Reclaiming Death

How eco-friendly and alternative deathcare movements are challenging the United States funeral industry

Kaja Emilie Walsh

Social Anthropology

120 ECTS

Department of Social Anthropology

Faculty of Social Sciences

Autumn 2021

Acknowledgements

Thank you first and foremost to my supervisor Kenneth Bo Nielsen, without whom this thesis would be far poorer. Thank you for the support, insight, encouragement, and critical eye, I am incredibly grateful.

I would also like to thank my interlocutors, who kindly gave their time and patience in the midst of a global pandemic, and a thank you to all I reached out to who could not participate, but offered tips, encouragement, and resources.

Finally, thank you to my fellow students and to the faculty in the department, who have made my time at the University of Oslo more than I could have hoped for. An added thanks to everyone who has read my text and given me valuable feedback (many of whom who have also listened to me talk about decomposition during lunch – my apologies).

Abstract

In the past decade, the United States has seen an alternative and eco-friendly/natural deathcare movement emerge, offering a variety of alternatives in caring for the dead, and bringing environmentally friendly options to those offered by the mainstream funeral industry. These movements, though diverse and made up of distinct actors, share an overarching goal of changing a culture of death denial through kin and community involvement in deathcare, operating on scales from the individual to the global. Focusing on the actors and organisations, this thesis seeks to understand how these movements enter and challenge the established funeral industry, as well as the important historical events and background that created the tension leading to these movements. Central to this thesis is the notion of care, and I trace as the concept expands and retracts through the changes in funerary practices. I examine the impact the professionalisation and institutionalisation of death has had on the American way of death, and the ways cultural shifts in attitudes towards death are reflected in changes to funerary practices. As the Covid-19 pandemic prevented me from travelling to the field, I have used a combination of digital fieldwork, inciluding interviews with people involved in the alternative and eco-friendly/natural deathcare movement, anthropological literature, and an interdisciplinary approach to best address my research questions.

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Introduction

> *Picture the forest floor. Rich earth continually replenished by fallen trees, dry leaves, and bright moss. New roots reach through each layer, drawing nutrients into branches high above. Recompose uses the principles of nature to transform our dead into soil.*[1]

This quote is from Recompose, a U.S. company that makes compost out of the dead by placing the body into an aerated capsule with woodchips and plants. The capsules themselves are hexagonally shaped and stacked on top of each other, creating a large, white structure reminiscent of both Japanese pod hotels and beeswax. This combination of nature and technology is representative of important themes in this thesis, which is a study of the changing rituals of death in North America and Europe. The thesis focuses particularly on the United States and analyses the ways in which the so-called alternative and natural deathcare movements work to alter the ways in which we deal with and relate to death and dying. Within this topic are a collection of motivations and actors, and contracting and expanding notions of care within the deathcare industry.

Three decades ago, anthropologists Peter Metcalf and Richard Huntington observed half-jokingly:

> One cannot help wondering whether Robert Hertz, reading in the library of the British Museum at the turn of the century, might have made embalming his special case, rather than secondary burial, if he had found as much material about America as he did about Borneo, and what twist that might have put on the anthropology of mortuary ritual. (Metcalf and Huntington 1991, 23)

As Metcalf and Huntington (1991) point out in the quote above, this is an area of research that has received less attention within anthropology, true today as it was thirty years ago. Additionally, they say that: "we have more descriptive material about funerals in Indonesia than in America," (Metcalf and Huntington 1991, 193), showing just how understudied this field has been. Sociologists Carol Rowland-Maguire and Brendan Maguire write of American funerals that: "Curiously, there is very little in the sociological literature about the nature of funeral practices, *let alone changes in these practices over time*," (Rowland-Maguire & Maguire 1993, 21. Emphasis mine).

[1] www.recompose.life

While mortuary rituals and funeral practices in North America are thus largely ignored within contemporary anthropology, the alternative and natural deathcare movements which are the focus of this thesis similarly remain vastly understudied. One of the few scholars who has worked in this field is Philip R. Olson. He remarked only a few years ago that "[…] no academic scholarship has yet been devoted to the current natural deathcare movement," (Olson 2018, 197). While Olson's statement may be exaggerated – chapter three of this thesis, for example, discusses Alexa Hagerty's 2014 work on home funerals, while chapter four analyses the work of two anthropologists from the 2015 book *Natural Burials: Landscape, Practice, and Experience* (Clayden et.al. 2015) – his observation is not far off the mark. In fact, the three contributions mentioned here are the only ones to be mentioned in Matthew Engelke's article *Anthropology of Death Revisited* (2019).

