The Life and Death of Funeral Practices:

Persistence and change in the death system and the rise of eco-funerals in the United States

Elena Michele Slominski

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Abstract

While societies are becoming increasingly aware of their environmental footprint in life, people rarely stop to think about the ecological impact they might have after they die. Yet in the United States, post-mortem customs have created an unsustainable death system based on toxic embalming, emissions-heavy cremation, and material-intensive ground burials, all while facing a growing, aging population and dwindling global resources. This thesis addresses the *social* side of this important, neglected issue, by recognizing that systems and traditions do not exist on their own but are developed and perpetuated by society. The project combines the multi-level perspective with social practice theory as a dual framework for understanding the micro- and macro-level dynamics behind change and continuation in the American death system and its constitutive practices. Tracing funeral customs back to their historical origins reveals how they have emerged, evolved, and persisted throughout the past century, exemplifying the 'stickiness' of social norms and the path dependence of societal structures. Yet the turn from burial to cremation also exemplifies that systems can and do change alongside shifting consumer preferences and the evolving sociotechnical background. Correspondingly, the project examines the intertwined developments that have opened a window of opportunity for eco-funerals to move from a niche practice to potentially reconfiguring the American death system. Where mainstream practices fill, pollute, and permanently occupy the earth with harmful ashes or with chemically preserved bodies in durable constructions, green funerals enrich nature by facilitating the decomposition of the body, thereby enabling the natural cycle between death, decay, and new life. Drawing on qualitative interviews and participatory site observations, the findings from this research reveal that despite a widespread persistence of conventional methods, green funerals are increasingly challenging the dominant regime by offering solutions that are ecologically sustainable, cost-effective, and more healing to the bereaved. However, challenges to a potential 'green transformation' include resistance by the dominant funeral industry and the potential for greenwashing. Hence, the project concludes with a proposal for small-scale, community-oriented green 'micro death systems,' and offers directions for future research in this field. This study contributes to the tangible discussion on funeral reform as well as the broader theoretical discussion on sustainable transformations.

Keywords: green funerals, eco-funerals, social practice theory, multi-level perspective, death system, sustainable transformation, environment, niche

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It may take a village to raise a child, but it takes a whole international network of people to put together a thesis! So many wonderful people have helped bring this project to life, and to them I wish to express my sincerest gratitude and appreciation.

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Last but not least, I want to thank my own family and friends worldwide for tolerating me as I indulged in an 11-month obsession over death and funerals. Thank you for humoring me every time I shared bizarre 'fun facts' about corpses. I promise to research something more cheerful next time… Well, maybe. In all seriousness, I appreciate the love and support throughout this journey – especially on the hard days, when the weight of the subject came crashing down around me. Studying death and contemplating mortality for so long has really put some things into perspective and has made me truly grateful for every fleeting moment. At the end of it all, you guys are what makes life worth living.

Thank you, truly, to everyone who was a part of this project. Through you, I managed to 'get by with a little help from my friends.'

Foreword: A letter to the reader

Before we dive into this thesis, I wish to share a few reflections in order to better describe some of the hurdles and lessons throughout this research project. First and foremost, while completing a master's thesis is always challenging in its own regard, conducting research on heavy or depressing topics can create an added emotional burden. I recall one frosty morning the week before Christmas, sitting at the kitchen table with my father. It was just the two of us, silently eating oatmeal. We had just finished breakfast when I gave myself an internal nudge and blurted out, "this is really uncomfortable to talk about, but have *you* made plans yet … for yourself…?" "You mean for tomorrow?" he asked. "No, I mean like … for whenever … you … um, you know… pass away." "Oh," he said. Then, without missing a beat, he added in classic dad-fashion, "Well, if I die this weekend, just put me in one of those big black trash bags. The garbage pickup is on Monday."

Discussing death and funerals can be difficult and uncomfortable – hence the myriad of reactions I received when announcing my topic, ranging from disgust to confusion to morbid fascination. For the most part, however, people have found a great deal of interest in this topic, perhaps due to its paradoxical novelty and banality. Nevertheless, conversations around death are not always easy, as the kitchen-table vignette with my father showed. It takes courage and vulnerability and sometimes a big, internal nudge to overcome our reluctance and avoidance of confronting this important topic. This project aims to be that nudge; to open that door; to invite that conversation into our homes and our minds. That being said, the light-hearted language used throughout this text is never meant in a disrespectful manner but has instead been chosen to make this serious and emotionally charged topic lighter and more palatable for the reader.

Despite the somewhat humorous approach, dealing with death every day for eleven months during this project was not easy. Some days it seemed insurmountable. In September 2019, my teenage sister lost one of her closest friends in a sudden fatal accident that brutally ripped a sweet seventeen-year-old boy out of his young life. Though I had never met him myself, I was shocked. After having carefully crafted an artificial 'academic distance' to the topic, death suddenly became *real.* As my little sister was grappling with overwhelming devastation and grief after losing her friend, it somehow felt *wrong* to be writing about death, to curiously and methodically analyze the dark and grotesque while others were suffering. But this low point also served as a reminder that this *is* such an important and universal topic, and that death is as

raw and as real as life gets. So, after several deliberations, I made the decision to move forward with the topic despite its challenges.

This turning point also served as a reminder to learn to embrace the sad and difficult parts of life, rather than trying to avoid them – a common theme that later emerged in my data as well. Leaning into these raw, painful challenges in life – what Jon Kabat-Zinn (2013) calls "full catastrophe living" – requires mindfulness, compassion, vulnerability, and above all, courage. My wish is that this project will help serve as a wakeup call that reconnects us not only to death but also to life, and to this planet we call our home. Despite its trials, this project was a worthwhile pursuit and was completed in honor of all those we have lost along the way and will continue to lose (including ourselves one day). These words were written in the hope of finding a better way of coping with, honoring, and embracing death – and, consequently, the fleeting moments of our precious life.

As uncomfortable as it was to initiate, the conversation with my father on that frosty morning did also end on a more serious and thoughtful note. After he made his characteristic dad-joke, he agreed that, yes, perhaps it is time for him to start writing down his own final wishes. If nothing else, this process has invited many stimulating conversations into my own family and social circles, voicing the uneasy, unspoken reality we try so hard to escape from. Opening ourselves to conversations around death and funerals means facing the inevitable – but with a bit of humor and a lot of compassion, it need not be scary. So, as the weight of mortality settled around us like an unwelcome visitor at the kitchen table that morning, my father promised he would start putting pen to paper soon. I suppose the time has now come for me to do the same with this thesis.

I hope that reading these pages will make you smile a little and contemplate a lot.
After all, if we cannot avoid death, we might as well get comfortable with it.

All my best to you,

Elena

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Reference Guide: Abbreviations

AH: Alkaline Hydrolysis (water cremation)

CANA: Cremation Association of North America

FCA: Funeral Consumers Alliance

GBC: Green Burial Council

MLP: Multi-level Perspective

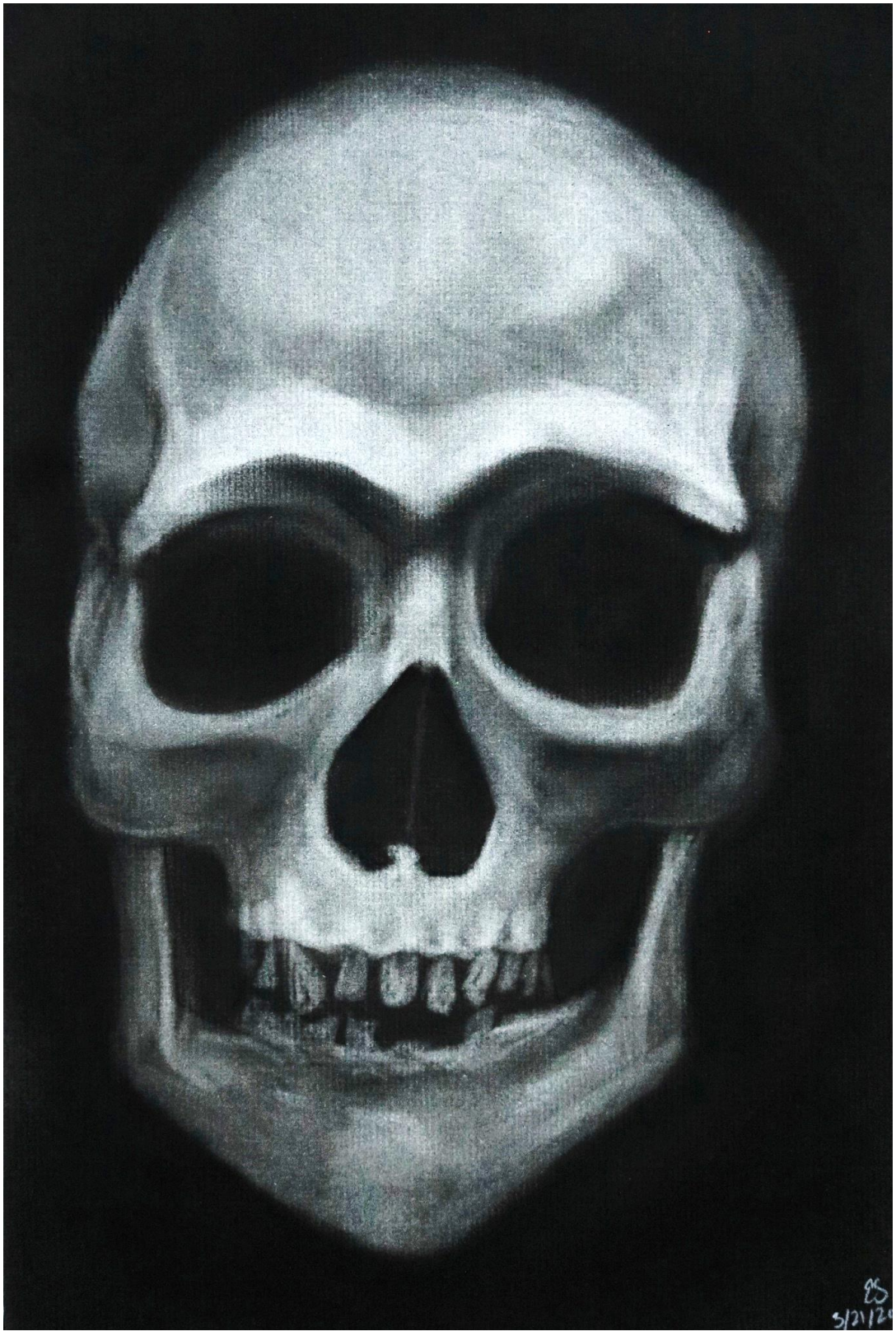
NFDA: National Funeral Directors Association

NHFA: National Home Funeral Alliance

SPT: Social Practice Theory

U.S.: United States

WHO: World Health Organization



"When Death Do Us Part" [charcoal on paper, 11x17in.] © Artwork by the author.

"Death is our friend precisely because it brings us into absolute and passionate presence with all that is here, that is natural, that is love."

– Rainer Maria Rilke

1 Waking Up to Death: Introduction

One day, you will die. Whether it comes after years of illness or in a sudden, unsuspecting instant, there is no escape from it. What will happen after you take your final breath? If you live in the United States, your lifeless body will be swiftly transported to a funeral home, where it will be refrigerated among the other corpses until it is time to pump your arteries full of foul-smelling, colorful, carcinogenic embalming chemicals for artificial preservation. Afterwards, your family will spend a small fortune to have you cleaned and dressed by strangers. Your nails will be clipped, your hair will be styled, and, regardless of your gender, you will have cosmetics painted onto your face to make you look like a peaceful sleeping doll inside your expensive casket. Enclosed in a heavy cement vault, you will then be mechanically lowered into the chemically fertilized, manicured ground for eternity. Alternatively, your family might choose to have your body cremated, in which case the flesh will be burned off your bones in a fossil-fuel guzzling oven, and your pulverized remains will be handed back to them in a small container to be buried, scattered, or left behind in a corner of your grandchild's attic one day.

Perhaps this grotesquely illustrative opening scene was able to 'rattle your bones' enough to make you stop for a moment and think about the way we handle death in society. For the past century, Americans have perpetuated a system that is environmentally destructive and that lets us outsource all the 'dirty work' to polished professionals who are happy to take our cold, hard bodies and our cold, hard cash. Previous research has revealed the alarming ecological impacts of mainstream funerary practices[1] in the United States yet failed to properly address the *social* side of this issue. This thesis explores how our current funerary practices developed, why they persist in society, and how they are increasingly being challenged by sustainable alternative methods. Of course, it would be far easier to avoid this unsettling topic of funerals altogether, but unfortunately, we must all deal with it sooner or later on a personal level. On a societal level, the issue is timely and urgent. In light of the growing population, the swelling climate catastrophe, and the burgeoning fatal pandemic we currently find ourselves in, this research on death systems and funeral practices comes at a particularly relevant moment in history.

[1] Throughout this thesis, I will refer to *funerary practices*. The term 'funerary' simply describes anything related to funerals or the disposal of the dead. A 'practice' can be understood as a custom, a convention, or a habitual and expected way of doing something in society. We will explore this concept further in Chapter 3 as we discuss a theory around social practices. For now, it suffices to conceptualize *funerary practices* as the socially constructed rites or rituals surrounding death. Moreover, the terms *rite* and *ritual* are very similar in meaning and will be used interchangeably throughout the text, as will the terms *eco-funeral* and *green funeral*.

While we are becoming increasingly aware of our individual and collective environmental footprint throughout our lifetime, we rarely stop to think about the ecological impact we might have once we die. Currently, nearly 3 million people in the United States die annually; worldwide, over 50 million people die each year (Fournier, 2018). Canning et al. (2016) offer a warning: "As the world becomes increasingly populated, so the removal of human remains becomes a fundamental environmental issue with regards [to] land use, material and resource consumption, waste and emissions" (p. 228). With a growing global population and expansive urban sprawl, land is a rapidly dwindling resource linked to a loss of natural habitat, biodiversity, and ecological resilience around the world. Some densely populated countries have already run out of land space to bury their dead (Aveline-Dubach, 2012). Thus, as we enter a phase of mass deaths in the U.S. with 78 million baby boomers nearing the end of their life in the foreseeable years (Fontana & Keene, 2009), we face a jarring quandary: "How will death rituals and traditions change when we run out of space for the earth's bodies?" (Podoshen, 2016, p. 316).

In the vast U.S., running out of land space for burial is not an urgent concern nationwide, although urban and developing areas will continue to face rising pressure for cemetery space. Nonetheless, from the hazardous chemicals used in the embalming process to the construction of millions of steel and hardwood caskets every year, the practices and resources involved in North America's funerals warrant serious reflection. Even in regions with abundant space, the *permanency* of materials in the ground and their potentially hazardous impacts on the soil and groundwater are crucial considerations, making cemeteries comparable to a landfill (Fiedler et al., 2012). Cremation has often been touted as an environmentally friendly alternative to ground burial because it avoids the problem of land use and arguably reduces the materials involved. However, the input of fossil fuels and the output of toxic emissions in the cremation process (Canning & Szmigin, 2010) are largely overlooked. Furthermore, due to their high pH levels, cremated ashes are environmentally harmful if scattered or buried (Fournier, 2018; Herring, 2019). Hence, the predominant funerary options (embalming, ground burial, and cremation) entail resource-intensive practices that are ecologically damaging, financially burdensome and, on top of that, oftentimes emotionally unfulfilling (Coutts et al., 2018; Herring, 2019).

Although death is an innate, fundamental part of life, people in the United States often feel uncomfortable and emotionally paralyzed when confronted with death, both in conversation and in practice (Mellor & Schilling, 1993). Mellor and Schilling (1993) note that "as a society

we remain characteristically uncomfortable with the facts of mortality" (p. 423), echoing Becker's (1973) influential theory on the psychosocial *denial of death*. Different cultures deal with death and grief in a variety of ways, illustrating a vast array of rituals and practices around the world that different societies subscribe to. Kastenbaum and Aisenberg (1972) describe these culturally crafted ways of handling death as *societal death systems* with certain actors, functions, materials, symbols, and places that shape cultural customs and practices around death. Notably, because death systems are socially constructed, they are neither fixed nor static and are thus able to change alongside shifting technological, economic, and sociocultural backgrounds (MacMurray & Futrell, 2019).

Over the past 160 years, American practices surrounding death have evolved from an intimate, family-organized affair that was close to home and close to nature into a sanitized, professionalized, and institutionalized endeavor that leaves a permanent mark on one's bank account and on the environment (Herring, 2019; Kelly, 2015; Mitford, 2000). Hence, what is perceived today as 'traditional' funerary customs is actually the product of relatively recent industry developments. With death-related processes and practices largely hidden behind the closed doors of a multi-billion-dollar funeral industry – a trend that Mellor and Schilling (1993) term *the sequestration of death* from society – families have become disconnected from their formerly intimate ways of handling and understanding death (Herring, 2019; Kelly, 2015). Moreover, these customs are also increasingly shifting away from the sacredness of ritual and more towards 'quick and easy' solutions, mirroring a wider cultural orientation towards efficiency and convenience in our everyday lives (Ritzer, 1996; Shove, 2003). Therefore, not only the funerary practices themselves have changed in society, but also the meanings, materials, and competences that constitute these practices.

Since the 1950s, various movements have sprung up criticizing the American funeral industry and calling for a change in death-related customs. Throughout the years, advocates and reformers have demanded reductions of cost, more personalized and humane care for the dying, more consumer choice and flexibility in the planning and pricing of funeral arrangements, as well as more ecologically benign options for the disposal of the deceased (MacMurrary & Futrell, 2019). This last movement began in the United Kingdom in the early 1990s with the advent of green burials, which rapidly gained ground in the United States and has since expanded into an eclectic "ecodeath ethic" (Ibid., p. 9). Proponents of the eco-death movement promote sustainable alternatives to conventional funerary practices, most notably including

green burials, home funerals, water cremation, and body composting. These practices exemplify environmentally friendly approaches to funerals, as they avoid embalming, only permit biodegradable shrouds or burial boxes, facilitate the decomposing of bodies, and generally aim to protect nature.

The reduction of bodies to fertile soil through decomposition creates opportunities for new plant life to thrive. Thus, while 'traditional' funerary practices revolve around conspicuous materials and the preservation of the body, eco-death practices instead aid in the preservation of nature by fostering the natural cycles of death, decay, and new life (Fournier, 2018). Additionally, eco-death practices invite more hands-on family participation and closer connection in the preparation of the body, enabling the bereaved to come to terms with death in a more intimate, healing way. Such physical participation and emotional involvement can help people process grief more effectively (Herring, 2019). Herring (2019) notes that these practices might therefore also help reduce America's cultural fear and avoidance of death, aside from the ecological benefits. Despite their promising advantages, eco-death practices have largely remained on the sideline while conventional funeral customs prevail in society. Spaargaren (2013) pointedly asks: "Now that […] the ability to live more sustainable lifestyles is available, the challenging question is why more sustainable consumption patterns have not yet become mainstream and why they are generally restricted to a small minority of the population" (p. 239). In lieu of lifestyles, we might pose the exact same question about sustainable *deathstyles*.

As MacMurray and Futrell (2019) point out in a recent paper, much research is still needed on how change happens within death systems, and, more specifically, what motivates people's end-of-life choices. Additionally, Woodthorpe (2017) calls for funerals "to be examined with relationships and family as the unit of analysis at their heart, with a recognition and appreciation of the influence of class culture in this context" (p. 592). In other words, there is a need to research *death systems change* as well as the socially influenced nature of *funerary practices*. Moreover, these two focal points must be combined with a recognition of the dynamic interplay between societal systems and practices of individuals-in-society. Only by examining both the micro and macro perspective of change and continuation in the death system can we "capture the intricacies of this industry and the interrelationship among business practices, cultural changes, technological developments, and consumer demand that all work to shape, shift, and mold the funeral industry in American society and others" (Beard & Burger, 2017, p. 48). Hence, this study employs a dual framework of social practice theory and the multi-level

perspective to explore how death-related systems and practices develop, change, persist, and challenge one another, by asking the following research questions:

(1) How have environmentally harmful death practices in the United States developed, and why do they persist?

(2) How are participatory eco-funerals challenging the mainstream funeral regime?

The remaining structure of the thesis is arranged in the following order: Chapter 2 provides essential background information on the social construction of rituals, the environmental impact of conventional funerary practices, a brief introduction to the eco-death movement, as well as a discussion on *death avoidance* in the United States. Chapter 3 elucidates the two theoretical frameworks that will be used throughout the project to understand and analyze death practices and the wider systems and contexts they occur and evolve in. The methods used in the empirical data collection for this project are laid out in Chapter 4, while also reflecting on the ethics and challenges throughout the research process. In Chapter 5, I address the first research question, examining how environmentally harmful death practices developed and why they persist in the United States. This chapter will traverse back through history to the origins of the modern funeral industry, exploring the subsequent developments that braided together a trajectory for certain ritualized patterns. The story of cremation demonstrates a major disruption in this trajectory, causing a shift in the death system and subsequent adoption of this practice by the industry. The chapter also draws heavily on social practice theory to exemplify how practices are normalized and standardized across society. Chapter 6 begins with another twist in funeral patterns, examining how the formerly solid funeral regime has begun to fray at the edges alongside wider developments across different levels in society. Emerging trends are presented, including a selection of greenwashed innovations in the death realm. The chapter then reveals the main points of differentiation between true eco-funerals and conventional funerals, thereby addressing the second research question of how eco-funerals are challenging the dominant funeral regime. Finally, the chapter examines the barriers to green funerals becoming mainstream, reflecting on the benefits and pitfalls of a potential green shift in the prevailing regime, and offering an idea for localized, sustainable 'micro death systems.' The conclusion in Chapter 7 offers a summary of the research and its implications, as well as suggestions for further research directions. In the Afterword, the project ends with a special note on the current situation we find ourselves in with the global pandemic of 2020, leaving open the question of how this experience may affect the death system in the future.

2 Six Feet Under: Background

2.1 Funeral rites and wrongs: Socially constructed death systems

To analyze and understand the processes and practices around death and dying in a society, Kastenbaum and Aisenberg (1972) introduce the concept of a *societal death system*, which provides "the cultural framework and material practices through and by which a society's members interpret and manage death" (MacMurray and Futrell, 2019, p. 2). Although dying is always a unique, individual experience, a person's death reaches far beyond the individual and into their surrounding society (Corr, 2014; Fontana & Keene, 2009). Along these lines, Corr (2014) argues that "death is not solely an individual matter; it is also a societal concern" (p. 17). Kastenbaum and Aisenberg (1972) emphasize the societal rules, expectations, motives, and symbols that influence and shape an individual's encounter with death. To break down the components of a societal death system, Kastenbaum and Aisenberg (1972) identify the following seven functions and five elements present in all death systems. The functions of a death system are: (1) to give warnings and predictions of threats of life, (2) to prevent death, (3) to care for the dying, (4) to dispose of the dead, (5) to work toward social consolidation after death, (6) to help make sense of death, and (7) to bring about socially sanctioned killing. The five elemental components of a death system are: (1) people (whose social roles are more or less directly related to death), (2) places (specific locations that have a death-related character), (3) times (or specific occasions associated with death), (4) objects or items associated with death, and (5) symbols and images related to death (see also Corr, 2014, p. 19).

For the purpose of this thesis, I will mainly touch on the disposal of the dead, social consolidation after death, and making sense of death (functions 4, 5, and 6 of a death system), as these functions correspond to practices *after* the death has occurred and thus relate to funerals. Additionally, the discussion will include the people, places, times, material objects, and symbols involved in American funerary practices (all five elements). As the ensuing chapters will illustrate, these functions and elements have undergone drastic changes in the United States over the course of history. Ironically, the practices Americans categorize today

as longstanding funeral 'traditions'[2] derive from a regime that is only about one hundred years old. Before that, the more distant historical funerary traditions were environmentally friendly and community oriented. Thus, as the world has shifted, so have ritual practices, and, concurrently, as cultural practices have changed, so have the meanings around death. MacMurray and Futrell (2019) pointedly note: "Part of the social reality of societal death systems is that they are never static" (p. 21). Thus, death systems do not only vary between cultures, but they also shift over time within a given society as new practices, materials, and technologies are developed and adopted. Alongside these tangible changes, the underlying meanings and understandings around death also evolve, which in turn influences which rites and practices will be accepted and perpetuated by society.

Every society in human history has had some kind of conceptual framework for understanding and managing the death of its members. The anthropologist Margaret Mead wrote: "I know of no people for whom the fact of death is not critical and who have no ritual by which to deal with it" (Mead, 1973, pp. 89-90, as quoted in Corr, 2014, p. 22). Even 'primitive' societies had methods and rituals in place of how to dispose of the dead, how to mourn, and how to make sense of death within their religious or spiritual belief systems (Corr, 2014; Taylor, 2002). Wells (2000) lays it out in this way:

> For the living, rituals prescribe proper behavior in times of crisis and provide mechanisms for managing grief. For both the dying and their survivors, ritual gives meaning to what is clearly one of life's most awe-inspiring transitions. Both the rituals themselves and the persons in charge of enforcing them reflect much of what a society values. (p. 272)

As we can see in the passage above, our ritualized practices around death "prescribe proper behavior," or what we might view as the socially held 'correct' modes of operating: the 'right' way of grieving, the 'appropriate' amount of money to spend on a casket, and the 'proper' funeral arrangements to make. When enough people subscribe to these sanctioned modes of behavior over a significant period of time, these practices become increasingly normalized, developing into societal norms and expectations. Bell (2009) remarks: "there is no doubt that ritual has become one of the ways in which we structure and interpret our world" (p. 267). Once

[2] I put the term 'traditions' in quotation marks to denote the industry-constructed funerary conventions and to differentiate them from America's actual, historical burial traditions, which were similar to green burials today.

these socially sanctioned rituals are in place, anything that deviates too far from these practices may therefore be seen as ‘unusual’ or even ‘wrong’ behavior – a niche practice outside the norm. However, as aforementioned, these socially constructed systems and practices around death can shift over time alongside the changing sociocultural, technological, and economic landscapes (MacMurray and Futrell, 2019). In this way, “Ritual action involves an inextricable interaction with its immediate world, often drawing it into the very activity of the rite in multiple ways” (Bell, 2009, p. 266).

Woodthorpe (2017) echoes this embeddedness of death-related practices in the wider cultural and historical context: "What happens after death, specifically the expression of loss and the associated funerary ritual, is […] shaped by social, political, cultural, and economic contexts" (p. 594). These wider contexts must be taken into account when examining a society’s death system. Additionally, Doka (cited in Corr, 2014) points out that "Because it is a related system, changes in one part of the system are likely to generate changes in other parts of the system" (p. 23). Thus, to fully understand the ways in which such a complex system changes, transitions must be analyzed on both a micro level (i.e. how funerary practices are maintained by individuals in society) and a macro level (how incremental changes can disrupt or shift the entire societal death system). This dual approach of analysis will be taken up further in Chapter 3. First, let us turn our attention to the fundamental issue that has prompted this research: the environmental impact of the current American death system.

2.2 Killing two birds with one (head)stone: The environmental impacts of funerals

Conspicuous consumption plays a vital role in conveying quality of life in the United States, but how do we measure “quality of death?” (Walter, 2012, p. 136). Does a ‘good death’ require excessive consumption just like the American ‘good life’? With average funerals oftentimes costing $10,000 (Beard & Burger, 2017), Sanders (2010) points to the “various entanglements that exist between consumer goods and ritualized meaning-making in the contemporary West (or more specifically, in the U.S.)” (p. 50). The opening scene in Chapter 1 offered a brief glimpse into the three principal funerary practices in the U.S.: embalming, ground burial, and cremation. The following sections will present a more detailed overview of the consumption and ecological concerns embedded in these predominant American funerary practices.

2.2.1 A sacred landfill: Environmental impacts of ground burial

Conventional ground burials in the United States are incredibly resource-intensive affairs that permanently take up vast amounts of land space and cause undue damage to the environment, which is why Fiedler et al. (2012) categorize burial grounds as “a particular kind of landfill” (p. 90). According to Herring (2019), "This kind of burial is also a strong source of pollution and toxicity and is not a sustainable practice for the future" (p. 125). Historically, simple coffins were built by hand from available local wood. Today, caskets are typically mass-produced and frequently include various non-biodegradable materials (Sanders, 2010). Modern wooden models are constructed of mahogany, walnut, cherry, maple, oak, magnolia, pine, willow, and poplar, some of which are expensive hardwoods. “A typical 4 ha swath of cemetery contains enough wood to construct 40 homes” (Coutts et al., 2018, p. 131), pointing to the vast deforestation involved in the construction process. Additionally, the wood is treated and lacquered during the assembly, adding toxic varnishes into the ground as well (Canning & Szmigin, 2010).

While wooden models are still very popular, many people choose metal caskets made of bronze, steel, or copper. Especially metal caskets are highly durable in the ground as their materials do not easily break down, and they can contaminate the soil and groundwater (Oliveira et al., 2013). According to Canning and Szmigin (2010), “Possible contaminants from coffins include preservatives, varnishes, and sealers on wood coffins, and lead, zinc, copper, and steel in metal coffins” (p. 1133; see also Zychowski, 2012). In the U.S., caskets are often additionally encased in a massive vault made of concrete, steel, plastic, fiberglass, or bronze (Herring, 2019). Cement vaults use up over 1.6 million tons [1.4 billion kg] of concrete and nearly 65,000 tons [just under 59,000 kg] of steel every year (MacMurray & Futrell, 2019). Allegedly vaults serve as ‘extra protection’ under the ground, though their actual purpose is to maintain the flat, even surface of the cemetery lawn when the grave begins to sink in (Fournier, 2018; Herring, 2019).

Aside from the ecological destruction caused by burying durable caskets and vaults into the ground, we must also consider the footprint of their construction and transportation (Fournier, 2018). Herring (2019) points to the big picture: "The distribution, shipping, and manufacturing of parts and caskets span the globe, creating a huge carbon footprint that is wasteful, unnecessary, and unsustainable" (p. 125). In her life cycle assessment of funerals, Keijzer (2017) found that the transportation of the grave monument adds a huge environmental cost to an average funeral. In terms of other materials, Keijzer (2017) also found that “the cotton lining

of the coffin […] is a major contributor to the total environmental impact of a funeral" (p. 726). Cotton represents the world's largest pesticide-consuming crop, accounting for 24% of all insecticides and 11% of all pesticides used globally (Conca, 2015). If the cotton lining were replaced with a more sustainable fiber such as jute, the ecological impact of the lining could be reduced by 86% (Keijzer, 2017). However, typical caskets are often lined not only with pure cotton, but with blended or entirely synthetic textiles such as polyester, which do not break down easily in the ground (Fiedler et al., 2012). Additionally, the synthetic clothing worn by the corpse can contain microplastics, leach toxic gases, and – in the case of polyester – takes two hundred years to fully break down (Conca, 2015).

Due to the widespread practice of funeral embalming, over 4.3 million gallons [about 16.3 million liters] of highly toxic embalming fluid are buried into the ground in the U.S. annually (Coutts et al., 2018), causing elevated levels of arsenic and formaldehyde in the soil (Fiedler et al., 20112; Zychowski, 2012). The formaldehyde in embalming fluid is hazardous to the environment and is also dangerous to those who come into close contact with the cancer-causing substance, namely morticians (Ferreira et al., 2017; Fournier, 2018). Formaldehyde has been classified as a human carcinogen by the International Agency for Research on Cancer (NCI, 2011). Studies conducted by the National Cancer Institute (NCI) among funeral industry workers and other occupations have found that increasing levels of exposure to the chemical are, among other dangers, linked to higher risk of leukemia (Ibid.). Additionally, formaldehyde is "very toxic to aquatic life" and "When released into the soil, [it] can reach the groundwater" (Ferreira et al., 2017, p. 493). In a review article of groundwater contamination from cemeteries worldwide, Zychowski (2012) lists concerns over other elements too, including nitrate, phosphate, chloride, lead, arsenic, zinc, aluminum, ammonium, among others, noting that "If inappropriately located or insufficiently protected, cemeteries pose a significant health problem for people" (p. 29).

The maintenance of modern lawn cemeteries also requires large amounts of pesticides and water, as well as fuel for frequent mowing of the grass (Fournier, 2018). Canning and Szmigin (2010) note the vast amount of land space dedicated to cemeteries in countries across the world. Yet even giant cemeteries eventually reach their capacity and communities are forced to expand the old ones or open new cemeteries (Monaghan, 2009). Out of more than 145,000 designated burial places in the U.S., only 22,500 are considered "active" cemeteries, with the rest either full or abandoned (Coutts et al., 2018). In some European countries, there is a turnover rate

after which grave spaces are reused for new 'inhabitants.' Such reusing of burial plots is not typically practiced in the U.S., and many offer 'perpetual care' of burial plots, meaning that cemeteries reach their capacity sooner and gravesites take up space for eternity. Considering urban sprawl and growing populations, the question arises: should land be reserved for the living or the dead? Bennett and Davies (2015) point out the frequent tensions that arise from land use allocation for burial grounds in local and regional strategic planning. While cemeteries used to sit at the outskirts of towns and communities, they have gradually become enveloped as expanding cities grew around them. As new cemeteries are needed to accommodate the future population, the current *wants* and long-term *needs* of communities are oftentimes at odds, resulting in NIMBY (not in my backyard)-type resistance (Ibid.). Communities may not want a cemetery in their residential area, yet they still expect a place to bury and visit their dead within reasonable distance. Some areas, including China and Hong Kong, have shifted almost entirely to cremation as a result of land constraints for burial purposes (Aveline-Dubach, 2012; Canning & Szmigin, 2010). Is cremation a better alternative for the environment?

2.2.2 Smoke signals: Environmental impacts of cremation

The practice of cremation is a resource-intensive endeavor, guzzling fossil fuels to power the cremation oven (also called a *retort*), and emitting noxious gases as a result (Canning & Szmigin, 2010). The environmental impacts of cremation center chiefly on energy consumption and emissions, both of which come from the process of incineration itself. Cremation furnaces operate at temperatures around 1000°C, consuming an average of $50m^3$ of gas per body burned (Keijzer, 2017). The process emits approximately 150kg of carbon dioxide per body, as well as other combustion gases (NO_x, CO, SO_2, among others), polychlorinated dibenzo-*p*-dioxins and dibenzofurans (PCDD/Fs), mercury (from dental fillings), nitrogen oxide, and other gases and particulate matter (Herring, 2019; Mari & Domingo, 2010). Mari and Domingo (2010) warn about "toxicity and capacity for bioaccumulation" of heavy metals and PCDD/Fs[3] in the atmosphere, "which means potential risks for human health" (p. 131). Mercury is of specific concern due to its capacity to travel long distances in the atmosphere and due to its high toxicity, especially in marine environments (Monaghan, 2009). Dangerous particles can also enter the food chain and be ingested by humans as they are released into the atmosphere and settle on the

[3] PCDD/Fs were listed as part of the "dirty dozen" pollutants by the Stockholm Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants in 2001. They are released into the atmosphere from combustion of chlorinated products such as plastics (i.e. from prosthetics or from the casket) during the cremation process (Mari & Domingo, 2010).

land (Mari & Domingo, 2010). Moreover, longitudinal studies from England have shown increased stillbirth and birth defects in close proximity of crematoria (Ibid.; Monaghan, 2009).

With approximately 3 million people dying in the U.S. each year, we can roughly calculate the annual cremation emissions based on the cremation rate of 53.1% in 2018 and 150kg CO_2 per body to amount to over 238.5 million kg of carbon dioxide emitted *every year* in the United States alone. According to science writer Mary Woodsen of Cornell University, "you could drive about 4,800 miles [over 7724km] on the energy equivalent of the energy used to cremate someone - and to the moon and back 85 times from all the cremations in one year in the U.S" (cited in MacMurray and Futrell, 2019, p. 14). Cremation rates are projected to rise further in the U.S., as they have done in many other countries around the world. In the early 2000s, cremation had already become the predominant form of body disposal in several places, with rates over 70% in Switzerland, the Czech Republic, the U.K., Denmark, Hong Kong, Singapore, Japan, and Sweden (Canning & Szmigin, 2010; Mari & Domingo, 2010). Fournier (2018) lists an estimate by the United Nations that crematoria "contribute up to 0.2 percent of the annual global emission of greenhouse gases" (p. 25). These rates will continue to rise as more and more people choose this option and as more societies around the world shift their death systems towards cremation. Although newer ovens are more fuel efficient and generally operate with better filtration to reduce emissions and particles, neither human nor animal crematoria in the United States are regulated by the federal Environmental Protection Agency[4] (EPA, 2005; Mari & Domingo, 2010). Instead, regulation of crematoria falls onto individual state agencies (for example the State Board of Mortuary Arts or the Department of Health & Environment).[5]

Aside from the emissions, many people are also unaware of the impact of the ashes, believing that cremation is an eco-friendly option because it does not take up land space. However, contrary to common belief, cremated 'ashes' are not the same as you might find after a campfire, but rather ground-up bone mass which does not degrade and is primarily composed of "tricalcium phosphate with small amounts of other minerals and salts unique to each body" (Fournier, 2018, 25). Bodies are burnt in either cardboard or wooden coffins, so the ashes also contain the remainders of the container and clothing, though charred metal from the handles or from potential medical inserts is removed before returning ashes to the family. Nonetheless,

[4] Nor are they regulated by the European Union in Europe (Mari & Domingo, 2010).
[5] For more information, see the EPA website: https://publicaccess.zendesk.com/hc/en-us/articles/212071007-What-are-the-EPA-regulations-for-crematories-and-pathological-incinerators-

ashes have high levels of sodium and a high pH level of 11.8, whereas soil pH levels range from 5-8 (Herring, 2019). For this reason, cremains are "a source of pollution rather than nourishment for the environment" (Ibid., p. 211), impeding plant growth wherever they are buried or scattered (Let Your Love Grow, 2020). Furthermore, as cremated remains are now increasingly stored in columbaria or buried in a small grave, the impact of cremation also extends into land use as well (Canning et al., 2016). In other cases, ashes might be scattered into bodies of water that serve as recreational spaces or even as sources of drinking water. The European Lake Constance (also known as Bodensee in Germany) is a popular location for the dumping of ashes from the Swiss side, while still providing drinking water for 4,5 million people there (Axel Springer SE, 2012).

