectory in the complexity of life". One does not need to succeed in touching death or find ritual ecstasy and meaning; only try, in order to keep trying with "the full understanding that such an embodiment is by definition impossible to achieve fully" (Puett 2014, see p.125). Herein, the (un)fathomable is metaphor, an ethical comment on impotence, and circularly – as any academic text? – a fathoming in turn.

Figure 39 – Self-portrait at the Old Operating Theatre Museum, part of Old St Thomas' Hospital in London

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Aaron, Michele, ed. 2013. *Envisaging Death: Visual Culture and Dying*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

Abel, Emily K. 2018. *Prelude to Hospice: Florence Wald, Dying People and Their Families*. Critical Issues in Health and Medicine. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press.

Ahmed, Sara. 2021. *Complaint!* Durham: Duke University Press.

Airoldi, Massimo. 2018. 'Ethnography and the Digital Fields of Social Media'. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* 21 (6): 661–73. https://doi.org/10.1080/13645579.2018.1465622.

Allard, Olivier, and Harry Walker. 2016. 'Paper, Power, and Procedure: Reflections on Amazonian Appropriations of Bureaucracy and Documents'. *The Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Anthropology* 21 (3): 402–13. https://doi.org/10.1111/jlca.12237.

Allen, R. E. 1959. 'Anamnesis in Plato's "Meno and Phaedo"'. *The Review of Metaphysics* 13 (1): 165–74.

Aranda, J, and Eben Kirksey. 2020. 'Toward a Glossary of the Oceanic Undead: A(Mphibious) through F(Utures)'. *E-Flux*, no. 112.

Ariès, Philippe. 1974. 'Western Attitudes toward Death'. In *Death: Current Perspectives*, edited by John B. Williamson and Edwin S. Shneidman. Mountain View, CA: Mayfield Pub. Co.

———. 1982. *The Hour of Our Death*. Lst Vintage Books ed. New York: Vintage Books.

Austin, J. L. 2018. *How to Do Things with Words: The William James Lectures Deliveres at Harvard University in 1955*. Edited by James O. Urmson. Eastford, CT: Martino Fine Books.

Bachofen, Johann Jakob, Ralph Manheim, George Boas, and Joseph Campbell. 1992. *Myth, Religion and Mother Right*. Mythos 84. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Baudrillard, Jean. 1976. *Symbolic Exchange and Death*. 1 Oliver's Yard, 55 City Road London EC1Y 1SP: SAGE Publications Ltd. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781526401496.

Bauman, Zygmunt. 1992. *Mortality, Immortality, and Other Life Strategies*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.

———. 2007. *Liquid Times: Living in an Age of Uncertainty*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Bear, Laura. 2012. 'Sympathy and Its Boundaries: Necropolitics, Labour and Waste on the Hooghly River'. In *Economies of Recycling The Global Transformation of Materials, Values and Social Relations*, edited by Catherine Alexander and Joshua Reno. Zed Books Ltd.

Beatty, Andrew. 2019. *Emotional Worlds: Beyond an Anthropology of Emotion*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Becker, Ernest. 1973. *The Denial of Death*. New York: Free Press.

Bergenholtz, Heidi, Helle Ussing Timm, and Malene Missel. 2019. 'Talking about End of Life in General Palliative Care – What's Going on? A Qualitative Study on End-of-Life Conversations in an Acute Care Hospital in Denmark'. *BMC Palliative Care* 18 (1): 62. https://doi.org/10.1186/s12904-019-0448-z.

Berlant, Lauren. 2008. *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture*. Duke University Press. https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822389163.

Bertelsen, Bjørn Enge, and Synnøve Bendixsen. 2016. 'Recalibrating Alterity, Difference, Ontology: Anthropological Engagements with Human and Non-Human Worlds'. In *Critical Anthropological Engagements in Human Alterity and Difference*, edited by Bjørn Enge Bertelsen and Synnøve Bendixsen, 1–40. Cham: Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-40475-2_1.

Billaud, Julie, and Miia Halme-Tuomisaari. 2014. 'Moments When "Things Happen" – Boredom REDUX!' *Allegra Lab - Anthropology, Law, Art & World*.

Binski, Paul. 1996. *Medieval Death: Ritual and Representation*. Ithaca, N.Y: Cornell University Press.

Blaine, Diana York. 2016. 'Death on Display: The Social Function of Bodies at the Mummies of the World Exhibit'. In *The Power of Death: Contemporary Reflections on Death in Western Society*, edited by Maria-José Blanco and Ricarda Vidal. New York: berghahn.

Bloch, Maurice, and Jonathan P. Parry, eds. 1982. *Death and the Regeneration of Life*. Cambridge [Cambridgeshire] ; New York: Cambridge University Press.

Borgstrom, E. 2017. 'Social Death'. *QJM* 110 (1): 5–7. https://doi.org/10.1093/qjmed/hcw183.

Bowman, Marion. 2021. 'Trees, Benches and Contemporary Commemoration: When the Ordinary Becomes Extraordinary'. *Journal for the Study of Religious Experience* 7 (3): 33–49.

boyd, danah. 2010. 'Social Network Sites as Networked Publics: Affordances, Dynamics, and Implications'. In *A Networked Self*, edited by Zizi Papacharissi. Routledge.

boyd, danah, and Kate Crawford. 2012. 'CRITICAL QUESTIONS FOR BIG DATA: Provocations for a Cultural, Technological, and Scholarly Phenomenon'. *Information, Communication & Society* 15 (5): 662–79. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2012.678878.

Brown, Brian, Peter Nolan, Paul Crawford, and Alison Lewis. 1996. 'Interaction, Language and the "Narrative Turn" in Psychotherapy and Psychiatry'. *Social Science & Medicine* 43 (11): 1569–78. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0277-9536(96)00053-6.

Buch, Elana D. 2015. 'Anthropology of Aging and Care'. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 44 (1): 277–93. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-anthro-102214-014254.

Butters, Maija. 2023. 'Death and beyond: Thoughts and Preparations for the Final Journey'. *Approaching Religion* 13 (1): 5–20. https://doi.org/10.30664/ar.121829.

Byock, Ashley. 2007. 'Embalming the American Body: Sentimental Mourning on the Cusp of the Civil War'. In *Dying and Death: Inter-Disciplinary Perspectives*, edited by Asa Kasher. Brill.

Cabanas, Edgar, and Eva Illouz. 2019. *Manufacturing Happy Citizens: How the Science and Industry of Happiness Control Our Lives*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.

Cahill, Spencer E. 1995. 'Some Rhetorical Directions of Funeral Direction: Historical Entanglements and Contemporary Dilemmas'. *Work and Occupations* 22 (2): 115–36. https://doi.org/10.1177/0730888495022002001.