This dearth of work on the alternative and natural deathcare movements is partly what motivated me to embark on this MA research project: as a way of contributing to and exploring an emerging field within anthropological death studies, where much ground remains to be covered. Against this backdrop, the central aim of this thesis is to analyse the historical evolution and contemporary practices of these movements within the deathcare industry, and to unpack how they relate and react to the contemporary "mainstream" funeral industry. The main research question that guides my study is therefore the following:

How are alternative approaches to death and burial changing relationships to death?

To operationalise this overarching question, the thesis addresses a series of subsidiary key questions in the chapters that follow. These include: how did death and dying become the area and authority of experts? How are attitudes towards death reflected in funerary customs and practices? And, crucially, how do new actors and movements work and manoeuvre as they attempt to change prevailing cultural attitudes toward death? I seek to answer the main and subsidiary questions by operating with considerable historical depth. Methodologically, the covid-19 pandemic prevented me from being physically present in the field. Instead, I have approached the gathering of this data through online fieldwork. Working with the websites of activists, organisations, and technologies as my field site, in combination with key informant interviews has, I believe, enabled me to answer my research questions and to contribute original analyses.

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

Chapter one focuses on the historical background of North American and European funeral customs, including important works in the study of death from various fields. The focus is largely on the latter part of the 19th century to today, while also mapping significant events that shaped death and funerary rituals from the middle ages. I argue that the professionalisation of deathcare has removed the dead from their kin, simultaneously disembedding death from communities, families, and society. This shift contributed to a culture of death denial, observed and argued by many within thanatology. This chapter also introduces and discusses understandings of 'good' and 'bad' deaths.

Chapter two builds on the historical background of chapter one, and moves on to analyse the American contemporary funeral and deathcare industry. It engages with select anthropological literature within the field of deathcare, in combination with contributions from a range of other fields. I also draw on my own research on funeral home websites to enrich the analysis, and in conversation with theories and concepts from within anthropology. I argue that the gradual professionalisation and medicalisation of death in the US has created an increasing distance to death, something which I show to be visible in the language and practices of funeral homes. As such, I argue that there has been a shift in the past 100 years towards a situation where most, if not all deaths are now considered 'bad deaths'. This chapter concludes by presenting some of the criticism against the mainstream American funeral industry that emerged from the 1960s. In combination, chapters one and two contextualise and help explain the emergence of the new movements within deathcare that are the analytical and empirical focus of chapters three and four.

Chapter three introduces the natural deathcare movement and the death positive movement, analysing their roots and background. Care in new contexts is a central theme to this chapter, which I explore through the work of death doulas and the death positive movement. These movements, I argue, are in effect working against the historical disembedding of death, seeking to re-embed it and bring it back into the social and community sphere. The topic of 'good' and 'bad' deaths are re-examined in this chapter, insofar as the movements under study actively work towards a paradigm shift that would reframe these conceptions within contemporary American society and culture. This chapter, along with chapter four, looks at how new and old ways of caring the dead are meeting. Agency and the dead body are also explored in the goals of the death positive movement. The

conclusion of this chapter looks at how death is being re-embedded by the actors within the natural deathcare movement and death positive movement.

Chapter four extends the concept of care and practices of caring for the dead, to additionally encompass care for nature and the environment. I draw from the existing anthropological literature within this field, and use this to discuss new natural burial and eco-friendly technologies introduced to body disposal in recent years. I also draw on my research into the larger field of environmentalism to argue that concepts such as recycling feature in the language and ideas of eco-friendly burial technology and natural burials.

The Field

In this section, I outline the field of study for this thesis, including the main actors and focus of my research. I then identify the key themes and theoretical approaches in my analyses, before introducing the foundational work within the anthropology of the rituals of death. I conclude this chapter with an overview of the limitations and ethical considerations of my work. There are parts in this section that are from the fieldwork rapport I submitted in spring 2020.

When searching for a relevant field site, I knew I wanted to do fieldwork somewhere with different and various actors of the eco-friendly and death positive movement. I spent months reaching out to funeral homes, death doulas, and organisations within the movement. Familiar to many anthropologists in the process of finding a field, I believe, most of these attempts felt like shots in the dark and often went unanswered. A prerequisite for selecting a field site was that I wanted to locate at least one or two interlocutors before deciding exactly where to conduct my fieldwork, and in December 2019 I seemed to find exactly what I needed: a funeral home in California with a natural burial site, and two death doulas with networks to other actors in the alternative deathcare field who were willing to work with me. The funeral home had responded positively to my email – which is how I contacted every prospective interlocuter – and the death doulas had been recommended to me from others I had emailed who did not have the time or were less involved in the field.

My original fieldwork was thus planned to have taken place in San Francisco, California, working with a funeral home and two end-of-life guides that I had been in contact with. The funeral home also ran a cemetery, and both parts of their business offered greener options as well as the standard options for funerals and burials.