2.2.3 Is the environmental impact of funerals worth considering?

Although the overall ecological impact of a conventional ground burial is higher than that of a cremation, the ways in which these practices impact the environment differ (Keijzer, 2017). With ground burial, the impact comes mainly from land usage and hazardous materials in the ground, as well as the construction of these products. With cremation, the impact results from fuel consumption and carbon emissions, and from potential ecological disruption through buried or scattered remains. Is the ecological impact in either case big enough to warrant serious concern, or should we just 'live and let die'? In her lifecycle assessment of funerals, Keijzer (2017) compares the carbon footprint of both ground burial and cremation, concluding that:

> the carbon footprint of funerals is 97 CO_2 equivalents per burial or 210 kg CO_2 equivalents per cremation, meaning respectively 0.01 and 0.03% of a person's life carbon footprint. The climate change impacts of a funeral in comparison to the other activities during a person's life are thus very small. (pp. 727-728)

However, Keijzer's (2017) study was based on Dutch funerals, not American funerals, which has several implications: a) neither toxic embalming fluids nor vault usage were considered in these measurements, which both pose a major ecological concern in American funerals; b) the data assumes a limited resting period in the ground after which the body and burial goods are removed, rather than a permanent burial plot occupying land space for eternity; c) the pollution and emissions data is based on Dutch crematoria, which have stricter filtration standards and regulations than many other countries (Keijzer, 2017; see also Mari & Domingo, 2010); d) the data also assumes recycling of metals after cremation and after exhumation of the body from

the grave, explaining that "the recycling of metals have a large impact on the results" (p. 718), yet metal recycling is not always practiced (especially not if the body stays in the ground); e) the average life expectancy and average carbon footprint of Dutch people differs from Americans,[6] which then also alters the ratios of lifetime carbon footprints. Keijzer (2017) offers her findings only as a benchmark, admitting that "the conclusions cannot be translated directly to other countries" (p. 728).

Additionally, Keijzer's (2017) research was partially commissioned by the Dutch funeral company *Yarden*, pointing to possible conflicts of interest in the presentation of environmental data, especially as the tone of the paper seemed, in part, aimed at disproving the need for 'green' funeral options. Moreover, Keijzer's (2017) study only regarded the carbon footprint of funerals on an *individual* level, positioning the numbers in relation to the remainder of an individual's lifetime practices. While the impact of funerals on climate change surely pales in comparison to many other lifetime activities such as flying, Keijzer's (2017) conclusion that "the environmental impacts of funerals in general are not primarily a reason for societal concern" (p. 728) seems overly optimistic given the ecological impacts this section has examined. Just because funerals do not pose the *biggest* impact on the environment and on climate change does not mean they are not worth consideration. While much literature is dedicated to sustainable transformation of the food, housing, and transportation sectors, Monaghan (2009) aptly notes that "As long as society exists, the need to dispose of the dead will be in as much demand as that for food, shelter, and transport" (p. 1032). Yet by only focusing on an individual level, Kaijzer's (2017) study did not take the compounded carbon footprint (let alone the non-carbon ecological impacts) on a *societal* level into consideration. With over 329 million people in the U.S. and a climbing death rate in the near future, the impact will only continue to increase.

Fiedler et al. (2012) explain that while the "substances contained in the human body cannot be altered" (p. 96), the artefacts we place into the ground (or incinerate) surely can. Hence, corpses will always release their natural elements (carbon, sodium, calcium, etc.) back into the environment as they break down, yet our funerary *practices* largely influence whether this release serves the environment (as nutrients) or harms the environment by hindering the natural decomposition process through preservatives, non-biodegradable materials, and pollution. Our funeral practices pose an environmental justice problem as well, since those living closest to

[6] Americans have a lower life expectancy but their per capita carbon footprint is 1.6 times higher than in the Netherlands; see https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/EN.ATM.CO2E.PC

the contamination of graveyards and the toxic emissions of crematoria are likely to be families of low social and economic status. Moreover, Coutts et al. (2018) posit that "These practices undoubtedly have local environmental impacts, but the gross consumption of resources also has more far reaching regional and global impacts" (p. 130). Besides the actual disposal of the body, there are many other, less-obvious forms of consumption that go into funerals as well, including the food consumed (and wasted) at the wake, the expensive (and oftentimes imported) floral arrangements, the fuel and emissions involved in the transportation to and from the hospital/funeral home/cemetery, as well as the short- or long-distance travel by funeral guests, etc. Indisputably, mainstream American funerary practices have significant negative impacts on the environment – but what is the alternative?

2.3 Pushing up daisies: The eco-death movement

Although there are examples of woodland burials that go back to the early 1900s,[7] the modern-day concept of green burials originated in England in the 1990s with a cemetery manager named Ken West. Working at the Carlisle Cemetery, Ken became disillusioned with the ecologically destructive nature of the funerary business and decided to conserve nature *and* cut down on management costs by not mowing unvisited spaces. These spots became little pockets of nature preserves, which later flourished into a bigger idea: natural burial (Clayden et al., 2015). A *natural burial*, also termed *green burial*, is an ecologically benign form of body disposal reflective of the ways in which humans used to bury their dead before the rise of the funeral industry (Herring, 2019). Before we filled the earth with expensive, lacquered caskets and heavy cement or steel vaults; before it became customary to pump a body full of chemicals; before we had well-dressed strangers take our loved ones away and immediately shove them into a refrigerator – before all these practices became the *normal* way of handling death – we simply dug a hole into the ground, crafted a simple wooden box, and gently placed the body inside (Ibid.). A return to these practices has gained in popularity in Britain since the early 1990s, with over 270 natural burial grounds established there today (Ibid.).

The eco-death movement quickly caught on in the U.S. as well. The first-ever conservation burial ground was opened in Westminster, South Carolina, in 1998, and in 2005, the Green Burial Council (GBC) was established, serving as a nationwide, non-profit organization

[7] The Waldfriedhof Cemetery in Munich, Germany, was established in 1907 and is believed to be the oldest woodland cemetery, though it differs from today's conception of natural burials (Clayden et al., 2015).

overseeing, certifying, and advocating green burial projects. Given their roots in simplicity and the idea of returning to nature, green burials could be considered within the wider movements of *simple living* as well as *slow living* (see Parkins & Craig, 2006, on these concepts). The tenets of green burials[8] include: (a) no grave liners or vaults in the earth, (b) no embalming, or if necessary, nontoxic 'green' embalming fluids must be used, (c) a shallower grave to facilitate decomposition,[9] (d) either no encasing at all or a burial container made from biodegradable materials (e.g. wicker, bamboo, cardboard, a simple pine box, or a fabric shroud made from natural fibers), (e) local rocks or stones can be used to mark the graves if desired, though no commercial headstones are used, (f) native plant species can be added on or around the grave (Herring, 2019). Given these guidelines, green burials avoid all the chemicals and materials that make conventional burials so environmentally harmful. Additionally, other aspects of the funeral can be 'greened' as well, for example by serving local, organic, plant-based foods at the reception, and by dressing the dead body in biodegradable fabrics such as cotton or linen.

The grass is always greener on the other grave: Ranks of green burial grounds

As increasing numbers of green burial grounds have begun popping up across the U.S., the Green Burial Council (GBC) has developed a classification system to distinguish among three levels of sustainability: hybrid, natural, and conservation burial grounds. All three types of burial ground follow the basic guidelines for natural burials (see above), but their requirements differ in terms of the upkeep of the grounds and their levels of ecological restoration. These requirements were updated in December 2019 by the GBC mainly in terms of acreage, burial density, and best practices. Hybrid cemeteries have the least restrictions, and still allow the use of chemical fertilizers, pesticides, herbicides, and insecticides (Kelly, 2015). Natural and conservation cemeteries must conduct an ecological impact assessment and "use operational and burial practices that have no long-term degradation of soil health, plant diversity, water quality, and ecological habitat" (GBC, 2020a). Additionally, natural and conservation burial grounds also have a restriction in their burial density: for natural burial grounds the average

[8] For more detailed information and FAQs, see: https://www.greenburialcouncil.org/green_burial_defined.html
[9] There is more oxygen and thus more aerobic bacteria in shallower soil depths, which facilitates the breakdown of the body. Most green graves are about 3-3.5 ft deep (approx. 1 m), compared to conventional graves that are typically deeper. Herring (2019) notes that 3.5 ft is the depth at which most tree and shrubbery roots grow, thus a body will contribute its nutrients more effectively in a shallower grave as it breaks down and enriches new life.

density shall not exceed 500 burials/acre and for conservation grounds it shall not exceed 300 burials/acre (Ibid.).

Hybrid cemeteries integrate green sections into existing conventional cemeteries. Sometimes *natural burial grounds* are also linked to conventional cemeteries, though the maintenance of the grounds must be separate. *Conservation cemeteries* can be linked to parks or larger nature preserves and are typically larger than natural or hybrid burial grounds. Since the revised standards set forth by the GBC, the minimum size of a conservation burial ground is now 20 acres to increase the success of the land conservation efforts (GBC, 2020a). In addition, conservation burial grounds are required to "conserve, preserve, enhance, or restore the historic native or natural habitat and flora of the region," while also partnering with either a government agency or nonprofit organization through a legally binding agreement that ensures perpetual conservation of the land (Ibid.). Given these stricter guidelines, hybrid cemeteries far outnumber natural and conservation cemeteries, as they are much easier to add onto existing cemeteries. Conservation cemeteries in particular require much more planning, paperwork, and startup capital, though they are without a doubt the greenest option for disposing dead bodies while simultaneously working towards ecological restoration and nature conservation (Coutts et al., 2018). As of April 2020, there were an estimated 279 (natural or hybrid) green burial cemeteries[10] across the U.S. and Canada, yet only 7 officially recognized conservation cemeteries (GBC, 2020b).[11]

Aside from green burials, other sustainability-oriented innovations have emerged on the niche green death market, including urban indoor composting of human bodies (using the same principles of decomposition as green burials) as well as water-based cremation that dissolves the body instead of burning it. Both of these technologies will be discussed further in Chapter 6. Despite these developments, environmentally harmful death practices widely persist in the United States. Through this research, I examine how conventional and green funerary practices developed, why mainstream practices persist, and how eco-funerals are increasingly challenging the dominant regime. One factor that plays a major role in the way a society handles death is their relationship to it. In the United States, this relationship is a blend of fear and fascination, which will be explored in the next section.

[10] For a regularly updated list of green burial cemeteries in each U.S. state and Canadian province, see: https://www.nhfuneral.org/green-burial-cemeteries-in-the-us-and-canada.html
[11] Florida, North Carolina, South Carolina, Washington State, and three in Ohio (GBC, 2020b).

2.4 Scared to death: Death denial, avoidance, and disconnection

In a work that has been both highly acclaimed and highly criticized, Becker (1973) draws on early psychoanalytic theory by Freud to prove "the universality of the fear of death" (p. 15). Becker's (1973) entire argument rests upon the premise that humans have an innate, biological desire to survive, which drives their need for heroism in an attempt to overcome their own mortality. This striving towards heroism can certainly be observed in the workaholic American culture and its conspicuous consumption. Becker (1973) conceptualizes the human condition as a conundrum between our ability for self-awareness (a unique trait compared to all other species) which provides us with a god-like sense of power, and our physical animal bodies which serve as constant reminders of our mortal limitations. Thus, man finds himself caught in a duality between the infinite reach of his mental world and the determinism of his physical existence. According to Becker (1973) "the two dimensions of human existence - the body and the self - can never be reconciled seamlessly" (p. 29). Thus, "what bothers people is really incongruity, life as it *is*" (Ibid., p. 34). He believes that the world is too overwhelming to take in as it is, which is why humans build up a personal and socially sanctioned system of death denial as a defensive and protective shield against the reality of mortality.

> Although we often think of the denial of death as an individual phenomenon, cultures vary in terms of the extent to which they deny the reality of death, and individuals' responses to death are to a certain extent a function of the cultural contexts in which the individuals are born, grow, mature, and eventually die. (Hayslip, 2003, p. 34)

Kastenbaum and Aisenberg (1972) explain important differences between modern-day death and death throughout human history. For centuries, death was a frequent and prevalent occurrence in a community, as life expectancy was short and infant mortality rates were very high. Consequently, people's exposure to death was equally high, and it was accepted as a normal part of life, especially given the perceived defenselessness against God and the overwhelming force of nature. Thus, death was also seen as an act of God and as a warning to those left behind about the punishment of sin (Wells, 2000). Today, individuals in wealthy post-industrial societies such as the United States take their survival for granted and are instead focused on securing subjective well-being, self-expression, and personal fulfillment (Walter, 2012; Wells, 2000). These aspirational, future-oriented goals leave little time or mental capacity

for contemplating one's death, as that would place into question the worthiness of all our personal pursuits. Are we required to deny our own death to keep playing our role in society's script?

The term *denial* in its psychiatric sense is "often used too loosely in regards to death. Some responses that are misinterpreted as denial are better understood as selective attention, selective response, compartmentalizing, deception, or resistance" (Kastenbaum, 2007, p. 27). Death *anxiety* is typically experienced at different points across the lifespan, including heightened periods during adolescence, early adulthood, later middle age, as well as transitional periods such as divorce, separation, illness, family reconfiguration, or exposure to death of parents or peers (Ibid.). Still, "Americans prefer to ignore reminders of death as much as possible" (Wells, 2000, p. 284). Hence, while the term *denial* may be a misnomer, Americans do regularly engage in defensive strategies that typically fluctuate on the spectrum from complete denial to complete acceptance (Kastenbaum, 2007). We can see this not only in our youth-oriented culture but also in the ways we handle death when it occurs. With the "sequestration of death" (Mellor & Schilling, 1993) into the hidden realm of professionalized care, we are rarely confronted with death *personally*, making it seem more like an abstract and distant concept than the inevitable finish line of our own life.

> For most of us, the actual witnessing of death will occur quite infrequently over the course of our lives. When it does, as in the case of the death of a friend or loved one, we find ourselves in the uncomfortable position of spectator, witnessing the sublimation of dying to the auspices of professional medical and postmortem practices. With these practices, public and private rituals of dying, burial, and care for the dead common to earlier eras fade into solitary and disconnected stories. (Wood & Williamson, 2003, p. 14)

While we may feel uncomfortable around death *in situ*, Americans certainly enjoy watching death through the safety of a screen. "It is a cultural commonplace that children who watch television are exposed to thousands of violent deaths by the time they become adults […] As such, death becomes cool and distant, and our connection vicarious" (Wells, 2000, p. 280). Wells (2000) uses the term 'vicarious' here to indicate that we frequently experience death indirectly, not as a personally disruptive event in our own close circles, but as a distant phenomenon presented through various forms of media. Bombarded with a constant stream of death-related images in movies, the evening news, and especially the blood, gore, and slaughter

of many video games, we seem to be simultaneously fascinated by and desensitized to death. McIlwain (2005) observes the shift that death in pop culture has created in our public discourse around the matter. With popular series such as *Six Feet Under, Dead to Me,* and *The Casketeers,* death is no longer a 'taboo' topic, but rather a cultural pastime. Televised real-life instances come to mind as well, such as the cultural fascination with serial killers including Ted Bundy and Jeffrey Dahmer, making death seem mysterious, evil, and distant from ourselves and our own lives. When sensationalized in this manner, death then becomes something that happens 'out there' rather than the inevitable and natural end to our own existence. Such exceptionalism sits at the core of Becker's (1973) argument about the heroic striving towards immortality as a core defense against the reality of our own demise.

Notably, a 'denial of death' does not indicate a cognitive lack of *awareness* or *understanding* of one's mortality, but rather an *unwillingness* to confront this matter openly and vulnerably. Therefore, perhaps the term 'death avoidance' would be more apt. Whether or not we agree with the label 'death denying,' it is certain that we have become *disconnected* from death in many ways on both a personal and cultural level. As this thesis will demonstrate, our conventional death practices mirror and perpetuate this disconnection and avoidance by acting in some ways like a defense mechanism or maladaptive coping strategy. According to Vasilyuk (1991): "[defense] processes are aimed at releasing the individual from discord among impulses and ambivalence of feelings, at preventing him from becoming conscious of undesirable or painful contents, and, most importantly of all, at removing anxiety and tension" (p. 59). In a way, it seems that our avoidance of death drives our funerary practices, while – simultaneously – our practices also reinforce our disconnection from death. Canning and Szmigin (2010) explain that bringing the cultural, emotional, and environmental issues around funerals out into the open is beneficial and that "Awareness of people's fears, as well as their preferences, is the route to better understanding and better information and provision" (p. 1139).

3 The Bare Bones: Theoretical Frameworks

Answering the research questions of this project requires a theoretical framework that is sufficiently broad yet thoroughly nuanced to account for the complex layers and dynamics involved in funerary practices in an evolving death system. The multi-level perspective (MLP) and social practice theory (SPT) spring from different – occasionally antagonistic – theoretical camps, yet both provide valuable frameworks for analyzing different aspects of change and continuity in societies (Hargreaves et al., 2013). In a study conducted on the most useful theories and concepts for explaining socio-technical transitions, the two most frequently listed frameworks by social science experts were the MLP (listed there as 'sociotechnical transitions theory') and SPT (Sovacool & Hess, 2017). Both frameworks bring valuable insights into interdisciplinary research concerned with sustainable transitions, yet neither one is all-encompassing. Warde (2014) reminds us that "Theories necessarily bracket off most parts of complex reality to give a parsimonious account of how particular phenomena operate" and that, "Consequently, a principal effect of any theory is that it [emphasizes] some features of the world and not others" (p. 280). Accordingly, Hargreaves et al. (2013) find that "analyses that adopt only one of these theoretical lenses risk blindness to critical innovation dynamics" (p. 402). To arrive at a fuller understanding of the dynamics at hand within this study, I therefore draw on *both* theoretical frameworks. In this chapter, I present each framework individually before explaining how they will be combined in the later analysis.

3.1 As above so below: The multi-level perspective

Due to its interdisciplinary roots and its adaptability, the multi-level perspective (MLP) lends itself well to understanding the dynamic nature of transitions, particularly sustainable transitions, which are interdisciplinary by design. The MLP does not aim to lock in facts and figures in a rigid, mathematical model, but serves rather as a heuristic device that guides to the important questions and relevant issues within a systemic transformation (Geels, 2011). In this way, the MLP functions as a useful tool for recognizing patterns and for understanding the messy, non-linear, complex processes of transitions, without necessitating a detailed recounting of all the variables and mechanisms within those processes. Rather, the MLP explains outcomes "in terms of event sequences and the timing and conjunctures of event-chains" (Ibid., p. 34).

A useful way of capturing the unfolding of events is through *causal narratives*, which not only trace the sequence of events, but delineate the story within a unifying framework, giving it a plotline, so to speak. Geels (2011) argues that the MLP "provides such a plot for the study of transitions" (p. 35). This idea of a plotline will be useful for understanding the history and trajectory of the American death system, including the birth of the funeral industry and its expansion and dominance over death-related practices. Furthermore, the MLP illuminates the socio-cultural conditions that have enabled *windows of opportunity* (Geels, 2010, p. 495) for shifts in the monolithic death regime over the course of history, focusing in particular on the spread of cremation and the recent eco-death movement. While plotlines and causal narratives can help us understand the basic story behind a transition, Geels (2011) also warns us that there is "no single 'cause' or driver. Instead, there are processes in multiple dimensions and at different levels which link up with, and reinforce, each other" – a process termed *circular causality* (p. 29). Thus, it is fruitless to search for a simple cause and effect or to try to pin any blame, because real life structures do not fall like dominoes or read like tales of good-versus-evil, but are instead a complex entanglement of operations, people, markets, decisions, and interactions.

The three levels in transitions: Landscapes, regimes, and niches

Multiple actors and elements are involved in systemic transitions, making them complex and often lengthy processes (Geels, 2011). Transitions are seen as "non-linear processes that [result] from the interplay of developments at three analytical levels: *niches*, *socio-technical regimes*, and an exogenous *sociotechnical landscape*" (Ibid., p. 26). The term 'socio-technical' acknowledges that such large-scale transitions require changes on both social and technical levels, affecting industries, consumers, infrastructures, stakeholders, technologies, markets, and policies (Ibid.). The three levels interact with one another to create large-scale transitions, or what Geels (2010) labels *regime shifts* (see Figure 1). Within this framework, the niche and landscape levels are always conceptualized in relation to the existing regime. For example, a niche could be "practices or technologies that deviate substantially from the existing regime" (such as green burial), while the landscape could be seen as an "external environment that influences interactions between niche(s) and [the] regime" (Geels, 2011, pp. 26-27). Let us turn our attention to each level of the MLP:

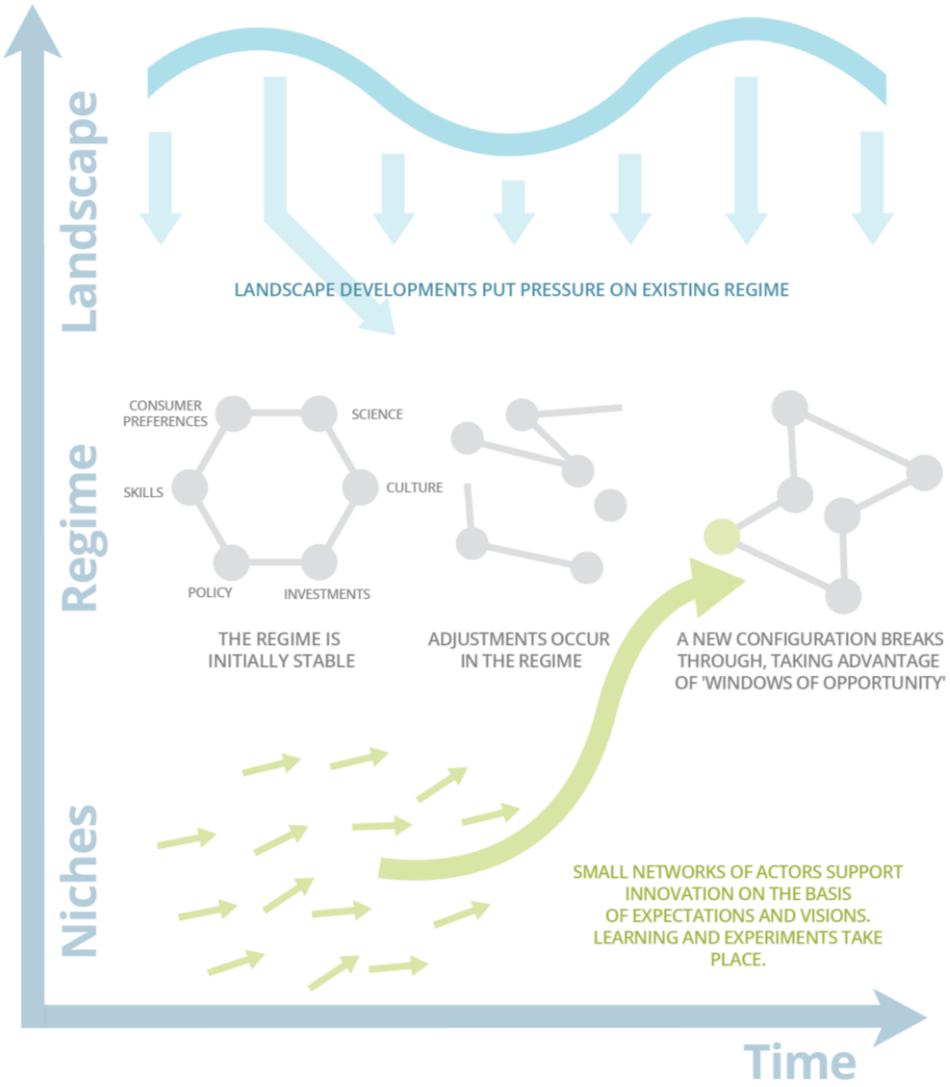


Figure 1: The multi-level perspective of sustainability transitions. Image source: Sustainability transitions: now for the long term - Scientific Figure on ResearchGate. Available from: https://www.researchgate.net/figure/The-multi-level-perspective-on-sustainability-transitions_fig3_336412104 [accessed 19 May, 2020].

A **socio-technical regime** is made up of smaller sub-regimes (such as politics, markets, user preferences, science, technology, and culture), which co-evolve and influence one another. Furthermore, a socio-technical regime is governed by certain system rules and boundaries that help to stabilize its existence and to coordinate the activities of everyone and everything operating within the regime. Shared beliefs and lifestyles, user practices and routines, institutional regulations, laws and contracts collectively exemplify some of the guidelines of a given regime. In such a stable regime, innovations occur slowly and must build over time via incremental adjustments to reach a powerful new trajectory (Geels, 2011). The terms 'regime' and 'system' are oftentimes used interchangeably in the literature and represent similar meanings. Therefore, Kastenbaum and Aisenberg's (1972) concept of the *death system* could

equally be termed a ‘death regime.’ For the purpose of this thesis, I maintain the original terminology of the death system, but refer to the ‘funeral regime’ to specifically indicate the reign of the professionalized funeral industry over the regime (see Appendix I Glossary).

Niches are "protected spaces" in which innovations can occur, and they are "crucial for transitions" as they "provide the seeds for systemic change" (Geels, 2011, p. 27). Through a three-step process (described below), niches can develop enough momentum to disrupt an existing stable regime, and either be incorporated into it, modify it, or completely replace it. For this to happen, niche actors must articulate their visions and expectations with increasing specificity, they must grow their networks of supporters, and they must converge their efforts into an aligned, dominant design that has the potential to destabilize the extant system. Geels (2011) emphasizes that "most niches do not emerge *within* regimes, but often *outside* them" (p. 37). Gaining traction outside the dominant market can help niches expand within a protected space before confronting the prevailing regime (Monaghan, 2009; Van Driel & Schot, 2005). As we will see, green funerals started out in small niche pockets and have been gaining traction in recent years, incrementally making their way into the mainstream funeral regime.

The **socio-technical landscape** provides the wider playing field within which regimes and niches reside. Comparable to Braudel's well-known concept of the *longue durée*, the socio-technical landscape describes the ongoing *zeitgeist* of the time, made up of demographical trends, political ideologies, societal values, macro-economic patterns, technologies, and materialities of society that generally change slowly and cannot directly be influenced by niche and regime actors in the short run (Geels, 2011, p. 28). Van Driel and Schot (2005) differentiate the socio-technical landscape further into three types of dynamics: (1) factors that either change very slowly or do not change at all, such as the geographical landscape, (2) rapid external shocks, including wars, economic crashes, or severe fluctuations in oil prices, and (3) slow, long-term trends in a certain direction, including demographical trends, such as the aging U.S. population. Both slow and rapid developments on the landscape level have influenced the trajectory of the American death system over the course of history, from the Civil War to innovative funeral technologies.

Pathways of transition

Geels (2011) reminds us that every transition is unique, but there is a general pattern that can be observed between the three levels: (1) first, internal momentum builds up around an

innovation within a niche setting; (2) the regime comes under pressure from changes within the broader socio-technical landscape; (3) as the current regime destabilizes under the pressure, windows of opportunity create an opening for the niche innovations to take root. This process can further be broken down into phases such as: emergence of an idea, take-off of the momentum, acceleration and growth around the innovation, and stabilization as a new regime is established (Ibid.). Of course, this is a very simplified model of the actual, drawn-out and interwoven processes that happen during a regime shift. Furthermore, transitions can come about in various ways and for various reasons. A change can occur either rapidly or slowly and incrementally, and it can embody either a symbiotic or a competitive relation to the existing arrangement. Moreover, the extent of the change can also vary from minor adjustments to major overhauls. To capture the variety of potential outcomes of regime shifts, Geels (2011) presents four distinct *transition pathways*:

a. **Transformation**: The regime comes under pressure from developments in the wider landscape, which leads to gradual adjustments in the existing regime. Niche innovations may influence some activity, but in their under-developed state they do not play a defining role in this transition pathway; the pressure on the regime originates instead in the external landscape.

b. **Reconfiguration**: Niche developments are advanced to a point where they can comfortably be added onto an existing regime, oftentimes in the form of addressing local needs or solving local problems. The newly incorporated innovations may spark additional changes and adjustments throughout the regime in a ripple effect that can alter the regime's basic structure in time.

c. **Technological substitution**: Niche innovations are well-developed and ripe for implementation at the same time as tensions are mounting in the regime from external landscape pressures. These tensions open a window of opportunity for the well-defined niche innovations to overhaul the old regime. Internal momentum such as cultural enthusiasm, political support, and high consumer demand can add to the pressure and final takeover of niche innovations.

d. **De-alignment and re-alignment**: In this scenario, the existent regime disintegrates under extreme landscape pressure (de-alignment), leaving behind an open vacuum.

> Competing niche-innovations emerge and flourish in this space, and eventually one of these competing options crystallizes into a new regime (re-alignment).

Locked into path dependence

Geels (2011) explains that so-called ‘sustainability transitions’ pose unique challenges because they are environmentally goal-oriented and thus geared towards the collective good, rather than purely entrepreneurial and profitable. Hence, they can rarely compete with established technologies in terms of their cost-performance, and it is "unlikely that environmental innovations will be able to replace existing systems without changes in economic frame conditions" (Ibid., p. 25). In other words, for sustainability transitions to be successful, they often require support in the form of subsidies, taxes, policies, or some other form of governmental support, without which it would be difficult for these new ideas to be competitive or financially viable (Ibid.). This is true of any market, including the death market:

> For new death management options to spread into a death system's common consumptive practices, they must successfully compete in the marketplace. However, the deathcare marketplace is already replete with established businesses and professional networks committed to conventional funerals and post-mortem body management. (MacMurray & Futrell, 2019, p. 16)

This brings us to the next challenge, namely that sustainable transitions are likely to be met with resistance from the existent structures and dominant players who benefit from the current structures and market conditions (Geels, 2011). For this reason, "Transitions do not come about easily, because existing regimes are characterized by *lock-in* and *path dependence*, and oriented towards incremental innovation along *predictable trajectories*" (Geels, 2010, p. 495; italics added for emphasis). While small changes may be permitted and welcomed, the overall organization is guarded and maintained through a number of so-called lock-in mechanisms, including infrastructures, investment deals, power relations, cultural beliefs and discourses, as well as political lobbying (Geels, 2011). These mechanisms aim to preclude any major changes that might be unfavorable or unprofitable to those in power. Geels (2011) observes how "lock-in mechanisms create path dependence and make it difficult to dislodge existing systems. So, the core analytical puzzle is to understand how environmental innovations emerge and how these can replace, transform or reconfigure existing systems" (p. 25).

The system changes, but who changes the system?

Even though actors are not explicitly accounted for in the MLP diagrams, Van Driel and Schot (2005) position regimes at the intermediate 'mesolevel' due to their influence on actor practices and preferences, and also emphasize the role that these actors play in determining the direction in which history unfolds. Geels (2011) affirms that the "different structural levels are continuously reproduced and enacted by actors in concrete activities" (p. 29). This begs the attention that individual and collective actors deserve in either maintaining or altering a regime – an element that has been grossly understated by the MLP. A regime or system can only survive as long as individuals utilize it and engage with it and – by doing so – simultaneously perpetuate it. MacMurray and Futrell (2019) pertinently describe the dynamic relationship between social structures and humans in a death system:

> People produce and maintain death systems, and death systems structure and constrain how people experience dying and death. Just as death systems will shape the experiences of those within them, those systems may also be reshaped by collective change efforts. (MacMurray & Futrell, 2019, p. 22)

In this way, death systems can be understood as "culturally negotiated constructs open to critique and modification by societal members" (Ibid., p. 22). While the multi-level perspective helps us to understand change from a macro viewpoint, it does not lend itself well to understanding the daily interactions between individuals and the systems they reside in. Furthermore, the MLP focuses chiefly on the processes behind innovative change but does not offer much for explaining stages of plateau (Hargreaves et al., 2013). In other words, when a new regime becomes stabilized in a society *after* a transition, the MLP fails to explain how actors maintain and perpetuate the new system through their everyday interactions. These weaknesses of the MLP are addressed more effectively by social practice theories. In fact, the dependence on actors to reproduce the elements of a system through their individual and collective behaviors lies at the very heart of social practice theories. This strand of theories, introduced in the following section, emphasizes the importance of societal activities ('social practices') in understanding the ways in which systems either remain static or change.

3.2 Old habits die hard: Social practice theory

Although their philosophical roots can be traced all the way back to the works of Wittgenstein and Heidegger, the clan of social practice theories became prominent with the 'cultural turn' in the 1970s (Reckwitz, 2002). By taking *social practices* as their unit of analysis (Ibid.; Spaargaren, 2013), practice theories elegantly circumvent the limiting agency-structure dichotomy of earlier social theories, which fixated either on the individual or on the surrounding structure. According to this viewpoint, practice theories are neither individualist nor holist, as practices sit at the *intersection* of the individual and the social realms, creating both structural order *and* individual activity (Schatzki, 1996). While heterogeneous strands of practice theories are difficult to combine into a single theoretical unit (Reckwitz, 2002), Schatzki (1996) describes their commonality in seeing social practices as "the fundamental component of social life" (p. 12). Classic works from the 1970s through the 1990s were formulated by Bourdieu, Giddens, Foucault, and Schatzki, while more recent voices include Reckwitz, Røpke, Shove, Spaargaren, and Warde (Sahakian & Wilhite, 2014). For the purpose of this thesis, I will focus mainly on the theoretical interpretations of Shove et al. (2012), while weaving in other voices to enrich the understanding of the social nature of action. For simplicity purposes, I will refer to these selected strands as a singular 'social practice theory' with the abbreviation SPT.

Defining social practices

First, let us take a step back and clarify: what exactly *is* a social practice? Schatzki (2002) defines a practice as "an organized constellation of actions," or an "integral activity bundle" (p. 71). A more comprehensive definition is given by Reckwitz (2002):

> A 'practice' […] is a routinised type of behaviour which consists of several elements, interconnected to one another: forms of bodily activities, forms of mental activities, 'things' and their use, a background knowledge in the form of understanding, know-how, states of emotion and motivational knowledge. (p. 249)

How does *routinized* behavior fit in with *funerals*? We shall understand the term 'routinized' here not necessarily in reference to temporal frequency or to the sense of an activity being ordinary or mundane, but rather as physical and mental knowledge that is *embodied* in such a way that it becomes second nature (Reckwitz, 2002) – like a dance routine becoming muscle memory. Moreover, while we "tend to think of ritual as a matter of special activities inherently

different from daily routine action" (Bell, 2009, p. 138), ritual activities (such as funerals) actually entail many of the same behavioral dynamics as everyday social practices. It is therefore useful to examine funerary rituals not as separate from common activities, but as *ritualized* forms of social practices (Ibid.). From this perspective, it becomes clear that a 'funerary practice' is generally comprised of an aggregate of activities that have become both *normalized* in society, and generally *formalized* into a specific sequence of events.

What makes a practice *social*? According to Schatzki (1996), "a functional adult's extensive bodily repertoire of doings and sayings is social in the sense of being acquired through learning and training in the context of others' activities" (p. 70). In other words, everything we do, we have learned at some point through our social networks. Practices, even if carried out in solitude, are by definition social phenomena, because the engagement in a practice links the participant to all others who also engage in the same practice, whether or not these individuals ever interact directly (Reckwitz, 2002; Schatzki, 2002). Even if practitioners never meet, they share a common tendency to engage in a certain practice, collectively acting as carriers of this practice in their society, thus forming a *community of practice* (Lave, 2019). We can think of the millions of Americans who wake up every morning and drink coffee. It is, of course, a completely normal thing to do in this society, and yet, the only reason drinking coffee in the morning *is* considered a 'normal thing to do' is because so many people regularly engage in this practice. Whether or not we realize it, with every cup of coffee we consume, we are actively participating in this social practice of coffee-drinking as members in a community of practice.

However, "Performance in a given practice is often neither fully conscious nor reflective" (Warde, 2005, p. 140). In this way, we might just drink coffee because that is a 'normal thing to do,' or because that is what our parents did, and we became accustomed to coffee in our household. If we had grown up in the U.K., we might be more inclined to drink tea in the morning, engaging in that practice instead. Even if membership in the community of practice is invisible or oblivious, "participants in a custom must believe that some action, say X, is the appropriate action to perform in a certain manner, m, in the circumstances in question because that is believed to be so in the group" (Tuomela, 2002, p. 114). Through the practices they engage in, "individuals are profoundly linked to the groups in which they are members and that group membership is a powerful social force that directly impacts individual lives" (Fontana & Keene, 2009, p. 5). Social institutions, customs and norms are built around collective acceptance and a 'we-attitude' (Tuomela, 2002, pp. 22-23) of mutually shared beliefs that "this

is how things have been done and are generally done in the present group" (Ibid., p. 114). This collective attitude and justification of engaging in certain funerary customs will be a recurring theme in our later analysis.

Building blocks of practices: Meanings, materials, and competences

Let us now take a closer look at how individual practices form and disintegrate within a society. According to Shove et al. (2012), social practices can be broken down into three necessary elements*: materials, competences*, and *meanings.* These three building blocks are combined in a certain manner and reproduced throughout the passage of time to form and sustain a practice. The first element, *materials*, includes the objects, tools, hardware, and infrastructures involved in a practice, as well as the physical body itself, which engages in the practice. The second element, *competence*, describes the mental capacity and the practical skill or expertise that is necessary to perform a certain practice. Lastly, the *meaning* of a practice embodies the "social and symbolic significance of participation at any one moment" (Ibid., p. 23). In other words, engaging in a practice means we subscribe to a certain shared meaning that the practice entails.