Callon, Michel, Pierre Lascoumes, and Yannick Barthe. 2011. *Acting in an Uncertain World: An Essay on Technical Democracy*. First MIT Press paperback edition. Inside Technology. Cambridge, Massachusetts London, England: MIT Press.

Cannadine, David. 1981. 'War and Death, Grief and Mourning in Modern Britain'. In *Mirrors of Mortality: Studies in the Social History of Death*, edited by Joachim Whaley. London: Europa.

Canning, Louise, and Isabelle Szmigin. 2010. 'Death and Disposal: The Universal, Environmental Dilemma'. *Journal of Marketing Management* 26 (11–12): 1129–42. https://doi.org/10.1080/0267257X.2010.509580.

Care in Practice: On Tinkering in Clinics, Homes and Farms. 2010. 1st ed. transcript Verlag. http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy-prd.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/stable/j.ctv371bpzz.

Chapple, Helen. 2018. 'The Disappearance of Dying, and Why It Matters'. In *A Companion to the Anthropology of Death*, by Antonius C. G. M Robben. John Wiley & Sons.

Clayden, Andrew, and Katie Dixon. 2007. 'Woodland Burial: Memorial Arboretum versus Natural Native Woodland?' *Mortality* 12 (3): 240–60. https://doi.org/10.1080/13576270701430700.

Collins, Anna, Sue-Anne McLachlan, and Jennifer Philip. 2018. 'Communication about Palliative Care: A Phenomenological Study Exploring Patient Views and Responses to Its Discussion'. *Palliative Medicine* 32 (1): 133–42. https://doi.org/10.1177/0269216317735247.

Cook, Ifor, Aimee L. Kirkup, Lauren J. Langham, Muminah A. Malik, Gabriella Marlow, and Ian Sammy. 2017. 'End of Life Care and Do Not Resuscitate Orders: How Much Does Age Influence Decision Making? A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis'. *Gerontology and Geriatric Medicine* 3 (January): 233372141771342. https://doi.org/10.1177/2333721417713422.

Cook, Joanna. 2010. 'Ascetic Practice and Participant Observation, or, the Gift of Doubt in Field Experience'. In *Emotions in the Field: The Psychology and Anthropology of Fieldwork Experience*, edited by James Davies and Dimitrina Spencer, 239–66. Stanford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1515/9780804774260-013.

Coontz, Stephanie. 2005. *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap*. Nachdr. New York, NY: Basic Books.

Cowling, Charles. 2010. *The Good Funeral Guide*. London ; New York: Continuum.

Crépon, M. 2013. *The Thought of Death and the Memory of War*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Crettaz, Bernard. 2010. *Cafés mortels: sortir la mort du silence*. Genève Paris: Labor et fides [diff.] Éd. du Cerf.

Danby, Colin. 2004. 'Conceptions of Capitalism: Godelier and Keynes'. In *In Values and Valuables: From the Sacred to the Symbolic*, edited by Cynthia Ann Werner and Duran Bell. Society for Economic Anthropology Monograph Series 21. AltaMira.

Das, Veena. 2007. *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Das, Veena. 2018. 'Ethics, Self-Knowledge, and Life Taken as a Whole'. *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 8 (3): 537–49. https://doi.org/10.1086/701379.

Das, Veena, and Clara Han eds. 2016. *Living and Dying in the Contemporary World: A Compendium*. Oakland, California: University of California Press.

Davies, Douglas J. 2000. 'CLASSICS REVISITED Robert Hertz: The Social Triumph over Death'. *Mortality* 5 (1): 97–102. https://doi.org/10.1080/713685991.

Davies, Douglas J. and Hannah Rumble. 2012. *Natural Burial: Traditional-Secular Spiritualities and Funeral Innovation*. London: Continuum.

Davies, Douglas James. 2002. *Death, Ritual and Belief: The Rhetoric of Funerary Rites*. 2nd ed. London ; New York: Continuum.

Davies, Douglas J. 2015a 'Emotions, Grief, and Reality-Unreality in Human Mortality' in Outi Hakola, Sara Heinämaa, Sami Pihlström (eds.) *Death and Mortality: From Individual to Communal Perspectives.* Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies
Davies, Douglas J. 2015b *Mors Britannica: Lifestyle and Death-Style in Britain Today*. First edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Davies, James. 2010. 'Disorientation, Dissonance, and Altered Perception in the Field'. In *Emotions in the Field: The Psychology and Anthropology of Fieldwork Experience*, edited by James Davies and Dimitrina Spencer, 79–97. Stanford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1515/9780804774260-006.

Davis-Floyd, Robbie. 2005. 'Anthropology and Birth Activism: What Do We Know?' *Anthropology News* 46 (5): 37–37. https://doi.org/10.1525/an.2005.46.5.37.

Dennis, James. 2019. *Beyond Slacktivism: Political Participation on Social Media*. Cham: Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-00844-4.

Dickens, Charles. 1852. 'Trading in Death'. *Household Words* VI (140).

Dobson, Andrew. 2014. *Listening for Democracy: Recognition, Representation, Reconciliation*. Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199682447.001.0001.

Doss, Erika. 2008. *The Emotional Life of Contemporary Public Memorials : Towards a Theory of Temporary Memorials*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press. https://doi.org/10.5117/9789089640185.

Doughty, Caitlin. 2015. *Smoke Gets in Your Eyes: And Other Lessons from the Crematorium*. Edinburgh: Canongate.

Dunant, Sarah, and Roy Porter, eds. 1996. *The Age of Anxiety*. London: Virago.

Dureau, C. M. 1991. 'Death, Gender and Regeneration: A Critique of Maurice Bloch'. *Canberra Anthropology* 14 (1): 24–44. https://doi.org/10.1080/03149099109508474.

Durkheim, Emile, and Steven Lukes. 1982. *The Rules of Sociological Method*. 1st American ed. New York: Free Press.

Engelke, Matthew. 2019. 'The Anthropology of Death Revisited'. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 48 (1): 29–44. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-anthro-102218-011420.

Fabian, Johannes. 1972. 'How Others Die: Reflections on the Anthropology of Death'. *Social Research* 39 (3).

Farrell, James J. 1980. *Inventing the American Way of Death, 1830-1920*. American Civilization. Philadelphia: Temple Univ. Press.

Faunce, W. A., and R. L. Fulton. 1958. 'The Sociology of Death: A Neglected Area of Research'. *Social Forces* 36 (3): 205–9. https://doi.org/10.2307/2573805.

Feifel, Herman, ed. 1965. *The Meaning of Death*. 1. McGraw-Hill paperback ed. McGraw-Hill Paperbacks. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Filitz, Thomas, and A. Jamie Saris, eds. 2013. *Debating Authenticity: Concepts of Modernity in Anthropological Perspective*. New York: Berghahn Books.