End-of-life guides, or death doulas, work with families and funeral homes in various ways. Many stay with the dying, offering comfort and care during final hours, as well as offering legal and practical help for families in arranging funerals and burials. My work within these two fields would have given me an insight into the emerging alternative deathcare in the US, where the traditional funeral industry is being challenged.

When it became clear that the coronavirus pandemic would delay my travel to the field, I postponed my departure and focused more on the literature I would be using to support my thesis. As the delay prolonged, I decided with my supervisor to begin planning my thesis with

a heavier focus on literature-based research, leaving the possibility for a shortened fieldwork. Finally, in late summer 2020, we decided that travel was likely impossible, and therefore my research would be entirely carried out in Oslo. I considered whether carrying out some degree of fieldwork in either Great Britain or Norway in funeral homes that also offered green burial options would be conducive to my thesis, but decided against it as it would move my research away from much of the work I had already done, and the places where my interests lay heavily in this topic. Great Britain was the most relevant of the two options, and as it has also been hit hard by the pandemic, I did not feel comfortable with the idea of traveling.

Shifting most of my research onto a digital platform was challenging in several ways. As Anette Markham notes, "Although fieldwork is the foundation of robust ethnographic inquiry in physical settings, the practical methods have never fit comfortably in digital contexts," (Markham 2013, 434). This is something I certainly found to be true. After months of preparations for entering the field, navigating (and embracing) awkward situations, and the expectation of getting close to these personal experiences of grief and loss, I found myself cut off from the field site. Thus, while I had expected and prepared for problems around access, gatekeeping, and boundaries, these challenges assumed a different quality. Eventually, the digitally and pandemically adapted 'fieldwork' I did instead consisted of familiarising myself with the various actors in the alternative and natural deathcare movement through interviews, podcasts, websites, YouTube videos, TED-talks, and media, observing and analysing their statements, goals, language use, and practices as expressed via such media.

Lynne Hume and Jane Mulcock write about how ethnographic research is conducted in their introduction to *Anthropologists in the Field: Case Studies in Participant Observation* (2004):

> The ethnographer's core methodology, participant observation, requires that researchers simultaneously observe and participate (as much as possible) in the social action they are attempting to document. The rationale for this approach is that; by 'being there' and actively taking part in the interactions at hand, the researcher can come closer to experiencing an understanding the 'insider's' point of view. (Hume and Mulcock 2004, xi).

For the unseasoned field researcher, Hume and Mulcock's book provides many useful insights and guides. But, when I was cut off from my field site, I began to wonder how my digitally adapted research approach would fare against the standards set by Hume and Mulcock (2004). In particular, I worried that the fact that I would not 'be there' would

diminish the quality of my research, and my ability to write authoritatively about my theme – particularly since I had chosen a field about which we have limited *empirical* knowledge.

Luckily, in "Fieldwork in Social Media: What Would Malinowski Do?" Markham (2013) offered good advice: "Without the baggage of thinking I ''ought to'' interview, or participate, or observe, one can more fully embrace what needs to be done in situ. Good researchers do this anyway," (437). In other words, while I could not change the facts of a global pandemic, but I could embrace my "what needed to be done" and adapt my project in a way that could still contribute to the field.

Instead of being rooted in the classic ethnographic fieldwork, my thesis mainly draws upon the diverse literature I had planned on using to support and engage with in my original plan, as well as an array of other sources. Some of these other sources include newspaper articles, state legislation processes, academic texts from various fields, funeral home websites, interviews with people within the alternative deathcare movement, death activism newsletters, and interest organisations websites. In my thesis I draw especially on interviews with two key interlocutors: Anna: a death doula who additionally hosts events relating to the care of the dying; and Irina: a former board member of the Green Burial Society. These interviews gave insight to the ground-level work from people within deathcare, as well as perspectives from someone who has worked actively to promote green burial options and has knowledge of the work being done within that particular field.

During my preparations for fieldwork, it became clear that in order to fully understand the death positive and natural deathcare movement that had drawn my interest, it would be vital to understand both the historical and contemporary context these movements are reacting to. This approach allows larger lines of development within this field to become clear, while also placing the work of my interlocutors and the new movements into perspective. It also allows me to engage with a lot of foundational work within the anthropology of death and mortuary rites, drawing from and building on this field.

As a result of my "embracing what needed to be done" and adapting both my field and my approach to it, I engage with the existing anthropological work within this field in a different way than I had foreseen. While my initial pre-pandemic plan was to work towards an ethnographically rich and textured account of current practices – focused in detail on the experiences of a funeral home and a section of the alternative deathcare field – I have ended

up taking a much more longitudinal and, in part, 'bird's eye' look at the death positive and green burial movement.