To use a relevant example, we will see in subsequent chapters that funerary practices can also be broken down into these three elements: (1) the *materials* used typically include caskets, shovels, floral arrangements, etc., as well as the dead and living bodies involved in the funeral; (2) the *competences* required will differ for various actors involved in the funeral; for example, funeral directors are specially trained to handle dead bodies and coordinate all the necessary paperwork and activities, while family members of the deceased may require more emotional competences to cope with the loss; (3) the social and symbolic *meanings* of funeral practices include their religious associations as well as the philosophical meanings we ascribe to death. All three elements must be taken together to establish a stable funerary practice in a society. If one or more of the building blocks changes, it may disrupt or dissolve the entire practice. Thus, "practices emerge, persist, shift and disappear when connections between elements of these three types are made, sustained or broken" (Shove et al., 2012, pp. 14-15).

Coming to life: The birth and death of a social practice

Shove et al. (2012) conceive of three simplified stages in the building and collapsing of a social practice (see Figure 2). In the 'proto-practice' stage, all three elements of a given practice may already exist in the world but have not yet been successfully linked together to form a (widespread) practice. Once the necessary (new or existing) materials, competences and meanings have been integrated into a novel combination, a practice comes into being. These elements must be connected in the same or a similar fashion over and over again to continually reproduce this practice and to thereby perpetuate its existence as a practice in society (Ibid.). If the elements cease to be linked, or if any of the individual elements deviate too far from the standard, the practice either evolves into a new form, or disintegrates completely. An example would be the art of letter-writing, which used to be a common practice in many parts of the world. With the technological innovations of e-mails and instant messaging, the necessity for handwriting letters to communicate with others has become all but obsolete. Now that letter-writing is only seldom performed in modern Western societies (aside from the occasional postcard), this formerly common practice is fading away.

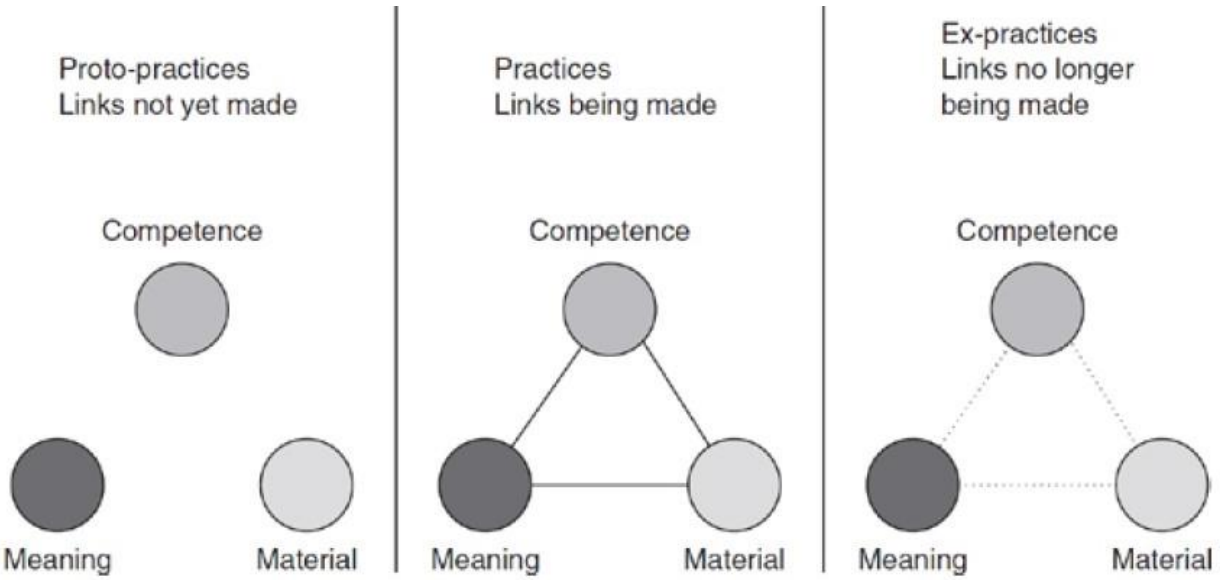


Figure 2: Links connected and broken in the formation and dissolution of social practices. | Image: Shove et al. (2012), p. 24.

Shove et al. (2012) explain the phenomenon in these terms:

> if specific configurations are to remain effective, connections between defining elements have to be renewed time and again. This suggests that stability and routinization are not end points of a linear process of normalization. Rather, they should

> be understood as ongoing accomplishments in which similar elements are repeatedly linked together in similar ways. (p. 24)

In order for a new practice to form, all three of its constitutive elements (material, competence, and meaning) must be present and accessible in the same time and space. However, the mere coexistence of all three elements does not guarantee the formation of a practice (Ibid.). The elements must be societally linked, and the practice must be carried out repeatedly by members in that society. Shove et al. (2012) stress the importance of early participants in a new practice (often within a niche setting), who then set the tone and meaning of the practice, which in turn affects future uptake by other participants. People position themselves within their society by either purposefully or unreflectively engaging in some practices but not in others, which reinforces certain societal (and sometimes gendered) patterns and expectations. Thus, there is a "dynamic relation between the status of participants and the meaning of the practices they carry" (Ibid., p. 54). An entire practice can change if the 'carriers' of that practice change, or if its constitutive elements are replaced or bundled together in new ways (Watson, 2012).

If the building blocks of a practice change, the entire practice will thus either adapt or transform, because the elements not only bind together to co-create a practice, but also mutually shape one another. With an eye on the shifting elements involved, Shove et al. (2012) discuss the patterns of collective learning and unlearning in the history and evolution of different practices. Using the example of car-driving, the authors state: "Cars, once important sites of amateur expertise, have been re-designed to prevent tinkering and ensure that relevant knowledge is concentrated in the hands of a very few" (Ibid., p. 35). As we will see, this has been the case in the history of American funerary practices as well, especially with the professionalization of funeral directors and the standardization of embalming bodies. What used to be taken care of by the family in the home is now handed over to well-dressed strangers with a hefty price tag. This example demonstrates how a shift in *competence* or practical skills can change an entire practice, and even an entire industry. The *materials* involved in a practice can also shape and shift the nature of that practice. In some cases, new materials merely provide a modern update to a stable practice; in more extreme cases, new technologies and innovations may completely overturn a practice, as motorized cars did with horse-drawn carriages, or as emails did with hand-written letters.

Have it your way, within limits: Individuality and collectivity

Is there room for variability within a social practice? Shove et al. (2012) emphasize that while describing a practice as homogenous for simplicity's sake, it is important to note that there are oftentimes many acceptable variations within a given practice. The history of a practice is seldom a single, linear story, but rather "a composite narrative in which diverse experiences, […] are, for the sake of argument, folded together" (Ibid., p. 37). With this in mind, we can tease apart the commonalities that make a given *practice-as-entity* (Ibid., p. 15) recognizable across time and space (and sometimes even across borders and cultures), while appreciating the localized and personalized flavor that creates diversity and flexibility within the same practice. To return to the example of coffee-drinking in the U.S., we can observe a wide range of sub-cultural or personal variations within the same general practice: adding milk and sugar vs. straight black, drinking it hot or iced, brewing a pot at home, using a French press, brewing single-serve Keurig cups, or getting a to-go cup at Starbucks. Despite these different preferences, we can still recognize that everyone drinking coffee belongs to a broad group of actors engaging in the same overall practice, thereby maintaining and perpetuating the coffee-drinking culture of the U.S.

Clearly, there is a spectrum of flexibility for different styles of doing the same thing or achieving the same result within a given practice. The boundaries for this spectrum are always socially constructed, because the rules, regulations and guidelines around what is considered a ‘correct’ or ‘incorrect’ performance of a practice stem from the social norms, expectations, and laws within a society (Warde, 2014). These social norms and values are often "tacitly accepted and unspoken" (Sahakian & Wilhite, 2014, p. 29), silently dictating what might be considered correct or ‘normal,’ as well as incorrect or deviant, behaviors within a society. We thus collectively construct our ideas about the ‘right’ way(s) to do something, providing a handy cultural blueprint for navigating society. By subconsciously repeating the same behavioral patterns we acquire through social emulation, we then reinforce and perpetuate those practices in our society. To a certain extent, we model our behaviors based on others, and in turn serve as a model to others. Over time, "Routines and habits … produce social order(s), perhaps because of expectations formed in the light of how others do things" (Warde, 2014, p. 283).

Systems of practices: 'Sticky' connections

A social practice only remains relevant as long as members of society continue to engage in this practice and carry forward its existence (Shove, 2014; Warde, 2005). Accordingly, individual practices can either wither and fade, or spread and become stable in society for long periods of time. However, individual practices do not exist in a vacuum (Warde, 2005). Hence, when discussing any singular practice, we must also consider the surrounding practices that are interrelated with the practice in question, what Watson (2012) calls *systems of practices*, or what Shove et al. (2012) differentiate into loose *bundles* of practices or into intricately connected practice *complexes*. As we will see in the ensuing chapters, the practice of embalming in the United States often links to the practice of open-casket viewings, which in turn relates to the practice of purchasing and utilizing ornate caskets. Trying to change any one of these practices will require thoughtful consideration of all of them, as they can create 'sticky' interdependences. In extreme cases, practice complexes can become so extensive as to restructure societal functioning. Coming back to an earlier example, the extensive practice of car-driving has shaped many of our social structures, locking us into a "system of automobility" (Urry, 2004), around which we organize our entire society.

Van Driel and Schot (2005) assert that the course of history is contingent upon many factors, yet "given the narrative unfolding at several levels, certain developments become more probable than others" (p. 57). In other words, the dominant structures set in place can guide behaviors in certain directions and discourage any divergence from the dominant path (as we saw in the discussion of the MLP). In this way, the given structures and technologies delineate social norms and social norms simultaneously perpetuate the dominant structures in place. Like the continuous, rhythmic movements required to uphold a hula-hoop, social practices require individuals to keep moving in the same ways for these practices to last in society. As we will see, mainstream post-mortem practices in the United States (embalming, conventional burial and cremation) have been successfully perpetuated for many decades, creating social, financial, and environmental challenges (Coutts et al., 2018). Through continued repetition of these practices, the dominant funeral regime has maintained its influence over societal funerary rites. To borrow Urry's (2004) terminology of the 'system of automobility' and apply it to the realm of death, we could say that we have thus become locked into a 'system of unsustainable death practices.'

Old dog, new tricks: How social practices change

Because practices are embedded in a wider system, they may be geared towards a certain trajectory, hindering or even completely resisting change. According to Shove et al. (2012), "the range of practices in existence today results from an unbroken lineage of past patterns of persistence, transformation and disappearance" (p. 64). Hence, societal norms and practices today are born from those in the past. Attempting to change a social practice forcefully is typically fruitless, as solitary, top-down change models (such as information campaigns) typically only have marginal effects when implemented in isolation (Tukker et al., 2010). In order to create sustainable change within a social system, Shove (2014) emphasizes that it is not necessarily about persuading individuals to rethink their own behaviors one person at a time, but rather about shifting the structures and institutions to make sustainable practices possible, affordable, convenient, and desirable. Policymakers are thus called upon to create systems with trajectories for more sustainable practices to emerge and spread (Ibid.).

Nonetheless, since “People are vital as the carriers and transformers of practice” (Shove, 2014, p. 424), structural changes alone are also pointless unless the people (individually and collectively) are willing to shift their current practices in new directions or adopt new practices altogether. For example, implementing bicycle lanes or investing in a new public transit system in a city only makes sense if people actually utilize these structures. Whether or not a practice is taken up and adopted into a society will depend on the local culture (Shove et al., 2012). Because "individuals engage in many practices and consequently belong to multiple communities at once" (Ibid., p. 68), social networks play a major role in the horizontal spread of practices (Ibid.). One path to creating change, suggested by Sahakian and Wilhite (2014), is therefore to "amplify existing efforts, not necessarily by scaling up from small to large projects, but [by] bridging between communities of practice and sharing learning opportunities across different contexts" (p. 40).

In this way, creating spaces for social learning and participation can foster shared values that are more successful in creating change than mere appeals to people’s morality or individual altruism (Ibid.; Warde, 2005). Through experiential learning, the meanings involved in social practices are changed or enhanced from the inside out (Carden, 2005; Lave, 2019). Peripheral participation in a practice can inspire new recruits and grow the community of practice, which subsequently can also alter the trajectory of the practice (Lave, 2019; Shove et al., 2012). Most importantly, each performance of a practice provides a window of opportunity for change,

because it is a moment of potential reconfiguration of a practice (Shove et al., 2012). In this sense, “Practices also contain the seeds of constant change” since “the sources of changed behaviour lie in the development of practices themselves (Warde, 2005, pp. 140-141). Hence, just as we adopted our current practices through social learning, we can also revise our practices through social learning by physically engaging in new forms of doing things and thereby embodying new competences and meanings.

Notably, practices can also lay dormant for a period before being taken up again. An example of this would be homemaker practices such as baking bread or knitting, which have both seen a revival in certain sub-cultures after being abandoned for many years due to the ease and access of mass-produced consumer goods. In these examples, the meanings associated with homemaking have arguably changed from ones of necessity and frugality to meanings of eco-consciousness, individuality, creativity, health, and/or anti-consumerism. We will see many of these same themes and meanings emerge in the rise and revival of green burials and home funerals in later chapters. Shove et al. (2012) point out that in some cases, rather than old meanings being replaced, "forms of social significance seem to accumulate: one layer being added to the next, with the result that previous meanings are overlain rather than obliterated or dissolved" (p. 35). In other cases, new connotations and associations are attached to an object or practice through a process of "de- and re-classification" (Ibid., p. 53).

3.3 Nestled levels of interaction: Bringing it together

The MLP understands systemic transitions “as emerging through realignments between the vertical levels of niche, regime, and landscape” (Hargreaves et al., 2013, p. 402) and has been criticized for its focus on technology and for not stressing the agency of individuals enough in its explanation of systems transitions (Monaghan, 2009; Sovacool & Hess, 2017). Additionally, the MLP concentrates largely on novelty and innovation while disregarding the systems that maintain and perpetuate ‘normality’ (Hargreaves et al., 2013). Meanwhile, SPT concerns itself with the “horizontal circulation and integration of different elements of practice” (Ibid., p. 402) that shape social norms and routines in a society. SPT has been criticized for focusing too narrowly on individual and household practices, while neglecting the larger structures these practices are embedded in (Sovacool & Hess, 2017). Additionally, the multiple, divergent strands of practice theories lack unity and create a disarray of similar yet varied approaches

(Shove et al., 2012; Warde, 2005). Hargreaves et al. (2013) aptly summarize the fundamental strengths and weaknesses of the MLP and SPT:

> The MLP allows one to examine the emergence of novelty through the interactions between the vertically ordered levels of niche, regime, and landscape, while SPT focuses attention instead on the horizontal dynamics of practices that cut across multiple regimes as they follow their circuits of reproduction. (p. 407)

Thus, the strength of the MLP lies in its large-scale explanation of systemic transitions through change and innovations. The strength of SPT lies in its detailed account of the normalization and stability of social practices and – in the case of funerals – rituals and traditions that are difficult to change. Since both the MLP and SPT describe themselves more as open frameworks or heuristic tools rather than comprehensive theoretical models (see Geels, 2011, p. 38), they can conceivably be brought together to complement one another in an analysis of the changing death system in the United States. While Geels (2010) explicitly rejects the connection of social practice theories with the MLP, he does recognize that "socio-technical transitions are multi-dimensional phenomena [which] can be studied from various angles by different disciplines" (p. 496). Moreover, combining both theories allows this project to "capture dynamic relations between agency and structure, change and stability, material interests and symbolic meaning, rational strategy and institutional embeddedness" (Ibid., p. 504).

Geels (2011) posits that multifaceted topics require multi-dimensional theories to explain the complex dynamic processes of change. Shove (2003) creatively illustrates how the horizontal nature of social practices intersect with the vertical levels of the MLP, integrating practices within an evolving sociotechnical landscape (see diagram on p. 193 in her book). Watson (2012) also manages to bridge the MLP and SPT by arguing that “processes of socio-technical transition can usefully be recast as transitions in ‘systems of practice’” (p. 491). He goes on to explain that “systems persist and are transformed only through the flow of practices – of action and doing – which comprise them” (Ibid., p. 492). Hence, we must recognize that the various levels in the MLP can only be established and maintained through the repeated performance of practices within these niche and regime levels. In the words of Reckwitz (2002): “social order is thus basically social reproduction” (p. 255).

Hargreaves et al. (2013) call upon further research on “how niches, regimes, and landscapes in particular systems interact with and impact upon multiple everyday practices, *and* how

particular practices and systems of practice intersect with the dynamics of niches, regimes, and landscapes" (p. 408). The authors further suggest that "analyses employing an SPT-based understanding of innovation in regimes can usefully benefit from the insights of MLP and vice versa" (Ibid., p. 417). Therefore, this project draws on both frameworks in order to: (1) get a broad as well as deep understanding of how transitions happen in society by examining large systemic (vertical) changes and smaller behavioral (horizontal) changes, (2) account for the shortcomings of each framework by supplementing them with the strengths of the other, and (3) open the door for more nuanced ways of analyzing and discussing change in future empirical studies. Engaging in *theory triangulation* also helps to ensure research quality by approaching the phenomena and data through various lenses to scrutinize and validate the findings to see how they hold up to different viewpoints (Seale, 2018).

The purpose is not to merge the MLP and SPT frameworks in a way that would create a hybrid theory, but rather to see them as *complementary* to each other. The concepts of practices and systemic levels can usefully be brought together in what I call *nestled levels of interaction* (see Figure 3). Joining these concepts enables a more comprehensive understanding of how practices exist within systems and indeed perpetuate these systems, which themselves exist within an evolving socio-technical landscape. Practices on the niche level can expand to the point of perforating the barriers of the mainstream regime, either integrating into it or transforming it. Now that we have laid out the bare theoretical bones of the project, it is time to 'flesh things out' with the empirical methods used in this study.

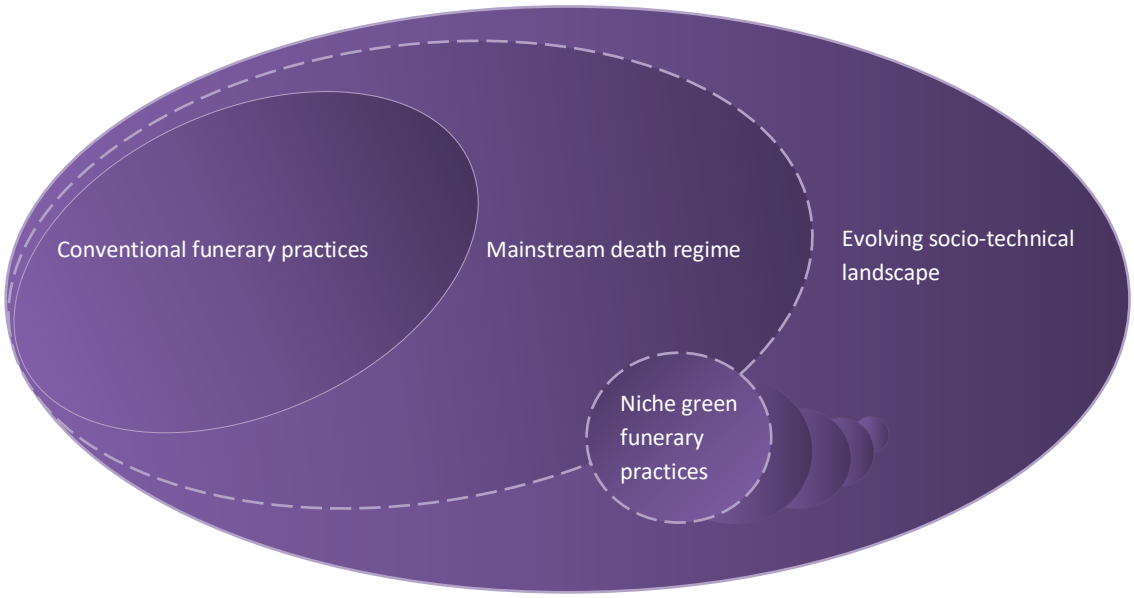


Figure 3: The dynamics between practices and systems in nestled levels of interaction. | © Illustration by the author.

4 Digging Deeper: Research Methods

4.1 Motivation for study

Let me begin by saying that funerals were not my original choice of research topic. However, in May 2019, I came across an online article titled 'Washington Becomes First State to Legalize Human Body Composting' (see Rosane, 2019). Captivated by the headline, I clicked on the article and was immediately struck when learning about the environmental impact of conventional funerals in the U.S. In all my years studying environmental issues in everyday life, it had never crossed my mind that there is an environmental impact even *in death*. Intrigued by this revelation, I began reading everything I could find around this topic. After a few weeks, I emailed my supervisors and declared I was changing my project and starting anew. Understandably, my enthusiasm was initially met with a few question marks, but as strange and morbid as this choice of topic seemed, it was also incredibly fascinating and, paradoxically, seemed very 'original' despite the universality of death. The more I read about the demographic changes and subsequent scale of death ahead, it also seemed like a very timely topic (little did anyone know back then about the mass deaths the 2020 pandemic would bring, making the research even more timely now). Once I had finalized my decision, the next step was to figure out *how* to research the environmental impact of death, which led me to my research design.

4.2 Research design

While we are used to seeing death represented through numbers and statistics, a quantitative approach would have been entirely inadequate at capturing the nature of social practices and the changing dynamics of a death system. The depth of immersion afforded by qualitative research methods was therefore a much more appropriate choice for this particular study. According to O'Leary (2017), the power of qualitative work is being able "to share the human condition in ways that simply cannot happen with statistical analysis of quantified experiences" (p. 343). Thus, the ultimate goal of such a qualitative research approach "is to gain an intimate understanding of people, places, cultures and situations through rich engagement and even immersion in the reality being studied" (Ibid., p. 142). Beginning with broad, open-ended research questions (Bryman, 2012), I was able to gather valuable insights throughout my fieldwork that helped me understand how the American death system has come into place and,

most importantly, how the dynamic processes of change and stagnation have shaped death practices today.

Given the above considerations, I chose a qualitative research design with ethnographic elements, becoming immersed in the field by observing, participating, and learning about death-related phenomena from the inside out. Although the limited scope of the project did not allow for prolonged engagement in the field, an *ethnographically-inspired* approach – or what Bryman (2012) might label a 'multi-site' 'micro-ethnography' – was fitting for this particular research project, providing rich firsthand observations and experiences. According to Seale (2018), "ethnography entails a learning role in which the observer is attempting to understand a world by encountering it first-hand" (p. 265). O'Leary (2017) adds that the goal of ethnographic work "is to go beyond an exploration of simply what is, and begin to explore why it is" (p. 145). Thus, to gain a deeper understanding of various death care practices, their functions and meanings, it was vital to "take it all in – to see, hear, smell, feel and even taste [the] environment" (Ibid., p. 251). For example, in December 2019, I spent six hours with an informant, shadowing the life of a mortician, riding in a hearse, and touching a dead body – talk about *hands-on* research. These experiences provided invaluable insights into the world of funeral-related practices, which I could not have obtained through more distanced methods.

4.3 Fieldwork location

For the empirical component of this thesis, qualitative data was collected over two separate field trips in late July - early August 2019 (within a one-week span), as well as in December 2019 - January 2020 (over a six-week span). The first fieldtrip was mainly to gather some preliminary insights and ideas over the summer as the project was still taking shape, while the bulk of the data was then collected several months later during the winter fieldtrip, after reading and reviewing relevant literature on death systems and practices. Most of the fieldwork was conducted in North Carolina, with supplementary trips to neighboring states Virginia and South Carolina during the second fieldtrip. North Carolina was an opportune choice, due to family ties there, but mainly because it provided a particularly fruitful setting for the study of changing funerary practices. Nestled into the 'bible belt' of the Southeastern United States, many North Carolinians are deeply rooted in their religious traditions, yet the state is equally buzzing with very progressive eco-death activity, creating an interesting oscillation between 'old' and 'new' ways of handling death. The eco-death movement has blossomed into a growing niche bubble

in the state of North Carolina, with a hub of Death Cafés (see Appendix I Glossary), a multitude of 'green' cemeteries, as well as one of the few institutions across the country that offers aquamation (water cremation). Moreover, North Carolina was a convenient location for reaching other important spots as well, such as the very first burial ground with the specific purpose of nature conservation in the entire world, which is located in South Carolina. By the end of the two fieldtrips, I had driven over 3850 km (roundtrip) to reach all the people and sites. While I certainly enjoyed these road trips, it is also worth noting the irony of all the driving (and trans-continental flights) frequently involved in 'environmental' research.

4.4 Methods

Empirical data for this study was collected through three (often overlapping) methods: *semi-structured interviews*, *site visits/observations*, as well as *participation* at various events including two Death Cafés and two funerals. The three overlapping methods used in the project were chosen for several reasons: (1) engaging in semi-structured interviews enabled me to guide the conversation in a direction that suited the purpose of this study and answered my questions, while giving the participants the flexibility to share other stories and information they deemed useful that I might not have considered otherwise, or might not have covered in my original interview guide; (2) by including observations and participation in events, I was able to develop a richer understanding of the places, practices, and phenomena related to death in American culture, including, for example, behind-the-scenes access to funeral homes; (3) meeting with and talking to different kinds of people who are involved in the death system in different capacities enabled me to collect a rich tapestry of voices, rather than the limited data that results from only gathering information through surveys rather than more in-depth methods; (4) by using *methodological triangulation* (see Seale, 2018, p. 575), I was able to generate not only richer data but also ensure more validity in the results of the study by "validating observational data" (Ibid., p. 574).

Interviews and informants

At my first Death Café in July 2019, I met the founder and host Sara Williams, as well as the founder of the Green Burial Project, Anne Weston, both of whom served as 'door openers' or *gatekeepers* (Seale, 2018, p. 264) for this project, connecting me with other important individuals that I would not have otherwise been able to reach. Through a process of *snowball*

sampling (Ibid., p. 167) these informants thus granted me access to their wider network, including key informants Joel,* a funeral director, and Lee Webster, a published author and public speaker on funeral reform as well as the acting president of the Green Burial Council's education and outreach branch. Other informants were contacted directly after finding them through Google searches, and two of the informants were connections through personal friends.

The pool of informants (see Appendix II) for this project thus constituted a *purposive sample*, with each informant carefully selected for their particular expertise and potential contribution to the project (Seale, 2018). For reasons mentioned below, informants consisted chiefly of people who work with death *professionally* in various capacities, including a cemetery manager, two funeral directors, a home funeral guide, a funeral reform advocate, an artist who weaves caskets, and a co-founder of a conservation cemetery, among others. In total, I conducted 11 interviews, 6 of which were in conjunction with site observations at funeral homes or cemeteries. Additionally, I partook in a guided private tour at a funeral history museum, during which I asked questions and gathered information, but did not follow the same questionnaire scheme as with the other 11 interviews. In preparation for each meeting, the interview guide (see Appendix III) was slightly altered to tailor it to each informants' particular role and area of expertise. Most of the interviews were conducted in person, but two meetings were held via Skype and Zoom with participants in New Hampshire and in Washington State, which helped to broaden the scope of data collection beyond the southeastern U.S.

Site observations and event participation

Site observations were conducted at two funeral homes (one with a crematorium and one with an aquamation facility, as well as embalming rooms at both locations), a small woodland burial ground behind a church, a 'mixed' cemetery that contained both conventional graves and a wooded green burial area, two conservation cemeteries, and a funeral history museum. 'Unofficial' site visits included a historical cemetery and a modern memorial park, although these observations were mainly for my own interest and familiarization of different cemetery landscapes and were therefore not included in the analysis or discussion. The most enriching, observational and participatory experiences came from attending the funerals of two complete strangers: one 'traditional' burial in December 2019 and one conservation burial in a wooded area in January 2020. Furthermore, I attended two Death Cafés in different towns in North Carolina (one during each field trip), and one additional event on the cycles of life and death in

Oslo, Norway. While all three of these group events served as excellent 'food for thought,' I approached them more for the experience rather than as primary sites for data collection. The Death Cafés however served the vital function of networking with the green burial community, which was a great boost to the project.

Data collection

For this project, I used a mixed methods approach for collecting and documenting data through audio recordings, handwritten notes, and photos. As aforementioned, site visits usually overlapped with interviews, therefore, audio recording was not always feasible, given the location or circumstances. For instance, some of the interviews were conducted on foot while walking through the rustling winter leaves in natural burial grounds, which would likely have made the recording inaudible. In these cases, it felt 'safer' to just focus on taking notes during the session. On days when I spent multiple hours with an informant, parts of conversations were audio recorded while sitting in their office, while other information was not recorded if it was shared later while in transit (i.e. while driving in the car, or while eating lunch together at a restaurant). In these cases, it felt more appropriate to just listen intently and let the conversation flow without interrupting my informant. Afterwards, I would jot down notes in a quiet moment. Reflecting on the day's findings after each meeting also helped me capture and retain the most vital information.

4.5 Data preparation, processing, and analysis

Before embarking on the first fieldtrip, I received feedback from one of my peers on my interview questions while they were in the development stages. This helped to create more clarity, for example by ensuring that the questions were asked openly rather than leading in a particular direction or including implicit assumptions. Throughout the project, the questions were also refined as needed, especially as various topics and themes began to take on more weight after reoccurring in multiple conversations with different people. Thus, the project remained open to new avenues of thought, while slowly funneling towards a more specific direction. Spending several months reading and engaging with the literature in between my two field trips helped me to narrow down what Seale (2018) calls "foreshadowed problems" (p. 263), which in turn also helped me clarify more specific research interests before the winter fieldtrip. Annotating my notes throughout the process also helped me find links and connections

early on, which further informed my thought processes, analytical themes and categories, and the ‘story’ that seemed to be emerging.

After a discussion with my supervisors, we decided that it was superfluous to transcribe each recording word-for-word, partly due to time constraints (as some of the interview recordings were over 3 hours long) and mainly because the purpose of the project was to capture the essential information, not to engage in a linguistic analysis of informants’ responses. Moreover, given the semi-structured design and the close rapport I built with participants, many of the conversations fluidly drifted into sidebars before returning to the main theme of conversation. For these reasons, the interview material was only partially transcribed, filtering out irrelevant parts and summarizing some lengthy stories in my own words, while still capturing an abundance of direct quotes by informants word-for-word. Afterwards, the transcripts from the audio recordings were checked against my hand-written interview notes to ensure that there had been no oversights and that all the important points had been accounted for. The handwritten notes were manually transferred onto the computer and combined with the transcribed material for each interview. To ensure thoroughness, I spent several weeks immersing myself in the data, listening to the recordings, pouring over my notes, and sketching out rudimentary connections between my findings.

For the analysis, I used the data program *Nvivo* to conduct both deductive and inductive thematic content analysis of the interview material, seeking out, adding and refining themes in a circular fashion. This coding approach helped me to sort through the data material and discern common analytical themes that fit into the overall theoretical scheme of the project, while remaining open to new thematic discoveries along the way. After the first phase of coding was completed, the 45 resulting codes were revised: some broad codes were broken down into more specific categories while some narrower codes were combined or merged with others. Examples of broad codes included: *Social Norms* and *Healing/Catharsis*. After multiple rounds of combing through each category, restructuring and refining the hierarchy of codes, the data was ready to be brought to life on the pages. Rather than presenting my findings in a separate chapter, my supervisors and I agreed it made sense to weave the findings and analysis into the discussion, which is broken down into two parts: one for each research question. Laced into the discussion are also short, impressionistic *vignettes* or "vibrant illustrative excerpts” with the purpose of providing “readers with a sense of what it was like to be there in the field. They are

thus distinct from more detached or sanitized forms of presenting data" (Jarzabkowski et al., 2014, p. 281).

4.6 Ethical Considerations

Consent, anonymity, and transparency

All informants who were interviewed for the project received an information sheet and signed a written consent form (see Appendix IV) in accordance with NSD (Norwegian Centre for Research Data). All photos and audio recordings were produced with the explicit consent of informants, and audio recordings as well as interview notes will be erased immediately after completion of the project. Although all informants except one openly agreed to have their real names used in the final written report, I have changed the names of half of the informants to guard their personal and/or professional identity. New names were randomly generated and assigned in a gender-appropriate manner to the list of informants. While the real names and identities have been concealed, the professional roles of the informants are often indicative of their opinions, which is why their roles are revealed in the findings whenever relevant. The real names of select informants have been deliberately kept in the study as they are considered key figures in the emerging eco-death movement (in a local, regional, or national context), and they shall therefore be recognized by name for the pivotal work they have done and continue to do. Including their voices in this research also adds credibility and flavor to the project. In the analytical discussion (Chapters 5 and 6), an asterisk* behind a name indicates that the name of the informant has been changed (e.g. Frank* indicates that the name has been changed from its original). To distinguish from literary citations, quotes or other information by informants is cited in a square bracket with the real or changed name of the informant, followed by 'PI' (personal interview) and the year of the interview, for example: [Frank,* PI, 2019].

Because many of the interviews lasted several hours when combined with field observations or a 'shadowing' of the informant, this allowed me to become quite familiar with the informants and get into deeper topics of conversation with them. Moreover, because most of the informants advocate for green funerals, being on the same 'side' helped us connect and build rapport with one another quickly. The risk of building such good relationships was that I became quite close with a few of my informants, especially when sharing thoughts and opinions about a mutual topic of interest. Such closeness *can* pose a risk to research quality if the roles between

researcher and ‘friend’ become blurred. However, building these relationships also proved to be a vital part of the fieldwork, as it helped create a supportive and encouraging environment in which informants were eager to help advance the project, for example by connecting me with other people or by recommending further resources. As Seale (2018) notes: “Once access to a setting has been achieved, the success of observational work depends on the quality of the relations with the people under study” (p. 265). Additionally, fostering a solid basis of *trust* ensured that participants felt safe to share their views without feeling the need to conceal or omit information.

By remaining overt in my role as researcher throughout my engagements with participants, I was able to create transparency about the project and about my intentions, even when switching between observer and participant roles. During the Death Cafés (and the event in Oslo), I acted as a peripheral participant so as not to influence the discussions or proceedings. As mentioned, these events acted more as ‘food for thought’ than proper data collection sites. Therefore, these events were not audio recorded, nor did I seek consent from the participants as no personal information from the events was used in the study. Nonetheless, I did always introduce myself and my research project to remain transparent about my position and reason for participating.

The only instance in which I took on a covert role was during the ‘traditional’ funeral, which I was able to witness on short notice without the family having been notified of my presence prior. Strictly speaking, such a lack of informed consent could be seen as a breach of ethics; however, it was done in order to respect the higher-ranking principle of ‘do no harm’ (Bryman, 2012). In other words, it would have been insensitive to approach the family right before the funeral to explain my research role. Instead, dressed in all black that day, my informant invited me to act as ‘part of the team’ in order to quietly observe the proceedings. Sitting in the back of the chapel, riding along in the funeral procession, and helping to carry floral arrangements to the gravesite, my role and outward appearance resembled that of an apprentice, and the family never knew the difference. Moreover, no personal data about them was collected, and the point was to observe the *funeral*, not the family. Still, the situation presented an ethical decision that had to be weighed carefully. Bryman (2012) admits that “there is sometimes a clash between the ethically desirable and the practical” (p. 148). Given the circumstances, adopting a covert role seemed like the best course of action, enabling me to observe a ‘traditional’ funeral up close without disrupting the family in their time of grief. During the conservation burial in January 2020, my informant cleared the situation with the family

beforehand and they generously consented to my presence and participation prior to the funeral. This time, I attended the funeral not as an undercover apprentice but as a guest, although I was still able to actively participate by shoveling dirt into the grave.

Researcher positionality and reflexivity

Before we proceed to the discussion sections of this thesis, I wish to openly disclose my own positionality in relation to this research project. According to Seale (2018): "Reflexivity involves […] acknowledging that the researcher approaches the research from a specific position and that this affects the approach taken, the questions asked and the analysis produced" (p. 224). First and foremost, I must therefore reveal my environmentalist standpoint, which arguably could bias me towards green funerals and against the mainstream funeral industry. Admittedly, after conducting this research, I do plan on a conservation burial for myself one day and hope my family members will consider the same for themselves. However, as a multicultural graduate student with family dispersed all over the globe, I also acknowledge my own *un*-environmental habits, such as frequent flying, which place me in no position to judge anyone for their unsustainable choices – *especially* during a time of grief. I also wish to disclose my agnostic views on religion, which takes away the potential burden of deeply ingrained doctrines or commitments towards certain traditions. I thus feel open towards 'new rituals.'

My own family has engaged in a myriad of conventional funerary practices: two of my grandparents were embalmed and elaborately buried at Arlington National Cemetery as a military honor (in the U.S.), one was cremated (in Germany), and one was buried in a wooden casket without embalming (in Germany). Unfortunately, I was unable to attend three of these funerals, as I was always on the wrong side of the Atlantic when it happened in the middle of the schoolyear or semester, making their deaths feel distant and abstract. I was therefore also never present for the funeral planning or decision-making process and have thus never been in the active or even peripheral role of 'funeral consumer.' Before this project, if I had suddenly found myself in the position of having to plan a funeral, I would not have known what to do or whom to call. I would have relied on outside information and standard social procedures. I explain this to demonstrate that I myself was no more informed about funeral legalities or procedures than the average person. Upon entering the field, I was ambivalent towards the funeral industry and even more so towards death. I had no idea what happens to bodies after they die. Consequently, I approached this research very much as a 'novice' to the realm of

death. Hence, given their expertise as well as the age differences between myself and most of my informants, the power dynamics during the interviews were shifted away from me as the researcher and towards them as the experts (see Seale, 2018, on power relations in research).

Since the original intent had been to focus solely on eco-funerals in this project, most of the informants felt favorably towards green funerals, which made it easy to find common ground in our discussions. However, this also means that my overall data could potentially be tilted towards a green bias, as only one of the later informants was rooted entirely in the 'traditional' side of the mainstream industry. Yet, given my position as an environmentally-focused social researcher, it is unclear how welcoming other mainstream funeral professionals would have been if I had approached them for the project. Indeed, 'traditionalist' Brad,* the manager of a casket company and the funeral museum guide, did not hide his antagonistic sentiments towards the "green burial crowd" during our meeting, openly displaying a sense of mistrust towards my intentions with this project. I reassured him that my intent was not to villainize an industry but to understand the role it plays in perpetuating the death regime. While Brad's* insights were invaluable in creating a fuller picture of the funeral regime and its history, our lukewarm interaction also discouraged me from seeking out additional informants who might be closed off to the idea of sustainable death practices.