Fischer, Edward F. 2014. *The Good Life: Aspiration, Dignity, and the Anthropology of Wellbeing*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.

Fong, Jack. 2017. *The Death Cafe Movement: Exploring the Horizons of Mortality*. New York, NY: Springer Berlin Heidelberg.

Fraenkel, Béatrice. 2011. 'Street Shrines and the Writing of Disaster': In *Grassroots Memorials*, edited by Peter Jan Margry and Cristina Sánchez-Carretero, 1st ed., 229–43. The Politics of Memorializing Traumatic Death. Berghahn Books. http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy-prd.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/stable/j.ctt9qd4xs.14.

Freud, Sigmund. 1968. *Essais de Psychanalyse*. Paris: Éditions Payot.

Froggatt, Katherine. 1997. 'Rites of Passage and the Hospice Culture'. *Mortality* 2 (2): 123–36. https://doi.org/10.1080/713685862.

Fulton, Robert. 1964. 'Death and the Self'. *Journal of Religion and Health* 3 (4): 359–68. https://doi.org/10.1007/BF01636299.

Garces-Foley, Kathleen, ed. 2006. *Death and Religion in a Changing World*. Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe.

Garces-Foley, Kathleen, and Justin Holcomb. 2006. 'Contemporary American Funerals: Personalizing Tradition'. In *Death and Religion in a Changing World*, edited by Kathleen Garces-Foley. Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe.

Gawande, Atul. 2015. *Being Mortal: Illness, Medicine and What Matters in the End*. Paperback edition. Wellcome Collection. London: Profile Books.

Giddens, Anthony. 1990. *Social Theory and Modern Sociology*. Social and Political Theory. Cambridge: Polity press.

Giddens, Anthony. 1992. *The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love, and Eroticism in Modern Societies*. Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press.

Glaser, Barney G., and Anselm L. Strauss. 1965. *Awareness of Dying*. New Brunswick, NJ: Aldine.

Goodhead, Andrew. 2010. 'A Textual Analysis of Memorials Written by Bereaved Individuals and Families in a Hospice Context'. *Mortality* 15 (4): 323–39. https://doi.org/10.1080/13576275.2010.513164.

Gorer, Geoffrey. 1965. *Death, Grief, and Mourning in Contemporary Britain*. Cresset Press.

Gorman, David. 1999. 'The Use and Abuse of Speech-Act Theory in Criticism'. *Poetics Today* 20 (1): 93–119.

Gossett, Che. 2014. ‘We Will Not Rest in Peace: AIDS Activism, Black Radicalism, Queer and/or Trans Resistance’. In , 1st ed., 31–50. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203798300-2.

Gottlieb, Alma. 2004. *The Afterlife Is Where We Come from: The Culture of Infancy in West Africa*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Gow, Peter. 1990. ‘Could Sangama Read? The Origin of Writing among the Piro of Eastern Peru’. *History and Anthropology* 5 (1): 87–103. https://doi.org/10.1080/02757206.1990.9960809.

Green, James W. 2012. *Beyond the Good Death: The Anthropology of Modern Dying*. Philadelphia, Pa.: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Greenberg, Jeff, Tom Pyszczynski, and Sheldon Solomon. 1986. ‘The Causes and Consequences of a Need for Self-Esteem: A Terror Management Theory’. In *Public Self and Private Self*, edited by Roy F. Baumeister, 189–212. New York, NY: Springer New York. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4613-9564-5_10.

Hakola, Outi. 2018. ‘Kuolemisen Affektiivinen Mainonta Yhdysvaltalaisten Saattohoitokotien Markkinoinnissa’. *Lähikuva – Audiovisuaalisen Kulttuurin Tieteellinen Julkaisu* 31 (3): 46–64. https://doi.org/10.23994/lk.76571.

Hallam, Elizabeth, and Jennifer Lorna Hockey. 2001. *Death, Memory, and Material Culture*. Materializing Culture. Oxford ; New York: Berg.

Hallam, Elizabeth, Jennifer Lorna Hockey, and Glennys Howarth. 1999. *Beyond the Body: Death and Social Identity*. London ; New York: Routledge.

Hammersley, Martyn. 2018. ‘What Is Ethnography? Can It Survive? Should It?’ *Ethnography and Education* 13 (1): 1–17. https://doi.org/10.1080/17457823.2017.1298458.

Handelman, Don. 2013. ‘Bruce Kapferer, Deleuzian Virtuality, and the Makings of a Ritual Masterstroke’. *Religion and Society* 4 (1). https://doi.org/10.3167/arrs.2013.040102.

Haraway, Donna. 2016. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Experimental Futures Technological Lives, Scientific Arts, Anthropological Voices. Durham London: Duke University Press.

Hart, Bethne, Peter Sainsbury, and Stephanie Short. 1998. ‘Whose Dying? A Sociological Critique of the “Good Death”’. *Mortality* 3 (1): 65–77. https://doi.org/10.1080/713685884.

Hazen, Helen. 2017. ‘“The First Intervention Is Leaving Home”: Reasons for Electing an Out-of-Hospital Birth among Minnesotan Mothers: Reasons for Electing out-of-Hospital Births in Minnesota’. *Medical Anthropology Quarterly* 31 (4): 555–71. https://doi.org/10.1111/maq.12358.

Heelas, Paul. 1996. *The New Age Movement: The Celebration of the Self and the Sacralization of Modernity*. Oxford ; Cambridge, Mass., USA: Blackwell.

Heessels, Meike. 2016. ‘Every Funeral Unique in (Y)Our Way! Professionals Propagating Cremation Rituals’. In *Emotion, Identity, and Death: Mortality across Disciplines*, edited by Douglas James Davies and Chang-Won Park. London: Routledge.

Heidegger, Martin. 1972. *On Time and Being*. Translated by Joan Stambaugh. 1st edition. Harper Torchbooks, TB 1941. New York Hagerstown San Francisco London: Harper & Row, Publishers.

Hertz, Robert. 1928. *Mélanges de Sociologie Religieuse et Folklore*. Paris: F. Alcan.

Hertz, Robert. 1960. *Death and the Right Hand*. Repr., Transferred to digital print. 2009. Routledge Library Editions Anthropology and Ethnography Religion, Rites & Ceremonies 4. London: Routledge.

Hill, Carole. 1974. 'Graduate Education in Anthropology: Conflicting Role Identity in Fieldwork'. *Human Organization* 33 (4).

Hine, Christine. 2000. *Virtual Ethnography*. London ; Thousand Oaks, Calif: SAGE.