This, importantly, includes a larger selection of the activism that happens outside of the day-to-day work inside the funeral home. Because the field of green and natural burials is fairly new as an option and on the market in the U.S., I've focused on a series of actors offering a variety of options, rather than focusing on one actor or organisation. My hope is that this broader and historically "deeper" view of the field more than compensates for the relative lack of original fieldwork-based (in the conventional sense) empirical material.

What these actors and organisations have in common is that they are looking to change the way that death is thought of and dealt with in society. I argue that these are attempts to naturalise death in one or both ways: 1) by integrating death with life, as a natural and unavoidable event that should be embraced and prepared for, and 2) literally bringing the dead body to nature and bringing concerns for the environment and nature to the dead body.

My analytical strategy for literature and academic texts began before I knew that conventional fieldwork would not be possible. I began seeking out literature that would give me an overview of the US funeral industry, and ethnographic works from within the alternative deathcare field. Working with the first part of the literature required careful selection, as this is a fairly broad topic. This careful selection was made with a two-pronged approach: 1) relevance to the work I wished to carry out, and 2) regarded highly by the academic field and supported by other work. The latter part of the literature, concerning the alternative deathcare industry has been selected mostly within anthropology, where I have been able to engage critically with the work, and discuss these texts with the original data I have collected. The literature used serves as both background material and is used for comparative analysis, and also in discussion with the other sources and data material I have collected.

The interviews I conducted with my interlocutors were, as I have mentioned, digital. This type of interview, hindered by distance and breaks in internet connection, provides a challenge to the 'friendly conversations' that James P. Spradley (1979) suggests ethnographic interviews should be. But, in his guide he offers a series of elements important to these interviews: explicit purpose, ethnographic explanations, and ethnographic questions (Spradley 1979, 495). I was fortunate that my interlocutors were open, interested, and engaged during the interviews, and I was able to build a repertoire with them that made the

interviews less formal while retaining the explicit purpose of the interviews. They shared personal experiences within the field, more than I had perhaps anticipated without having spent much time with them before the interviews. Maintaining the explicit purpose of the interviews was easier because of the setting, as we had a time and place (though digital) with a limit. While I had to ensure that my questions were answered, I had a loose structure in order to open up avenues that I may not have included when my interlocutors shared topics of interest to my purpose.

Building on Spradley's (1979) ethnographic explanations, I focused on "project explanations" to properly outline the interest and goal of my research, "native language explanations" to observe any differences and similarities between their lived experiences and my research, and "ethnographic questions" with particular focus on its subtype: "descriptive questions" (Spradley 1979, 465-466) that were open in order to encourage my interlocutors to use their own words in describing their work. Another useful guide I found in Spradley's (1979) chapter, one that many professors have also touted, was to express both interest and ignorance. This is not the easiest balance to strike while ensuring the interview stays on track, but it opened the conversations and led to new information I otherwise would not have discovered.

IDENTIFYING KEY THEMES

During my preliminary research, I identified two key themes that came up regularly in many of the texts, and which have subsequently formed the basis of my thesis work as well as the structure of the thesis itself. The first is changes in rituals over time, tied to specific movements or events. This was clear in much of the historical research on the topic and connects to the death positivity and eco-friendly burial movement that has emerged in the U.S. and parts of Europe. The second theme was the importance of the concept and practice of care. This appeared across the historical periods and movements that I have researched, in constantly changing form and usage, but ever present. Having identified these themes has helped me in my approach to analysing subsequent texts – both where they come up more explicitly and when they were conspicuously absent – and in my approach to digital sources, as well as with my interlocutors.

ONLINE FIELD SITES, SOURCE MATERIAL, AND SELECTING FUNERAL HOMES

When looking for the funeral homes that I would use to present a 'typical' experience for the American customer, I wanted to ensure that I included independent funeral homes, small business (co-op) funeral homes, and funeral homes owned by the large corporations, as well as both geographical and urban/rural selections. The alternative and natural deathcare movements happening in the U.S. are reacting to the general practices of the funeral industry, not specific funeral homes. As such, this selection provides insight into a diverse country where inhabitants occupy many different spaces, as well as mapping similarities and differences across regions and types of ownerships in the funeral homes.

I knew that there were several corporations that owned a large section of the funeral industry in many states (including cemeteries, funeral homes, funeral services) before starting my selection. Figuring out which funeral homes were independent, however, was not a straightforward task. The big corporations most often keep the original name of the funeral home after acquisition, and it can be difficult to find information on the funeral home websites that points to ownership from a larger company or corporation. Service Corporation International (SCI), who owns more than 1500 funeral homes in the US, does have a map showing which funeral homes they own and where they are located, but it is only possible to view a small selection at a time.