Nonetheless, three of my other informants (two funeral directors and a cemetery manager) straddle both the green *and* mainstream sides of the funeral industry, offering both types of services without an obvious preference for one over the other, thereby providing a reasonable middle ground from which I could obtain information about both 'sides.' As we will see later on, these individuals at the threshold between the niche and the mainstream levels are key players in negotiating the future of eco-death practices. Moreover, even those informants from the "green burial crowd" were able to engage in critical reflections about the subject, for example by discussing the potential for greenwashing through eco-death products and services. Finally, the questions on the interview guide (Appendix III) were deliberately formulated in an open-ended and value-free tone to remain as neutral as possible and to gather the *informant's* insights rather than project my own beliefs into the conversation.

Once I began my fieldwork, I was amazed, disgusted, fascinated, curious, shocked, confused, and mind-blown – often within the course of a single day. Regardless of my own preferences, it was both creepy and cool to see the inside of a cremation oven, let alone to learn about what happens during an autopsy, how a body decomposes underground, or the step-by-step process

of embalming. Given my background in the performing and visual arts, I enjoyed learning about the special effects makeup and magic tricks that happen behind closed doors to reconstruct the faces of disfigured victims. Hence, everything I learned, I approached with fresh eyes and curiosity. As an avid meditator, I also made a deliberate effort to keep an open mind and practice non-judgmental awareness throughout the process. Despite these efforts at objectivity and an open-mindedness towards learning, by understanding research as *situated knowledge,* I recognize that "research can never be fully 'objective', neutral or value-free because it is produced by 'knowers' who are situated in the social world and whose knowledge reflects its values" (Seale, 2018, p. 45). By openly reflecting on my own positionality, the reader gains a better understanding of how I approached this topic, and how my own beliefs may have colored the process. Nonetheless, over the course of this research journey, I also came to soften my position about the funeral industry, seeing it not as 'the enemy' of a sustainable transition, but as an integral part of the story. Moreover, getting to know people who straddle both 'sides' was very enlightening, and helped me to adopt a more nuanced viewpoint about the old, the new, and the in-between in the complex world of the evolving funeral regime.

Research quality and project limitations

In my original research design, I had planned to interview 'eco-death professionals' and to hold a focus group of 'eco-death consumers,' i.e. individuals who had personally experienced green funerals in their close circle. However, despite several recruitment efforts with the help of well-networked people in the field, finding participants for the focus group proved fruitless, and I had to shift my strategy. While I was still able to meet with one man who graciously shared his experiences of his mother's home funeral and green burial, all other informants came from the professional side of the death realm, rather than the consumer side. Thus, aside from the potential 'green bias,' one of the shortcomings of this project was not being able to gather more firsthand accounts by funeral *consumers* about their experiences and impressions of funerals, as well as the meanings they personally ascribe to various funeral practices. Nonetheless, speaking chiefly with funeral *professionals* throughout the study also opened new doors, granting me behind-the-scenes access to the daily operations at funeral homes, which enabled me to expand the scope of my project beyond the realm of eco-death to include insights into mainstream funerary practices as well. Moreover, since all the people I met with have dealt with numerous funerals, they were able to consolidate several second-hand stories of families, which allowed at least a partial glimpse into their experiences.

When engaging in qualitative and ethnographic-type work, there is an inherent risk of personal bias that must be accounted for, as "our constructed understandings are condensed into our official observations" (O'Leary, 2017, p. 252). Information necessarily gets filtered through the researcher's own perception and is recorded within their framework of understanding the world. Thus, one of the shortcomings of ethnographic-type work is having to accept that "descriptions are necessarily interpretive, and that the basis of interpretation is the filtering of observations and inputs through theoretical and analytic frameworks that are, of course, imbued with a researcher's own worldview" (Ibid., p. 148). I accounted for these risks by triangulating my data from informant interviews, events and site observations with the wider death-related literature to check for potentially biased interpretations or oversights in my findings. Thoroughness was achieved through engagement in the field to the point of *saturation* (stopping only once the same themes kept coming up in discussion) and *crystallization*, which O'Leary (2017) defines as "Building a rich and diverse understanding of one single situation or phenomenon by seeing the world as multi-faceted, and accepting that what we see depends on where we look" (p. 144). This "rich and diverse understanding" was achieved by meeting with a variety of participants who are involved with death practices in different capacities, as well as site visits on both the eco-death and the conventional funeral side (or, in some cases, the 'middle ground'). Additionally, I documented as much as was possible and permissible at each site through audio recordings, photos, and hand-written field notes to ensure accurate, vivid, and detailed representation and to guard against memory bias (Bryman, 2012).

While qualitative research does not intend to result in generalizability, the findings from this research arguably carry a degree of *transferability* (see Seale, 2018, p. 576), given the more-or-less homogenized form of standard American funerary 'traditions' (with some notable regional exceptions such as New Orleans jazz funerals or Native American funerary rites). By conceptualizing funeral customs as social practices, we can assume them to conform to roughly standardized parameters that make them widely recognizable as a "culturally understandable practice" consisting of "a pattern of routinized (bodily) behaviour and of a certain way of understanding" (Reckwitz, 2002, p. 254). In this way, the practices of cremation, ground burial, or embalming are recognizable due to their meanings, materials and competences beyond the geographical scope of this particular study, and thus transferable to a wider context. Moreover, given its "contribution to some existing body of knowledge," this project also adds to *theoretical generalization* (Seale, 2018, p. 573) of both the MLP and SPT, widening the application and 'transferability' of both frameworks individually and combined.

5 Buried Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Stuck in an Unsustainable Death System?

Now that the methodology behind this research has been fleshed out, we finally come to the crux of the entire project – the *lifeblood*, so to speak – in which I present my empirical findings through the lens of the dual theoretical framework. The analytical discussion is broken down into two parts: this chapter will address the first research question, examining how environmentally harmful death practices have developed and why they persist in the United States. Chapter 6 will then address the second research question, exploring how participatory eco-funerals are challenging the dominant funeral regime. First, let us begin with a snapshot from my time in the field: my undercover day as a funeral home apprentice, witnessing a 'traditional' American ground burial.

A HEAVY LETDOWN: WITNESSING A 'TRADITIONAL' AMERICAN FUNERAL

Inside the chapel, I quietly took my seat in the back row, observing the ceremony like a fly on the wall. At the front, the minister preached wildly at the funeral guests that they will all go to hell unless they follow Jesus' way, explicitly condemning all other religions (not to mention the non-believers). *Great, thanks. Amen.* Once the hellfire-and-brimstone church service was over, we drove in a long line of cars to the cemetery. My informant and I lead the funeral procession in a van carrying the floral arrangements. The grave-side service was brief, unremarkable, and seemed unemotional even to the closest family members who gathered under a tent by the gravesite. A carpet of artificial grass concealed the large mound of dirt behind the grave, reminiscent of a hillside golf course. The metal casket remained perched above the grave until after the family left. Being a 'part of the funeral home crew' for the day, I got to stay and witness the mechanical lowering of the casket into a chunky cement vault (which had been concealed from view with a green curtain while the family was still there). The two men from the vault company then cranked a handle to lower everything down with cables. Watching the men handle these heavy boxes containing a dead person made me think of two words: *routinized* and *perfunctory* – much like airport workers handling the heavy, precious luggage of the countless, faceless travelers passing through. Perhaps it

was a good thing the family did not stay to witness their well-insulated grandfather being lowered into the ground. It was a *heavy* 'letdown,' indeed.

Image 1: A metal casket rests on top of a cement vault before being inserted into the ground. | © Photograph by the author.

5.1 Coming to life: The birth of the funeral regime

To understand the prevalence and persistence of our current funerary customs, we must investigate the origins of these practices, including the socio-technical landscapes and regimes they emerged in, and the social contexts they were adopted and normalized in. We will see how over time, multiple developments at various levels created a *trajectory* (Geels, 2010) of resource-intensive, polluting death practices. Keeping in mind that current practices are born from former practices, and that current systems evolve from former systems, we must therefore ask: where did our death system come from? Did we *always* handle death in this way? Catherine Bell, a worldwide leading expert on ritual studies, remarks how rituals and traditions seemingly imply that they have always existed, yet, paradoxically, even longstanding traditions began at some point (Bell, 2009). In the case of contemporary funerary rites, we can trace their roots back to the American Civil War (1861-1865), which inadvertently opened a *window of opportunity* (see Geels, 2010) for the emergence of an entirely new professional regime: the funeral industry. Utilizing the dual framework of the MLP and SPT, we can then analyze the *nestled levels of interaction* at play in the formation and perpetuation of the dominant death system, by framing

> ritual as part of a historical process in which past patterns are reproduced but also reinterpreted and transformed. In this sense, ritual is frequently depicted as a central arena for cultural mediation, the means by which various combinations of structure and history, past and present, meanings and needs, are brought together in terms of each other. (Bell, 2009, p. 83)

5.1.1 Inventing a new 'tradition': Building blocks of burial practices

New frontiers: Setting the stage for new consumer needs

Throughout the 19th century, several landscape-level developments took place, gradually shifting American society in new directions and rapidly evolving new regimes of technology and transportation. The Industrial Revolution (early 1800s), westward expansion, and the advent of the railroad in America allowed for increased mobility, moving family members further apart from one another (Beard & Burger, 2017), thereby weakening ties to former places. The spread of families also increased the demand for post-mortem transportation of bodies back to the familial burial plot (Iron Coffin Mummy, 2020). During this time, neither embalming nor refrigeration techniques were available to preserve bodies during their homeward journey (Ibid.). In the late 1840s, a man named Fisk 'accidentally' became the founding father of today's metal caskets [Brad,* PI, 2020] when he invented Fisk brand cast iron coffins for the purpose of transporting bodies without decomposing. Modeled after the Egyptian sarcophagus, the airtight, sealed Fisk iron coffins were shaped to snuggly fit the body form to reduce the amount of oxygen in the enclosed space and thus slow the process of decay (Iron Coffin Mummy, 2020). A glass window enabled mourners to safely identify and view the deceased when they arrived, without fearing contagion from widespread diseases such as cholera (Ibid.). While we still widely practice a viewing of the deceased, we have modified the practice to viewings with open caskets, rather than through a glass window.

After former first lady Dolley Madison was buried in a Fisk iron coffin in 1849, the expensive, niche products quickly became "a mark of status for the upper and middle classes during the early years of consumer culture and the nascent funeral industry" (Iron Coffin Mummy, 2020). Other politicians, including President Abraham Lincoln and his son, were also early adopters of Fisk iron coffins. Through a process of social emulation these iron coffins then spread beyond the political elite, especially as the California gold rush pulled masses of people out west,

further distancing families and driving the need for transportable remains (Ibid.). We can see the dynamics of *positional consumption* at play here, a concept introduced by Veblen that describes the "tendency of many goods to start as luxuries and then diffuse to the rest of the population" (Dwyer, 2009, p. 334). Nevertheless, not everyone was so fortunate to even have a proper funeral at home during the westward migration. Fontana and Keene (2009) detail the "overwhelmingly common experience" (p. 167) of women having to unceremoniously bury a child on the side of the trail while en route. Because "births and deaths were daily events" during this time, people were "acutely aware of the dangers of disease and accidents and the overall loss of human life" (Ibid., p. 167). As we saw in Chapter 2, death has since then become far less routine, and far more sequestered from daily life.

From conspicuous to standardized: Funerals become avenues of consumption

The rapid industrialization and increasing stratification into wealthy and poor social classes during the 19th century (Fontana & Keene, 2009) distinctly revealed the "dynamic relationship between stratification structures and consumption" (Dwyer, 2009, p. 337). A stronger focus on the individual resulted in the notion that everyone deserves a decent and individual burial, especially compared to the mass graves[12] that had historically been used for the poor (Fontana & Keene, 2009; Wood & Williamson, 2003). The desire for an individualized and 'decent' funeral expanded death-related consumption patterns dramatically. Fontana and Keene (2009) explain that "In keeping with these macro-level changes in society at large, funeral rituals and beliefs about how to honor the dead also changed. In contrast to the simplicity of early American rites, funerals themselves now turned into a status-seeking display" (p. 71).

For rich (predominantly white) people, the mourning period was a chance to exhibit their wealth through extravagant amounts of food, gifts, and alcohol (Beard & Burger, 2017; Fontana & Keene, 2009). However, even working-class families would scrape together whatever they could to afford a 'decent' burial, including dark-colored mourning outfits for the family, and a food-filled gathering at the home following the funeral (Strange, 2002). Given the social expectations for what was deemed 'proper' attire and behavior, people adhered to these societal standards and norms, simultaneously reproducing them (see Warde, 2014). Indeed, "The

[12] Later, during urgent situations such as the 1918 pandemic or WWI, the death system was unequipped to handle the staggering number of bodies and mass graves became an unfortunate necessity once again (see Rugg, 2018). This shows how landscape-level emergencies can overwhelm and (temporarily or permanently) tilt existing death systems.

opinions of neighbors [were] a powerful force in determining what was deemed appropriate at the time of death" (Wells, 2000, p. 137). We can thus see how "working-class funerals were symptomatic of a burgeoning culture of consumerism: expenditure on extraordinary items acquired a symbolism beyond their intrinsic economic worth. In this sense, conspicuous consumption became synonymous with a specifically working-class concept of 'respectability'" (Strange, 2002, p. 156).

Despite oftentimes impoverishing themselves in the process, the conspicuous funeral consumption of poor families of course looked very different than the extravagant funerals of wealthy families (Strange, 2002; Wells, 2000). Still, death rites and ceremonies during the 19th century *in general* became more lavish, with a stronger emphasis on the materiality of funerals. The overall expansion of funeral-related consumption patterns can be explained by the *ratchet effect*: as consumers adapt to the "conventional standard of decency" (Dwyer, 2009, p. 336) within a society, everyone's consumption increases when the standard of decency gradually increases. Recall the effects of *positional* consumer goods we saw with Fisk iron coffins. What once began as a luxury good quickly diffused throughout society through "mimetic processes that occur without intentional emulation" (Ibid., p. 336). Shove (2003) refers to this phenomenon as the "ratcheting up of demand" (p. 3) in society, which leads to an overall *escalation* of consumption patterns. These same dynamics incrementally raised the expectations involved in 'decent' funerals over time. Hence, what began as a *conspicuous* display of wealth at funerals morphed into high-level *positional standards* that society often still adheres to today.

To keep up with the high death rates of the time, production of burial containers had largely shifted from simple, hand-crafted wooden coffins to factory-produced caskets by the mid-nineteenth century (Sanders, 2010). This shift in production gave American consumers a huge array of casket styles, materials, embellishments, and colors to choose from as the funeral enterprise grew (Fontana & Keene, 2009). The extravagant caskets that typically function as the centerpieces of modern-day funerals thus have their roots in the social norms of the 1800s. Over time, casket fashions shifted to the rectangular shape we still use today (Iron Coffin Mummy, 2019). Sanders (2010) makes the interesting observation of how the changing shape of burial containers seems to add to the sequestration of death. While traditional wooden *coffins* (as well as Fisk iron coffins) had been constructed in an 'anthropoidal' shape – "broad at the shoulders and tapered towards the feet," the rectangular shape of the *casket* "served to abstract death by hiding the shape of the deceased human being inside" (Ibid., p. 58). Sanders (2010)

compares the form and interior of modern rectangular caskets to jewelry boxes with their plush velvet or satin inner linings. Arguably, the cushioned padding and soft pillow in modern-day caskets also alludes to the image of a bed, giving the illusion of someone who is just sleeping. We will return to this notion of a 'peaceful slumber' at the end of the chapter.

"Tupperware for the dead"? The perfection of body preservation techniques

Although the shape of burial containers has changed over the ages, the desire for protection, durability, and preservation from modern-day caskets (and vaults) remains the same as it was with Fisk's invention – especially if they are sealed with an airtight gasket. Yet the science behind these airtight models is faulty. While some mummified remains have been found in Fisk iron coffins or other highly durable, sealed caskets, a lack of oxygen typically leads not to preservation, but rather to anaerobic rotting of the corpse. Moreover, as gases build up pressure in the enclosed space from the decaying body, it can lead to "exploding casket syndrome" (Slocum, 2014; see also Emerick, 2000). Josh Slocum, the executive director of the Funeral Consumers Alliance, notes that even today, "the funeral industry is making money off public ignorance," selling sealed, airtight caskets to consumers who are under the impression that they will keep oxygen and moisture out and thus preserve the body, much like "Tupperware for the dead" (Slocum, 2014). In a footnote of his paper, Sanders (2010) explains that "The degree to which a casket is air-tight is largely irrelevant since anaerobic bacteria, which do not require air, are primarily responsible for decomposition" (p. 58). The Funeral Consumers Alliance (2007), a present-day watchdog group with the purpose of protecting funeral consumers, also makes it clear that "No casket or vault will prevent a body from decomposing, and no casket or vault will permanently keep out water, air, or earth" (p. 6).

Seeking more reliable methods for lasting body preservation, medical scientists had been tinkering with embalming techniques on the sidelines for centuries, modeled at first after the ancient Egyptian practice.[13] In 1615, an English physician named Dr. William Harvey

[13] Egyptian embalming techniques owe much of their success to the dry climate, which impeded the growth of bacteria and thus hampered decomposition (Lee, 1929). The intricate process took between forty to seventy days to complete, during which the intestines were removed through an incision in the side, and the brain was removed through the nostrils. Afterwards, the body's cavities were filled with balsamic herbs, myrrh, and cassia, and balsam was injected into the extremities as well (Ibid.). Egyptians filled the body's cavities with saline, bituminous materials and aromatics, before soaking it in nitre and wrapping it in long strips of fabric (Ibid.). Thousands of years later, these highly effective preservation techniques can still be admired in museums around the world. The early Egyptian embalming techniques were also carried to Asia and Europe, where bodies have been excavated in a remarkable condition hundreds of years later (Ibid.).

discovered the circulatory system of blood through the body, which enabled the practice of intravenous embalming (Lee, 1929). Over time, all three elements (see Shove et al., 2012) of the embalming practice evolved: the *meaning* behind bodily preservation likely shifted from preparation for the afterlife to scientific study of cadavers, and the *competence* changed with the discovery of intravenous embalming. The *materials* changed as well, as different (often highly toxic) concoctions were experimented with [Brad,* PI, 2020]. John Hunter, a leading surgeon in the 18th century, injected camphorated spirits of wine into the veins and arteries of bodies to preserve them (Lee, 1929). Scientific advances during the 1800s had generated new chemical compounds containing arsenic, mercury, and zinc that could be used as highly concentrated and toxic embalming fluids (Beard & Burger, 2017). While these different approaches varied in their successes of durable bodily preservation, they were typically not effective in maintaining the 'lifelike' look embalmers strive to achieve today. As we will see, the skills and results of the embalming practice have greatly gained in finesse over time.

A bloody good opportunity: Seizing the moment for a new profession

Before the mid-1800s, embalming was not a common practice in the U.S. Although it had been experimented with, it was performed solely for the preservation of cadavers to be studied in medical schools (see Sanders, 2010, footnotes on p. 55). However, matters drastically changed when thousands of Civil War soldiers needed to be shipped home after dying in battle, calling for a functional method of body preservation (Kastenbaum, 2007). Where other methods had failed (such as exploding iron caskets, or keeping the bodies iced on trains in the sweltering heat), embalming became the most effective way to keep the bodies from decaying on their long journey home. Since embalming techniques had been developing over time in a niche setting, the landscape-level eruption of the Civil War provided a *window of opportunity* (Geels, 2011), for this niche practice to rapidly become mainstream. Additionally, President Lincoln was embalmed and transported across 1,600 miles after his assassination in 1865, during which time millions of American citizens were able to view his intact body [Cassie, PI, 2019]. The viewing of the deceased president reinforced the social acceptance of embalming (Herring, 2019). Hence, the practice of embalming became widely normalized and accepted during the Civil War (Beard & Burger, 2017; Fontana & Keene, 2009; Kastenbaum, 2007; Olson, 2016).

The radical transformation of death care during this era resembles what Geels (2011) calls a process of *de-alignment and re-alignment:* Coming under extreme pressure from the war

(landscape level disruption), traditional death practices quickly collapsed as society could no longer deal with death in the way it was accustomed to. Before this time, people generally died at home and family members, particularly women, prepared the dead body in their own home (Beard & Burger, 2017; Wells, 2000). The community was much more involved in a death as well, as communities were generally smaller and close-knit, making the death a collective event and a collective loss (Wells, 2000). With the outbreak of the war, the sheer quantity of dead bodies was overwhelming. Moreover, with tens of thousands of soldiers dying hundreds of miles away, the need to preserve their bodies on their return home fueled the need for embalming. Who should perform this activity? With the prior, family-centered and community-oriented rudimentary death 'system' no longer able to meet the demands of handling the dead, society was suddenly left with a vacuum – and a golden opportunity for a new industry.

Walter (2012) describes how every country undergoes crucial moments in history that serve as turning points for its death system. He sees them as "key transitional, or even revolutionary, periods in which each nation and its death practices were modernized" (p. 130). In the United States, we see many of these key moments unfolding in the tumultuous Civil War era. With the increasing social acceptance of embalming, the profession of undertakers emerged, and with this new profession came the dawn of an entirely new regime. The role of the undertaker initially acted as more of a mediator, transporting a dead body from the clinic, where a doctor had embalmed it, back to the family for the funeral (Beard & Burger, 2017). Later, undertakers were trained in the art of embalming themselves and took over the practice, as "growing numbers of entrepreneurial undertakers perceived the social and economic advantages of consolidating funeral work, thereby initiating the process of professionalizing funeral work" (Olson, 2016, p. 75). Thomas Holmes further perfected the method of embalming during the Civil War period and is therefore considered one of the founding fathers of the modern funeral industry (Herring, 2019).

New undertakers were trained at burgeoning mortuary schools, and the profession of licensed funeral directors was recognized across many states by the end of the 19th century (Beard & Burger, 2017). The profession had thus remained in a niche setting for a while before being widely accepted and recognized by society. For many years, undertakers typically had another day job as carpenter, blacksmith, or other type of craftsman [Brad,* PI, 2020]. During this time, people also relied on horse-drawn carriages and mostly traveled shorter distances. Brad,* an expert on funeral history, explained that undertakers would take their tools, a coffin, and an

embalming kit to the family's house with their horse and carriage (much like a doctor making a house call) and would prepare the body at the home. The practice of embalming – though no longer needed for its original purpose of transporting soldiers' bodies long distances – had become so normalized in society that it became a standard practice (Wells, 2000). By this point its function had shifted slightly, to keep the body from decaying immediately (especially in the absence of indoor climate control[14]) while families held a typical three-day at-home vigil. In some cases, embalming also served as a way of buying time until poor families could save up enough money to afford a 'proper' burial (Fontana & Keene, 2009), keeping up with societal expectations and *positional* funeral norms. If the family lived far away from the nearest undertaker, it was common for him to spend the night at the house before his long journey back [Brad,* PI, 2020]. Despite the preparation of bodies by traveling undertakers, the burial and funeral ceremony itself was still in the hands of the family, the community, and the sexton of the church during this time (Wells, 2000). It was not until the early decades of the 20th century that modern funeral homes were established, allowing funeral directors to fully take over all bodily preparations and burial arrangements (Bear & Burger, 2017). What prompted this final step in the formation of the funeral regime?

Driving Miss Daisy('s corpse): How automobility *drove* the funeral regime

The beginning of the 20th century witnessed two major landscape-level disruptions to societal functioning: the first world war (1914-1918), overlapping with the influenza pandemic of 1918. Both of these events brought death on a massive scale that completely overwhelmed the system with overfilled morgues and piles of bodies being taken away on carts to be dumped in mass graves (Klein, 2020). In the 1920s, after society resettled, the death rate stabilized, and the funeral industry blossomed. According to Brad,* whose family has been in the funeral business for nearly a century, the real line of demarcation between the early undertaker days and today's fully-fledged funeral service was the spread of automobiles around this time (see also Wells, 2000). As society became increasingly mobile by the 1920s with the spread of personal vehicles

[14] Before embalming was popular, families would sometimes keep dead bodies in a wicker casket which allowed for air flow and thus was able to keep the body cooler (thereby slowing decomposition) than by placing it in a completely enclosed container. Additionally, these wicker caskets were used if the family was *uncertain* whether the person was truly dead. In a time before modern medical advancements, people with serious illnesses sometimes *appeared* to be dead, but then woke up again after several days. The wicker caskets enabled them to breathe, should they be alive, but also kept them quarantined, should they be dead [Brad,* PI, 2020].

(courtesy of Fordism-type assembly-line production), permanent funeral homes were also increasingly established in towns, which enabled an entirely new business model.

Hence, it took the development of another regime – automobility – to finalize the new regime of the professional funeral industry. We can see in this example how seemingly unrelated practices oftentimes link together in powerful ways, constituting inextricable '*complexes* of practices' (Shove et al., 2012). In this case, the practice of driving not only altered the former practices of undertakers but *enabled* the entire shift to new practices under a new professional role. Instead of coming to the family's home to perform their work, they could now pick up the body in their motorized hearse, take it back to the funeral home, and prepare it for burial there. Consequently, with the change of location, the nature of the undertaker's work radically changed as well, from merely *assisting* a family, to entirely taking over the care of the body in a *professional* setting – in this sense altering the *competences* around death care. In the early days of the industry, some funeral businesses even offered to store bodies at their shop for free – a welcome invitation, especially as society became increasingly crowded and urbanized (Wells, 2000). Keeping the body at the house, as had previously been the norm, may have become increasingly impractical and undesirable with the move to city apartments with less space (Ibid.). "Thus began the great migration of the dead away from the home, and from a family's natural and loving care, into the hands of "professionals" - whose services inevitably included business strategies and the bottom line" (Herring, 2019, p. 11).

Stayin' alive, stayin' alive: How medical advancements affect the death system

Another major development began at the turn of the 20th century that led to irrevocable changes in the *trajectory* (Geels, 2010) of our death system: the medicalization of death. By 1900, cities and states began recording deaths in official registries, and causes of death began to be explained in biomedical terms, rather than being attributed to a moral punishment of God (Wells, 2000). Improvements in public health and the eradication of diseases also led to lower mortality rates and longer average lifespans, making death less of a routine occurrence (Beard & Burger, 2017; Bryant et al., 2003). Medical advancements have thus shifted the demographics of death significantly. Not only is the U.S. population living longer,[15] but they are also growing older as a whole: by 2050, the percentage of people 65 years or older is projected to reach 20.3% (1 in every 5 people), which is nearly a five-fold increase from the

[15] In 2017, the average life expectancy in the United States was 78.539 years (World Bank Group, 2019b).

turn of the twentieth century (Bryant et al., 2003). Additionally, the speed and causes of death are shifting from infections and parasitic diseases common in the nineteenth century, such as tuberculosis and pneumonia, to more chronic and non-communicable diseases such as heart disease, respiratory diseases, and cancer (Bryant et al., 2003; Fontana & Keene, 2009).

Kastenbaum (2007) explains the complex relationship between landscape level developments, the causes of death in society, our meanings around death, and the resulting impact on the death system: "As one or another mode of dying becomes more prominent in society, the death system is likely to change in response. Similarly, as sociocultural conditions change, the types of death that are most prominent are also likely to change" (p. 96). According to epidemiologic transition theory, "as societies become increasingly modern and industrialized, their social, health, and economic conditions improve; and these changes have implications for how people die" (Fontana & Keene, 2009, p. 13). As more people are dying in old age, death has largely been transposed to hospitals and elderly care facilities (Ibid.), adding to the medicalization of death and the shift away from home into the hands of professionals. As a result, death has become less visible in everyday life, marking another step towards the 'modern sequestration of death' (punctuated by instances of war and epidemics during which death was highly visible).

> This reduction of death to an individual event with an individual cause is therefore one more representation of the modern sequestration of death. An 'unexplained death' is scandalous to modern sensibilities because people no longer recognise [sic] the inevitability and universality of death. (Mellor & Schilling, 1993, p. 425)

Over time, our perception of death has thus shifted from a sad yet natural and inevitable part of life to a biomedical problem to be 'overcome' (or at least greatly postponed) with the help of pharmaceuticals, technology, and medical advancements (Bryant et al., 2003; Fontana & Keene, 2009). Consequently, in modern American society, death is no longer easily accepted, and doctors are expected to do everything in their power to keep an individual alive at any cost, "to the point where many question its desirability" (Wells, 2000, p. 271).[16] The French historian Ariès' final period in the historical conceptions of death impeccably summarizes how our traditional, pre-Civil War death practices have changed over the past two hundred years to a stage of 'forbidden death':

[16] This medicalization of death has also led to a host of new moral issues around death, including euthanasia.

> from a communal, public setting, in which individuals and their loved ones had more control over the process of dying, to a completely different way of dealing with death, in a private, obscured, medicalized hospital environment in which doctors and medical staff are in control and the individual has little or no power. (Fontana & Keene, 2009, p. 14)

Deceased but not diseased: How fear of the dead legitimized the industry

After dying in a hospital bed or elderly care facility (in many cases), bodies are immediately transferred to the morgue, from where they continue their journey to the funeral home. With the medicalization of dying and the professionalization of death care since the 20th century, "Death was becoming, in most aspects, impersonal, managed increasingly through bureaucratic and professionalized institutions" (Wood & Williamson, 2003, p. 20). This shift was reinforced in part due to the widespread fear of bodies that lingered from earlier eras (prompted by the plague, cholera, influenza, etc.) and the emergence of germ theory in medical science (Beit-Hallahmi, 2012). In the 1930s, the burgeoning funeral industry played on these fears and "aggressively marketed" what Herring (2019) calls the "myth of contagion" (p. 75). This strategy has perpetuated the fear of dead bodies in American culture, making people even today uncomfortable at the thought of touching or handling a dead body, even though it is harmless (Beit-Hallahmi, 2012; Emerick, 2000; WHO, 2020; see also Sanders, 2010).

The ongoing fear of contagion has propelled the outsourcing of death to professionals as well as the widespread use of vaults as an extra layer of 'protection' since the 1930s. Additionally, a common fear of grave robbing in the early 20th century also helped in the sales of burial vaults [Brad,* PI, 2020], even though grave robbing had largely ceased by this time[17] (Fontana & Keene, 2009). Although embalming had already become a common practice before the establishment of professional funeral homes, the 'myth of contagion' also helped to further legitimize the practice, as embalming is commonly (but falsely) believed to reduce the risk of spreading disease (Herring, 2019). Accordingly, all of these developments – automobility, medicalization, and fear of dead bodies – proved to be major growth factors to the professional funeral regime. Geels (2011) refers to such an interwoven process of mutually influential

[17] Grave robbing for the purpose of anatomical research was a common occurrence in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, though it had effectively ceased by the 1900s as the church allowed medical schools to use cadavers of executed prisoners and stillborn infants (Fontana & Keene, 2009). Still, the fear of grave robbing was slower to die off than the practice of it.

developments as *circular causality*, which, taken together, enabled the centralization of competence and expertise around death care. While nobody at the time may have guessed it, the sequencing of all these events – the Civil War, the perfection of embalming techniques, the invention of motorized cars, medical advancements, and the establishment of the professional funeral industry – formed a *trajectory* for the death system that has persisted for over a century. Urry (2004) describes it in this way: "'Path-dependence' shows that the ordering of events or processes through time very significantly influences the non-linear ways in which they eventually turn out decades or even centuries later" (p. 32).

In the unfolding of all these events, we can thus see the *causal narrative* (Geels, 2011) or the plotline behind the development of our modern-day funerary practices. As the funeral industry increasingly gained in social stature, so did its influence on the practices in the societal death system. Funeral businesses began bundling their goods and services into funeral packages for convenience and cost transparency to the consumer (see Lee, 1929) – although they arguably have had the opposite effect. While a package can be customized to suit different tastes and price points, the basic components of the classic 'traditional' American funeral have largely remained static for the past century. The story at the opening of this chapter illustrated a standard funeral, including transportation, embalming, open-casket viewing, a metal or hardwood casket and a 'protective' burial vault – all remnants that grew out of historical practices over the past 160 years. Through the "event sequences and the timing and conjuncture of event-chains" (Geels, 2011, p. 34), we can see how our "current practices evolved out of past ones and contain the seeds of future practice" (Hargreaves et al., 2013, p. 406). Despite its financial and environmental costs, the 'traditional' American funeral was the most common choice of funeral consumers for nearly a century (Beard & Burger, 2017) – *until recently*.

5.2 The rise of cremation: Eruption of a new practice, disruption of the old system

For many decades throughout the 20th century, funerals remained largely unchanged, establishing a kind of *path dependence* along a *predictable trajectory* (see Geels, 2010). Still, this 'standard' funeral did not remain unchallenged forever. Although many ancient cultures practiced cremation, when it first came to the United States from England in the late 19th century, it was considered an unorthodox method of handling dead bodies (Fontana & Keene, 2009). The first 'official' cremation in the U.S. took place on December 6, 1876 in Pennsylvania

and was celebrated by some as “a significant achievement in transforming society from sentimentality to science, and denounced by others as Satanic blasphemy” (Kastenbaum, 2007, p. 399). Over the next eight years, only 41 cremations took place in the United States, but by 1900, the number increased to 2,414 cremations (Bryant et al., 2003). The adoption of cremation was partially prompted by the perceived “overcrowding of cemeteries, sanitation threats of decaying bodies, and fears about the possibility of being buried alive” (Fontana & Keene, 2009, p. 77).

Despite the rise in numbers around the turn of the 20th century, the percentage of cremations compared to burials was still miniscule: between 1934 and 1938, only 2.56% of all the deceased were cremated in the United States (Bryant et al., 2003). Hence, cremation started as a niche practice outside of the conventional funeral regime and was offered through privately owned crematoria. Recall that this was same period during which the nascent funeral industry had recently established itself. Threatened by the incremental rise of cremation, funeral directors would condemn the practice as an undignified and irreverent act, and at first did not accept cremationists as ‘insiders’ in the funeral industry (Olson, 2016). Additionally, the church objected heavily to this practice, which greatly limited the scope and popularity of cremation for many years (Fontana & Keene, 2009). Consequently, for the first half of the 20th century, “cremation was still not the norm for most Americans and was viewed as somewhat countercultural” (Ibid., p. 77).

Writing in the early decades of the 20th century, Lee (1929) observed that the idea of burning bodies alluded too closely to the fires of hell for many people, and that cremation was thus "unchristian," because it would be impossible to "greet the Lord on the day of the resurrection" (p. 11) without a physical body. Other people believed that "a body which once housed an immortal soul is too sacred for such barbaric desecration" (Ibid., p. 11). Many of these sentiments still hold today, nearly a century later, in certain religious doctrines. However, the Catholic church has since then softened its position on cremation, although Catholics still require all the ashes to be buried together in one place for resurrection purposes [Frank,* PI, 2020]. Especially after the second world war, religious objections became less stringent, and cremation rates began to rise more rapidly in society. This steady growth was of course bad news for anyone vested in maintaining the status quo of funeral practices based on profit-driven, resource-intensive ground burials. Was the ‘traditional’ funeral regime strong enough to withstand this pressure, or did the old regime go up in flames?

The spark that lit the flame: How one book shook the whole funeral industry

In the mid-twentieth century, after having witnessed the horrors and victories of WWII, death once again became much more visible in society with the ongoing Vietnam War (1955-1975). As with any occurrence of mass deaths, the Vietnam war would also have shaken up the death system as it tried to cope with the influx of bodies to be disposed (at least those that made it home). As we saw previously, when the normal functioning of a system is disrupted or overwhelmed, it can open a *window of opportunity* (Geels, 2010) for reconfiguration of that system – just like it did in the cases of the Civil War, and the combined casualties of WWI and the 1918 influenza. Moreover, given the political divisiveness over the Vietnam War, it was met with numerous protests. These anti-war campaigns came alongside the civil rights movement, the women's movement, and the environmental movement. This eclectic patchwork of social movements around the 1960s constructed a vibrant era of protest, hope, and change – and thus a sociotechnical landscape in constant flux. In other words, the time was ripe for a 'seed of change' to be planted in America's collective mind.

In 1963, that seed came in the form of Jessica Mitford's groundbreaking book *The American Way of Death,* which rattled society and served as a wakeup call for the U.S. to rethink its death rituals. With a punching sense of humor, Mitford (2000/1963) based her criticism of the funeral industry mostly on the economic and material aspects, inspiring many Americans to discard the expensive 'traditions' and instead embrace the simplicity of cheaper cremations. During my fieldwork, the book came up in several conversations, pointing to its widespread recognition – perhaps of the same caliber as Rachel Carson's environmental alert *Silent Spring*, which, coincidentally, appeared just a year before Mitford's publication hit the bookshelves. At one of the Death Cafés I joined, participants who had grown up in that era confirmed the book's impact on their own thoughts about death and the funeral industry. Several of my informants also explained that people believed (and continue to believe) that cremation was an environmentally friendly option. Amidst the parallel environmental movement, this rationale for choosing cremation likely played a role in the accelerated uptake of the growing niche practice. Just like systems, practices also have a trajectory that is dependent on the time, space, and social context in which they are adopted and spread (Warde, 2005). Indeed, by 1972, cremation rates had finally reached the 5% mark – nearly one hundred years after it was introduced into the U.S. (CANA, 2019), but within ten years of Mitford's book and the parallel environmental movement. From there on, the growth rate increased even quicker.

A burning ring of fire: Growing communities of practice

By the middle of the 20th century, other changes were underway as well, dramatically reshaping the American way of life – and the American way of death. Increased mobility around the country and around the world throughout the post-WWII era has played a significant role in the spread of cremation in the United States (Bryant et al., 2003; Kastenbaum, 2007). Casal et al. (2010) found that "Place attachment influences a person's choice of body-disposal method and final resting place" (p. 767). Furthermore, their study showed that cremation is the preferred method for those with no religious affiliation and those who are highly mobile (Ibid.). Not surprisingly, research by the Cremation Association of North America (CANA) also found that loosened ties to geographic origins and traditions as well as exposure to new ideas and practices correlate strongly with the choice of cremation (CANA, 2019). Some of the benefits of cremation include its cost-effectiveness, convenience, and the flexibility it provides in postponing the ceremony. Additionally, it is possible to divide ashes among family members or scatter them in multiple places, making it easier for a society of highly mobile and widely dispersed families to obtain, keep, and perhaps even divide up the remains, rather than sticking to a single, potentially faraway, resting place.