Hornborg, Anne-Christine. 2012. 'Designing Rites to Re-Enchant Secularized Society: New Varieties of Spiritualized Therapy in Contemporary Sweden'. *Journal of Religion and Health* 51 (2): 402–18. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-010-9356-5.

Houlbrooke, Ralph. 2000. *Death, Religion, and the Family in England: 1480 - 1750*. Oxford Studies in Social History. Oxford: Clarendon.

Houlbrooke, Ralph A., ed. 1989. *Death, Ritual, and Bereavement*. London ; New York: Routledge.

Howard, Sally. 2022. 'Leeds Trials "End-of-Life Doulas" to Ease Pressure on Beds and GPs'. *BMJ* 378 (September): o1836. https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.o1836.

Howarth, Glennys. 1996. *Last Rites: The Work of the Modern Funeral Director*. London: Routledge.

Howarth, Glennys, and Oliver Leaman. 2013. *Encyclopedia of Death and Dying*. London: Routledge.

Høybye, Mette Terp. 2016. 'Engaging the Social Texture of Internet Cancer Support Groups: Matters of Presence and Affectivity in Ethnographic Research on the Internet'. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 45 (4): 451–73. https://doi.org/10.1177/0891241615574287.

Hsu, Elisabeth. 2010. 'Tian'anmen in Yunnan : Emotions in the Field during a Political Crisis'. In *Emotions in the Field : The Psychology and Anthropology of Fieldwork Experience*, edited by James Davies and Dimitrina Spencer. Stanford University Press.

Hubert, Henri, Marcel Mauss, and Edward E. Evans-Pritchard. 2016. *Sacrifice: Its Nature and Function*. Translated by W. D. Halls. Midway reprint. Midway Reprint. Chicago, Ill: The University of Chicago Press.

Hull, Matthew S. 2012. *Government of Paper: The Materiality of Bureaucracy in Urban Pakistan*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Hutton, Fiona. 2015. *The Study of Anatomy in Britain, 1700-1900*. London: Routledge.

Hwang, Haewon. 2018. 'Exhuming the City: The Politics and Poetics of Graveyard Clearance'. In *Victorian Environments*, edited by Grace Moore and Michelle J. Smith, 115–34. London: Palgrave Macmillan UK. https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-57337-7_7.

Illouz, Eva. 2008. *Saving the Modern Soul: Therapy, Emotions, and the Culture of Self-Help*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Illouz, Eva ed. 2019. *Emotions as Commodities: Capitalism, Consumption and Authenticity*. Routledge Studies in the Sociology of Emotions 2. London New York: Routledge.

Incorvaia, Aubrey DeVeny. 2023. 'Inside American End-of-Life Doula Trainings through Analytic Autoethnography: A Social Movement for Death Positivity Manifests in a New Profession'. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 52 (5): 691–720. https://doi.org/10.1177/08912416231169501.

Ingold, Tim. 1992. 'Editorial'. *Man* 27 (4): 693–96.

Ingold, Tim. 2014. 'That's Enough about Ethnography!' *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 4 (1): 383–95. https://doi.org/10.14318/hau4.1.021.

Jaatinen, Satu. 2006. *Kahvilan pöydässä*. Helsinki: Multikustannus.

Jackson, Michael. 2010. 'From Anxiety to Method in Anthropological Fieldwork: An Appraisal of George Devereux's Lasting Ideas'. In *Emotions in the Field: The Psychology and Anthropology of Fieldwork Experience*, edited by James Davies and Dimitrina Spencer. Stanford University Press.

Jackson, Peter, and Jonathan Everts. 2010. 'Anxiety as Social Practice'. *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space* 42 (11): 2791–2806. https://doi.org/10.1068/a4385.

Jacobsen, Michael Hviid. 2016. '"Spectacular Death"—Proposing a New Fifth Phase to Philippe Ariès's Admirable History of Death'. *Humanities* 5 (2): 19. https://doi.org/10.3390/h5020019.

Jacobsen, Michael Hviid, ed. 2020. *The Age of Spectacular Death*. First edition. London: Routledge.

Johnsen, Rasmus. 2016. 'Boredom and Organization Studies'. *Organization Studies* 37 (10): 1403–15. https://doi.org/10.1177/0170840616640849.

Jupp, Peter C. 2006. 'The Development of Cremation, 1914–1939'. In *From Dust to Ashes*, by Peter C. Jupp, 98–124. London: Palgrave Macmillan UK. https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230511088_5.

Kapferer, Bruce. 2006. 'Virtuality'. In *Theorizing Rituals, Volume 1: Issues, Topics, Approaches, Concepts*, edited by Jens Kreinath, J.A.M. Snoek, and Michael Stausberg. Brill.

Karppi, Tero. 2013. 'Death Proof: On the Biopolitics and Noopolitics of Memorializing Dead Facebook Users'. *Culture Machine* 14.

Karppi, Tero. 2018. *Disconnect: Facebook's Affective Bonds*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Karppi, Tero, Lotta Kahkonen, and Mona Mannevuo, eds. 2016. 'Affective Capitalism'. *Ephemera: Theory and Politics in Organization* 16 (4).

Kasket, Elaine. 2019. *All the Ghosts in the Machine: Illusions of Immortality in the Digital Age*. London: Robinson.

Kaufman, Sharon R. 2006. *And a Time to Die: How American Hospitals Shape the End of Life*. University of Chicago Press ed. Chicago London: The University of Chicago Press.

Kearl, Michael C. 1989. *Endings: A Sociology of Death and Dying*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Kellehear, A. 2013. 'Compassionate Communities: End-of-Life Care as Everyone's Responsibility'. *QJM* 106 (12): 1071–75. https://doi.org/10.1093/qjmed/hct200.

Kellehear, Allan. 1984. ‘Are We a “Death-Denying” Society? A Sociological Review’. *Social Science & Medicine* 18 (9): 713–21. https://doi.org/10.1016/0277-9536(84)90094-7.

Kellehear, Allan. 2015. ‘Death Education as a Public Health Issue’. In *Death, Dying, and Bereavement*, edited by Judith M. Stillion and Thomas Attig, 1st ed. New York, NY: Springer Publishing Company. https://doi.org/10.1891/9780826171429.0016.

Kiesling, Scott F., and Christina Bratt Paulston, eds. 2005. *Intercultural Discourse and Communication: The Essential Readings*. Linguistics. Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub.

Kirkpatrick, Lee A., and Carlos David Navarrete. 2006. ‘Reports of My Death Anxiety Have Been Greatly Exaggerated: A Critique of Terror Management Theory from an Evolutionary Perspective’. *Psychological Inquiry* 17 (4): 288–98. https://doi.org/10.1080/10478400701366969.