They do also have a search function, which meant that I had to cross-check the various funeral homes against their websites when making selections for which funeral homes to choose, making sure it was fairly representative of the field. And while SCI is the largest owner of funeral homes in the US, it is not the only one, requiring quite a lot of careful work for me to untangle who owns what and where.

Insofar as SCI and the other major deathcare corporations own a significant portion of the market, they constitute a significant influence on the industry as a whole. For this reason, it was important for me to include these actors in my study. In approaching this task – identifying and understanding the scope of these corporations – I discovered that many of the relevant industry reports were behind paywalls; others were outdated, and much of the information I sought was, in fact, unavailable. In spite of these challenges, I have successfully gathered a considerable amount of publicly available information, including FTC (Federal Trade Commission) reports, funeral operator's newsletters, news articles, and other reports

commissioned by various official and un-official offices to build as complete a picture as possible.

CONTEXT OF PRODUCTION

The context of production for my source materials varies, but the issues that I have identified lie mainly within two fields. The first is the various green burial organisations and death positivity/death acceptance organisations where I only have insight into the materials they have shared with the public.

The second is materials from funeral home websites and organisations, including some statistics coming directly from them that I am not able to cross-check with other sources or verify in my own data. There is limited amount of this kind of data appearing in this text, stated clearly where the information is from and whether it is an official source. As much as possible I will use this material with data from peer-reviewed or official sources, to ensure that any bias is clear in the text, and compared with other findings.

For much of my source materials, I have not identified any reasons to believe the context of production would compromise or influence heavily the data and research produced.

THEORETICAL DISCUSSION

Rather than approaching this project through one or two major theoretical standpoints, I have taken use of a range of theories to explore the relevant topics. This ‘ground-up’ method was what I found most suitable for this field and project, rather than approaching with one or two main theories. The key themes in this thesis are varied and diverse, and are unsuited for the kinds of analysis that builds on one or two theories. By allowing each theme to be analysed and discussed with the most relevant theories – while maintaining the relevance of my main and subsidiary research questions – I present a multifaceted field that is interdependent but far from uniform in nature.

While my work and research has an anthropological core, it also has an interdisciplinary orientation, as I have included other forms of literature from the field of law, environmental science, medical science, history, psychology, mortuary science, philosophy, social work, and

sociology. In this section, I briefly introduce my main theoretical approaches. These are then further elaborated on when they are applied in the analysis in subsequent chapters.

Key literature I have chosen for the framework of my thesis include Philippe Ariès' *Western Attitudes toward Death: From the Middle Ages to the Present* (1974b) and Stephen Prothero's *Purified by Fire: A History of Cremation in America* (2001) for much of the historical background for European and North American funerary practices. Ariès' (1974b) book covers a wide span of history, which allowed me to build an overview over the most significant changes over time. He also provides useful examples for comparison with my own and others' observations of rituals and cultural attitudes toward death. Prothero (2001) and the history of cremation provided a more detailed account of geographically relevant movements and reactions to changes in rituals, which again assisted in the comparative work of this thesis, as well as allowing me to draw lines from contemporary movements to those in the past. I have built on Prothero's (2001) analyses of some of these key events in mortuary history, thereby engaging his work in both the historical and contemporary parts of this thesis.

Antonius Robben's *Death, Mourning, Burial: A Cross-cultural Reader* (2004) provided comparative and theoretical anthropological contributions. The contributors in this volume have provided some of the most significant analyses of death and mortuary rituals, and I have used this book to both identify gaps in the field, and for some of the key analysis and comparative work that I do.

Clifton D. Bryant and Dennis L. Peck's *Handbook of Death and Dying* (2003) is a thanatological collection including works from anthropology, sociology, law, medicine, mortuary science, psychology, social work, philosophy, history, and social work with both theoretical and empirical relevance to this thesis, which I have used both actively in the text, and which has provided an overview of much of the work done in various fields on the topic.

From Karl Polanyi's *The Great Transformation* (2001 [1944]) I have used the concept of 'disembedding' to analyse the changing death rituals and deathcare in the U.S. Introduced as a way to explain how the economy came to be understood as an abstract 'thing' outside society at large, disembedding involves what Polanyi calls fictitious commodities – fictitious in the sense that they were not created with the intention to be sold on a market. The economy before the great transformation was immersed and integrated within societies and communities, becoming a field of its own only through political interference. In this thesis, I

argue that death and deathcare have, in a comparable way, become disembedded from communities and kin in the U.S. as a result of the professionalisation and commodification of death. This is particularly discussed in the first half, while the latter half explores the ways in which a set of actors are working in ways that re-embed death.