Thus, the 'system of automobility' (Urry, 2004) that had originally enabled the establishment of the funeral regime expanded so far by the mid-20th century that society became highly mobile and, concurrently, less stuck on traditions (even more so since the expansion of global air travel). Once again, we see how various regimes can interact and either work symbiotically or undermine one another. A map of the United States broken down into the individual states on the CANA (2019) website helps to visualize the difference in cremation rates across the country. Noticeably, the west coast has overall much higher cremation rates than the east coast, with particularly high rates in the northwestern states as well as the northeastern tip of the country. Meanwhile, the five states with the lowest percentages of cremation all lie in the so-called 'bible belt' of the United States (Ibid.). Kastenbaum (2007) explains that "Obviously, local circumstances and traditions have their influence" (p. 399).

These geographical trends seem to indicate a relentless connection between religious affiliation, ties to 'traditions,' and the choice of method for one's final disposition (Casal et al., 2010). Still, even in the more tradition-oriented, highly religious states with the lowest cremation rates (Mississippi, Alabama, Kentucky, Louisiana, and Tennessee), approximately one third of bodies are burned (CANA, 2019). Research by CANA (2019) also found that

> states generally demonstrate a geographic clustering effect, suggesting that what started as individual preference became the norm in the community and heralded a cultural shift to a new tradition: cremation. Cremation will continue to be popular because it is "what we do now."

This regional clustering is no coincidence. According to my informant Brad,* who strongly favors funeral 'traditions,' cremation has shifted from being a trend to becoming "infectious." Indeed, as a practice becomes normalized in one place, it is not unlikely for it diffuse outward as the meanings, materials, and competences are taken up and recombined in new places (Shove et al., 2012). In this way, practices, and especially the elements that comprise them, are "capable of circulating between places and enduring over time" (Ibid., p. 44). Additionally, the upward trend perhaps also indicates a gradual shift in people's perceptions and meanings around cremation as they progressively adopt the practice. Through a process of "de- and re-classification" (Ibid., p. 53), the *meaning* behind a practice can be altered, which may allow people to reframe their previous connotations of cremation, for example, from a practice that is 'unchristian' to one that is 'normal' as well as 'convenient.' Shove et al. (2012) also emphasize that old meanings need not be obliterated but can instead be *layered* to create a more nuanced understanding or belief system around a given practice. This meaning-making process does not happen in isolation but results from our relations with others in society. Peter Berger terms this our *plausibility system*:

> the network of people who share the beliefs and make them appear to be a credible understanding of the true nature of things. The family is the most important component of this plausibility system, but the local community or peer group plays a decisive role as well. (Bell, 2009, p. 257)

Acting as a sort of echo chamber, our beliefs around what is 'normal' behavior are thus constantly shaped and validated by those around us (see Tuomela, 2002). In turn, each time we engage in a given practice, we also reinforce its magnitude in society in a constant reciprocal cycle. According to Casal et al. (2010), "The choice of cremation or burial is mainly dependent on one's religion and on the spouse's choice" (p. 774). With increased uptake by more and more people within a family, a state, or an entire country, a practice then spreads 'horizontally' across society as new 'carriers' of the practice are included (Shove, 2014). In this way, the *community of practice* (Lave, 2019) grows, continuously fortifying and normalizing cremation in society. As the service became increasingly available across the country, the practice also

became increasingly normalized. Hence, cremation rates began to climb more dramatically, reaching just over 25% in 1999 (Bryant et al., 2003). In comparison, the cremation rates in Great Britain were 70% in the same year, 48% in the Netherlands, 46% in Canada, and 39% in Germany. Meanwhile, Japanese cremation rates already reached 95% in the early 2000s (Kastenbaum, 2007). This disparity in numbers across countries points to the difference that culture can make in the update of a practice. Additionally, "Governmental efforts either to promote or discourage cremation for practical reasons often face determined resistance by people who prefer to care for their dead in their customary ways" (Ibid., p. 399).

We didn't start the fire: From industry-wide resistance to realignment

As is to be expected with any major transition (Geels 2011), fervent resistance came both from the consumer side and from the industry side. At this point, cremation still stood largely outside of the dominant funeral regime, with most crematoria operating as independent businesses. However, around the end of the twentieth century, the funeral industry could no longer deny the looming threat to their 'traditional' business model. As cremation became more mainstream, the dominant funeral industry was unable to extinguish the fire (quite literally), and thus needed to reformulate its strategy. During my fieldwork, I learned that a modern cremation oven costs $130,000 - $200,000 [Joel,* PI, 2020], which is a major investment for a business. However, alarmed by the growing popularity of cremation, funeral businesses were forced to either join the trend, or risk losing business if they did not offer the service.

With sufficient growth and under the right landscape conditions, a niche practice can spread not only 'horizontally' across society, but also 'vertically,' by tipping the dominant regime off balance. This has indeed been the case with cremation, as interwoven chains of development have decidedly caused a shift in the regime. Consequently, funeral directors who had first resisted this practice so adamantly had to accept a shift in their professional identity. Whether willingly or reluctantly, funeral homes increasingly began housing crematoria within their own businesses, reframing the notion of cremation from 'enemy' to 'profitable expansion in service.' Olson (2016) remarks that "new technologies are not simply passive in relation to fixed professional identities; new technologies also act to change professional identities" (p. 83). This was the case both with embalming in the 19th century as well as with cremation in the 20th century. In both instances, the death system had to reinvent itself entirely to adjust to these new technologies and practices; in both instances, these formerly niche practices also ended up

being profitable when adopted into the industry. Today, approximately one third of funeral homes in the U.S. operate their own crematoria, and another 11% plan to open their own within the next five years (NFDA, 2019a). Two thirds of crematoria still operate independently but may partner with specific funeral homes which then outsource the body to these businesses.[18]

Today, cremation is well integrated into the dominant funeral regime, yet some funeral homes have not expanded their service in this direction, refusing to step away from 'traditional' ground burial. As with any other industry, inflexibility may eventually lead to ruin. The National Funeral Directors Association (NFDA) website prominently declares that "cremation is no fading trend – it is the new norm" (NFDA, 2019a). Indeed, in 2015, the rate of cremation surpassed that of ground burial for the first time (NFDA, 2019b), and in 2018, more than half of Americans (53.1%) chose cremation (CANA, 2019). According to Mike Nicodemus, the vice president of cremation services at the NFDA, "Baby Boomers have been a significant factor in this shift and their preferences will inform decisions made by the funeral profession for years to come" (NFDA, 2019a). Recall that baby boomers are the same generation that grew up with Mitford's book – and an environmental agenda.

Another one buys the dust: Consumer reasons for and against cremation

Canning et al. (2016) cite various reasons why people choose cremation over ground burial, including (a) an avoidance of the image of decomposition of one's self or of a loved one, (b) an unwillingness or inability to tend and maintain a gravesite, and (c) lower costs. Although one can hardly argue with points (b) and (c), it is questionable whether the image of being burned in an incinerator is truly more pleasant than naturally disintegrating beneath the surface of the earth. Additionally, many people choose to have themselves and/or their loved ones embalmed and do not seem bothered by the image of their bodily fluids being sucked out and refilled with a toxic chemical substance.[19] This avoidance of critically comparing the processes involved in funerary practices can partially be attributed to the fact that the average person is likely ignorant about what happens behind the closed doors of a funeral home – and they probably do not really *want* to know, either, pointing to both the sequestration and cultural avoidance of death. Nonetheless, the economic reasons for choosing cremation are difficult to argue against. In

[18] By outsourcing to an external crematorium, some establishments offer cheap cremations for less than $800. In some cases, the bodies are transported across state lines to be cremated, depending on where they can get the best deal [Frank,* PI, 2019]. This leaves customers with even less control over their loved one's body.
[19] more on this lovely process in Chapter 6.

2013, the average cost of a cremation was roughly $1,600, which is approximately one fifth of the cost of an average burial (Cengiz & Rook, 2016). Cost was also the number one reason cited in a 2006 survey by CANA of why Americans were shifting their preferences from ground burial to cremation; the second most frequently mentioned reason was a desire to minimize the impact on the environment by saving land space, followed by a preference for simplicity (Ibid.).

In my field conversations, the desire for simplicity and *convenience* seemed to be major factors, as people like the idea of what they perceive to be a quick and simple solution. According to Dyanne, customers often "seem to think that cremation is an easy answer." However, she also reminded me that "easier doesn't equate with better." In fact, a funeral director told me that cremations are more complicated to put together than a ground burial because there is much more paperwork involved and many more legal regulations around it [Joel,* PI, 2020]. Yet people approach it with nonchalance: one of my informants who runs a Death Café suggested that if you were to ask a room full of people what they want to have happen to their body when they die, eight out of ten people would likely reply: "well I never really thought about it, but gee, I guess just cremate me." Such a statement echoes Warde's (2005) observation that "Performance in a given practice is often neither fully conscious nor reflective" (p. 140), pointing to the generally unwary nature of following the societal status quo. With a cremation rate over 53%, we can see how people's choices are "formed in the light of how others do things" (Ibid., p. 283).

Furthermore, many people also fail to consider what will happen with the cremated remains *afterwards*. According to cemetery manager Dyanne, a common answer to this question is "I don't know; they [the family] can figure that out." Such an avoidance of responsibility seems to point not only to our cultural aversion of death, but also to our habit of postponing death-related decisions. This response also places the burden on those left behind, and – without a set plan in place for final storage of the ashes – that task may end up being postponed as well. One informant told me the story of accidentally forgetting the container with her father's ashes in her purse after traveling home from the ceremony. When she got to the cash register at a store and reached for her wallet, she had the horrifying realization that they were still there: *"Oh my God, daddy's in my purse!"* As I was driving to another interview during my fieldwork, a woman on the radio admitted that her husband's ashes have been sitting in the trunk of her car for three years, because she just never got around to 'dealing with it.' I learned from my field conversations that crematoria also frequently have unclaimed remains that families never

picked up [Frank,* PI, 2019], or that people find cremated remains left behind in the attic or basement after buying a new house [Lee, PI, 2020]. Has the shift towards convenience in funerary practices made us lose touch with importance of rituals?

While increasing numbers of people are choosing cremation for the reasons listed earlier, other people turn against the practice for equally as compelling reasons. Many people find comfort in the familiarity of their known 'traditions,' such as communities in southern states with strong religious affiliation. Social practice theory explains that the adherence to socially sanctioned 'traditions' rests upon a shared group belief that "this is how things have been done and are generally done in the present group" (Tuomela, 2002, p. 114). Hence, in clinging to 'traditions,' "The meaning and purpose are thought to be obvious, and the assumption that it has always been done in this way slips in without official pronouncement" (Bell, 2009, p. 150). Some participants in a study by Canning et al. (2016) also found that cremation entailed an abruptness in taking the body away and making it unrecognizable, and that the thought of the burning a loved one was "difficult psychologically," or that it "makes you shiver" (p. 233). Burial, with the body kept intact, may then seem more appealing. Whether people choose cremation or burial as the 'right' funerary option, both of these practices have persisted in American society for decades. In the following section, we will inspect how these practices, and the regime they represent, have been sustained through time.

5.3 Mortal Reign: Maintaining the professionalized funeral regime

According to Geels (2011), a regime stabilizes itself through the enforcement of certain rules, boundaries, and social norms, all of which help to maintain the smooth functioning of the system. Laws and regulations can create a sense of order and help coordinate activities within a regime, thus acting as a kind of protective insulation. Nonetheless, even a stable regime (or, similarly, a stable death system) can come under pressure and be overthrown under certain landscape-level conditions, as we saw in the case of the Civil War overthrowing the previous, community-based death system. Furthermore, niche innovations and activities can also pose a threat to the stability of a regime, as we saw with cremation. Hence, in large part, the stability and durability of a regime also depends upon the repeated, unwavering practices of a society (in this case, repetition of conventional funeral customs). Yet, practices are far from static, as each performance of a practice holds the potential for reinvention of that practice (Shove et al.,

2012; Warde, 2005). Recall from Chapter 3 that "systems persist and are transformed only through the flow of practices – of action and doing – which comprise them" (Watson, 2012, p. 492). As this section will demonstrate, the survival of the dominant death regime under the reign of the funeral industry depends partly on the impermeability of the structures in place and partly on the continuous enactment of the normalized funerary practices by consumers. In other words, within *nestled levels of interaction*, the regime encourages certain practices and certain practices uphold the regime.

5.3.1 Directing the scene: The industry influence on funeral rituals

One way in which the funeral industry has maintained its powerful regime is by becoming increasingly incorporated, mushrooming into a multi-billion-dollar network. While conducting interviews at two separate family-owned and operated funeral homes in the field, I learned that corporations such as SCI (Service Corporation International) have progressively devoured small funeral businesses since the 1990s. Local, family-owned funeral homes are increasingly "being taken over or displaced" by a small number of corporate giants (Kastenbaum, 2007, p. 189). In some cases, the original owner will remain as an employee or 'front man' of the business to maintain a small-town feeling and local image with a familiar face, while hiding the fact that the brand now operates under corporate management ([Frank,* PI, 2019]; Kastenbaum, 2007). The National Funeral Directors Association estimates that "Approximately 89.2% of funeral homes in the United States are privately owned by families or individuals. The remaining 10.8% are owned by publicly-traded corporations" (NFDA, 2019b). While this may not seem like a large percentage, the reach is still expansive. SCI is the biggest name in the industry and serves as a multinational umbrella corporation with multiple brands, running over 1,900 funeral homes, more than five hundred cemeteries, and one hundred crematoria across the U.S. and Canada (Kelly, 2015).

Such an accumulation of power in any given industry begs the question of choice and agency of consumers. As Smart (2010) points out: "choices made by consumers are in respect of given ranges of goods and services produced within economic circumstances and market conditions and subject to cultural processes and influences which consumers have not chosen" (p. 33). In other words, consumer choices are always limited to the boundaries set by the dominant regime. For many decades, this left consumers with slim options outside the costly, standardized 'traditional' funeral. Yet even cremation, the cheaper alternative, typically amounts to a bill of

several thousands (NFDA, 2019c). Because disposal of the dead is deemed a necessary part of societal functioning (for obvious reasons), many people feel they have no choice but to follow the structures in place: "We've become convinced that parting with lots of money - as our final gift to someone that allows them to eternally rest in peace - is just the way it is and the way it's always been" (Fournier, 2018, p. 2).

Buried treasure: The underlying costs of funerals

People find themselves in a tricky situation as they are forced to make very difficult, very expensive decisions within a matter of days, all while dealing with their grief. When I visited the showroom of a privately-owned funeral home during my fieldwork, I was greeted by a wide selection of caskets to choose from. Steel caskets, which were painted in shiny metallic hues of blush pink, baby blue, silver, and gold, cost approximately $2,995. The most expensive casket in the room, made of beautiful dark mahogany, cost $6,995. Most caskets were priced within the $3,000-$4,000 range. The cheapest available casket ($1,995) was not displayed in the showroom – a typical sales tactic to encourage consumers to purchase whatever is readily visible (Mitford, 2000). “Funeral directors argue that they guide uninformed consumers to make better choices, while critics argue that they induce vulnerable consumers to overspend on funerals” (Harrington, 2007, p. 209). According to funeral director Joel,* what justifies spending so much money on a funeral is the peace of mind that comes from knowing that the deceased loved one is in good hands and well taken care of: “I just don’t think death is the time to half-ass do anything … because it’s an experience that will affect the living [for] the rest of their life.”

Today, with the average funeral costing $7,000-$12,000 (Beard & Burger, 2017; Cengiz & Rook, 2016; NFDA, 2019b), the impact on a family’s finances cannot be overstated.[20] Especially for those struggling with financial security, the cost may indeed “affect the living [for] the rest of their life,” as Joel* had put it. In 1929, R. P. Lee defended early funeral directors, claiming that "in many cases, the Funeral Director has been unable to properly justify his charges. As a result of this he has been the subject of considerable disfavor on the part of some

[20] The NFDA lists the 2019 median cost of a funeral with embalming, viewing and burial as $7,640 (or $9,135 including a vault). This estimate assumes a relatively cheap casket price ($2,500) and also does not include additional costs such as cemetery fee, flowers, headstone, obituary, catering, etc., which will increase the cost significantly. The 2019 median cost of a funeral with embalming, viewing, and cremation came to $6,645 including a cremation casket and urn. This estimate is based on the use of a third-party crematory which is generally cheaper than in-house cremation (see NFDA, 2019c). These cost estimates are thus very conservative.

of the public" (Lee, 1929, p. 68). Nearly a century later, my informants told me the disfavor is still widespread. Brad,* the manager of a casket company and funeral museum guide, blamed "Walmart mentality" for the common disdain towards the funeral industry. When people complain about the pricing, he likes to pull them aside and ask, "how much did you pay for your daughter's wedding?" The comparison of wedding costs to funeral costs is a frequent discussion point in the industry. With an average wedding cost of over $30,000 in the U.S. (three to four times the average funeral cost), some funeral professionals believe that the high price of other ceremonies somehow justifies the price of a funeral – or at least puts it into perspective. My informant Anne, who had accompanied me to the funeral museum, countered that weddings are joyous occasions that are pre-planned for months and that "people don't walk in on the worst day of their life" to purchase an expensive wedding like they do with a funeral. Hence, funerals are what Monaghan (2009) labels a "classic distress purchase" (p. 1037).

Why are funerals so expensive in the first place? Several of my informants who work in the mainstream funeral industry explained the costs involved with running and maintaining a funeral business. Between daily operations, staff salaries, vehicles, merchandise and overhead costs, one informant calculated that "you could literally buy a house every month" with the money it takes to run a funeral business [Joel,* PI, 2020]. The operating expenses help to explain in part why funerals cost so much. For family-run businesses with high competition and a small clientele, this can cause serious financial concern, and may force them to become absorbed into the corporate model. Acquisitions of smaller businesses allow corporate funeral chains to operate on economies of scale (Sanders, 2010), for example by maintaining centralized locations for embalming and/or cremation, with smaller satellite branches to handle sales and customer service (Harrington, 2007). This helps increase business efficiency and lower the operating costs for these funeral chains, in turn generating even more competition for the remaining small, family-owned businesses.

Nonetheless, with a national median of $2,195 to cover the 'nondeclinable basic services fee,' an average charge of $350 just to pick up and transport a body to the funeral home, $750 for embalming, a $500 charge to use the staff and facilities for the ceremony (usually less than an hour), and an average charge of $425 to use the facility for a viewing, we can extrapolate that the profit margin is still quite high for each funeral (see NFDA, 2019c, for national median cost breakdowns). Moreover, in 2012, over 100,000 people were employed in the funeral industry (Benincasa, 2017) and in 2015, the industry was worth over $15 billion USD (Kelly, 2015),

indicating that it is indeed a lucrative business – especially for corporate chains. Whatever goes deep into the ground is causing us to go even deeper into our pockets. Wood and Williamson (2003) pointedly ask: “Is good dying merely becoming good business?” (p. 22).

Masters of ceremonies: The guidance of funeral directors

With their dominance over the funeral regime since the early 20th century, funeral directors have dictated societal norms and practices around death to a large extent. Olson (2016) explains that "One key way in which funeral professionals maintain control over the dead human body (and thus death care markets) is by defining a unique social space over which they themselves have authoritative, expert jurisdiction" (p. 83). In other words, the funeral industry maintains its status and control over the death realm by seizing the authority and *competence* their *professional* status ostensibly endows them with. Wells (2000) notes that “the transition has been accomplished with the eager consent of most Americans, grateful […] to have the task of handling dead bodies assumed by others” (p. 287). In this way, “*Experts* emerged both to *define* and to *manage* death and grief” (Ibid., p. 282, emphasis added).

The practice of embalming provides a prime example of this transfer of authority: "Through the standardization of funeral embalming, US undertakers transformed the care of dead bodies into a technical occupation that required specialized knowledge, practical training, and skill" (Olson, 2016, p. 83). As we saw, embalming has become a staple of the American funeral ‘tradition’ (Canning & Szmigin, 2010), and the majority of people also believe that embalming is required by law (Kopp & Kemp, 2007). While some states require either embalming or refrigeration within a certain time period, embalming is typically only *required* in special circumstances, e.g. if an autopsy has been performed or if the body will be transported across state lines – what Kastenbaum (2007) calls “postmortem emigration” (p. 396). While embalmed bodies can be kept ‘fresh’ for six or seven months when refrigerated at a temperature of 34-37°F [about 1-3°C], even unembalmed bodies last up to four weeks, giving families a significant window of time to make funeral arrangements [Joel,* PI, 2020]. However, during my fieldwork I learned that some funeral homes have their own regulations and policies that a body must be embalmed before an open-casket viewing. In the absence of federal embalming laws, consumers can thus still get pulled into this practice through funeral businesses introducing their own policies that

mandate embalming.[21] Nonetheless, "All states have exceptions to embalming requirements if religious practices prohibit it" (Coutts et al., 2018, p. 141).

Similarly, policies for the use of burial vaults are often mandated by individual cemeteries, even though they are never legally required by any state or federal laws. Vaults or grave liners are often sold under the guise of 'protection' for the deceased, allegedly keeping them 'safe' from decomposition. The actual purpose of vaults is to ensure that the ground above the grave remains flat when the body and casket inevitably begin decomposing and caving in underneath. A cement or steel vault keeps the ground in place, making it easier for cemetery workers to mow the lawn, which is why many enforce these policies (Fournier, 2018; Wells, 2000). Thus, depending on the cemetery, consumers may find themselves forced to make these unnecessary and environmentally damaging purchases, whether or not they want them – adding another $1,500 to the price tag (NFDA, 2019c). Yet, because consumers likely take these regulations for granted, they may not question the necessity of vaults or embalming, since "Performance in a practice is often neither fully conscious nor reflective" (Warde, 2005, p. 140). Funeral consumers simply trust the funeral *professionals* when it comes to rules and regulations.

Whether a family chooses ground burial or cremation, funeral directors generally encourage an open-casket viewing beforehand, regardless of disposal method, claiming that it is an important step in the grief and healing process [Joel,* PI, 2020; Frank,* PI, 2019]. Especially for young people who have committed suicide or died in a car accident, funeral director Joel* explained that it can help the family to see the deceased one last time as a "whole" person (i.e. after being put back together through the magic of embalming). Yet Emerick (2000) notes that it can also be "disturbing to see loved ones in such a manner" (p. 43). Not coincidentally, hosting a public viewing also bodes well for funeral businesses financially, since it adds embalming as well as the purchase (or rental) of a nice, 'presentable' casket for the viewing. The practices of embalming and open-casket viewing are thus linked together in a "combination of complementary practices" (Hargreaves et al., 2013, p. 406), as one often encourages or even mandates the other.

[21] These regulations protect the business' liability in the case of bodies rapidly decomposing, for example due to post-mortem tissue gas forming from bacteria in the body which can cause "bloating and exploding" [Joel,* PI, 2020]. In some cases, bodies may also purge the contents of their stomachs or intestines even days after dying. One funeral director shared with me in vivid detail the story of a corpse that purged right before his own funeral, ruining his suit and coffin. For these reasons, many funeral businesses have introduced their own embalming policies to ensure that the bodies remain clean and preserved for their open-casket ceremony [Joel,* PI, 2020].

In 2019, the NFDA released several videos for funeral businesses to use as promotional material on their websites to help lead conversations around funeral planning with their clients, and to highlight "the important role funeral directors play in guiding families through the process" (NFDA, 2019d). In light of the business-specific policies in place, the potential nudging of the consumer towards specific goods and services, and the blatant self-promotion of funeral directors, Sanders (2010) explains the role of funeral professionals in shaping funeral practices:

> Because of their hegemony over funeral rites, [funeral directors] provide the public with understandings that inform consumers how to dispose of their dead, how to memorialize and remember the dead, and how to celebrate death with others in the community. (p. 50).

The industry has thereby scripted a societal blueprint for dealing with death, determining what is considered 'appropriate' conduct in times of overwhelming emotion and uncertainty. Consumers generally follow their guidance because they "don't know any other way to handle matters when a loved one dies" (Herring, 2019, p. 5). Thus, after a death has occurred, we tend to outsource the care and keeping of our deceased loved ones to *professionals*, the same way we might outsource our dry-cleaning. According to a cemetery manager I interviewed in the field, the title 'undertaker' originated from them *undertaking* the tasks people did not want to do – like cleaning and dressing a body for the funeral. In this way, funeral homes serve a vital function by providing the "space to allow a family to grieve and be with their own feelings and not have to deal with the logistics of a body" [Alan,* PI, 2020]. Yet, by fulfilling these vital societal functions, the funeral industry simultaneously dictates how these functions shall be performed. In other words, by taking over the *competences* of funerary practices, funeral directors have also dictated the *materials* to be used and the *meanings* they hold in society, and thus maintained control over the death realm – to a certain extent.

5.3.2 Playing their part: Funeral consumers act out societal norms

While funeral directors and the whole industry often receive heavy criticism for their power and control over funerals, Kastenbaum & Aisenberg (1972) remind us that the "inadequacies arise from broad problems in our culture, not simply from the maneuvers of a particular professional group" (p. 211). In other words, funeral professionals play a crucial role in shaping societal death practices, yet these practices did not evolve or perpetuate themselves in a vacuum – and certainly not without society's implicit consent. Mitford (2000) portrays funeral directors

as greedy manipulators who take advantage of people at their most vulnerable time. Certainly, funeral directors may *provide* and *guide* the selection of funeral goods and services, but the decisions ultimately lie with the consumer. Canning et al. (2016) point out that although legislation and service provision play a major role in the *availability* of funerary options, it is chiefly the cultural and religious norms that dictate which forms of body disposal will be accepted, taken up, and perpetuated by consumers, and which will be socially dismissed. Although funeral directors may 'direct' the action, the scene only takes place as long as funeral consumers 'act out' the socially scripted norms. Hence, in our frequent condemnation of the funeral industry, we tend to overlook the agency of an equally important player: the consumer.

The manifold factors that affect funerary decisions and purchases vehemently discredit the 'rationalist' approach of classic economics which paints consumers as detached, shrewd maximizers without any regard for emotions, habits, values, or sociocultural influences on choices. Undeniably, "Cultural norms play a very important role in shaping people's behavior" (Kollmuss & Agyeman, 2002, p. 249). Religions that believe in a resurrection of the body (Islam, Judaism, Christianity) typically bury the dead, while religions that believe in reincarnation (Hinduism) typically cremate (Walter, 2012). For many people in the U.S., their faith and their specific church play a significant role in dictating funeral practices. A funeral director I spoke with expressed his disapproval of the amount of control the clergy oftentimes has in influencing whether a body will be embalmed, what kind of casket should be used, and even what method of final disposition is deemed 'appropriate.' As aforementioned, secular people generally choose cremation, as they are less tied to burial 'traditions' (Casal et al., 2010; CANA, 2019). Yet even non-religious people generally follow in the footsteps and 'traditions' of what prior generations in their families and wider circles have done. As a cemetery manager I met with observed: "people like to do what other people do" [Dyanne, PI, 2020]. She explained that years ago it was a symbol of status to be embalmed, but today, it just becomes the "normal thing to do" in many families [Ibid.].

In this way, "Norms develop as people interact and develop guidelines for their behavior" (Kollmuss & Agyeman, 2002, notes on p. 258). Joel* emphasized that "people are really intimidated by what [other] people are going to think." This fear of judgment may lead them to overspend beyond their budget, or they may end up with goods and services they did not intend, all in an effort of 'keeping up with the Joneses.' Cengiz and Rook (2016) suggest that funerals have thus become "a new venue for conspicuous consumption" (p. 125). However, it may be

more apt to view funeral purchases as *comparative consumption* (Dwyer, 2009, p. 335), as families seek the reassurance of societal standards, embodied by the status quo. Dwyer (2009) explains that, especially in situations of uncertainty (for which funeral purchases serve as a prime example), people tend to follow the 'rule of thumb' or standard procedure, which they generally perceive to be the middle-range price. Moreover, when purchasing funerals, "normal market activities such as price comparisons may be perceived as socially and culturally taboo" (Canning & Szmigin, 2010, pp. 1130-1131). For this reason, "the high levels of consumption in modern societies may be maintained mainly by the force of habit" (Dwyer, 2009, p. 334).

Dwyer (2009) describes the habitual nature of humans as the "propensity of people to continue to do what they have done in the past without much conscious deliberation" (p. 331). Of course, not having to consciously deliberate every step we take in everyday life saves us much mental and physical energy and thus helps in the "achievement of social order and coordination, and as a tool to manage uncertainty" (Ibid., p. 331). Death, of course, is a time of much uncertainty and volatile emotions. Thus, rituals and traditions can serve as an anchor, and following the societal norms can help us feel a sense of stability. "Rituals fortify who we are, what we believe, and how we are to live" (Kelly, 2015, p. 70). If our death rituals revolve around consumption, environmental pollution, and financial extravagance, then this will also shape our beliefs and meanings around death (Ibid.). On a societal scale, the death-related practices we collectively accept and choose to engage in thus say a lot about our relationships to death and to life itself. In the words of Taylor (2002): "Funerary practices are a powerful way of stressing the ethnic identity of the living" (p. 83).

Sitting in the dark: Lack of consumer awareness and preparedness

Ironically, most U.S. states do not legally require a funeral professional to be involved in the planning and execution of a funeral – but most people are not aware of this fact (Kopp & Kemp, 2007). Only nine states[22] require a funeral director to be involved in *some* capacity, for example to complete paperwork or to transport the body (Herring, 2019). In all 50 states, it is legal to keep and care for the body at home until the funeral (Slocum & Webster, 2019), and in most

[22] Connecticut, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Louisiana, Michigan, Nebraska, New York, and New Jersey. For an easy overview of funeral laws by state, see: https://www.homefuneralalliance.org/state-requirements.html

U.S. states, you can be buried on your own property[23] (Fournier, 2018). Additionally, in several states including North Carolina, it is perfectly legal to transport a dead body in your own vehicle. You only need a special permit if you cross state lines [Anne, PI, 2019]. When it comes to planning, organizing, and arranging funerals, Fournier (2018) posits that we are "largely ignorant of our options and our rights throughout the whole procedure" (p. 14).

> We are so conditioned now as a culture to accept without question that the body is taken away immediately when someone dies. In the midst of our grief, we believe we must stop everything and call a chosen funeral service, so that strangers can whisk our loved one away to places unknown, to rooms behind closed doors – […] and the sooner the better. (Herring, 2019, p. 5)

Unwittingly, we tend to "cling to the accepted, society-approved ways to celebrate and memorialize a person's life" (Fournier, 2018, p. 1). Even professionals involved with death, such as doctors, nurses, hospice workers, law enforcement officers, and even some funeral professionals are often unaware of families' rights around death, funerals, and the body (Herring, 2019; [Joel,* PI, 2020; Lee, PI, 2020]). For these reasons, taking a proactive stance and getting well-informed about the legal matters before a death occurs can save lots of time, money, and frustration. Kopp and Kemp (2007) note that the effectiveness of regulations on funeral businesses is limited if consumers are unaware of their rights. Lee Webster, a published author and frequent speaker on funeral reform, explained to me:

> The real issue is that over time people have made assumptions that they were required by law to do: hire a funeral director, be embalmed, have vaults, […] simply because the industry developed the way any kind of profession would, marketing their own offerings. It's nobody's fault but the public's fault for misinterpreting and buying it […] and then in their own minds turning it into a legal requirement.

During our conversation, she added that it is "up to us to be informed consumers and understand the laws around this" [Lee, PI, 2020]. Becoming informed consumers requires time and research, which many people are simply unwilling to prioritize while they are young and healthy, putting off the burden of funeral discussions until death strikes in the family. As we

[23] Regulations vary by state and county for burials on private property and can include lots of paperwork. Typically, a grave must be a certain distance away from property lines, open water, and power lines. Furthermore, selling a house or property with a buried body, it must be disclosed in the deed (Fournier, 2018).

saw earlier, “The increasing statistical association between mortality and advanced age […] encourages us to transpose death from an immediate and perpetual menace to a distant, remote prospect” (Kastenbaum & Aisenberg, 1972, p. 206). In other words, because death has become chiefly associated with old age, we tend to put off thoughts and tasks around it, adding to – as Becker (1973) would argue – our death denial. Of course, “Turning toward death is not easy. Most of us actively avoid thinking about it. We are quite content to push the inevitable down deep, promising ourselves we will get to "all that" another day” (Herring, 2019, p. 3). Yet death remains an inevitable event, whether or not we prepare for it.

Sadly, as both funeral directors I talked with reminded me, death can happen at any age and frequently does, particularly in young to middle adulthood, with people dying from car accidents, drug overdoses, alcohol, or suicide. These ‘premature’ deaths are usually unforeseen and thus even more emotionally shattering. Especially in cases where no preparations are in place, “Funeral consumption presents the bereaved with decisions of considerable psychological and financial consequence, but the conditions of urgency and emotional vulnerability under which decisions are frequently made means that such purchases can be impulsive and irrational” (Canning et al., 2016, p. 230). An informant who has supported many bereaved families told me the story of a boy she knew who had been born with a severe disability and was only expected to live for six months. To everyone’s surprise, he survived for twenty-one years. Yet, in all that time, the family never managed to make plans for his funeral. On the morning he died, they had no idea whom to call or what to do. When we are left in such a situation of unpreparedness, we feel emotionally overwhelmed and are often incapable of making clear-headed decisions (Canning & Szmigin, 2010).

When the inevitable time comes to arrange a funeral, Kopp and Kemp (2007) found that people generally turn to family members first, and friends and work associates second, as sources of information about what to do. This behavior falls in line with social practice theory’s tenet that “individuals tend to adopt the consuming behavior of social contacts” (Dwyer, 2009, p. 335). However, with so few people informed about their rights and the legal obligations of funeral homes, it may be a matter of ‘the blind leading the blind.’ Even people with previous experience in planning funerals do not exemplify heightened awareness of funeral legalities (Kopp & Kemp, 2007). For example, Kopp and Kemp’s (2007) study found that only 4.3% of their respondents were aware that “it is illegal for funeral homes to refuse to give price information over the phone, while 70.7% reported not knowing” (p. 331). This law, known as ‘the Funeral

Rule' was set forth by the Federal Trade Commission in 1984 with the intention of protecting consumers by mandating funeral homes to provide clear and transparent pricing information (i.e. to list itemized prices for their services and to give out price information over the telephone to potential customers). Mitford (2000) criticizes the funeral industry for largely failing to comply with the Funeral Rule – a failure which a 2017 NPR investigation largely confirmed: "about 1 in 4 funeral homes break the rule and fail to disclose price information. That's even though they risk large fines from the federal government" (Benincasa, 2017).

Even though many funeral businesses have moved their advertising online, there have been no amendments to the Funeral Rule that require disclosure of prices online, making the rule outdated for modern consumers who are accustomed to online shopping and price comparison (Benincasa, 2017). However, given the recent explosion of online retailers offering funeral goods (including even Walmart, Amazon, and Costco), consumers can now choose from a wide selection of caskets and urns without having to go through a funeral home (Sanders, 2010). The online shop *The Casket Depot* warns consumers in bold red font not to purchase a casket from a funeral home, enticing shoppers instead with lower prices and free shipping and delivery. These online suppliers are putting competitive pressure on funeral homes by removing the middleman and offering much cheaper products, while also allowing consumers to *discreetly* compare prices, which they could not previously do in public (see Canning & Szmigin, 2010), adding to the shift towards *convenience* in funerals.

Legally, funeral homes are obligated to accept any outside casket purchased by the family without charging an additional casket handling fee (Harrington, 2007). This regulation was added in 1994 as an amendment to the Funeral Rule. However, in Kopp and Kemp's (2007) study on consumer awareness of funeral laws, 70.6% of their respondents did not know that it is illegal for a funeral home to refuse outside merchandise or to add a 'handling fee' for outside products. If consumers are unaware of their own rights and of the legal obligations of funeral businesses, how can they know if they are being taken advantage of? Furthermore, if consumers complain about industry pricing and control without taking the time to research their options and make plans *before* the need arises, is the industry to blame for their inertia?

5.3.3 Abra cadaver: The practice and illusion of embalming

Before we conclude this chapter, let us return to the practice of embalming. We are familiar with its historical roots and we have seen that funeral businesses encourage the process. But

what exactly *is* embalming, and why do consumers choose it? The term 'embalming' evokes images of special oils and herbal balsams ceremoniously anointed onto the body – at least that was my impression before I commenced my research. In fact, I admit I had never given much thought to it at all; like most people, I was ignorant of my own ignorance, so to speak. Because the process remains hidden from the public eye, most people likely have no idea what actually happens during an embalming. During my fieldwork, I was able to see the inside of two embalming rooms, replete with bottles of embalming fluid in all shades of pink and peach, as well as makeup, brushes and various tools, and a vast selection of surgical-looking instruments. At one of the funeral homes, there was even a body on the embalming table, tucked beneath a sheet, awaiting intravenous fluid replacement. Although I (fortunately) did not witness the actual process of embalming, I did get to meet a corpse who had already been preserved:

SLEEPING BEAUTY: COMING FACE TO FACE WITH AN EMBALMED BODY

> In December 2019, five days before Christmas, I found myself standing in the viewing room of a funeral home with a dead stranger in an open casket. I wondered if any of my classmates were getting this engaged in their fieldwork. The old man in the big metal box looked peaceful, as if he was just sleeping. While my informant Frank* prepared everything, I peered into the casket and tried to keep my composure. "Touch his hand," Frank* urged me. I mumbled something in response: "No… that's okay… thanks though?" "No, really, touch his hand," he insisted, lifting the dead man's arm playfully to demonstrate that it is harmless. Swallowing my urge to resist, I gingerly touched the back of the dead man's embalmed hand, which was now gently resting on his abdomen again. It felt like rubber and reminded me of the time my father took my sister and me to Florida to swim with dolphins when I was a child. *How bizarre,* I thought, while making a mental note to wash my fingers as soon as I could. I let go of the old man's dolphin-hand and we rolled the casket into the chapel where the family was waiting for the funeral service to commence. I wondered how much these solemn-looking strangers really benefitted from seeing their beloved grandfather turned into a mannequin. Did they *know* what had been done to him to make him look like he was just dreaming?