Kirksey, Eben. 2021. ‘Obituary: Deborah Bird Rose (1946–2018)’. *The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology* 22 (1): 81–83. https://doi.org/10.1080/14442213.2020.1867956.

Klass, Dennis, Phyllis R. Silverman, and Steven Nickman, eds. 1996. *Continuing Bonds*. 0 ed. New York: Taylor & Francis. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315800790.

Koksvik, Gitte H, and Naomi Richards. 2021. ‘Death Café, Bauman and Striving for Human Connection in “Liquid Times”’. *Mortality* 28 (3): 349–66. https://doi.org/10.1080/13576275.2021.1918655.

Korsmeyer, Carolyn. 2008. ‘Fear and Disgust: The Sublime and the Sublate’. *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* 62 (246 (4)): 367–79.

Krawczyk, Marian, and Merilynne Rush. 2020. ‘Describing the End-of-Life Doula Role and Practices of Care: Perspectives from Four Countries’. *Palliative Care and Social Practice* 14 (January): 263235242097322. https://doi.org/10.1177/2632352420973226.

Kroeber, A. 1927. ‘Disposal of the Dead’. *American Anthropologist* 29 (3).

Kurtz, Liza C., Sarah Trainer, Melissa Beresford, Amber Wutich, and Alexandra Brewis. 2017. ‘Blogs as Elusive Ethnographic Texts: Methodological and Ethical Challenges in Qualitative Online Research’. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 16 (1): 160940691770579. https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406917705796.

Laderman, Gary. 1996. *The Sacred Remains: American Attitudes towards Death, 1799 - 1883*. New Haven London: Yale University Press.

Laderman, Gary. 2003. *Rest in Peace: A Cultural History of Death and the Funeral Home in Twentieth-Century America*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Lambek, Michael. 2011. ‘Anthropology’s Ontological Anxiety and the Concept of Tradition’. *Anthropologica* 53 (2): 317–22.

Lampland, Martha, and Susan Leigh Star, eds. 2009. *Standards and Their Stories: How Quantifying, Classifying, and Formalizing Practices Shape Everyday Life*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Lange, Patricia G. 2019. *Thanks for Watching: An Anthropological Study of Video Sharing on YouTube*. Louisville: University Press of Colorado.

Larkin, Brian. 2013. ‘The Politics and Poetics of Infrastructure’. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 42 (1): 327–43. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-anthro-092412-155522.

Lawson, Victoria. 2007. ‘Geographies of Care and Responsibility’. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 97 (1): 1–11. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8306.2007.00520.x.

Leary, Mark R., and Lisa S. Schreindorfer. 1997. ‘Unresolved Issues With Terror Management Theory’. *Psychological Inquiry* 8 (1): 26–29. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327965pli0801_4.

Lifton, Robert Jay. 1979. *The Broken Connection: On Death and the Continuity of Life*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

Lifton, Robert Jay, and Eric Olson. 2017. ‘Symbolic Immortality’. In *Death, Mourning, and Burial: A Cross-Cultural Reader, 2nd Edition*, edited by Antonius C. G. M Robben. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell.

Litten, Julian. 1991. *The English Way of Death: The Common Funeral since 1450*. London: R. Hale.

Lo Bosco, Maria Concetta. 2021. ‘Feelings in the Field: The Emotional Labour of the Ethnographer’. *Anthropology in Action* 28 (2): 8–17. https://doi.org/10.3167/aia.2021.280202.

Lofland, Lyn H. 2019. *The Craft of Dying: The Modern Face of Death*. Anniversary edition. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

Long, Thomas G. 1999. ‘Why Jessica Mitford Was Wrong’. *Theology Today* 55 (4): 496–509. https://doi.org/10.1177/004057369905500402.

Lorimer, Francine. 2010. ‘Using Emotion as a Form of Knowledge in a Psychiatric Fieldwork Setting’. In *Emotions in the Field: The Psychology and Anthropology of Fieldwork Experience*, edited by James Davies and Dimitrina Spencer, 98–126. Stanford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1515/9780804774260-007.

Maanen, John Van. 1979. ‘The Fact of Fiction in Organizational Ethnography’. *Administrative Science Quarterly* 24 (4): 539. https://doi.org/10.2307/2392360.

MacDonald, Helen. 2009. ‘Procuring Corpses: The English Anatomy Inspectorate, 1842 to 1858’. *Medical History* 53 (3): 379–96. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0025727300003987.

Maddrell, Avril. 2010. ‘Memory, Mourning and Landscape in the Scottish Mountains: Discourses of Wilderness, Gender and Entitlement in Online Debates on Mountainside Memorials’. In *Memory, Mourning, Landscape*, edited by Elizabeth Anderson, Avril Maddrell, and Kate McLoughlin. At the Interface/Probing the Boundaries. Brill.

Maddrell, Avril. 2013. ‘Living with the Deceased: Absence, Presence and Absence-Presence’. *Cultural Geographies* 20 (4): 501–22.

Magliacani, Michela, Elena Madeo, and Paola Cerchiello. 2018. ‘From “Listener” to “Speaker” Museum Visitors: Guest Book as a Means of Dialogue’. *Museum Management and Curatorship* 33 (5): 467–83. https://doi.org/10.1080/09647775.2018.1506709.

Magnusson, Margareta. 2017. *The Gentle Art of Swedish Death Cleaning: How to Free Yourself and Your Family from a Lifetime of Clutter*. Edinburgh: Canongate Books.

Malinowski, Bronislaw. 1923. ‘The Problem of Meaning in Primitive Language’. In *The Meaning of Meaning*, edited by C.K Ogden and I. A. Richards. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World.

Malinowski, Bronisalaw. 1955. *Magic, Science and Religion and Other Essays*. Doubleday Anchor Books. https://www.wob.com/en-gb/rare-books/bronislaw-malinowski/magic-

science-and-religion-and-other-essays/1637055209EMB?gclid=Cj0KCQiAj4ecBhD3ARIsAM4Q_jHNjYpyw7Rz-lFF-AnNKe-_B6LFDfemHXopHxXc3RpYZiwsoThjfLYaAupJEALw_wcB.

Mannix, Kathryn. 2017. *With the End in Mind: Death, Dying, and Wisdom in an Age of Denial*. London: William Collins.

Marcus, George. 1995. 'Ethnography in/of the World System: The Emergence of Multi-Sited Ethnography'. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24: 95–117.

Markham, Annette. 2005. 'The Politics, Ethics, and Methods of Representation in Online Ethnography'. In *Handbook of Qualitative Research, 3rd Edition*, edited by Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

May, Todd. 2009. *Death*. Stocksfield: Acumen.