My analysis also draws considerably on concept of pollution introduced in Mary Doulgas' *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concept of Pollution and Taboo* (2005 [1966]), as well as on her related arguments about purity and impurity. The organisation and categorisation of dirt, pollution, uncleanliness, and the sacred are foundational to a society, Douglas argues. These categorisations, while universal in their existence, make concepts of dirt and pollution culturally specific. I have used Douglas' contribution on this topic to challenge Western ideas of hygiene, unpacking the foundation for both familiar and unfamiliar systems of pollution and purity. I focus on her concept of pollution, particularly in the discussions of the practices of embalming and cremation.

Michel Foucault's (1978) concept of 'biopower' from *History of Sexuality* is also relevant in this thesis, where I explore the medicalisation of the body, specifically in the case of the dead body. Stephen Black in *The Ethics and Aesthetics of Care* (2018) uses biopower in the context of the relationship between doctor and patient, and how the unequal relationship between the parties can have consequences for quality of care and health. I expand this discussion to what the unequal distribution of knowledge and power over the dead body does to both individual and cultural relationships to death.

Some of this literature features more heavily in the text, while some have provided guidance and insight, and some have illustrated where there might be 'gaps' within the field. One example of a gap was similarly observed by Olson (2018), where he states that the dead body has received less bioethical attention in the context of funerals and disposition, instead having focused on the moral issues around topics such as transplantation, cadaver donation intended for scientific use, and abortion. The first part of this thesis builds the foundation for understanding the alternative deathcare movement that has emerged in the United States. As has been stated, eco-friendly and natural burials are understudied within anthropology, and the latter part engages with the existing work in this field while adding my own contributions. The different parts of the thesis therefore draw on select elements of my theoretical framework, while the purpose of each part serve the goals reflected in my main and subsidiary research questions.

ANTHROPOLOGY OF THE RITUALS OF DEATH

In addition to the literature reviewed above, my study is also rooted in, and draws analytical inspiration from, the anthropology of rituals of death. Death and studying death rituals has been a staple of anthropology since its origin, and there have been many approaches in understanding and explaining the rituals of death. In functionalist approaches, such as that of Bronislaw Malinowski, rituals were studied to understand the origin of religion, arguing that it was created to help societies to deal with the crises of death – and other significant events. In fact, in "Magic, Science, and Religion", Malinowski opens with "Of all sources of religion, the supreme and final crisis of life – death – is of the greatest importance," (2004 [1954], 19).

Arnold van Gennep (1960 [1909]) and Victor Turner (1967) brought the approach of events such as initiation, marriage, and funerals as rites of passage, conceptualised by van Gennep (1960 [1909]) and built upon by Turner (1967), into anthropology. One of the important contributions of van Gennep's (1960 [1909]) analysis is that it identified some universal features in rituals of change, allowing for comparisons between many cultures as opposed to exotic exceptionalism. This was in clear contrast to earlier anthropology, such as the cultural evolutionists Edward Burnett Tylor (1871) and Lewis Henry Morgan (1877), who focused on the bizarre and unique features of a society to map the stages of human social development from savagery to civilisation.

Van Gennep's (1960 [1909]) work on rites of passage have been particularly influential within the anthropology of ritual. To van Gennep, rites of passage are comprised of three stages: there is a separation from the original state, a liminal transitional period, and the incorporation into the new state. The rites of passage concerned with death are not only applicable to the dead, but also to the living. For the living, separation from the original state in van Gennep's (1960 [1909]) analysis occurs during the separation from the body, through burial or cremation, where they enter the liminal period of mourning. This period does not have a set timeframe, but is characterised by suspension of certain or all social life. The liminal or transitional period lasts until reintegration with the community, which can simply be beginning to interact and attend community events, in their new social roles as determined by their relationship to the deceased.

There are many interesting ways to explore the period of liminality around death, and one is linking it to the concept of 'closure'. In the time between death and burial or cremation, the dead exist in this liminal space, emerging into their final category once the proper rituals of death have been performed. Those who die in circumstances where their body remains lost or missing thus exist permanently in liminality – not alive, yet not properly dead. This indefinite liminality can create a lack of closure as the rituals associated with death are not properly carried out. As I argue in chapters one and two, the period of liminality may also be manipulated and extended by the introduction of new technologies and institutions, in this case the introduction of embalming and the professional funeral director who, in combination, could extend the period of liminality in the mourning process, as the time between death and burial was prolonged.

The liminal phase can last for an extended period of time in other circumstances, explored by another classic example within anthropology: in Robert Hertz' (1960 [1907]) study of death rituals, drawing mostly from southern Borneo. He found that many tribes in the area practiced secondary burial, where the body is left to decompose in one place, and later retrieved and reburied once the bones are dry. During this time, the person exists in the liminal space between death and life, until decomposition is complete and a final feast to mark the event is prepared. In these southern Borneo tribes, mourning began during this liminal period – not at the final burial, demonstrating that van Gennep's (1960 [1909]) analysis applies differently in various contexts, a useful tool or starting point in the analysis of death rituals.