Because blood causes the first stages of decomposition, removing the blood from a body helps to slow the process of putrefaction (Emerick, 2000). In the back room, Frank* informed me that the embalming machine essentially functions like the heart, pumping embalming fluid into an incision (oftentimes at the neck) through the jugular vein into the circulatory system and

simultaneously flushing the blood out through the injection site. Depending on the blood pressure, it can be a gushing fountain or a gentle drip. A thoracic embalming additionally involves the draining of the body's cavities (stomach, lungs, bladder, etc.) through aspiration ('vacuuming'), and the filling of these spaces with even stronger chemicals [Joel,* PI, 2020]. The mouth is wired shut after being stuffed with cotton or a Play-Doh-like substance to retain its shape, and the eyeballs are covered with plastic half-spheres to maintain their shape before the eyelids are glued closed [Frank,* PI, 2019]. Final cosmetic touches include makeup, hair styling, and a manicure (on both men and women). To achieve a lifelike look, embalmers undergo rigorous training not only in embalming but in cosmetology and 'restorative arts' as well (Fontana & Keene, 2009). Both funeral directors I spoke with exhibited zealous enthusiasm for embalming and told me they enjoy the challenge each case presents, comparing it to reconstructive surgery.

Image 2: Instruments used in embalming laid out to dry. | © Photograph by the author.

When embalming first started, bodies would last a very long time due to the high formaldehyde content. In the 1970s, embalming formulas began decreasing the formaldehyde ratio to lower its toxicity, adding in other preservatives instead [Joel,* PI, 2020]. Embalmers used to sell the idea that this service would make a body last forever (Fontana & Keene, 2009). In 1982, the Federal Trade Commission barred them from making such statements after various lawsuits disputed these claims. According to funeral director Joel,* "perfect preservation *can* happen, but the general public thinks it *always* happens." In most cases, however, "embalming keeps the body "fresh" for only a few days, for the viewing and the funeral" (Fontana & Keene, 2009,

p. 73). The rate of decomposition is affected by endogenous factors such as gender, weight, age, cause of death, presence of any drugs or pharmaceuticals in the body, presence of any open wounds on the body, as well as exogenous factors such as the temperature, humidity, oxygen levels, type of burial container, type of soil, etc. (Javan et al., 2019; Oliveira et al., 2013). In dry, arid conditions with some oxygen flow and a robust container (especially in an above-ground mausoleum), bodies can remain well-preserved for decades – which is why Egyptian mummies have survived for so long (see Carter et al., 2007; Lee, 1929). Meanwhile, bodies exhumed from less favorable conditions will oftentimes have turned to "soup" [Joel,* PI, 2020].

Of course, the decomposition of a body is anything but pleasant. Emerick (2000) describes in vivid detail the process of putrefaction, from the discoloration of the skin to the bloat stage to the "unmistakable stench of decay" (p. 41) to, the family of maggots that eventually nestle into the bodily orifices and feast on the flesh. To avoid this imagery, Americans choose to either annihilate the body completely (through cremation) or attempt to preserve it through embalming (Beit-Hallahmi, 2012; Emerick, 2000). Dyanne told me about a client who could not bear the image of her mother decomposing underground. It gave her peace of mind to picture her mother as she looked when she was alive, with her hair still coiffed and her nails still polished. Regrettably, the deceased mother would inevitably decompose underground. "Many people like the idea that the corpse looks asleep; it is a comfort factor for survivors of the deceased" (Emerick, 2000, p. 40). This illusion perhaps represents the epitome of our death denial. Wood and Williamson (2003) posit that the practice of embalming "seemingly refuses to acknowledge death," since it is "a practice devoted to making the dead appear as lifelike and serene as possible" (p. 22). Embalming has thus not only aided in creating and legitimizing the funeral industry, but the practice also embodies the very nature of our death-avoidant culture by creating an "illusion by hiding the physical reality of death" (Beit-Hallahmi, 2012, p. 327).

Beit-Hallahmi (2012) notes the simultaneous "fascination and curiosity" (p. 327) we experience around corpses when they are in a stable, 'dry' state, i.e. embalmed, mummified, or cremated. With unprocessed bodies, however, we feel disgusted and fearful (Ibid.; Emerick, 2000), which is very much in line with North America's "distinct culture of cleanliness" (Walter, 2012, p. 135) and the fearful meanings we ascribe to death and dead bodies. Lee (1929), observes that "Customs of funeral rites of the people throughout the world have been dominated by their

superstition and fear of death" (p. 57).[24] These fears, however, are unfounded, as "Medical experts agree that dead bodies pose no risk of infection or disease unless the death has been caused by an unusually infectious and dangerous disease, such as cholera, AIDS, or tuberculosis" (Beit-Hallahmi, 2012, p. 324). Even in those cases, actual contagion from dead bodies is rare if proper precautions are taken (i.e. protective gear and basic hygiene) (Ibid.; WHO, 2020). Still, the 'myth of contagion' (see Herring, 2019) that had spread in the early 1900s still widely influences our practices as well as our meanings around death today. The cultural framing of dead bodies as a public health concern reinforces the sequestration and avoidance of death and the outsourcing to professionals; the illusion of a peaceful slumber seems to clearly demonstrate our cultural *death denial* (see Becker, 1973).

5.4 Chapter summary: How do funeral practices develop and persist?

As this chapter illustrated, a myriad of developments at different levels have threaded together to create a *trajectory* (Geels, 2010) of unsustainable death practices, sparked by the Civil War and lasting all the way to our modern-day funerals. By investigating the history of these 'traditions,' we can see how "the ancestry of contemporary practices might be traced through the habits of previous generations and the consequences these have had for accumulations of material and other resources" (Shove et al., 2012, p. 64). Although the funeral regime has stood strong under the reign of the professionalized funeral industry for over a century, it has not remained unchallenged. The rise of cremation disrupted the death system and caused a major transition as the practice was first resisted and then adopted by the mainstream industry. Since then, mainstream funerary practices – embalming, conventional burial and cremation – have all persisted in society for decades. These practices have been upheld in part by the influence of the industry over funeral rituals, and in part by the continual engagement by consumers in these normalized customs. This mutual support structure points to the "constant interplay between regimes and practices, showing how both are constantly made and remade in each others [sic] image" (Hargreaves et al., 2013, p. 409). Given the lack of legal necessity, the outsourcing of funerals to professionals (and their adherence to these practices) is more a matter of *convenience.* This desire for convenience will be taken up further in the following chapter.

[24] Even the Old Testament proclaims that "Whoever touches the dead body of anyone will be unclean for seven days" (quoted in Kastenbaum, 2007, p. 49).

6 Dying to Save the Earth: Embracing Green Funerals

The previous chapter presented the trajectory of environmentally harmful death practices in the United States, supplied by the professionalized funeral industry and perpetuated by ordinary consumers following societally prescribed norms. This system has been in place for over a century, creating a securely locked-in, stable funeral regime. However, dramatic landscape-level changes in the cultural and technological fabric of society in recent years have enabled new lifestyles and, concurrently, new 'deathstyles.' This dynamic web of developments within the *nestled levels of interaction* has resulted in an overall

> upheaval of the traditional and a move toward more varied methods of memorialization and body disposal. These changes are being driven not only by the [industry's] desire to remain relevant, profitable … but also by consumer desire to move away from the traditional for a variety of reasons. (Beard & Burger, 2017, p. 64)

In this chapter, I begin by examining the developments and processes at various levels that have incrementally shifted the death regime, opening *windows of opportunity* (Geels, 2010) for new meanings, products, services, and practices to emerge. One distinct avenue of diversification has been a deliberate cultivation of eco-friendly funerary practices since the early 1990s. In the remaining chapter, I will elucidate my findings on eco-death practices, including their main points of differentiation from mainstream funerals, as well as the means by which these practices spread across society. Finally, I examine the potential for creating a sustainable death system, including the barriers to widespread uptake of green funerals. This chapter will thereby address the second research question of this project: *How are participatory eco-funerals challenging the mainstream funeral regime?*

6.1 Burying the past? Shifts in the death regime

Although "rituals tend to present themselves as the unchanging, time-honored customs of an enduring community" (Bell, 2009, p. 210), rituals also evolve and adapt in relation to changing conditions in the community (Ibid.) and the wider sociotechnical landscape they are embedded in. Since the original inception of our American funerary 'traditions' in the late 1800s, the sociotechnical landscape has unfolded in new directions, producing new technologies, and

opening new *windows of opportunity* (see Geels, 2010) for modifications to our funerary practices. One notable development is our current, fast-paced *sociotemporal order* (Shove, 2003) – what we might understand as society's relationship to time, or the way society exists and operates through, with, and in time. As Chapter 5 indicated, the speed of modern life arguably began after WWII with increased mobility as well as increased consumer goods for convenience and efficiency. Over the years, the speed of life has accelerated further through globalization and the internet, shaping many of our daily practices around expectations of instant gratification: online shopping, overnight shipping, all the goods and information in the world accessible at the touch of a button. "The increasing significance of convenience appears to relate to a contemporary sense of always being short on time" (Shove, 2003, p. 172). Olson (2016) eloquently describes how these developments affect the death realm:

> Technological shifts and innovations can unsettle any number of boundaries that work to organize and define communities of practice, giving practitioners reason to confront anew the prevailing practices, technologies, norms, professional identities, divisions of labor, and social relations that have become routine over time. The funeral industry is no exception (p. 76)

No time to rest in peace: Funerals in a fast-paced world

The current speed of life, coupled with new technologies, seems to be a major driving force of change in the funeral industry. Ritzer (1996) calls these developments the *McDonaldization* of society, offering this definition: "McDonaldization is the process by which the principles of the fast-food restaurant are coming to dominate more and more sectors of American society, as well as the rest of the world" (p. 293). Nothing proves this point more aptly than the existence of *drive-through* funeral homes, in which visitors can view the body through a window as they drive past. "In addition to novelty, […] the drive-thru viewings offer accessibility and convenience" (Jones, 2017). Ryan Bernard, who opened such a drive-through funeral home in Memphis, Tennessee, explained in a *USA Today* report that "It helps out those that lack (physical) mobility, those who don't feel like the hassle of parking cars and getting out or those who are afraid to come into a funeral home" (Ibid.). Reiterating once again the role of fear and discomfort around death in our society, this statement also highlights the increasing importance of *convenience* in our death practices. The 'tradition' of open-casket viewing remains, yet the practice is being reinterpreted in modern, *convenient* ways.

Time-efficiency and convenience were important concepts that recurred in several of my conversations in the field. Commenting on our "microwave society," funeral director Joel* explained that people used to stop their lives when someone died, and that nothing else came before that. In contrast, several of my informants witnessed that nowadays many people are unable or unwilling to move their hectic schedules around to make time for death when it occurs. According to Shove (2003), convenience has become a driving force in our society as people struggle with the "ever increasing challenge of 'keeping on top of things' and 'holding it all together'" (p. 170). Given how spread out many families live, coming together for a funeral can be challenging. Even when distance is not an issue, Joel* explained that jobs, appointments, and even children's dance recitals often take higher priority and must be worked around when scheduling a funeral. Brevity also seems to be a major concern for many families when planning funerals, as the public is generally unwilling to sit through lengthy ceremonies (Kastenbaum, 2007). The typical funeral ceremony thus lasts only twenty to forty minutes (Ibid.). Direct cremation has become an increasingly popular choice, in part for its lower cost and simplicity, and in part for the flexibility it allows in postponing the actual memorial ceremony to a more convenient time. Have we become *too busy* to deal with death?

The digital age has accelerated the sociotemporal order even further. We can see this in the explosion of online casket retailers creating competition for brick-and-mortar funeral homes, as well as the blossoming use of websites and social media, not only for funeral advertising, but also for death notices on social media, memorial webpages, and online grief communities (Beard & Burger, 2017; Cengiz & Rook, 2016; Walter, 2015). Digitalization has also enabled new practices *during* funerals, including memorial videos, or even a live stream of the funeral for those who cannot attend (Beard & Burger, 2017). These modern-day advances suggest that "although traditional funeral rites continue to be followed, there is a developing interest, or perhaps even need, to craft, organically and disparately, individual displays, practices and rituals for experiencing loss" (Cengiz & Rook, 2016, p. 132).

Corpse diem: Individualization and innovation in funerals

The financial burden associated with the 'traditional' American funeral model has been a point of contention since the earliest inception of the funeral industry and still continues today (Beard

& Burger, 2017). Thus, a general dissatisfaction[25] with the funeral industry has been brewing for over a century, mounting pressure on the dominant regime as consumers have questioned whether these 'traditions' with their hefty price tag (and their hefty environmental footprint) are still suitable for modern times. Kastenbaum (2007) notices a "significant resistance to the funeral process as it has been commonly practiced in mainstream society. It has been variously criticized as too costly, too time-consuming, too depressing, and too artificial" (p. 391). The pressure came to a spike with the 2008 economic recession, which likely made it difficult for middle class families to afford the extravagance of the standard American funeral (Cengiz & Rook, 2016). This suggests that the landscape-level disruption in 2008 may have functioned as a keystone in rerouting the industry's trajectory, as consumers increasingly began to question the conservative 'traditions' of standardized, cookie-cutter funerals, seeking out cheaper and/or more personalized alternatives instead.

A meta-analysis of articles in the industry's leading trade journal *American Funeral Director* in the years following the economic crash demonstrates industry-wide suggestions for reclaiming lost profits due to the recession and due to the increased preference for cremation (Beard & Burger, 2020). For instance, funeral homes have made up for lost revenue by raising their basic service charges (Harrington, 2007). Between 2014 and 2019, the national median 'nondeclinable basic services fee' increased nearly 10% from $2,000 to $2,195 (NFDA, 2019c). This move was also partly due to fierce competition from online casket retailers (Harrington, 2007). Moreover, to counteract financial losses and to boost profits, funeral businesses have had to "change, innovate, and attract customers or risk stagnation and decline" (Ibid., p. 546).

In the funeral industry, "Until very recently, the variety of products and services available to consumers was very limited" (Sanders, 2010, p. 59). In the past decade, however, the market has been flooded with novel goods and services, diversifying funeral businesses while catering to consumer demands for more unique and personalized funerals (Beard & Burger, 2017). "The higher the number of consumer niches, the wider the variety of products that can be offered" (Sanders, 2010, p. 54). These innovations have ranged from portions of ashes being sent to the

[25] Aside from the dissatisfaction over costs, there have also been numerous reported cases of abuse and mishandling in the funeral industry, from corpses being piled in a shed or dumped on the ground, to bodies being sold to the Army for testing of land mines, to bodies being used as 'crash dummies' in automobile safety tests, to the illegal harvesting of organs, to the wrong cremated remains (or just cement dust) being returned to families. Last but not least, African Americans have categorically been taken advantage of and overcharged. For more detailed information on these cases, see Kastenbaum, 2007, pp. 423-424.

moon, to ashes being incorporated into vinyl records, diamond jewelry, artistic sculptures, ammunition, plush toys, or tattoo ink (Beard & Burger, 2017). There is even a glass dildo containing ashes specifically designed for widows.[26] New methods of 'super embalming' allow human cadavers to be positioned in life-like poses for their wake (Robertson & Robles, 2014) – somewhat reminiscent of animal taxidermy – or allow them to be exhibited in museums around the world after undergoing the meticulous preservation technique of 'plastination.'[27] In the words of Bauman (2005), "The struggle for *uniqueness* has now become the main engine of *mass* production and *mass* consumption" (p. 24, emphasis in original). These niche inventions have simultaneously expanded and fragmented the funeral regime, and, in some cases, potentially increased the ecological impact of funerals even further.

Overall funeral trends: cheap, green, personal, and digital

Aside from the upsurge in funeral personalization, wider developments are incrementally shifting the American death system along a new trajectory. The NFDA (2020) lists the following six trends that are re-shaping the funeral regime today: (1) unique personalization of funerals to make them more individualized and meaningful; (2) more advance funeral planning, allowing consumers to make more informed decisions; (3) the shift towards cremation; (4) the use of digital technology in funeral planning and ceremonies; (5) the shift from a male-oriented 'family business' to more women and career-changers entering the industry, giving a fresh face to the funeral profession; (6) green funerals, which will be explored in detail in the ensuing sections. The NFDA (2020) website also links many of these trends to the demands and preferences of baby boomers, who are now the prime target market for funerals. Recall that this was also the generation that grew up amidst the environmental movement and with Mitford's (2000) critique of the funeral industry, after which "U.S. citizens began to think of themselves as consumers of death care who should have more of a say in what happens to them when they die" (Kelly, 2015, p. 114).

These trends and the resulting shifts in the death system illustrate that "no ritual stands by itself. It is always embedded in a thick context of traditions, changes, tensions, and unquestioned assumptions and practices" (Bell, 2009, p. 252). We can also witness Geels' (2011) process of *circular causality* at work, as several of the current trends in the funeral regime have likely

[26] Yes, seriously. See https://www.marksturkenboom.com/Works/21-grams/
[27] For more information on the plastination process, see: https://bodyworlds.com/plastination/plastination-technique/

developed in a symbiotic relationship of mutual reinforcement. For example, the demand for more unique and personalized services by the baby boomer generation has led to more advance funeral planning and more researching of options, which in turn leads to more informed decision-making. This trend has also been enabled by the digital age of information. Moreover, the baby boomers have been at the forefront of the shift towards cremation as well as the shift towards green burial – both of which are twisting the regime away from its 'traditions.' In the remainder of the chapter, we will take a closer look at the last trend on the list – *green funerals* – and how they evolved from a niche practice to a potential game-changer in the funeral regime.

6.1.1 Fifty shades of green: New 'sustainable' death solutions?

While most of the niche innovations exploding on the death market have largely been created for the purpose of novelty and capitalistic opportunity, some counterflow products and technologies are built with nature in mind, claiming to dispose of the dead in ways that are not harmful to the environment. Do these innovations live up to their promises? In 1986, the environmentalist Jay Westervelt coined the term *greenwashing* to describe "products and services that appear eco-friendly on the surface, but that carry an environmental or carbon footprint that offsets any positive gains" (Herring, 2019, p. 129). This type of labeling has taken the market by storm as more and more products and services are deemed 'natural,' 'organic' or 'eco-friendly,' from the food industry to the beauty industry and even the funeral industry. The past few years have witnessed a rise in consumer products and services marketed as eco-friendly methods of disposing the dead, yet most of them are disguised capitalistic, greenwashed ploys.

Greenwashing and eco-death consumerism

From the $1500 'Infinity Burial Suit' complete with mushroom spores to eat away bodily toxins to the Swedish efforts at freeze-drying bodies and shattering them to pieces, consumers have latched on to some 'green' ideas without any concern for scientific evidence behind the products (Campbell, 2016). The Italian company Capsula Mundi proposes placing bodies in the fetal position into giant biodegradable egg-shaped 'burial pods' that grow trees. The idea has been widely acclaimed even though the products are not available on the market. Additionally, digging a hole big enough to fit the burial pod would not be logistically feasible, nor do bodies decompose well in that position [Cassie, PI, 2019]. Several companies have offered smaller versions of the same idea, with biodegradable urns containing seeds or tree saplings. Consumers

may be disillusioned when learning that the tree does not actually grow *out of* the ashes, as they are contained in a separate compartment within the urn (Fournier, 2018). Moreover, once the urn breaks down, the cremains remain stable in the ground with their high pH and sodium levels, disrupting root systems, since "undiluted cremains are not healthy for plants" (Ibid., p. 136).

Several of my informants who engage with green burials took a critical stance towards these products, commenting on all the "gimmicks," "lies," and "bullshit" sold in this "greenwashing movement" the death industry has seen in recent years. Lee, the published author on funeral reform and president of Green Burial Council International, explained that the majority of these companies are just "venture capitalists trying to find a way to make money on a wave of interest." Because they get so much media attention,[28] the positive side is that these products serve as important conversation starters. However, consumers should critically think through their choices before falling for a green "gimmick."

Amidst the cacophony of greenwashing, some innovations seem more legitimate. Although the process of cremation is environmentally harmful, ashes can be mixed into artificial *reef balls* as a conservation effort for marine life (Eternal Reefs, 2020). Further, the *Let Your Love Grow* company sells an organic mixing compound for diluting ashes so they can be buried or scattered safely without harming the environment (Let Your Love Grow, 2020). This method is sometimes used at conservation burial grounds, enabling them to accept cremated remains as well [Kimberley, PI, 2020]. Additionally, two innovative funeral technologies deserve attention as sustainable alternatives to conventional methods: water-based cremation and human body composting. While no practice is 'greener' than a simple conservation burial which actually *protects* and *restores* nature, these technologies may provide the next best option for urban areas where natural burial is not feasible, and/or for people who refuse to go into the ground.

Aquamation

Alkaline hydrolysis (also known as 'aquamation' or 'water cremation') offers an alternative to conventional cremation and is legally categorized as a form of cremation in several U.S. states that have adopted the practice (Olson, 2016). However, standard cremations use eight times as much energy as alkaline hydrolysis and emit greenhouse gases and other toxins such as mercury in the burning process (MacMurray and Futrell, 2019). Alkaline hydrolysis (AH) works with

[28] For example, the viral mushroom burial suit video has had over 1.7 million views on the TED website: https://www.ted.com/talks/jae_rhim_lee_my_mushroom_burial_suit?language=en

water instead of fire, thereby reducing the carbon footprint by over 75% compared to conventional cremation (Ibid.). Olson (2016) describes alkaline hydrolysis as "a reductive chemical process through which tissues are dissolved in a heated (sometimes pressurized) solution of water and strong alkali" (p. 77). The liquid solution (95% water and 5% alkali) is sterile and can safely be disposed down the drain [Frank,* PI, 2019]. Within a matter of hours, the body is reduced to clean bones, which are pulverized and returned to the family, just as with fire cremation.

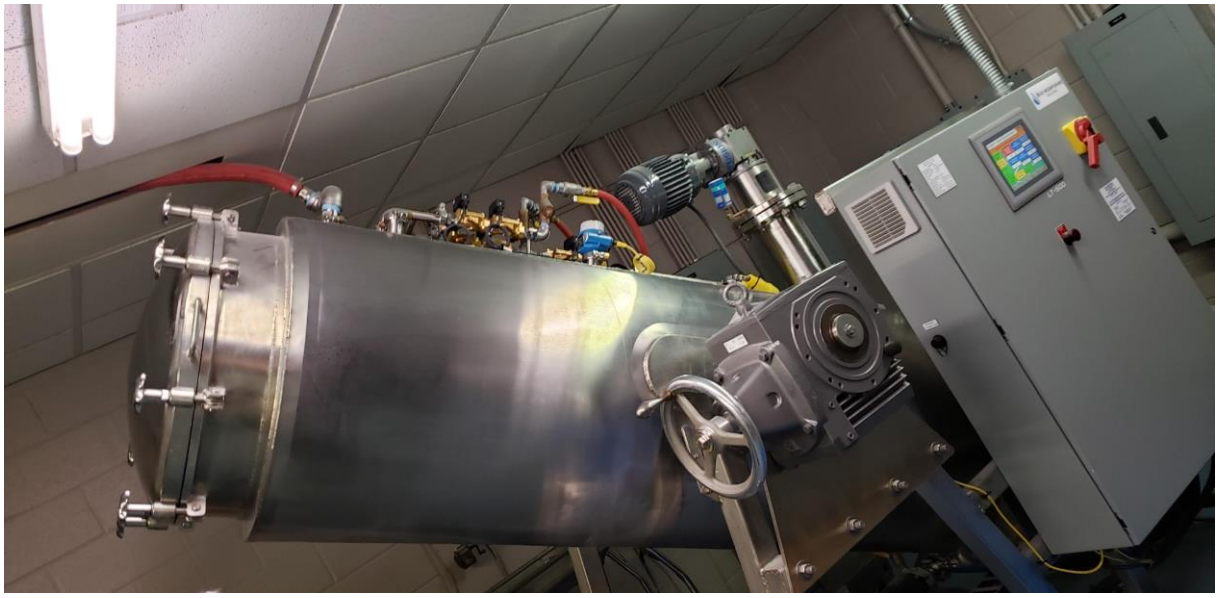


Image 3: An aquamation machine in operation. | © Photograph by the author.

Where cremationists once posed a threat to 'traditional' funeral directors, cremationists now see themselves threatened by alkaline hydrolysis. Competitors therefore oftentimes bash aquamation, calling it an "acid bath," describing the service as "boiling bodies," and asking clients if they want their "mother's body going down the sewer" [Frank,* PI, 2019]. None of these statements accurately reflect the process, but they use rhetoric to play on people's fears and emotions, and to dissuade them from the practice. According to Herring (2019), "Much of this resistance has been cultural and religious in nature, as well as a refusal on the funeral industry's part to embrace change, especially when such change involves a loss in profit and the bottom line" (p. 214). Given the number of crematoria already in the U.S. and the $160,000 investment to acquire an AH machine [Frank,* PI, 2019], it seems unlikely that aquamation would supplant the common fire-based practice.

Nonetheless, Canning et al. (2016) posit that the popularity and growth of cremation indicates a potential openness to comparable funeral technologies such as alkaline hydrolysis, which

involves an equally "rapid transformation and reduction of a corpse" (p. 234). Hence, the popularity of cremation may also aid in the adoption of this water-based form of body dissolution, which several of my informants agreed was better for the environment than fire cremation. The low-pressure system built by Bio-Response offers "one of the most economical and environmentally sound alternatives to cremation and conventional burial practices" (Herring, 2019, p. 213). With approximately 285 gallons (over 1000 liters) of water per cycle, the water usage poses a concern, but Herring (2019) points out that this is less water than the average individual in the U.S. uses in two days. Still, the amount of water and electricity to run the machine should be calculated into its environmental impact.

The future of body composting

Recomposition or 'natural organic reduction' is modeled after the process of natural burials but designed as an indoor service for dense urban areas facing land scarcity. The practice was legalized in Washington state on May 21, 2019, and the public benefit corporation Recompose hopes to open its first facility in Seattle by early 2021. Recomposition combines the idea of green burial with a method of livestock mortality composting, which has been practiced on deceased farm animals for decades. The website describes the process in the following way:

> Natural organic reduction is a managed biological process used to convert organic material, including human remains, into a stable earthy organic material that is unrecognizable as human remains. During the process, change occurs on a molecular level. (Recompose, 2018a)

In the renderings of the future facility, forty-two hexagonally shaped steel vessels (somewhat comparable to AH machines) are stacked like a honeycomb inside a bright, spacious hall filled with plants and natural sunlight. Bodies will be placed horizontally into the vessels along with wood chips and straw that help them decompose. The vessels optimize the temperature, oxygen, carbon, nitrogen and moisture levels for bacteria to rapidly break down the body (including bones and teeth) within 30 days (Recompose, 2018a). Any non-organic materials (e.g. artificial limbs, pacemakers, etc.) are filtered out and recycled whenever possible. In rare cases such as Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease, Ebola, or other highly contagious diseases, a body would not be allowed to be recomposed and would need to be cremated instead. Otherwise, pharmaceuticals (including antibiotics) as well as pathogens in the body are broken down by the heat and bacteria in the vessel, returning a soft soil to the family that can be used to plant a garden (Ibid.).

While several of my informants expressed enthusiasm and support for the Recompose project, seeing it as a good, ecologically sound solution for densely populated areas, some also noted that it is still a material-intensive process, using up vast amounts of biomass (e.g. wood chips) to break down each body. Furthermore, both aquamation and recomposition are only processes of body reduction, not a final method of disposal. In other words, both practices return a product (either ashes or soil), which must still be stored or disposed of in some way (just like cremation ashes). Kimberley Campbell, a long-time proponent of conservation burial, simultaneously expressed support and hesitation about the Recompose endeavor, pondering how much land could be conserved for the money and materials that go into building such a multi-million dollar facility. Currently, the company has raised $4 million of its $6.75 million goal in the first round of investments (Recompose, 2018b). Only time will tell if this is truly an investment for a more sustainable future, or whether that money could serve the environment better in other ways.

6.2 The green divide: What sets eco-funerals apart?

Although there is a range of green products and services available on the market, for the purpose of this section, we will focus on the most environmentally friendly practice, namely green burials. While aquamation and body composting may come to provide crucial services in the future death system, aquamation is still in its infancy stages and recomposition is not commercially available yet, making them difficult to evaluate in terms of their social impact. In the discussion on eco-funerals, I will therefore refer only to natural burials for the time being. Green burials are also the *original* practice of the eco-death movement. Thus, while the other technologies offer true 'niche innovations' in the MLP sense, green burials are more aptly considered a *dormant practice* (Shove et al., 2012) that is being reawakened. This concept will be elaborated on further in a subsequent section.

We have all heard the saying that one should not 'compare apples to oranges' because they are different fruits. Of course, in this case, we are less concerned about eating a Granny Smith and more concerned about burying her. So, can conventional burials and green burials be compared? Green burials differ from conventional practices in all three elements: *materials, meanings*, and *competences* (see Shove et al., 2012). The materials are simple and biodegradable, the meanings revolve around a return to nature, and the competences are often placed into the hands of the family by encouraging active participation in the preparation and ceremony. Nonetheless, while their constitutive elements are quite distinct, green and conventional funerals still both serve

the same purpose in society, and both revolve around the fundamental core practice of 'disposing a body.' Since there is an inherent range of flexibility within each *practice-as-entity* (Shove et al., 2012), different methods can achieve the same general results. For example, people differ in their ways of making breakfast, driving a car, taking a shower, shopping for groceries – and disposing bodies, yet these behaviors are still within a recognizable range of each core practice. In this section, I therefore identify three major points that differentiate eco-funerals from mainstream funerals: (1) environmental impact; (2) psychosocial impact; (3) financial impact. By offering an attractive alternative to conventional funerary practices, we can see how eco-funerals are challenging conventional methods in the regime.

6.2.1 Think outside the box: Environmental aspects

Green burials do not only abstain from *harming* the environment, but they actually *nurture* the environment by facilitating the decomposition of bodies. As the body breaks down, important organic nutrients are recycled back into the soil, attracting insect and bacterial activity, enriching plant fertility, and enhancing overall biodiversity (Carter et al., 2007). Picturing the breakdown of bodies can be gruesome for some people, and as we saw in Chapter 5, this aversion has been a major driver behind both embalming and cremation practices. Yet this process represents the most natural cycle on earth, transforming dead matter into new life (Ibid.). Carter et al. (2007) measure the ecological impact of decaying bodies of humans and other mammals, which provide highly concentrated and fertile "cadaver decomposition islands" to the surrounding ecosystem. In this way, "green burial is seen as offering a long-term, self-sustainable ecological environment that adds to existing resources rather than [depleting] them" (Monaghan, 2009, p. 1037). By reconnecting the cycles of death, decay, and new life, "Green burial, especially conservation burial, where we are protecting and restoring land that might otherwise be destroyed or developed, is a vital practice we are reclaiming today" (Herring, 2019, p. 98). Thus, natural burial can even serve as a land conservation tool (Coutts et al., 2018).

While several of my informants confirmed that green burial appeals to different kinds of people at every age, baby boomers have taken a particular interest in these practices. Regardless of age or religious affiliation, a common factor is that "it appeals to people who really love nature and those who are more environmentally conscious," and "some people just like the idea of going back to the earth naturally" [Dyanne, PI, 2020]. During my conversation with Lee, she also explained that the sense of place can be an important motivator for people to choose a green

burial or a conservation burial, because they want to be visited and remembered in a natural, peaceful setting. Casal et al. (2010) found that place attachment plays a significant role in people's choice of final resting place, as does their temporal orientation, i.e. whether they tend to hold on to the past (often choosing to be buried or scattered in their hometown, near their parents), or whether they are future-oriented, in which case participants "expressed a desire to leave a trace for succeeding generations or to nourish plants" (pp. 769-770). Joel,* who is in charge of green burials at his funeral home, emphasized that "the legacy we leave behind can also include how we treat the environment." He believes that embracing green funerals would make us "more conscientious people" who realize the importance of placing ourselves *within* the natural ecosystem, rather than assuming superiority to it [Joel,* PI, 2020].

GRAVES GONE WILD: OBSERVATIONS AT A CONSERVATION BURIAL GROUND

One of the first interviews and site visits I had was with a lady named Cassie at a conservation burial ground in the mountains of North Carolina. It was a cloudy day in early August 2019 when I waited to meet her by the entrance. Rain hung in the air as she swung into the parking lot on a golf cart and invited me to hop on. We drove along the bumpy path together, enthusiastically chatting about death and burials as she showed me the different parts of the nature preserve where people can be buried, including a shady area near the creek, lush woodland, an open meadow on a hill, and a pet memorial garden, reserved especially for departed furry friends. I was able to see the graves in a variety of 'stages:' some of them were very fresh (from a funeral that had taken place earlier that day) and looked like giant bird nests on the ground, covered in pine straw to help in the decomposition process and in the regrowth of plants. Other graves were several years old and had been taken back by nature, covered in abundant growth of native plant species. In the wintertime, when much of the plant life dies down, the graves become more visible, but in the summertime, you might think it was just an ordinary park as the lush green foliage conceals many of the gravesites. My initial impression was that everything looked so *wild* and 'overgrown,' especially the older graves that were camouflaged by the natural landscape. But then I realized that was the whole point – to conserve *nature*, not to constrain it and manicure it like we are used to seeing in conventional cemeteries. This place was not at all what I had imagined, but it was so peaceful to be out in nature, hearing the birds sing and the creek flow and the wind in the trees, surrounded by all those who had come and gone before me.

Image 4: A fresh grave at a conservation burial ground. | © Photograph by the author.

6.2.2 Saving a lot of green: Financial aspects

While the environmental aspects certainly sit at the forefront of most people's decision for a green burial, the financial aspects also frequently appeal to consumers (Coutts et al., 2018). A 2015 survey by the Education Committee of the Green Burial Council showed that the three top reasons for choosing green burial were: (1) minimizing the impact on the environment; (2) a return to old (i.e. pre-funeral industry) traditions; (3) cost efficiency (GBC, 2020c). These top three reasons were followed by spiritual/religious reasons, and lastly, the do-it-yourself ethic that is often involved (which also accounts for the cost efficiency). Green funerals are not *always* cheaper than conventional ones, depending on the materials and the burial plot that are chosen. In most cases, however, green funerals and especially home funerals are much cheaper than mainstream funerals (Coutts et al., 2018). According to Butz (2009), "one of the appealing and reoccurring themes of green burial is that it should be a simple affair" (p. 9).

Sanders (2010) comments on the historical shift in meanings that funeral products and services have undergone, from primarily utilitarian functions to more symbolic values, such as status and individualism. In one of the showrooms of a funeral business I visited, my informant explained that customers like to pick a casket that best fits the deceased's personality, sometimes based on their taste in furniture [Joel,* PI, 2020]. According to Sanders (2010), caskets do "the symbolic work of representing the identity of the person to be remembered" (p. 59). In this way, a casket can

> consolidate and perpetuate a particular memory on the part of the purchaser and simultaneously convey to other funeral celebrants how the purchaser feels about or chooses to represent the deceased, thus demonstrating the sacred meanings a mass-produced commodity can take on for consumers. (Ibid., p. 59)

Butz (2009) argues that "As much as someone might want their coffin to make a statement about their lives, the time for defining who you are is now, while we're actually alive" (p. 37). Is the purchasing of such luxurious products truly necessary to convey love, respect, and devotion to the deceased? While many consumers follow the *positional* standards of funeral consumption we saw in Chapter 5, some families are finding other ways to express their sentiments that do not come with such a heavy price tag, nor with such a large environmental footprint. One man I talked with in the field was amazed at "how inexpensive a green burial is." In preparation of the green home funeral for his mother, Alan's* family members and friends took on all the work themselves, from digging a hole (on a piece of privately-owned land), to washing and dressing the body. This work required *competences* that have lain dormant for most people in society since the professionalization of death care in the 1800s. Therefore, Alan* hired a home funeral guide to lead the family through the process for $100. After keeping the body cool on ice for three days, they placed the body in a cardboard casket that cost $106, which Alan* described as "a perfectly functional box." He added that "a lot of people in mom's community, including children, spent hours and hours and hours decorating it," giving the box a very personal, loving and homemade touch. The most expensive part of the funeral was the catering and the rental of a tent and chairs for the outdoor affair, although the total charge still remained well under $2,000 – a fraction of a conventional funeral.

Beard and Burger (2017) found that cost-saving motivation by consumers is "the main driving force behind changes within the funeral industry today" (p. 62). They believe that the unstable globalized economic climate is largely accountable for this trend, and the fact that typical funerals make up a large expense in a household (Ibid.). Green funerals provide a way for families to save money *and* protect the environment at the same time. Additionally, green funerals also provide opportunities for stepping away from commercially mass-produced materials. Some families may opt to purchase a cardboard casket and decorate it, like Alan's* family did, turning a sad event into a creative, collective art project. Others may choose to build a box themselves out of pine wood, which is renewable and plentiful in the U.S. [Cassie, PI, 2019]. Some families also turn to local artisans like a young woman named Zoey,* who hand-

weaves cradles and coffins out of willow branches. Getting to know her clients during the process allows Zoey* to craft a personalized, handmade product that (literally) weaves the family's story and meaning into each object. During our skype conversation, she described her work as a way of connecting with the earth and the ancient ways of creating, while seeking ways to "heal the wounds of culture" by bringing us closer to nature again. In this way, opting for alternative, eco-friendly materials can also support local community artisans. By reframing the *meaning* behind burial containers and other materials involved in funerals, some families are finding creative and environmentally friendly ways of burying the dead with dignity and individual care – but without the consumption of luxurious, ecologically harmful products.