Mbembe, Achille, and Steve Corcoran. 2019. *Necropolitics*. Theory in Forms. Durham: Duke University Press.

Metcalf, Peter. 2017. *A Borneo Journey into Death: Berawan Eschatology from Its Rituals*. Reprint 2016. Philadelphia, Pa.: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Metcalf, Peter, and Richard Huntington. 1991. *Celebrations of Death: The Anthropology of Mortuary Ritual*. 2nd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Miles, Lizzy, and Charles A. Corr. 2017. 'Death Cafe: What Is It and What We Can Learn From It'. *OMEGA - Journal of Death and Dying* 75 (2): 151–65. https://doi.org/10.1177/0030222815612602.

Miller, Daniel. 2015. 'The Tragic Denouement of English Sociality'. *Cultural Anthropology* 30 (2): 336–57. https://doi.org/10.14506/ca30.2.11.

Miller, Daniel, and Jolynna Sinanan. 2017. *Visualising Facebook: A Comparative Perspective*. London: UCL Press.

Mitford, Jessica. 1998. *The American Way of Death Revisited*. Rev. ed. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

Mohammed, Mohammed A., Jonathan Mant, Louise Bentham, Andrew Stevens, and Shakir Hussain. 2006. 'Process of Care and Mortality of Stroke Patients with and without a Do Not Resuscitate Order in the West Midlands, UK'. *International Journal for Quality in Health Care* 18 (2): 102–6. https://doi.org/10.1093/intqhc/mzi081.

Mol, Annemarie. 2011. *The Logic of Care: Health and the Problem of Patient Choice*. Transferred to digital printing 2010. London: Routledge.

Mol, Annemarie, Ingunn Moser, and Jeannette Pols. 2015. *Care in Practice: On Tinkering in Clinics, Homes and Farms*. 1. Aufl. Bielefeld: Transcript-Verlag.

Neimeyer, Robert A., ed. 2012. *Techniques of Grief Therapy: Creative Practices for Counseling the Bereaved*. Series in Death, Dying, and Bereavement. New York: Routledge.

Noomen, Ineke, Stef Aupers, and Dick Houtman. 2011. 'IN THEIR OWN IMAGE?: Catholic, Protestant and Holistic Spiritual Appropriations of the Internet'. *Information, Communication & Society* 14 (8): 1097–1117. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2011.597415.

Öhman, Carl J, and David Watson. 2019. 'Are the Dead Taking over Facebook? A Big Data Approach to the Future of Death Online'. *Big Data & Society* 6 (1): 205395171984254. https://doi.org/10.1177/2053951719842540.

Olson, Philip R. 2018. 'Domesticating Deathcare: The Women of the U.S. Natural Deathcare Movement'. *Journal of Medical Humanities* 39 (2): 195–215. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10912-016-9424-2.

O'Rourke, T., Brian H. Spitzberg, and Annegret F. Hannawa. 2011. 'The Good Funeral: Toward an Understanding of Funeral Participation and Satisfaction'. *Death Studies* 35 (8): 729–50. https://doi.org/10.1080/07481187.2011.553309.

Pajari, Ilona. 2014. 'Hautaustoimistot Surevien Tukena – Muuttuva Surukäsitys Ja Hautausalan Kasvava Rooli Kuolemanrituaaleissa 1900-Luvun Loppupuolen Suomessa'. *Thanatos* 132 (SYKSY).
https://www.academia.edu/38977975/Hautaustoimistot_surevien_tukena_muuttuva_suruk%C3%A4sitys_ja_hautausalan_kasvava_rooli_kuolemanrituaaleissa_1900_luvun_loppupuolen_Suomessa.

Palgi, P, and H Abramovitch. 1984. 'Death: A Cross-Cultural Perspective'. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 13 (1): 385–417. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.an.13.100184.002125.

Panagiotopoulos, Anastasios, and Diana Espirito Santo, eds. 2019. *Articulate Necrographies: Comparative Perspectives on the Voices and Silences of the Dead*. New York: Berghahn Books.

Papacharissi, Zizi. 2014. *Affective Publics: Sentiment, Technology, and Politics*. Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199999736.001.0001.

Parsons, Brian. 2018. *The Evolution of the British Funeral Industry in the 20th Century: From Undertaker to Funeral Director*. First edition. Emerald Studies in Death and Culture. Bingley, UK: Emerald Publishing.

Pels, Peter. 2008. 'The Modern Fear of Matter: Reflections on the Protestantism of Victorian Science'. *Material Religion* 4 (3): 264–83. https://doi.org/10.2752/175183408X376656.

Phillips, Scott W. 2023. 'Applying the Terror Management Theory to Active Shooter Events: Explaining the Police Response'. *International Journal of Police Science & Management*, July, 14613557231188577. https://doi.org/10.1177/14613557231188577.

Pitsillides, Stacey, Claire Nally, Anita Luby, Rhonda Brooks, Fiona Hill, Joanne Ghee, Katherine Ingham, and Judith Robinson. 2023. 'The Death Positive Library'. In *The Routledge Handbook of Museums, Heritage, and Death*, by Trish Biers and Katie Stringer Clary, 1st ed., 389–401. London: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003195870-33.

Poupard, Duncan James. 2021. 'Writings on the Wall: Powerful Inscriptions in the Sino-Tibetan Borderlands'. *Asian Anthropology* 20 (3): 210–29. https://doi.org/10.1080/1683478X.2021.1889788.

Powell, Mark, Jenny Hockey, Trish Green, and Andy Clayden. 2011. '"I Bury Boxes, Not Bodies": Identity, Emotionality and Natural Burial'. *ASAonline* 01 (03).

Prendergast, David, Jenny Hockey, and Leonie Kellaher. 2006. 'Blowing in the Wind? Identity, Materiality, and the Destinations of Human Ashes'. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 12 (4): 881–98. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9655.2006.00368.x.

Pruitt, Allison-Scott. 2018. 'Redoing Gender: How Women in the Funeral Industry Use Essentialism for Equality'. *Gender, Work & Organization* 25 (2): 144–58. https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12203.

Przybylski, Liz. 2021. *Hybrid Ethnography: Online, Offline, and in Between*. Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE Publications, Inc.

Puett, Michael. 2014. 'Ritual Disjunctions : Ghosts, Philosophy, and Anthropology'. In *The Ground between: Anthropologists Engage Philosophy*, edited by Veena Das, Michael Jackson, Arthur Kleinman, and Bhrigupati Singh. Duke University Press.

Puig de la Bellacasa, María. 2017. *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More than Human Worlds*. Posthumanities 41. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Radcliffe-Brown, Alfred R. 2014. *Taboo: The Frazer Lecture 1939*. Orig. publ. 1939, Re-Issued. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press.