Van Gennep's (1960 [1909]) view of death (and other major social events) is as a fundamentally disturbing or disruptive event requiring rituals that preserve social order, an understanding that has carried through within anthropology to today. In fact, Phillip R. Olson's "Flush and Bone" (2014) which looks at the introduction of a new form of cremation called Alkaline Hydrolysis opens with the statement that death is disruptive. What we find in the large body of anthropological work on death rituals are the many ways in which social cohesion is created out of this disruption, in the foundational work of Hertz (1960); in Maurice Bloch and Jonathan S. Parry's "Death and the Regeneration of Life" (1982) who explore through the symbolism in funerary rituals how the social and political organisation of societies are produced and legitimated; in Turner's study of Ndembu rites of passage (1967) where rituals express both conflict and cohesion.

In Olson's (2014) article examining the disruption caused by the introduction of new technologies of body disposal, this takes us beyond the ritualistic practices of death that reproduce society. Similarly to Turner's (1967) position that conflict provides a key for cultural understanding and analysis, Olson (2014) unearths an intersection of social and technological problems that shape the morality of Alkaline Hydrolysis and its introduction to body disposal. The questions raised when suggesting a chemical solution to breaking down the body provides an opportunity to examine the cultural attitudes around the sanctity of the dead body. I build upon and draw from these contributions to the anthropology of death rituals in the cases and analyses included in this thesis.

LIMITATIONS AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

With the field of death in Europe and North America being still somewhat limited, I have only identified quite a small selection of ethnographic work that relates to this topic. This is partly why I chose to broaden my research with contributions from other fields, as well as including more analysis from other sources, creating case studies out of the research I was able to do from afar. A limitation of my work that comes with a lack of fieldwork is that I was not able to have any contact with or sources from outside the deathcare and funeral industry, and their perspectives are therefore missing from my thesis. This meant, when I was planning my research, that I had to rethink the framing of my research question to fit what I had available from outside the field.

Research on death and dying in European and North American cultures, when it has been done, is somewhat scattered and much of the work was done more than three decades ago.

While my original fieldwork would have offered a range of delicate ethical situations and considerations, the way that my data is being collected and utilised in my thesis now removes a significant amount. Doing fieldwork in a funeral home and with end-of-life guides would have put me very close to people who were in a vulnerable state and asking them, while in that state, to grant me access to their final moments with their loved one.

In my interviews with deathcare workers, my primary ethical considerations centre around protecting their privacy, and those of their clients, who I have not been in contact with. I have not collected data that includes client's names or identifying factors, and I have anonymised all participants according to both their and my own discretion. With the field of alternative

funerals still being relatively small, there is a possibility that others within that field in the U.S., if they were to read the thesis, would be able to identify the participants to some degree. However, I do not believe there is any significant risk to the participants were they to be identified, and they are in the public space through the work that they do. Since the data collected from my interlocutorss comes from interviews on and about their work, I have not identified any significant ways in which their safety and privacy could be harmed as a result of my research, or on the publication of my thesis.

A Brief History of European and North American Funerary Practices

In their book *Celebrations of Death: The Anthropology of Mortuary Rituals* Metcalf and Huntington (1991) discuss some of the problems of studying American deathways, mostly due to the population (just under 330 million[2]) being so large and there being a lack of sufficient data on the subject. They argue that it would be difficult to say much about such a large population, or not particularly easy to contribute significantly to a discussion if the argument was presented based off of only a handful of cases. However, they also argue that there is a high degree of ritual uniformity of funeral customs in the U.S. and North America. Their argument is that there are few variations across regions, ethnic groups, or social class, despite the cultural diversity within the country.

With there (still) being somewhat a lack of ethnographic data available, this argument would be fairly easy to accept. But starting from Metcalf and Huntington's (1991) observation, in this chapter I analyse some of the reasons and historical background for the relative uniformity in an otherwise culturally diverse country.

This chapter offers a brief overview of the history of funerary practices, mostly focusing on the shift from a kin and community focused task to the professionalisation of deathcare seen in Europe and North America today. I argue that the dead have been removed from their kin in the process of this professionalisation, instead becoming the authority of experts.

DISEMBEDDING DEATH

Phillipe Ariès has made significant and comprehensive contributions to the field of death studies. His book *Western Attitudes Toward Death: From the Middle Ages to the Present* (1974b) traces the cultural changes through art, literature, religious imagery, and cemeteries. One of the main arguments he makes, repeated in his essay "The Reversal of Death: Changes in Attitudes Toward Death in Western Societies," (1974a) published the same year, is that death, both others' and one's own, was for most of human history, something that society and individuals were accustomed to confronting and accepting.