6.2.3 A helping hand: Psychosocial aspects

The grief that comes from the loss of a loved one is perhaps the most profound, most difficult experience a human could ever go through (Larsen, 2018). One of the functions of a death system, according to Kastenbaum and Aisenberg (1972), is *social consolidation*, or bringing the community back together after a loss has occurred. Indeed, social connections are a vital part of our healing process and overall wellbeing as humans (Kabat-Zinn, 2013). Unfortunately, for many people, "death is very lonely now" because we do not have adequate "death support" in our communities anymore [Joel,* PI, 2020]. Especially in cases in which ceremonies are postponed (due to time constraints and convenience, as we saw at the beginning of this chapter), family members oftentimes do not receive the same support they would if the ceremony was held closer to the time of death [Joel,* PI, 2020; Dyanne, PI, 2020]. Without adequate support, the bereaved may feel even more isolated and lonely as they cope with their losses.

With the professionalization of the funeral industry, death has largely been relinquished into the hands of strangers. Green funerals help to bring "death back into the hands of the people" [Zoey,* PI, 2019] by allowing families to become more involved in the process, or even take care of the body preparations on their own if they choose a DIY (do-it-yourself) funeral at their own home. In this way, "the family regains power," as home funeral guide Sara explained to me. Rugg (2018) proposes that in the search for greater consolation than what is offered by standard funerary practices, people may adopt new practices that can provide more emotional comfort. If these new practices are successful in delivering greater consolation, they will be adopted into society; if the new practices offer less consolation than the current standard practices, they will be rejected and likely not spread (Ibid.). Because green burials and

especially home funerals invite participation and collaboration, they serve as “an opportunity to really enrich our own autonomy and to do it in community” [Lee, PI, 2020].

In recent years, there has been an upswing in home funerals, in which the family takes care of the body rather than outsourcing it to a funeral home, as we saw with Alan’s* family in the previous section. By returning to these practices, "We are simply reclaiming our innate right to be more actively and creatively engaged when someone we love dies" (Herring, 2019, p. 50). However, given the cultural aversion to death, many people do not feel comfortable taking care of a dead body at home. They may be unable or unwilling to handle the emotional and/or physical demands, which include touching, cleaning, dressing, and lifting the body. Death, I learned, is also rarely “like a Shakespeare novel,” as funeral director Joel* put it, but can be a gruesome and violent event that involves the purging of bodily fluids. The muscles relax almost instantly, which distorts the face, causes the body to go limp, and oftentimes empties the bladder and occasionally also the bowels. Despite these unpleasantries, home funerals can be very emotionally fulfilling and healing. When asked how families have described these experiences, my informants listed words such as “life-changing,” and as giving the family “autonomy.”

A home funeral gives the family a sense of control by allowing them to take control themselves, determining “what happens to the body and *when*” [Joel,* PI, 2020]. This allows family members to take their time saying goodbye, spending as much time as they need with the body, rather than having it abruptly taken away. Several of my informants witnessed across numerous families that slowing down and taking care of the body helps families not only *accept* the death quicker but also to find *closure*. By taking part in the preparation of the body, it takes the mystery out of the process and helps people feel less afraid and alienated by a dead body: “I think it takes away the fear of death … that fear of the unknown,” Joel* explained. Sara, who has guided many families through the home funeral process, told me the story of a woman who refused to participate at first, but when she finally entered the room and approached her sister’s dead body, she could not stop brushing her hair, telling stories about her, and rubbing essential oils on her skin. Embracing death so closely provides families with the opportunity to laugh and cry together while telling stories about the deceased, and above all, it provides them with one last chance to lovingly take care of that person.

As stated, not all families are willing or able to take on a home funeral, nor is that a requirement of eco-funerals. A growing number of funeral homes and cemeteries across the U.S. are offering green funerals, allowing the family to ‘outsource’ the work while still choosing an

environmentally benign option. Even professionally handled green burials typically allow for more active family participation throughout the process (GBC, 2020c). Therefore, eco-funerals are effective at "addressing human needs as well" [Lee, PI, 2020]. Every green burial story I heard in the field highlighted the sense of community participation, either by family members or even in extended circles. Alan,* whose mother planned her own funeral parade, described the scene during her last few days: "her home was like Grand Central Station; people kept coming in and out all the time," delegating tasks and taking care of her both before and after she died. Different family members played different roles, but all participated in the process and once she was buried in the ground, "everybody took turns shoveling soil in" [Alan,* PI, 2020]. Anne told me a similar story of a backyard funeral in which the sweat and tears flowed with equal vigor as fifteen people took turns digging a man's grave and later filling it in together, sharing beers and sharing memories of the deceased.

Herring (2019) reminds us that engaging in green funerals and home care of the dead does not take away the pain and sadness; in fact, we may even feel these emotions deeper, because we are truly opening up to the feelings. Yet, she also points out that by allowing ourselves to truly feel and truly confront death, these participatory ceremonies enrich us with "more ways to find solace and comfort" (Ibid., p. 134). Several of my informants explained that the hands-on aspect of a green burial makes all the difference in the healing process compared to a conventional funeral, because "you're embracing the grief rather than denying it" [Dyanne, PI, 2020]. Firestone et al. (2003) explain that "Experiencing feelings of sadness tends to put people in touch with themselves, makes them feel more whole and more integrated," and that "unresolved grief and guilt" can lead to long-term depression (p. 119). During our conversation, Dyanne mused that confronting death head on "helps people actually open up with their grief rather than keeping a stiff upper lip and acting like someone is just asleep." Green burials and home funerals also tend to bring the community together in more enriching ways, which lends an additional avenue of social support during the time of grief. Dyanne beautifully stated:

> As much as people don't like grieving and the whole idea of a funeral, it has a purpose. It lets you work through your grief. And that's one of the things I think that people like about green burial is [that] it's so *cathartic*.

6.3 A big ‘undertaking’: Shifting practices and growing the niche bubble

Despite the availability of cheaper, more personalized, and more environmentally friendly options, most families still opt for either a ‘convenient’ cremation, or a full-fledged ‘traditional’ ground burial. Of course, changing ingrained practices is not easy – not for individuals and certainly not for societies. Anyone who has ever tried to break a bad habit knows this (Kollmuss & Agyeman, 2002). Yet, environmental campaigns and policies staunchly base their strategies on the assumption that rational actors will “see that it would only be sensible to modify their ways of life and help save the planet” (McMeekin & Southerton, 2012, p. 349). If this were the case, we would have long switched to more environmentally friendly burial practices (not to mention our behaviors around driving, flying, shopping, etc.). Unfortunately, mere cognitive knowledge of environmental impact is not enough, as “old habits form a very strong barrier that is often overlooked in the literature on pro-environmental behavior” (Kollmuss & Agyeman, 2002, p. 257). Even enthusiastic pro-environmental values often fail to translate into eco-friendly lifestyles (McMeekin & Southerton, 2012).

Accounting for the ‘value-action gap’ (see Kollmuss & Agyeman, 2002, p. 246) requires an understanding of individual choices and consumption patterns not as isolated phenomena, but as embedded practices within wider social systems. Moreover, as we saw in Chapter 5, “ritual activities generally tend to resist change and often do so more effectively than other forms of social custom” (Bell, 2009, p. 211). The ritual dimension thus adds an additional hurdle to changing social practices, as “the ability of ritual to give the impression of being old and unchanging helps to protect it from alterations both frivolous and serious” (Ibid., p. 211). Hence, even well-intentioned changes (such as reducing the environmental damage caused by funerals) will be met with resistance and protection of the ‘traditional’ methods. Herring (2019) denotes that even if people are aware of the environmental and financial burden involved in their ‘traditional’ practices, they still “find a sense of comfort in doing what is “always done” and fulfilling the wishes of the deceased” (p. 126). Kelly (2015) also highlights this point, explaining that “simply knowing something is wrong is often not enough to get people to work against it” (p. 6).

Irrefutably, it takes more than mere information to change rooted and ritualized social practices and the beliefs embedded in them. Socioeconomic status and subcultural ‘traditions’ both play

a significant role in the meanings and values we ascribe to funeral rites, and often dictate societal expectations. Especially in the 'deep south,' some African-American communities have very distinct funeral rites that are deeply embedded in their ethnocultural identity and that they are unwilling to change, even if it means taking out additional mortgages on their homes to pay for them [Lee, PI, 2020]. Highly religious communities also often exhibit strict adherence to their 'traditions,' which can act as an impermeable barrier to shifting meanings around death. Many people believe in an afterlife, which can make them feel bound to preservation efforts such as embalming and the use of robust, sealed caskets and burial vaults (to allegedly keep from decomposing and be able to resurrect one day). Yet, the truth is their body will decompose one way or another – it will just take longer and harm the environment if they choose conventional methods.

In recent years, the Catholic church has increasingly relaxed its stance on cremation and green burials (Fournier, 2018), assuring people that they can still be 'resurrected' without a physical body, as long as their remains are buried in one place. Additionally, the pope "has certainly gotten the environment to the forefront" [Sara, PI, 2020], which may also help people shift their attitudes towards more sustainable practices, by loosening the reins of religious 'tradition.' Reverend Henry,* whom I spoke with during my summer fieldtrip, has initiated a small conservation burial ground in the woods adjacent to the church he serves. Some religions including Judaism and Islam have *always* practiced green burials and not bought into the materialism of the modern funeral industry (Butz, 2009; Coutts et al., 2018; Herring, 2019). Despite a gradual softening of its commandments around funerals in some congregations, religion still acts as a major influence on funerary practices for many people [Joel,* PI, 2020]. Especially in times of uncertainty, it is human nature to cling to that which is familiar. In the words of Julie-Marie Strange (2002): "if cultural habits were slow to change in the best of circumstances, it was highly unlikely that they would during times of bereavement" (p. 158).

In light of the unyielding nature of funerary practices, how can a death system change in a more sustainable direction? What role do individuals play in the uptake and spreading of 'alternative' niche funerary practices? Dobscha (2016) phrases the question this way:

> How do we get … consumers to change deeply rooted, yet very toxic, burial practices in favor of more sustainable measures that at first glance will make them very uncomfortable, i.e., burying their loved ones without clothing or perhaps in a shroud; encasing them in a pine box; eliminating granite markers[?] (p. 1)

To some, these proposals may seem jarring and outlandish at first. Monaghan (2009) labels this the *niche paradox*: a niche practice or product "requires a degree of fit to the mainstream if it is to be adopted; this is difficult when a niche is created by a community of interest that is in direct ideological opposition to the mainstream" (p. 1027). Yet Fournier (2018) repeatedly emphasizes that green funerals are not new ideas, but instead old practices that we are now returning to. Thus, rather than viewing these practices as a novel fad, we can usefully conceptualize them as *dormant* practices that are now being reawakened (Shove et al., 2012). Although some countries, cultures, and religions have always maintained this natural way of handling their dead (Coutts et al., 2018), these practices have been cast into the outskirts of mainstream society for the past century. How might these practices be reawakened? As we saw in Chapter 3, the links between the elements must be reestablished (Shove et al., 2012). The *materials* are readily available, yet the *meanings* and *competences* around natural burials seem to have been lost among the majority of society. Let us turn our attention to these two aspects.

6.3.1 Reframing meaning by embracing death

In our current death system, death is avoided, denied, postponed, outsourced, rushed through, and feared. "Death, or at least the kind of death that is personal, proximate, and oftentimes tragic and immensely painful, results in, among other things such as terror and bewilderment, a state of paralysis" (Sanders, 2009, pp. 447-448). Feeling paralyzed with grief and denial, we find it difficult to cope with the immense loss that comes with death, clinging to social norms either as an anchor of familiarity, or because we do not know what else to do. By immersing ourselves in the painful yet cathartic embrace of death, we can redefine our relationship to it. Embracing death means shedding our fears and confronting our pain and discomfort head-on to emerge in a fundamental acceptance of death; it means slowing down the hectic pace of life and learning to sit with the inevitable pain of loss and grief; it means coming to terms with a new reality through mindfulness in the present moment (see Kabat-Zinn, 2013). According to funeral director Joel,* "the most beautiful part of death [is] if people allow themselves to be in that presence. … Death is one of those only life experiences that make people stop for one damn second and reflect… and that's the importance of ceremony."

The importance of ceremony and rituals and taking time for healing was also emphasized by Lee, who highlighted that these need not be religious or highly structured and scripted events, but should rather reflect *personal meaning* to the family. Bell (2009) discusses a new paradigm

of rituals in which new rites are invented, primarily as a “medium of expression” (p. 241). As we saw in previous sections, families are increasingly seeking new ways to personalize funerals even within the mainstream industry, pointing to a larger shift towards individualized funerals and rituals. However, what they are missing is the active, hands-on participation as well as the connection to nature that are both so inherent in green burials. Precisely these two elements are often cited as the most healing, cathartic parts of green funerals (Herring, 2019). Joel* believes that if more people had such hands-on experiences with death, they would lead "a more appreciative life, in the sense that they [would] realize how important life is and how important it is for it to go on in many ways.” Thus, by "recovering older practices […] renewed meanings are emerging - ones that are rekindling our bond with the earth" (Kelly, 2015, p. 6).

Overcoming our defenses and inertia around the subject of death is no small feat, yet it can be broken down into small, actionable steps. Researching and discussing funeral choices early in life not only ensures that everything is settled whenever death finally pulls us away, but it also allows for more time to make these important decisions and weigh all our options. In most cases, people who choose eco-friendly funerals have thoroughly researched their options and prepared arrangements well in advance. Alan* told me about his mother’s home funeral, which she had spent years enthusiastically planning down to the details. Complete with colorful puppets and a marching band for a funeral procession, this woman organized “the most magical, profound, joyful burial” he had ever seen. Rather than putting off funeral plans, Alan’s* mother found great joy in the process, embracing the opportunity to plan a huge fiesta for everyone she knew and loved. While not everyone will choose to have a parade at their funeral, or a big event in general, this example demonstrates that while green funerals are eco-friendly are materially *simple,* they need not be *plain.* Far from the ordinary, “impersonal, overly-sanitised [sic] funeral service” (Monaghan, 2009, p. 1037), green funerals are colorful, beautiful, meaningful events.

Since convincing the cemetery owners to add a natural burial section into the adjacent woods, cemetery manager Dyanne has experienced many green burials, all of which were unique and beautiful in their own way. She shared the story of a man who loved German Shepherds all his life, so the German Shepherd Rescue attended his woodland burial. As the man was lowered into the earth, all the dogs bowed down around the grave. At the green funeral of a little girl, all her classmates attended, writing messages on the simple wooden coffin that her father had built her: “Say hi to God for us,” “Have fun!” “You don’t have to go to school anymore,” and “I’m glad you’re our angel” [Dyanne, PI, 2020]. Kimberley at Ramsey Creek Preserve told me

about the funeral of a midwife who had helped deliver twenty-five children. All of the children attended her conservation burial, decorating her coffin and even exclaiming “this is weirdly fun!” [Kimberley, PI, 2020]. These intimate experiences create connection and vulnerability, priming us for healing, while also demonstrating that death need not be a scary thing. The children in particular remind us that there is still joy and love to be found, even among grief. These stories stand in sharp contrast to the ‘traditional’ funeral I described in Chapter 5, and bear witness to the fact that death "can either bring out the best or the worst" in us [Ibid.]. Before returning to Oslo, during my very last field observation, I had the great fortune to partake in a conservation burial in the woods of South Carolina.

A ‘HOLE’ NEW WORLD: PARTICIPATING IN A CONSERVATION BURIAL

> It was an intimate family affair – only the closest family members were present, so it was an honor to be welcomed into this special, memorable occasion. We all bowed our heads down in honor of the woman in the ground, wrapped in a blue floral quilt on a bed of pine branches and rose petals. Kimberley stood by the head of the grave, speaking gently before playing a song on the flute. The wind carried the soft music, rustling the leaves on the tree branches and reminding us of the life and spirit all around us. Despite the serenity in the air, the two young grandchildren had trouble remaining quiet and standing still – a poignant reminder that ‘real life’ continues even in the depths of grief. One of the boys kept walking up to the edge of the grave and peeking in, fascinated by the big hole in the ground. Not fully understanding the concept of a funeral at his innocent age, it probably seemed like a fun place to play. The boy’s worried mother kept pulling him back, trying to keep both children quiet. So, it was not picture-perfect, but it was certainly *real*, and that is what made this experience so personal and so beautiful. Each family member took turns sprinkling rose petals onto the body, followed by a shovelful of dirt. The two young grandsons found great delight in the shoveling of dirt. Afterwards, the family went for a walk through the woods, and the two grave diggers I had met earlier that morning came to finish closing up the grave. I watched the men for a while engaging in this back-breaking work, asking them a few questions as they continued to shovel. There was an extra shovel nearby, and I followed my urge to grab it and join them. It was harder than expected! It was also a very strange sensation, dropping dirt onto the blanketed woman in the hole. After a few minutes, she was completely covered, becoming one with the earth. The men added vertical sticks into

the dirt, which will quickly break down and facilitate the flow of air and water, helping the body to break down as well. The family returned from their walk just as the grave was about finished, and it was time for us all to head home. I took one last deep breath before moving away from the gravesite, taking it all in. *Goodbye*, I silently said to the stranger in the earth, as I walked back through the woods towards the parking lot.

Image 5: A blanketed woman lays in her grave surrounded by rose petals in the woods. |

6.3.2 Reclaiming competence through experiential learning

Participating in a green burial (and especially a home funeral) forces people in our death-averse culture to confront death head-on. As home funeral guide Sara described, "you are *in* it; you are dealing with it." All my informants involved with green burials confirmed that families and guests have always been pleased with the outcome, seeing it as a positive, cathartic experience. As we saw in the stories above, families and guests are often highly engaged and actively participate in the funeral preparations and procedures. These participatory events provide fertile ground for opening our minds and shifting our practices. Carden (2005) describes the pivotal work by Lave and Wenger from the early 1990s on *situated learning*:

> learning is not understood as a top-down dissemination of knowledge; rather it is the relationships between people and the part every member of the community plays in both creating and sustaining the everyday structures of practice. We are all members of such communities, but in some we have a core role; in others we are only peripheral. (p. 189)

In Chapter 3 we learned that “the sources of changed behaviour lie in the development of practices themselves;” in this way, each performance of a practice contains “the seeds of constant change” (Warde, 2005, pp. 140-141). Given the embodied nature of learning, even “peripheral participation in communities of practice” (Lave, 2019, p. 135) can plant and grow these seeds of change. While in the field, I heard countless stories about people partaking in a green burial and/or home funeral for the first time and completely opening their mindset after the experience. In this way, people can be recruited through *peripheral participation* into a *community of practice* and become ‘carriers’ of that practice themselves (Ibid.; Shove et al., 2012). Dyanne, who oversees a natural burial ground, told me this story of a funeral guest who diametrically changed her stance after witnessing a green burial: At one of the first green burials they did in the forest, a funeral guest commented on how “arcane” it was to bury this young girl in the woods and that she "deserves better than that." The woman believed the girl should have been cremated and scattered in the mountains because she loved the mountains. However, by the end of the ceremony, the same woman was in tears saying "this is the most beautiful service I've ever been to. This is what I want; this is what everybody should do."

Although many people have revelatory experiences when participating in green burials, not everyone is immediately charmed and convinced of these ideas when they first hear about it. Sara, the home funeral director, described people’s reactions as a “spectrum from gross to great,” i.e. ranging from complete disgust to awe and curiosity. Yet *experiencing* these events firsthand often opens people’s minds to the idea. As Zoey* phrased it: “that’s where change happens, at the edge of curiosity.” Several other informants told me stories of being approached after a green burial by funeral guests who were amazed, exclaiming “I didn’t know you could do this!” Some even ended up choosing this option for themselves: “I want my funeral to be this way.” Of course, as Shove et al. (2012) remind us, "First encounters are surely critical, but […] more is required if practices are to retain faithful cohorts of suitably committed carriers" (p. 69). In other words, while people may feel inspired after attending a green burial, their enthusiasm may not necessarily translate into choosing this practice when the time arises in their own family. However, funeral director Joel* finds that in his community, green burials have come in “clusters,” as guests who partook in one indeed oftentimes end up choosing this option for themselves or their loved ones. According to Rugg (2018), “active consumers and choice-makers play a large part in the invention of a new ritual" (p. 75).

In this way, communities of practice grow as new recruits join the circle and may in turn attract even more recruits, either through word of mouth information sharing, or, more effectively, through *peripheral participation* in a green burial as a guest. Shove et al. (2012) highlight the significance of established networks in introducing new recruits into a community of practice: “Since social networks overlap and extend beyond the margins of any one practice, they can be, and often are, important in generating what seem like chance encounters and unpredictable experiences” (p. 68). As the community of practice expands and more people become exposed to green funerals through peripheral participation, green funerals will continue to become normalized in society. The interesting point in these cases is that engaging in green burials could hardly be described as a *regular* or *routinized* practice. Therefore, "Individuals are constantly taking up and dropping out of different practices as their lives unfold," which creates “changing cohorts of carriers” (p. 65). Nonetheless, even if members are not *actively* engaging in green burials, they may still remain *passive* carriers in the overall community of practice. In this way, the community of practice may continue to grow, perhaps somewhat under the radar, while the practice itself may remain ‘dormant’ for many years among individual carriers – until the need arises for a funeral.

6.4 Overtaking the undertakers? Challenging the dominant funeral regime

6.4.1 Not yet over the hill: Barriers to a regime shift

The previous section illustrated the process of shifting practices on a micro level through experiential learning and recruitment of new carriers into a community of practice. In this way, the niche bubble of green funerals has been growing for the past two decades. At first, green funerals remained embedded within a “protected space” (Geels, 2011, p. 27) outside of the dominant regime while building momentum. Yet in recent years, a process of *reconfiguration* (Ibid.) began to unfold as eco-death practices are incrementally incorporated into the mainstream death system to meet local needs and consumer desires. We see this especially in the rise of hybrid cemeteries and in funeral homes expanding their products and services to include ‘green’ options, such as biodegradable caskets. Over time, these developments may gradually reconfigure the regime along a new path. However, at the current stage, these offerings merely constitute ‘additional options’ rather than a definite ‘new way of doing things.’

More is required for a complete *regime shift* (Geels, 2010) towards a truly sustainable death system. As Chapter 3 emphasized, total regime shifts do not come about easily, and are likely to be met with resistance from the dominant structures in place (Geels, 2011). During my time in the field, I asked all my informants what they saw as the biggest barriers to making sustainable death care more mainstream. Aside from the need to open people's mindsets and reframe the meanings around death, which I explored earlier in the chapter, I have consolidated the following categories of 'barriers,' based on my discussions in the field.

Widening awareness through education and rhetoric

"When consumers lack experience to guide their decisions, and are less aware of the choices available […], the standard cultural modes of disposal are likely to dominate with significant guidance from market providers" (Canning & Szmigin, 2010, p. 1131). In other words, if people are unaware of their options, they tend to default to the standardized social funerary practices, guided by funeral directors who steer them in this direction. Because people "can't know what they don't know" [Sara, PI, 2020], Monaghan (2009) explains the importance of making people "aware of how their purchase decision-making (i.e. consumption activities) in funeral-related practices relate to local and wider issues of sustainability" (p. 1041). Thus, one of the first tasks is to educate people on their options and spread awareness about the environmental impact of current practices. Several of my informants explained that most people simply are not aware that eco-friendly funeral options exist. Dyanne put it this way:

> I find that when people know about green burial, a lot of people like it… A lot of people […] thought their only options were cremation or embalming [and] casketed, vaulted burial. [If] they know there's an alternative that's more earth-friendly than either one of those, then they choose to do this.

According to the 2015 survey by the GBC, the three most common ways people hear about green funerals is through (1) cemetery websites, (2) word of mouth, and (3) public speaking/presentations (GBC, 2020c). Yet when my informant Lee has spoken at libraries and other public places, she has found that most people in the audience still have never heard of green burial and are mind-blown when they learn about it. Several books and documentaries have sprung up around these topics in recent years, including *Grave Matters* by Mark Harris in 2007, which served as a wakeup call to several of my informants, just like Mitford's original publication had done nearly fifty years prior. The seed of interest in natural burial was also

planted through a woodland burial scene in the popular tv series *Six Feet Under,* inviting curiosity and interest by new funeral consumers. "It is only once consumers have the knowledge to make informed choices that innovative solutions that challenge traditional practices associated with disposal may be considered" (Canning & Szmigin, 2010, p. 1139). However, as we saw earlier, information alone is seldom enough to create a change in practices. It also requires a shift in meaning and experiential learning, as well as an openness to change. As Sara said to me: "honey, you can lead a horse to water, but you can't make him drink."

Rugg (2018) emphasizes the role rhetoric plays in the transition from one mode of body disposal to another. Proponents tend to highlight the merits of the innovative form while condemning the old tradition. As the new discourse catches on in the public, the new practice gradually gains in acceptance and popularity until it becomes normalized, as we saw in the case of cremation. Thus, the widespread adoption of green funerals may depend in large part on the rhetoric around it. Language can be powerful. While antagonists of aquamation refer to it as an "acid bath," proponents highlight the water-based process as a cleaner and gentler alternative to cremation. Frank* tells his clients "we don't burn bodies here at our funeral home," evoking images of burning in hell. In his highly religious community, he also uses the selling point that people are baptized in water and that it therefore makes sense to return to water. When selling a green burial, Joel* explained that it helps to play up the romanticism and beauty of this option, because "it's a foreign idea to a lot of people," therefore "you have to ease them into [it]." With all the positive aspects of green burials, this is not difficult to do. He added that "there's nothing negative to say about it … so it's easy to romanticize it and sell it because it *is* a great thing!"

As a self-proclaimed pragmatist, Lee explained that she is less interested in the flowery language and romanticism behind green burials but cares more about the legal protection of funeral consumers' rights to autonomy when making funeral decisions. Still, she agreed that language is important, and because funeral reform involves many moving parts, it requires consistency across messages and information. Geels (2011) highlights this point as well, stating that the visions and goals of niche actors must be clearly articulated and aligned in order to grow reliable networks of allies and eventually destabilize the existent regime. Therefore, strategic use of rhetoric and a consistent, clear image provide crucial elements in the spreading of green funerals and the overall process of transformation in the death system.

Making eco-death options available and accessible

As we saw earlier, the frequent lack of pre-planning before death leaves many families scrambling to choose whatever options are closest, most familiar, and easily available at the time of death. This counts for funeral methods as well as locations. While there are increasing numbers of hybrid cemeteries around the country, green burial is not available everywhere, much less conservation burial (Coutts et al., 2018). Aquamation facilities are sparsely spread across the U.S., and body composting has yet to become available. Thus, another major barrier to shifting the death system in a sustainable direction is the currently limited availability and accessibility of green funeral options: "if we don't make it available, nobody has a choice" [Lee, PI, 2020]. It seems unlikely that most people would travel far distances or even cross state lines[29] to bury their loved ones, making green funeral options potentially inaccessible to many people. If people do insist on driving or flying to a conservation burial ground for example, they add a large carbon footprint to their 'sustainable' endeavor (Kelly, 2015), not only for the funeral but anytime they wish to visit the gravesite as well. For these reasons, choosing a natural or even hybrid cemetery in closer proximity may be a better current option for many people.

Because establishing conservation burial grounds can be so costly and burdensome, this also begs the question of who will be able to establish these grounds, and for whom (Kelly, 2015). For far too long, poor, colored, and historically underprivileged groups have been facing undue environmental degradation and living in conditions with increased pollution, contamination, and environmental health hazards. Will these communities benefit from green cemeteries, or will they be reserved for wealthier areas with the available funds and land to establish them? The potential benefit of hybrid grounds that latch onto existing cemeteries is that they do not require massive funds, nor do they require a search for an appropriate new piece of land. Furthermore, because they are popping up in more and more places across the U.S., they make green burials more accessible to diverse communities, rather than just the privileged few (Ibid.). Yet they also do less in terms of preserving nature (Coutts et al., 2018). For these reasons, the eco-death movement not only links to environmental issues, but also to social justice issues [Ibid.; Anne, PI, 2020; Lee, PI, 2020]. On the legal side, cemetery laws and funeral home

[29] Still, when I visited the aquamation facility during my fieldwork, a man had driven up to North Carolina all the way from Florida with his dead wife in a box in the backseat (which is legal!), because it was her wish to be aquamated. He drove all night and arrived there early that morning. When I finally got to see the machine, it was in operation, dissolving the Florida woman's body.

regulations should be revised to disallow individual businesses from mandating the use of embalming or vaults, thus making green(er) options more accessible everywhere.

Making eco-funerals profitable

Although increasing the number of green burial grounds across the U.S. will provide a crucial step, geographical accessibility must be met with economic feasibility for a practice to become widespread. As with any market, businesses that are willing to adapt are likely to be successful, while those who resist changes risk growing stagnant, outdated, and going out of business. At this point we might ask: are funeral directors willingly embracing green burials because they *support* the idea, or do they see themselves pushed into it by a desire to keep up with rising consumer demand? Answering such a question goes beyond the scope of this project, however, my fieldwork gave me an indication that *both* reasons likely apply. Dyanne and Joel,* the cemetery manager and a funeral director I spoke with, both seemed highly enthusiastic about the environmental aspects of green burial, while still offering conventional funerary services to the public as well. Frank* conspicuously highlighted the environmental aspects of the aquamation technique in his marketing, yet throughout our conversation he seemed more fixated on the idea of diversifying and branding his business. Regardless of their reasons for offering eco-friendly services, at the end of the day, these services must be able to contribute to the bottom line if they are to be taken up by the industry: "because we're a business we also do have to have an income" [Dyanne, PI, 2020]. Dyanne added, however, that "if you just look at this as a business, you miss so much." Joel* also believes that people need to be "passionate about the cause and not about the profit." According to Dyanne, "a lot of funeral homes don't let people know it's an option … and a lot of cemeteries don't do green burial because […] you don't make as much money as you do [with] a contemporary burial."

However, as aforementioned, green funerals are not always a 'cheap option,' nor is cost typically the main reason people choose it. In fact, green burials oftentimes cost more than direct cremation, which has been a rising trend in recent years. With a green burial, families often still include merchandise (e.g. a nice, 'presentable' biodegradable casket) as well as the basic service charge, and (if desired) even a 'green' embalming (with less effective yet non-toxic embalming fluid). At one of the funeral homes I visited, a green burial package cost $2,000-$3,000 more on average than a basic direct cremation [Joel,* PI, 2020]. Hence a shift towards eco-funerals might still be more profitable to the industry than the current trend of

direct cremations. Joel* foresees that a green burial will someday be just as expensive as a 'traditional' burial, because funeral homes will have to raise the price on in order to make it profitable if they lose revenue from 'traditional' burials. The *Recompose* company currently forecasts the price for body composting at $5,500 (Recompose, 2018a), resting between the typical prices of conventional cremation and conventional burial. Aquamation, though also typically earning less revenue than a 'traditional' burial, may be priced higher than direct cremations. Thus, offering eco-friendly services does not have to result in a loss of profits for a funeral business. Commercial cemeteries are finding ways to cash in on green funerals as well. While establishing a new conservation burial ground requires a large amount of startup capital, adding a natural burial section onto an existing conventional cemetery can diversify the business while adding a stream of revenue. Kelly (2015) points out that

> Much of this has been a matter of business. […] Established cemeteries can diversify their interment options with little expenditure or extra work. And as many cemeteries around the United States struggle to survive, blossoming interest in green burial gives them one more way to stay afloat. (p. 103)

The cemetery Dyanne manages offers both 'regular' burials on the lawn, and green burials in a separate wooded area of the property. The green burial plots were more expensive than the conventional cemetery plots (depending on the location – some conventional spots near the pond came at a premium price as well). Dyanne explained to me that the price hierarchy is a way they can make green burials more profitable for themselves. Since the price of a green burial plot only includes the opening and closing of a grave and does not include the addition of a burial vault and a grave marker in the sale, the prices for green burial plots were heightened accordingly. At a conservation burial ground I visited, the costs for a burial were around $7,000, which gets close to the price tag for a 'traditional' burial. However, this money is used for land conservation efforts rather than as profit [Kimberley, PI, 2020]. Thus, while eco-funerals are not necessarily a 'cheap' option for consumers, the money can potentially be used for a greater good by preserving nature.

Regime response: Resistance or acceptance?

As consumers seek alternative methods that are more cost-effective, more personalized, and better for the environment, the professional identity of funeral directors becomes increasingly fragmented as their monopoly over the death realm begins to unravel. As we saw in the

beginning of this chapter, changes have come in the form of new actors, new technologies, and new practices entering the death market, blurring the once-distinct boundaries of the entire funeral regime. In his empirical research ten years ago, Sanders (2010) found that "Most funeral directors I interviewed have mixed feelings about the direction their occupational careers are heading. They typically attribute the changes to cultural developments beyond their control" (p. 62). How does the mainstream funeral industry respond to green niche developments today? Are they embracing the opportunity for a sustainable shift, or are they burying their heads in the sand? My own findings provided examples of both resistance *and* embrace of the eco-death movement by the dominant funeral industry.

Beard and Burger (2017) state that funeral directors are "becoming more open-minded to change" and are "embracing the inevitable changes that are being socially and culturally driven in our society" (p. 57). To support this claim, the authors cite the widespread adoption of new technologies into the industry, and the well-attended industry seminars on emerging trends such as green burials. Conversely, Lee shared her experiences of speaking about green burials at funeral industry conventions where some of them go "kicking and screaming" into these sessions, not wanting to even hear about it. "The ones who are resisting are the ones who just don't want to see anything change," she explained. Why are they so closed off to change? Given their former monopoly over funeral rites, Joel* observed that "it is seen by some people in this profession as a threat to our industry," adding that: "funeral directors thought that cremation was going to be a threat to our industry [but] it didn't threaten, we just had to change! We just had to embrace it and figure out what we're going to do now." Unfortunately, not everyone is willing to reframe the perceived competition as an opportunity for collaboration and positive change. Brad,* the manager of a casket company, was less than thrilled about green burials and repeatedly emphasized the importance of 'traditions.'

As the funeral industry sees an increasing number of women entering the profession (NFDA, 2020), they might show a greater inclination towards adopting green burials into the industry in the future. This speculation rests in part on the fact that the eco-death movement is led predominantly by women, and on "female virtues related to care, empathy, intuition, connection, and cooperation," for which "Women are often seen as closer than men to nature" (Dryzek, 2013, p. 190). Moreover, age could be a factor as younger funeral directors may be more open to new and different ways of doing things. Meanwhile, the older generation of funeral directors seems to drag their heels, refusing to embrace anything outside the 'traditions'

they are accustomed to [Joel,* Lee, Anne, PIs, 2020]. Joel,* who is a younger funeral director and enthusiastic supporter of green funerals, believes that the older generation is responsible for the way things have been and for the bad reputation that funeral directors have often gotten. "It's our job to help clean this up and build the trust back," he told me. On the flip side, Anne talked about her encounter with an old-school funeral director who was completely closed off to the idea of a green burial, paraphrasing his standpoint as follows: "I've been in this business all my career. I'm 84 years old and I have gotten by doing what I do for all my career, and I don't need something new at this point."

Despite this resistance, several of my informants predicted that green burials will continue to expand and become more widespread, just like cremation did. Therefore, it is in the funeral industry's own interest to embrace these changes and adapt their services. As Dyanne aptly put it: "you can either be part of [the change] or you can resist it." After struggling to convince his bosses to introduce green burials at their funeral home, Joel* found that it has benefitted the business greatly: "it gave us a good name in the community." After performing the first few green burials, news spread through word-of-mouth and more people began showing an interest in this technique. Dyanne had a similar experience after finally convincing the owners of the cemetery to add a woodland burial section (which was already part of the property). Because green burial grounds are still relatively sparse, it gives the cemetery a competitive edge over others in the area. Anne observed that green burial "is still niche, but funeral directors who embrace it also embrace other family-oriented practices, like permitting the family to dress the body or to wash the body." Some funeral businesses are also offering eco-friendly options among their casket selection. While many in the mainstream funeral industry are invested in maintaining the dominant regime, Joel* believes that their resistance is futile and that they should instead "be conscious and embrace and be aware of their community's needs."

Bridging *between* and *across* communities of practice

Being aware of a community's specific needs is crucial for funeral businesses. Every community needs to dispose of their dead, yet, some communities are more receptive than others to change. Hence, some communities seem ripe to adopt eco-funerary practices while others cling to their 'traditions' [Lee, PI, 2020]. Kelly (2015) notes the role that partnerships, organizations, and alliances have played in mobilizing a new death ethic. These alliances include the Green Burial Council (GBC), the Funeral Consumers Alliance (FCA), and the

National Home Funeral Alliance (NHFA). Future partnerships might include public parks that already engage in nature and wildlife conservation and might be willing to offer green burials in part of the park (Kelly, 2015; see also Coutts et al., 2018). Nevertheless, there is still a need for more collaboration and banding together, especially among singled-out green burial advocates spread across the country. Bridging between such communities of practice can help a practice spread, solidify, and become normalized in wider society. This requires "everybody doing their little part to do something different to create a shift" [Zoey,* PI, 2019].

However, bridging communities of practice is not only about the recruitment and networking of likeminded people. Bridging is also required *across* different communities of practice. The previous section illustrated the widespread resistance by many in the funeral industry, posing an obstinate hurdle to the successful integration of eco-funerals into the dominant regime, let alone a complete regime shift towards a sustainable death system. However, based on my observations and conversations in the field, the antagonistic feelings are often mutual on *both* sides. When funeral director Joel* first became curious about natural burials, he began attending eco-oriented Death Cafés to learn more about the subject. He found that "green burial people can be quite intense," as they are generally well-versed in funeral laws and vigilant about not being taken advantage of by the funeral industry. Thus, there seems to be a tension between the green burial community of practice and the mainstream funeral community of practice. Many in the mainstream industry feel threatened by this growing niche (like Brad* did), while many people in the green burial community feel a general distrust towards the mainstream funeral industry. Yet this hostile playing field complicates and hinders collaboration. Fearing that he might be seen as the 'bad guy,' Joel* was pleasantly surprised to be so welcomed by the group, noting that "once you're in that community, they'll support you." After fostering a relationship with members of the Death Café and establishing his intention to *collaborate,* Joel* was able to bridge the divide, and his new connections even began sending him clients when he started offering green burials at his funeral home.