Rapport, Nigel. 2000. '"Best of British"? The New Anthropology of Britain.' *Anthropology Today* 16 (2).

Rapport, Nigel., ed. 2002. *British Subjects: An Anthropology of Britain*. Oxford ; New York: Berg.

Rawlings, Deb, Lauren Miller-Lewis, Jennifer Tieman, and Kate Swetenham. 2022. 'An International Survey of Death Doula Training Organizations: The Views of Those Driving Death Doula Training and Role Enactment'. *Palliative Care and Social Practice* 16 (January): 263235242211233. https://doi.org/10.1177/26323524221123344.

Rawlings, Deb, Lauren Miller-Lewis, Jennifer Tieman, and Kate Swetenham 2023. 'Death Doula Working Practices and Models of Care: The Views of Death Doula Training Organisations'. *BMC Palliative Care* 22 (1): 78. https://doi.org/10.1186/s12904-023-01200-w.

Rawlings, Deb, Jennifer Tieman, Lauren Miller-Lewis, and Kate Swetenham. 2019. 'What Role Do Death Doulas Play in End-of-life Care? A Systematic Review'. *Health & Social Care in the Community* 27 (3): e82–94. https://doi.org/10.1111/hsc.12660.

Reiss, Nira. 1985. *Speech Act Taxonomy as a Tool for Ethnographic Description: An Analysis Based on Videotapes of Continuous Behavior in Two New York Households*. Vol. VI:7. Pragmatics & Beyond. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company. https://doi.org/10.1075/pb.vi.7.

Richardson, Ruth. 2000. *Death, Dissection, and the Destitute*. Second edition with a new afterword. Chicago London: The University of Chicago Press.

Robben, Antonius C. G. M., ed. 2017. *Death, Mourning, and Burial: A Cross-Cultural Reader*. Second Edition. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell.

Robben, Antonius C. G. M.ed. 2018. *A Companion to the Anthropology of Death*. Blackwell Companions to Anthropology 32. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.

Robbins, Joel. 2016. 'What Is the Matter with Transcendence? On the Place of Religion in the New Anthropology of Ethics★: What Is the Matter with Transcendence?' *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 22 (4): 767–81. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9655.12494_1.

Robert, Martin, and Laura Tradii. 2019. ‘Do We Deny Death? I. A Genealogy of Death Denial’. *Mortality* 24 (3): 247–60. https://doi.org/10.1080/13576275.2017.1415318.

Rosaldo, Michelle Z. 1982. ‘The Things We Do with Words: Ilongot Speech Acts and Speech Act Theory in Philosophy’. *Language in Society* 11 (2): 203–37.

Rosaldo, Renato. 1989. *Culture & Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Rosenblatt, Abram, Jeff Greenberg, Sheldon Solomon, Tom Pyszczynski, and Deborah Lyon. 1989. ‘Evidence for Terror Management Theory: I. The Effects of Mortality Salience on Reactions to Those Who Violate or Uphold Cultural Values.’ *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 57 (4): 681–90. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.57.4.681.

Rosenow, Michael K. 2015. *Death and Dying in the Working Class, 1865-1920*. The Working Class in American History. Urbana [Illinois]: University of Illinois Press.

Rugg, Julie, and Brian Parsons. 2018. *Funerary Practices in England and Wales*. First edition. Funerary International. United Kingdom ; North America: Emerald Publishing.

Rumble, Hannah, John Troyer, Tony Walter, and Kate Woodthorpe. 2014. ‘Disposal or Dispersal? Environmentalism and Final Treatment of the British Dead’. *Mortality* 19 (3): 243–60. https://doi.org/10.1080/13576275.2014.920315.

Rundblad, Georganne. 1995. ‘Exhuming Women’s Premarket Duties in the Care of the Dead’. *Gender & Society* 9 (2): 173–92. https://doi.org/10.1177/089124395009002003.

Salazar, Carles, and Gemma Orobitg. 2011. ‘The Making of an Imagined Community: The Press as a Mediator in Ethnographic Research into Assisted Reproductive Technologies (ART)’. *Ethnography* 13 (2): 236–55. https://doi.org/10.1177/1466138111420621.

Schumacher, Bernard N. 2011. *Death and Mortality in Contemporary Philosophy*. Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press.

Searle, John R. 2011. *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language*. 34th. print. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press.

Semple, Sarah, and Stuart Brookes. 2020. ‘Necrogeography and Necroscapes: Living with the Dead’. *World Archaeology* 52 (1): 1–15. https://doi.org/10.1080/00438243.2020.1779434.

Seremetakis, Nadia. 2007. ‘The Breast of Aphrodite’. In *The Taste Culture Reader: Experiencing Food and Drink*, edited by Carolyn Korsmeyer. Oxford: Berg.

Sherman, David. 2014. *In a Strange Room: Modernism’s Corpses and Mortal Obligation*. Modernist Literature & Culture 23. New York: Oxford University Press.

Shumar, Wesley, and Nora Madison. 2013. ‘Ethnography in a Virtual World’. *Ethnography and Education* 8 (2): 255–72. https://doi.org/10.1080/17457823.2013.792513.

Silva, M. C. Da. 2010. ‘Mauritanian Guestbook: Shaping Culture While Displaying It.’ In *Tourism and Visual Culture, Volume 1: Theories and Concepts*, edited by P. Burns, C. Palmer, and J. A. Lester, 1st ed., 181–90. UK: CABI. https://doi.org/10.1079/9781845936099.0181.

Smilie, Kipton D. 2022. ‘Death Education’s “Period of Popularity”: Lessons for Contemporary P-12 Schools in the United States during the COVID-19 Pandemic’. *Death Studies* 46 (1): 65–77. https://doi.org/10.1080/07481187.2021.1902427.

Snodgrass, Jeffrey. 2014. 'Ethnography of Life Online'. In *Handbook of Methods in Cultural Anthropology*, edited by H. Russell Bernard and Clarence Gravlee, 2nd edition. Rowman & Littlefield.

Straub, Julia, ed. 2012. *Paradoxes of Authenticity: Studies on a Critical Concept ; [... a Conference Entitled Authenticity Which Took Place in Berne in October 2008 ...]*. Cultural and Media Studies. Bielefeld: transcript-Verl.

Swora, Maria Gabrielle. 2001. 'Commemoration and the Healing of Memories in Alcoholics Anonymous'. *Ethos* 29 (1): 58–77. https://doi.org/10.1525/eth.2001.29.1.58.

Swora, Maria Gabrielle. 2004. 'The Rhetoric of Transformation in the Healing of Alcoholism: The Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous'. *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* 7 (3): 187–209. https://doi.org/10.1080/13674670310001602445.