Thus, for eco-death practices to flourish, it is crucial to overcome the 'us vs. them' mentality among communities of different funerary practices. Lee emphasized the importance of collaboration between both 'sides' as well, seeing funeral directors not as enemies but rather as *allies*. It is unlikely that many people will choose to take care of a dead body themselves (even if they have a legal right to do so). Therefore, funeral directors will continue to provide important services to society, but the nature of these services must be reappraised in light of

their environmental impact. Moreover, they may increasingly share the *competences* involved in death care with the family, allowing greater participation if desired. It is important to realize that the aim of the eco-death community is not to eradicate the funeral industry, but to shift funerary *practices* in a sustainable direction. People like Joel,* Frank,* and Dyanne, who straddle both 'sides' are key players in the incorporation of eco-funerary practices into the death system, acting as 'gatekeepers' to the societal uptake of these practices, so to speak. People are increasingly embracing green funerals for various reasons, and funeral homes can offer these services alongside their conventional services to meet consumer needs. However, offering green burials is contingent upon access to green burial grounds in their area. Thus, funeral professionals benefit from fostering connections with eco-death advocates whom they rely on for expanding access and availability of green burial grounds and methods [Lee, PI, 2020]. Furthermore, funeral directors can turn to eco-death advocates for knowledge and information to pass along to potential clients, creating a *partnership* rather than rivalry between the two 'sides.' By bridging between *and* across communities of practice, we can witness "the building of strategic coalitions" (Monaghan, 2009, p. 1031), or what Zoey* described as "the magic of growing relationships and collaborating, and being willing to leap into unknown territory, too."

6.4.2 Green window of opportunity: Reconfiguring the funeral regime?

The way we dealt with death 200 years ago differs greatly from the way we deal with death today. How will we deal with death in the future? The exponential uptake of cremation we saw in Chapter 5 exemplifies how a niche practice can grow into a widespread phenomenon that eventually overtakes the 'traditional' method and can therefore alter or replace the entire regime. After futile attempts at resistance, the funeral industry recognized the growing threat posed by cremation and adopted the practice into its repertoire. Thus, the regime first underwent a process of *reconfiguration* (see Geels, 2011), as the industry restructured its business model while still maintaining 'traditional' ground burial as well. However, through industry support as well as gradual religious acceptance, cultural enthusiasm, and high-level consumer demand, the spread of cremation has now set American society on course for large-scale substitution of 'traditional' burials. Hence, what began as a reconfiguration may transition rather into a process of *technological substitution* (Geels, 2011), with cremation rates projected to continue growing to nearly 80% in the next twenty years (NFDA, 2019b). If this trajectory continues, 'traditional' burial may become largely obsolete within the foreseeable future. The story of cremation thus

gives us an idea of what a *regime shift* (Geels, 2010) can look like, from modest origins in niche pockets at the margins of society to becoming the 'new normal.' Will the industry be forced to realign itself once again along the lines of sustainable funerary practices?

Despite the growing community of practice supporting green funerals, the previous section exemplified the myriad of hurdles that currently still stand in the way of a regime shift towards a sustainable death system. Kemp and van Lente (2013) remind us that socio-technical regimes cannot change overnight as they are the "long-term outcomes of changes in technology, cultural aspirations, problem definitions and various processes of coordination in a changing landscape involving dissent and political struggle" (p. 117). Moreover, "for a transition to occur different developments must come together" (Ibid., p. 118). Along these same lines, Kollmuss and Agyeman (2002) add that "The biggest positive influence on pro-environmental behavior […] is achieved when internal and external factors act synergistically" (p. 257). In other words, it takes a fusion of internal and external motion across various levels for a regime shift to occur.

According to Geels (2010), "niche-innovations may break through more widely if external landscape developments create pressures on the regime that lead to cracks, tensions, and windows of opportunity" (p. 495). Indeed, we currently find ourselves in a pivotal moment in history in which various tensions may mutually feed and reinforce each other in a process of *circular causality* (see Geels, 2011). We can observe developments on all levels of the MLP that show potential for a shift towards a more sustainable death system: (1) on the landscape level, we see economic pressure, growing environmental awareness, as well as the populous baby boomer generation nearing the end of their lives; (2) on the regime level, there has been dissatisfaction with the dominant death system and, in response, an abundance of new products and services have sprung up, rattling the regime from its once steadfast position; (3) on the niche level, we see a growing community of practice embracing eco-funerals, fervently led by the aging baby boomers and the millennial 'death positivity' followers (see Glossary).

As this chapter has demonstrated, changes are undeniably already underway. We can witness the three broad steps of Geels' (2011) transition process: (1) internal momentum has built up around green burials (and to a lesser extent other green funeral methods) within an isolated niche bubble over the past two decades, gaining traction and recruiting new carriers into these practices; (2) meanwhile, the formerly solid funeral regime has come under increasing pressure from various sides, destabilizing the industry's monopoly over the death realm and exploding in a myriad of new innovations; (3) with the gradual rise in environmental consciousness,

especially in our era of unprecedented climate change, a *window of opportunity* (Geels, 2010) presents itself for a potential regime shift in a more sustainable direction. As consumers become more aware of their environmental footprint, Spaargaren (2013) asks: "how do ordinary people get to grips with environmental issues and how do they perceive, comprehend, evaluate and manage the connections that their personal lifestyles and routine consumption practices have in terms of global environmental change?" (p. 229). We might pose the same question about people's perception and management of their personal *deathstyles* as well as their lifestyles. According to the 2019 'Consumer Awareness and Preferences Study' conducted by the National Funeral Directors Association:

> Americans are increasingly aware of and interested in personalization options, green burials and using a funeral home that's familiar or has been used by a loved one before – with less of an emphasis on the religious elements that were once a cornerstone of the funeral ritual. This creates a unique opportunity for today's funeral director to provide the kind of experience that more and more consumers have come to expect and even plan for as times and priorities change. (NFDA, 2019e)

These shifting values and trends away from 'tradition' provide fertile ground for new (or reawakened) practices to grow. The NFDA survey also found that 51.6% of respondents "would be interested in exploring "green" options because of potential environmental and cost-saving benefits," and in turn offered workshops to professionals for providing "more holistic, modern services that help families grieve and heal in a healthy way" (Ibid.). These points indicate a significant interest in green funeral practices *and* a recognition of consumer desires for (a) reducing the environmental impact of funerals, (b) saving money, and (c) engaging in rituals that allow healthier expressions of grief and that foster healing. Earlier in the chapter, we saw that these three elements are exactly what set green funerals apart from mainstream funerals.

Beard and Burger (2017) posit that "consumer-driven funeral-related requests may at first only be done on a case-by-case basis, but as they grow in popularity, they may be adopted as a general practice among a funeral home and sold as a commodity as a way of increasing profits" (p. 63). According to social practice theory, each performance of a practice creates an opportunity for transformation, because "human subjectivity is at the heart of processes of structuration, reproduction, and (also) environmental change" (Spaargaren, 2013, p. 133). In this case, every funeral thus holds the potential for reinventing societal ways of handling death. Indeed, "as Americans become more environmentally conscious, burials that preclude costly

caskets constructed to last in perpetuity, chemically induced preservation, or the noxious air pollutants that are by-products of cremation, all stand to become even harder to sell" (Sanders, 2010, p. 60). According to Shove (2003), "what people take to be normal is immensely malleable […] it is perfectly possible that future concepts will be less resource intensive than those of today" (p. 199). Hence, as the baby boomer generation continues to normalize green funerals while recruiting new carriers into the community of practice, these methods could potentially be taken up by future generations as the new 'normal way to do things' (Tuomela, 2002; Warde, 2014). Because societal norms evolve alongside the changing preferences and practices of society, the high projections of cremation rates for the coming years may therefore shift once again with "changing ideas about how things should be and what people should do" (Shove, 2003, p. 79). In this way, the entire *trajectory* (Geels, 2010) of the funeral regime could be rerouted in a new direction, from a cremation-oriented death system to a green one.

As previously mentioned, many people have chosen or would choose cremation *because* they believed it was the environmental option. My informant Alan* explained that growing up in a liberal, eco-conscious family typically meant choosing cremation, because people were under the impression that it was the most environmentally friendly method. The NFDA also lists costs followed by "the perceived environmental impact" as the main reasons for the prevalent societal choice of cremation (NFDA 2019a). Hence, with competitive pricing and a much smaller ecological impact, green funerals are likely to appeal to people who would have ordinarily chosen cremation. Furthermore, because people who choose cremation are typically less rooted in traditions and more open to alternative options (CANA, 2019), 'cremation-carriers' may be easier to sway into a different direction than those who unwaveringly hold onto their environmentally harmful 'traditions' of embalming and resource-intensive conventional burial. Dyanne confirmed that most of her clients who choose green burials originally wanted to be cremated, and Frank* explained that he usually has no trouble shifting clients from cremation to aquamation. Additionally, families who choose a direct burial (without embalming or public viewing) may thus also be open to a *green* 'direct' burial instead.

6.5 Closing notes: Green *micro* death systems?

Shifting to a sustainable death system is an "open, dynamic process characterized by uncertainty, non-linearity and qualitative change" (Monaghan, 2009, p. 1031). Since the inception of natural burials in the U.S. over twenty years ago, an abundance of new voices, new

practices, and new technologies have sprung up, expanding into an eclectic eco-death movement (MacMurrary & Futrell, 2019) and gaining increased traction across the country. Small-scale, local motions and connections have thus far been the main drivers of the eco-death movement (Kelly, 2015), as increasing numbers of people are hosting their own Death Cafés or opening their own natural burial grounds, for example. These endeavors help to create and bridge communities of practice, demonstrating that larger changes are already underway (Coutts et al., 2018) – with or without the professional funeral industry. According to Lee, "it's either going to happen within [the mainstream funeral industry] or it's going to happen without [the industry], or it's going to be a combination of the two." Lee also believes we have passed the point where we need to convince people that eco-death practices are the 'right' way to go, but now it is a matter of jumping through hoops to make it happen locally. As this chapter demonstrated, the transition process has already begun. The direction it will take remains to be seen, yet – as the story of cremation showed – acceptance and embracing of these changes likely bodes better for the industry than resistance.

The growth of green funerals and the merging of developments at various levels all point towards an upcoming transformation of the death regime. However, with the expansion of a niche bubble also comes a risk of bursting. In other words, the outcome of such a *regime shift* (Geels, 2010) is unknown. Given the industry's continuing power over the death realm and the persistence of familiar funeral practices, a complete overhaul of the system seems unlikely in the foreseeable future. Furthermore, Geels' (2011) warning about the economic challenges in sustainability transitions points out that it is "unlikely that environmental innovations will be able to replace existing systems without changes in economic frame conditions" (p. 25). In the capitalist economy of the U.S., the corporate funeral industry is thus not likely to step aside and give up their profit-oriented business model for the greater good. Instead, funeral director Joel* foresees the corporate industry increasingly commodifying green burials to make them profitable. In this way, they can "appropriate some of the more compatible elements of a niche innovation without overly disrupting their own […] vested interests" (Monaghan, 2009, p. 1031). As we saw earlier, this is already the case as eco-funerals are gradually adopted into the mainstream system, turning them into additional streams of revenue for funeral homes and hybrid cemeteries alike (Coutts et al., 2018).

"Demographic projections for an ageing, more culturally diverse and growing population clearly point to the need to develop strategic plans for burial infrastructure and policy that

responds to demand" (Bennett & Davies, 2015, p. 450). Yet the scaling up of green funerals on a societal level to meet the needs of future generations may entail a degree of commodification and commercialization that could diminish the *sustainability* of these practices. In 2017, the death rate in the U.S. stood at 8.5 deaths per 1,000 people (World Bank Group, 2019a). Using this rate at the current population of 329.4 million citizens (United States Census Bureau, 2020), we can calculate about 2.8 million current deaths per year in the United States. By 2080, around the time late millennials and early Generation Z's will be dying, the annual number of death occurrences in the United States is projected to reach 6.5 million (Bryant et al., 2003). With more than double the number of today's annual deaths, dying will soon become much more prevalent, as will the environmental problems associated with those 6.5 million funerals every year. Meeting future funerary demands through mass-production of 'green' funeral goods and services may invite increased homogenization and greenwashing, taking away from the original, simplistic, nature-oriented practice of green burials. Thus, a standardized, nation-wide 'sustainable death system' may not be practical or even feasible.

Given the potential for greenwashing and commercialization if adopted on a mass scale, perhaps community efforts should continue focusing on creating smaller, sustainable *micro death systems* based on the needs and wishes of local families, while still maintaining a viable place for small-scale funeral businesses to serve the community. Monaghan (2009) suggests a process of *conceptual niche management* by first "combining alternative and conventional socio-technical practices to avoid polarization between advocates of innovations and actors deeply committed to the incumbent system" (pp. 1041-1042). Cremation might still be required on rare occasions for bodies with diseases such as Ebola.[30] However, most funeral practices can be replaced by sustainable alternatives, such as green burials, aquamation, and body composting. Long-distance transport can utilize either cooling techniques or green embalming with non-toxic fluids (these can also be used after an autopsy [Joel,* PI, 2020]). Thus, there will still be plenty of work for funeral professionals (especially given the cultural avoidance around death) – the work will just shift slightly, as has already been the case for funeral professionals. Over time, such "modernized mixtures" can then "point the incumbent system in a more sustainable direction" (Monaghan, 2009, p. 1041).

[30] As of this writing, WHO guidelines do *not* require cremation for victims of COVID-19 as the bodies do not transmit disease if proper protective practices are followed. Green/home burials are permitted (WHO, 2020).

As practices morph and adapt in conjunction with their shifting community of carriers (Shove et al., 2012), the local milieu will likely play a major role in the uptake and manifestation of eco-funerals. Hence, rural and urban contexts must be considered alongside religion, local trends, and societal preferences. For example, while rural areas may expand their provision of conservation burial grounds, densely populated urban areas may instead adopt technologies such as aquamation and/or indoor body composting (once this service becomes available and spreads beyond Seattle). In this way, green funeral technologies may support the transition to a more inclusive sustainable death system where simple green burials are not feasible. Such localized approaches may also boost the work of craftspeople and artisans like Zoey,* by commissioning handmade burial shrouds and containers as an alternative to mass-produced products. This avenue of incrementally 'greening' the death system thus falls in line with Sahakian and Wilhite's (2014) proposal to "amplify existing efforts, not necessarily by scaling up from small to large projects, but [by] bridging between communities of practice and sharing learning opportunities across different contexts" (p. 40). Monaghan (2009) muses on what a sustainable death system transition might look like:

> A diversity of facilities would be offered to users in order to meet their different (ideological and/or geographically-specific) social economic and environmental needs while also ensuring that they are well informed about the choices available to them. This diversity would feature aspects of stability – in the continued but more sustainable provision of incumbent infrastructures – and innovation – with new ways to meet society's evolving needs. (p. 1040)

Shifting to a sustainable death system involves the coordinated efforts of many actors and the careful balancing of various moving parts. As the eco-death niche bubble continues to grow, it must be delicately guided and managed so as not to burst on the sharp edges of the corporatized funeral regime. Hence, much like the local food movement, successful continuation and expansion of the eco-death movement may benefit from *localized* activities and communities of practice in green *micro death systems*, without attempting to build a singular, large-scale, homogenized new regime. While it is impossible to predict the future, the findings from this research indicate that green funerals are likely to play a pivotal role in America's future death system(s). What exactly that arrangement will look like remains to be … *unearthed.*

7 Famous Last Words: Conclusion

7.1 Research summary and implications

The very first page of this thesis opened with a scene that begins the moment someone takes their last breath. Death may be the end of life, yet, as previous research has shown, it is not the end of a person's ecological impact. The problem is what happens *after* dying. The mainstream death system in the United States is comprised of environmentally harmful post-mortem practices including embalming, cremation, and material-heavy ground burials. This research contributes to the literature around environmental funeral reform by addressing the *social* side of this understated issue, recognizing that systems and practices do not exist on their own, but that they are created and perpetuated by society. In this way, "the meanings and perceptions of death and dying are embedded in and influenced by cultural beliefs, moral codification, social processes, and structural realities. Thus they are subject to controversy and change" (Bryant et al., 2003, p. 1029). By combining the multi-level perspective and social practice theory, this research project has delineated the dynamics of persistence and change in funerary practices (and the wider contexts they exist in) from both a macro and micro perspective. The *nestled levels of interaction* concept showed how practices reside *within* systems, acting simultaneously as their foundation and their outcome. In other words, systems and practices co-create one another, as systems shape practices and practices in turn perpetuate or reorganize systems. Thereby, this project also contributes to the wider theoretical discussion on sustainable transformations, indicating that both practices and systems are vital for understanding the dynamic processes of transition as well as stagnation.

To answer the first research question, how environmentally harmful practices have developed and why they persist in the U.S., the origins of these practices were traced back through history, demonstrating how events at various levels interacted to create a *trajectory* (see Geels, 2010) of professionalized, resource-intensive death care. From the American Civil War to the spread of automobiles to the adoption of new technologies, historical developments over the past 160 years have fashioned funeral 'traditions' that have increasingly stabilized the capitalist funeral regime, locking society into what we might label a 'system of unsustainable death practices.' Through the professionalization of death care, the funeral industry has claimed *competence* and authority over funeral rites and practices, scripting a certain *path dependence* (see Geels, 2010) of expensive, resource-intensive, and environmentally damaging funerals. Although the funeral

industry largely sets the parameters of the funerary goods and services that are available, the continuation of funerary practices still always depends on the uptake and faithful perpetuation by society. In other words, practices can only persist as long as carriers of these practices continue to engage in them, giving them momentum and normalizing them across society. As social practice theory explains, people tend to do what other people do – a finding that was consistent with my interview data. As certain conventions become normalized across society, families tend to emulate these behaviors, leading to *positional* standards of consumption (Dwyer, 2009) and unreflective adherence to the societal norms around funerals. Moreover, given the cultural aversion to death, many people are also unprepared and uneducated when it comes to their consumer rights and the regulations around funerals. Thus, environmentally harmful funerary practices persist as individuals follow in the footsteps of industry-produced and socially sanctioned rituals. Although families do not perform these practices *themselves*, embalming, cremation, and 'traditional' ground burial all persist because families continuously *outsource* funerals to mainstream professionals whose entire business models are built upon these particular practices. Hence, the dominant funeral regime rests upon a mutual dependence between the funeral industry and society, with each relying on the other to ensure the perpetual preservation of these normalized, expected services.

Despite their tendency towards rigidity and permanence, this project also demonstrated that funerary practices evolve and adapt with changing times and with the changing preferences of society. By addressing the second research question, how eco-funerals are challenging the mainstream funeral regime, we saw how even 'traditionalized' practices are, paradoxically, in constant flux as each funeral occasion holds the potential for incrementally reconfiguring what is considered 'normal' in society. In other words, each funeral contains "the seeds of constant change" (Warde, 2005, p. 141), which can add up to a wave of transformation. The funeral regime first underwent such a transformation with the societal shift towards cremation. Though it is too early to speak of any major transition, the American death system is currently witnessing a process of *reconfiguration* (Geels, 2011) again, as formerly niche eco-funerals are increasingly accepted into the mainstream industry, while also continuing to spread outside the dominant regime. Thus, green funerals are challenging the mainstream funeral regime by offering options that are ecologically sustainable, financially feasible, and psychologically more soothing to the bereaved than conventional practices have been. According to MacMurrary and Futrell (2019), "society is already embracing pro-environmental attitudes and ecodeath options calibrate well to realign contemporary death systems with these changing

worldviews" (p. 12). Therefore, if green burials continue to become more widespread, and if other technologies (including aquamation and body composting) also expand consumer awareness around the ecological impact of funerals, these practices may witness a snowballing uptake into growing communities of practice. However, while a shift towards a greener death system is already slowly underway, the integration of the niche into the mainstream regime may pose additional challenges of commercialization and commodification by the corporate industry, which could undermine the ethos of eco-funerals. Consequently, this project suggested the continuation of small-scale, community-oriented green 'micro death systems.' Over time, by bridging local communities of practice and through incremental shifts in the mainstream system, the once locked-in pathway may shift tracks in a new direction. Recall that "what people take to be normal is immensely malleable […] it is perfectly possible that future concepts will be less resource intensive than those of today" (Shove, 2003, p. 199). With the determined baby-boomer generation forging new pathways in the death realm, we may indeed follow in very different footsteps than previous generations.

While the topic of death continues to conceal many mysteries, this research has illuminated the practices and processes that come after dying, showing how they mutually shape and are shaped by society. The findings from this project also carry potential implications for understanding systems and social practices *beyond* the death realm, as this project helps to explain the 'stickiness' of normalized social practices and the sturdy yet delicate balance required to maintain regimes. Thus, the question "*why do environmentally harmful (death) practices persist?"* could just as easily be applied to other circumstances with possibly similar outcomes, as it has been done in previous research around unsustainable eating or traveling or heating practices. Nonetheless, previous research has predominantly focused on the habitual behavioral patterns of people in *everyday life*. This project thus contributes another nuance, as the topic of funerals adds the weighty layer of *grief* and the burden of *tradition*. This may add to the unreflective perpetuation of certain practices, as traditions arguably place a degree of societal pressure of adherence to the 'proper' modes of action. Moreover, grief hinders rational decision-making capabilities, which may lead funeral consumers to cling to the familiarity of convention, without taking full consideration of alternative options. The findings from this project thereby also support SPT in discrediting the 'homo economicus' paradigm, demonstrating that decisions are not made by purely rational actors, but that many other factors contribute to the decision-making process. In the case of funerals, positional consumption, convenience, religion, and societal norms all play major roles in the selection of funerary

products and services. Moreover, the research illustrates how intertwined the death system is with other systems, for example the medical regime and the regime of mobility, which points to the complex, tangled nature of regimes and their 'stickiness' as they tend to uphold each other. Hence, when researching sustainability transitions of any kind, the adjacent regimes must also be taken into consideration. Furthermore, this project also reveals a fascinating bond between systems and practices, as mainstream death practices persist *despite a lack of legal requirements*. Although private cemeteries and funeral homes often introduce their own regulations, even the use of funeral directors is not mandatory by law (in most states). Consequently, the funeral regime is held in place chiefly by the *fear* of dead bodies, the *convenience* of outsourcing, the *ignorance* around funeral consumer rights, the *assumptions* around legalities, and the *familiarity* of following the status quo. Just like in many other regimes – especially the food and travel regimes – it is not impossible or illegal to forgo the mainstream system, it is often just inconvenient and, in the case of handling dead bodies, deemed 'dirty' and uncomfortable. When studying sustainable transformations, we may thus follow Shove (2003) in asking how many other environmentally harmful practices and entire global systems are maintained by the incessant desire for *convenience, cleanliness,* and *comfort*.

7.2 The afterlife: Directions for future research

This project has offered insights into the barriers of eco-funerals becoming mainstream as well as the ways in which these formerly niche practices are already entering and challenging the dominant regime. Yet the extent to which green funerals will reshape the American death system in the future remains to be seen, offering rich opportunities for further research. First, quantitative studies, for example through online surveys, could measure awareness of and interest in green funerals across the U.S., elaborating further on recent research by the NFDA, and mapping regional trends and preferences like CANA (2019) does for cremation rates. Secondly, engaging in in-depth interviews with funeral consumers might elucidate the detailed decision-making processes around funeral choices within and across families, and longitudinal follow-up studies could potentially demonstrate how attitudes and meaning-making processes around funerals may change. Third, as eco-funerals continue to expand and potentially transform the death system, research should also focus on the *feasibility* of green funerals on a societal scale, or – as per the closing remarks in Chapter 6 – the potential for creating a network of sustainable, community-oriented, localized 'micro death systems' across the United States.

Afterword: The parting gift

We currently find ourselves in a frightening and fascinating junction in history that may or may not completely reroute the systems of society. Amidst the global coronavirus pandemic, entire countries and economies have come to a screeching halt as the world tries to reconfigure itself. While millions anxiously await a return to the normalcy of the neoliberal hamster wheel, others are seeing this potent moment of silence as a *window of opportunity* for a rebirth of societies. In the United States, as in many other countries, both the health system and the death system were completely underprepared for a pandemic and have been entirely overturned by the mass carnage (see Yuan & Morgan, 2020). Of course, these are extraordinary circumstances that require extraordinary measures. However, as we saw in this thesis, rapid external shocks in the socio-technical landscape level also open the door for transformation and optimization of societal systems (Geels, 2011; Van Driel & Schot, 2005).

Thus, the regime currently finds itself under a dual pressure: with increased environmental consciousness, the death system is already slowly and gradually being pulled in a green direction; with thousands of families unable to have proper funerals due to the pandemic, the "seeds of constant change" (Warde, 2005, p. 141) may take root much quicker, as people reevaluate social funerary practices. Due to these extremely rare circumstances, if society is indeed given the chance to reinvent its death system, what would we want such a system to look like, and how could we ensure that it serves not only the purpose of psychological comfort and healing for the bereaved, but also does not harm nature? Herring (2019) uses the term "co-creating" to express her vision of what it truly means to bring death and nature together. She posits that "the concept invites a certain kind of relationship, one that sees the possibility of consciously creating with nature and the earth in new and emergent ways" (p. 98). Will this horrifying global event spark "a potent reimagination of what is possible in our lives and our deaths" (Ibid., p. 98)? Only time can tell.

By addressing the environmental issues around current American funerary practices and by raising awareness about more sustainable death-care options, this thesis has aimed to open a conversation about the ways we handle death in the United States. In this way, the project also serves as a wider invitation to mindfully re-evaluate not only our death practices but also our life practices, perhaps paving the way for a more mindful, sustainable way of dying *and* living. As we contemplate the legacy we wish to leave behind one day, let us not forget that our funeral

will represent our very last footprint on this earth, our ‘parting gift’ to the world. It is up to us what that gift will look like. Perhaps a reconnection between death and nature will allow us to live in greater communion with not only the earth, but also with one another, recognizing our finite time not as a rush to get things done in the hurried *sociotemporal order*, but as a precious gift that allows us to exist, right here, together – even if just for now.

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Appendix I: Glossary of Terms

Aquamation / alkaline hydrolysis / water cremation: A method for the reduction of a corpse that functions similar to cremation but uses pressurized water instead of fire.

Body composting / recomposition: A method for the reduction of a corpse that naturally decomposes bodies in an indoor facility.

Death Café: These discussion groups are not intended as grief support groups or to provide counselling, but rather to open honest, real discussions and answer people's questions. The first Death Café ever was held in London in 2011 and the idea spread to the U.S. in 2012. Today, over 10,600 death cafés have been held worldwide in over 70 countries. According to the website, the objective of death cafés is "to increase awareness of death with a view to helping people make the most of their (finite) lives" (https://deathcafe.com/what/).

Death positivity: The death positive movement is led and popularized by Caitlin Doughty through her website The Order of the Good Death and her humorous YouTube channel 'Ask a Mortician.' The mission of her work is "exploring ways to prepare a death phobic culture for their inevitable mortality" (http://www.orderofthegooddeath.com/about).

Death system: A socially constructed system for understanding and managing death in a society, including normalized and expected rituals, practices, people, places, objects, etc.

Eco-funeral / green funeral: A funeral that utilizes environmentally friendly methods of body disposal such as natural burial, aquamation, or body composting.

Embalming: A post-mortem practice that is common in North America involving the draining of blood and filling of the corpse with toxic chemicals for temporary preservation.

Funeral regime: Similar to the death system but referring specifically to the professionalized regime created by the capitalist funeral industry over the past century.

Funerary: Any object or action related to funerals or the disposal of the dead.

Green burial / natural burial: A burial practice that uses only biodegradable materials and facilitates the decomposition of bodies, thereby enriching nature rather than harming it.

Green Burial Council: The GBC is a nationwide non-profit organization that encompasses two distinct yet connected entities: one that oversees certification of green burial projects, and one for education and outreach. The overall mission of the GBC is: "to inspire and advocate for environmentally sustainable, natural death care through education and certification" (see https://www.greenburialcouncil.org/our_mission.html).

Nestled levels of interaction: A simplified illustration of the correlative dynamics between practices, regimes, niches, and socio-technical landscapes.

Niche: A "protected space" (Geels, 2011, p. 27) outside the dominant regime, within which innovations can occur and grow. A niche practice would be any type of practice that is considered outside normal conventions.

Practice: A practice (also called 'social practice') is a collectively constructed and repeatedly enacted form of normalized behavior within society. A distinct practice is made up of materials, meanings, and competences, and can also be linked to other practices. The repeated (sometimes habitual) engagement in a practice perpetuates its existence in society and simultaneously maintains the status quo of normalized behavior. Practices and systems co-create one another.

Regime: A regime exists within a wider socio-technical landscape and is stabilized through laws, regulations, infrastructures, and societal routines. A regime is held in place by the continuous enactment of certain practices that maintain its functioning, and can be transformed or overthrown by niche developments or landscape-level events.

Regime shift: A process of transformation during which the predominant regime undergoes either partial or complete structural changes, in some cases resulting in an entirely new regime.

Socio-technical landscape: The socio-technical landscape is the broadest level of the MLP framework, encompassing time, history, politics, culture, and the general 'zeitgeist.' As the socio-technical landscape evolves, it may bring new niches to fruition, and may shift old regimes.

Appendix II: List of Informants

(Asterisk indicates name has been changed)*

Lee Webster: President of GBC International (the Green Burial Council's Education and Outreach chapter); author, editor, researcher and public speaker on funeral reform; former president of the National Home Funeral Alliance; advocate for green burials and funeral consumer rights

Kimberley Campbell: Co-founder of the first ever conservation burial ground in the U.S.; member of the Conservation Burial Alliance; advocate for nature conservation

Anne Weston: President and founder of the Green Burial Project, a North Carolina-based educational organization; former board member at the GBC; green burial advocate

Sara Williams: Home funeral guide; founder and host of a Death Café; former director of a local Funeral Consumers Alliance chapter; served on the board of directors of the National Home Funeral Alliance; green burial advocate

Dyanne Miller: Cemetery manager on both the green and conventional side; recipient of a Green Burial Council Leadership Award for her work in establishing a woodland burial ground

Cassie Barrett: Manages daily operations and marketing at a conservation burial ground; member of the Conservation Burial Alliance

Joel*: Younger generation funeral director on both the green and conventional side

Frank*: Funeral director on both the green and conventional side

Brad*: Manager of a 'traditional' casket company and funeral history museum guide

Alan*: Funeral consumer who hosted a green home funeral for his mother

Zoey*: Artist who hand-weaves willow caskets (among other items)

Henry*: Reverend of a church and co-founder of an adjacent woodland burial ground

Appendix III: Sample Interview Guide

Name: _____Org/Location:_____ Date:_____

Questions	Notes
Can you tell me a bit about the work you do – your exact job title, your responsibilities, etc.?	
How did you get into this line of work? What first drew you to (sustainable) death care?	
In your city – is space an issue at cemeteries? What have the trends been over the past years in terms of burial vs. cremation? How popular are eco-funerals?	

Do your clients usually have previous knowledge about eco-funerals? Are they aware they have alt. options? How do they react?	
If people *do* know about alternative practices - what are some of the main reasons people may still choose more 'conventional' funerary practices?	

What kind of feedback have you gotten from families who have chosen sustainable funerary practices? Have their experiences changed their ideas about life and death at all?	
The funeral industry has undergone big changes in the past decade – how have you experienced these changes? Do you perceive the divergence of funerary practices as positive or negative?	

What are your thoughts on the "death denying" label of American culture? How has our relationship to death changed or evolved?	
Do most of your clients pre-plan their final arrangements for themselves, or is it typically left to the family to make all the decisions?	
Of the people who choose a sustainable funeral option – what's the typical age range? Do you notice any trends in terms of their religion, socio-economic status, or environmental attitudes/lifestyles?	

How does the baby boomer generation differ from other/previous generations in their funeral wishes?	
What do you see as some of the biggest challenges in making sustainable death care more mainstream?	
What role does the funeral industry play in shifting to a more sustainable death system? Do you see them embracing or resisting the changes?	
In your own opinion – how do you think shifting to a more sustainable death system would impact society's relationship to death, life, and nature?	

Appendix IV: Consent form

Attached is the original informational sheet and consent form that was printed for and signed by each participant. It has not been updated (so as to accurately reflect its original content), and thus includes the old project title as well as outdated research questions.

Are you interested in taking part in this research project?

When Death Do Us Part: Reimagining our relationship to death, life, and nature through eco-friendly funerary practices

This is an inquiry about participation in a research project with the goal of exploring sustainable burial alternatives and their potential for changing our relationship to life, death, and nature. This letter contains information about the project and what your participation will involve.

Purpose of the project

This research is part of a master's thesis which aims to address the environmental issues around current American funerary practices, while also raising awareness about more sustainable death-care options. Further, I hypothesize that adopting eco-friendly funerary practices can help us foster a more holistic, healthier relationship to both death and nature, which I aim to illustrate through this thesis.

The overarching research questions for this thesis have been framed as follows:

1. How has the American death system evolved?
2. What are eco-friendly alternatives to mainstream American funerary practices?
3. How can an environmentally-benign death system help us reinvent our relationship to death, life, and nature?

Who is responsible for the research project?

The Centre for Development and the Environment (Senter for Utvikling og Miljø) at the University of Oslo (Norway) is the institution responsible for the project.

Why are you being asked to participate?

You have been asked to participate in this project based on your expertise and/or interest in the subject matter. Your personal knowledge of, experience with, and opinions/attitudes towards sustainable death care will help gain deeper empirical insight into this subject matter. All participation is voluntary (see below), and any data collected may or may not appear in the final project.

What does participation involve for you?

The methods for this research project include site observations and informal group or individual interviews. Information from interviews may be audio-recorded, as well as manually recorded through note-taking. Questions will be asked periodically to guide or clarify, but the overall interview style is informal and open-ended, intended to lead to meaningful, deep, and open conversation without a pre-determined direction or outcome. You as a participant are free to share as much or as little as you feel comfortable discussing regarding the subject matter.

Participation is voluntary

If you choose to participate, you have a right to withdraw your consent at any time. All information about you will then be made anonymous, or erased entirely if a valid reason is given for this. There will be no negative consequences for you if you choose not to participate or later decide to withdraw. You can also choose to participate anonymously by having your name changed or only initials used.

Your personal privacy – how we will store and use your personal data

We will only use your personal data for the purpose(s) specified in this information letter. We will process your personal data confidentially and in accordance with data protection legislation (the General Data Protection Regulation and Personal Data Act). Personal data will only be accessed by the student researcher and their supervisor(s) at the University of Oslo. All personal data will be stored on a secure university server and protected by a password. Personal data may be processed from within the United States or the EU. Personal data may include name, gender, approximate age, occupation, location, religious affiliation or beliefs, and direct quotes (if applicable), and may be published in the final project.

What will happen to your personal data at the end of the research project?

The project is scheduled to end no later than June 2020. After the thesis has been submitted and defended, all electronically recorded personal data will be erased.

Your rights

So long as you can be identified in the collected data, you have the right to:

- access the personal data that is being processed about you
- request that your personal data is deleted
- request that incorrect personal data about you is corrected/rectified
- receive a copy of your personal data (data portability), and
- send a complaint to the Data Protection Officer or The Norwegian Data Protection Authority regarding the processing of your personal data

What gives us the right to process your personal data?

We will process your personal data based on your explicit consent. Based on an agreement with the University of Oslo, NSD (The Norwegian Centre for Research Data AS) has assessed that the processing of personal data in this project is in accordance with data protection legislation.

Where can I find out more?

If you have questions about the project, or want to exercise your rights, contact:

- The Centre for Development and the Environment at the University of Oslo via Elena Slominski (student researcher; elenams@student.hf.uio.no) and via supervisors Arve Hansen (arve.hansen@sum.uio.no) and Ulrikke Bryn Wethal (u.b.wethal@sum.uio.no)
- Our Data Protection Officer: Maren Magnus Voll (personvernombud@uio.no)
- NSD – The Norwegian Centre for Research Data AS, by email: (personverntjenester@nsd.no) or by telephone: +47 55 58 21 17.

Yours sincerely,

Elena Slominski, Project Leader (Student researcher)

Arve Hansen & Ulrikke Bryn Wethal (Supervisors)

Consent form

I have received and understood information about the project *When Death Do Us Part* and have been given the opportunity to ask questions. I give consent:

- ☐ to have my responses and opinions from an informal interview or group discussion recorded and directly or indirectly used in publication (i.e. quoted or paraphrased)
- ☐ for information about myself to be published in a way that I can be recognised (i.e. by name, occupation/job title, gender, and location) - OR -
- ☐ for personal information from interviews to be used, but without using my real name
- ☐ to include information such as my religious beliefs (if applicable)
- ☐ to be contacted again for further questions or clarification for the duration of the project
- ☐ for my personal data to be processed outside the US

Additionally,

I would like to stay in touch and would like to receive a digital copy of the completed work.

Email:

_____

I hereby give consent for my personal data to be processed until the end date of the project, approx. June 30, 2020.

_____ _____

(Signed by participant) (Date)

Appendix V: Informational Resources

Aquamation: https://aquamationinfo.com/

Conservation Burial Alliance: http://www.conservationburialalliance.org/

Death Café: https://deathcafe.com/

Eternal Reefs (artificial reef balls containing ashes): https://www.eternalreefs.com/

Green Burial Council: https://www.greenburialcouncil.org/

Green Burial Project (North Carolina based org.): https://www.greenburialproject.org/

Green Burial Society of Canada: http://www.greenburialcanada.ca/

Funeral Consumers Alliance: https://funerals.org/

Let Your Love Grow (organic mixture to neutralize ashes): https://letyourlovegrow.com/

National End-of-Life Doula Alliance: https://www.nedalliance.org/

National Home Funeral Alliance: https://www.homefuneralalliance.org/

Recompose (Body Composting): https://www.recompose.life/

State-specific Organizations: https://www.greenburialcouncil.org/partner_organizations.html