Thamann, Aubrey, and Kalliopi M Christodoulaki, eds. 2022. *Beyond the Veil: Reflexive Studies of Death and Dying*. Berghahn Books. https://doi.org/10.1515/9781800730656.

Tonkin, Lois. 1996. 'Growing around Grief—Another Way of Looking at Grief and Recovery'. *Bereavement Care* 15 (1): 10–10. https://doi.org/10.1080/02682629608657376.

Tradii, Laura, and Martin Robert. 2019. 'Do We Deny Death? II. Critiques of the Death-Denial Thesis'. *Mortality* 24 (4): 377–88. https://doi.org/10.1080/13576275.2017.1415319.

Tumber, Alana. 2020. 'Death Becomes Them: Death Doulas, Gender, and Advance Care Planning'. https://doi.org/10.48336/6CGM-P280.

Turner, Victor. 1979. 'Dramatic Ritual/Ritual Drama: Performative and Reflexive Anthropology'. *The Kenyon Review* 1 (3): 80–93.

Turner, Victor. 1968. *The Drums of Affliction: A Study of Religious Processes among the Ndembu of Zambia*. Oxford, London: Clarendon P.; International African Institute.

Turner, Victor. 1990. *Drama, Fields and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society*. Symbol, Myth and Ritual Series. Ithaca London: Cornell University Press.

Utriainen, Terhi. 1996. 'Kuolettajanainen ja kuolemisen metonyymiset merkitykset'. https://helda.helsinki.fi/handle/10224/4088.

Utriainen, Terhi. 2010. 'Agents of De-Differentiation: Women Care-Givers for the Dying in Finland'. *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 25 (3): 437–51. https://doi.org/10.1080/13537903.2010.516556.

Utriainen, Terhi 2011. 'The Post-Secular Position and Enchanted Bodies'. *Scripta Instituti Donneriani Aboensis* 23 (January): 417–32. https://doi.org/10.30674/scripta.67399.

Valentine, Christine. 2006. 'Academic Constructions of Bereavement'. *Mortality* 11 (1): 57–78. https://doi.org/10.1080/13576270500439274.

Venbrux, Eric. 2007. 'Robert Hertz's Seminal Essay and Mortuary Rites in the Pacific Region'. *Journal de La Société Des Océanistes*, no. 124 (June): 5–10. https://doi.org/10.4000/jso.712.

Wachterman, Melissa W., Elizabeth A. Luth, Robert S. Semco, and Joel S. Weissman. 2022. 'Where Americans Die — Is There Really "No Place Like Home"?' *New England Journal of Medicine* 386 (11): 1008–10. https://doi.org/10.1056/NEJMp2112297.

Walford, Edward 2022. *OLD AND NEW LONDON,: A Narrative of Its History, Its People, and Its Places; Illustrated with Numerous Engravings from the Most*. S.l.: Forgotten Books

Walter, Tony. 1991. 'Modern Death: Taboo or Not Taboo?' *Sociology* 25 (2): 293–310. https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038591025002009.

Walter, Tony 1994. *The Revival of Death*. London ; New York: Routledge.

Walter, Tony 1995. 'Facing Death without Tradition'. In *Contemporary Issues in the Sociology of Death, Dying and Disposal*, edited by Glennys Howarth and Peter C. Jupp, 193–204. London: Palgrave Macmillan UK. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-24303-7_15.

Walter, Tony. 1996. 'Ritualising Death in a Consumer Society'. *RSA Journal* 144 (5468): 32–40.

Walter, Tony. 2004. 'Body Worlds: Clinical Detachment and Anatomical Awe'. *Sociology of Health and Illness* 26 (4): 464–88. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0141-9889.2004.00401.x.

Walter, Tony 2005. 'Three Ways to Arrange a Funeral: Mortuary Variation in the Modern West'. *Mortality* 10 (3): 173–92. https://doi.org/10.1080/13576270500178369.

Walter, Tony 2016. 'The Dead Who Become Angels: Bereavement and Vernacular Religion'. *OMEGA - Journal of Death and Dying* 73 (1): 3–28. https://doi.org/10.1177/0030222815575697.

Walter, Tony 2017. 'What Death Means Now'. Policy Press. 2017. https://policy.bristoluniversitypress.co.uk/what-death-means-now.

Walter, Tony 2019. 'The Pervasive Dead'. *Mortality* 24 (4): 389–404. https://doi.org/10.1080/13576275.2017.1415317.

Walter, Tony 2020a. *Death in the Modern World*. LA: SAGE.

Walter, Tony ed. 2020b. *The Mourning for Diana*. London: Routledge.

Waters, Catherine. 2003. '"Trading in Death": Contested Commodities in "Household Words"'. *Victorian Periodicals Review* 36 (4): 313–30.

West, Sharon Crook, and Joseph P. McKerns. 2009. 'Death and Communists: The Funeral Industry's Attack on Jessica Mitford's *The American Way of Death*'. *American Journalism* 26 (1): 31–53. https://doi.org/10.1080/08821127.2009.10677691.

Westendorp, Mariske, and Hannah Gould. 2021. 'Re-Feminizing Death: Gender, Spirituality and Death Care in the Anthropocene'. *Religions* 12 (8): 667. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12080667.

Whaley, Joachim, ed. 1981. *Mirrors of Mortality: Studies in the Social History of Death*. London: Europa.

Wilce, James MacLynn. 2009. *Crying Shame: Metaculture, Modernity, and the Exaggerated Death of Lament*. Malden, Mass: Wiley-Blackwell.

Williams, Howard. 2004. 'Material Culture as Memory: Combs and Cremation in Early Medieval Britain: Material Culture as Memory'. *Early Medieval Europe* 12 (2): 89–128. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0963-9462.2004.00123.x.

Williams, Howard, and Anna Wessman. 2017. 'The Contemporary Archaeology of Urban Cremation'. In *Cremation and the Archaeology of Death*, edited by Jessica Cerezo-Román, Anna Wessman, and Howard Williams. Oxford University Press.

Williamson, John B., and Edwin S. Shneidman, eds. 1995. *Death: Current Perspectives*. 4th ed. Mountain View, CA: Mayfield Pub. Co.

Wylie, John. 2009. 'Landscape, Absence and the Geographies of Love'. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 34 (3): 275–89.

Žibaitė, Solveiga 2022 *Talking about talking about death: an ethnographically informed study of Death Cafés in the UK using neo-tribal theory*. PhD thesis available at: https://theses.gla.ac.uk/83270/

Zimmermann, Camilla, and Gary Rodin. 2004. 'The Denial of Death Thesis: Sociological Critique and Implications for Palliative Care'. *Palliative Medicine* 18 (2): 121–28. https://doi.org/10.1191/0269216304pm858oa.