[2] https://data.census.gov/cedsci/table?q=United%20States&g=0100000US&tid=ACSDP1Y2019.DP05

Over time death became something shameful – a failure, a disturbance (Ariès 1974b, 87). Implicitly, this traces a process from societies with at least some concept of a 'good death' and a 'bad death', to one where all death, the only death, is 'bad death'.

Ariès (1974b) covers a wide span of history in his book, roughly a millennium ending in the mid-1900s. Up until the nineteenth century, according to Ariès (1974b), death was mourned and ritualised, but an accepted and integrated part of social life. Ariès calls it *familiar*, and suggests it did not evoke long-lasting grief or anguish. The dying person, so long as it was not a sudden death, recognised and acknowledged his or her own death; they would inform those around them of what was soon to occur. "Knowing that his end was near, the dying person prepared for death," (Ariès 1974b, 7).

The deathbed was the place for final rites, where the family and community, including children, gathered. Ariès writes that "in the early nineteenth century, passers-by who met the priest bearing the last sacrament still formed a little procession and accompanied him to the sickroom," (1974b, 12), where we see death very much as a social event. On his or her deathbed, the final will would be delivered to close kin and family, settling their affairs and ensuring their wishes would be honoured. The way Ariès (1974b) presents it, this was a calm and simple affair, with the purpose of sending the dying off in a peaceful manner, where "death was a ritual organized by the dying person himself," (1974b, 11). The burial would take place shortly after death, in a plain coffin or a burial shroud at a near-by gravesite, in what Ariès calls "a ceremonial manner […], but with no great theatrics," (1974b, 12-13).

Another important contribution to understanding attitudes toward death, though focused more on the U.K., is the anthropologist Geoffrey Gorer's "Pornography of Death" (1955). His text helped fuel in academia the death awareness movement in the fifties and sixties, which I will cover in the third chapter. In his text, he points to some of the similar changes that Ariès (1974b) would later note, how there was a shift in the relationship to death from one of familiarity to, here, something obscene.

Sex and birth had been the areas of human life considered 'unmentionables', while "[…] death was no mystery, except in the sense that death is always a mystery," (Gorer 1955, 50). Most people in the 19th century (and before) had seen death, including children, as this was still the time of community gathering around deathbeds. This was also a time where the "cemetery was the centre of every old-established village, and they were prominent in most towns," (Gorer 1955, 50). Death was present and near, therefore familiar.

Gorer's (1955) title "Pornography of Death" refers to the shift he identifies as happening in the 20th century, where sex moved to a more acceptable topic of discussion, while death "has become more and more 'unmentionable' as a natural process," (Gorer 1955, 50). Death is obscene, private; perhaps a more personal, individual event.

"In a world of change the traditional attitude toward death appears inert and static. The old attitude in which death was both familiar and near, evoking no great fear or awe, offers too marked a contrast to ours, where death is so frightful that we dare not utter its name," (Ariès 1974b, 13). This shift, or disembedding, is a convergence of many factors, important to unpack to understand how death is viewed today. It is also important for the latter part of this thesis, which explores the way some actors are looking to re-embed death through new technology, or going back to the practices more similar to those of pre-Civil War America, today.

While Ariès' work is extensive and important, there are two aspects, which I explain below, often less focused on, that I argue should be explored more thoroughly in order to understand how North American and European death ways came to be, and how the dead were removed from their kin.

The first aspect is the professionalisation of deathcare, beginning in the U.S. around the late 1800s (Williams 2003). This, I argue, is a process that greatly contributed to the disembedding of death and contributed to unfamiliarity and fear of the subject. In *The Great Transformation* Karl Polanyi ([1944] 2001) introduces the concept of *embeddedness* for the economy; the concept that the economy was not an autonomous entity above and beyond social life, but integrated and dependent upon social relations. The process of disembedding involves removing, or attempting to remove, from social and political life that which has previously been integrated.

Polanyi ([1944] 2001) argues that land, labour, and money are fictitious commodities because they were not created for sale on a market originally. The professionalisation of death creates a commodity, both by moving from un-traded labour – kin labour that is not bought and sold on the market – to marketable labour, and creating services in deathcare that previously did not exist. Through this capitalistic transformation, it is possible to see death or deathcare as a fictitious commodity, a previously community and kin-based affair where the dead were often buried on family land, to a wholly outsourced and monetary service by professionals.

Deathcare before professionalisation, in North America and Europe, was usually women's work as part of 'reproductive', 'household', or 'domestic' labour. These terms are often used to describe the same thing, and I will use 'reproductive labour' going forward. In *The Political Economy of Women's Liberation* Margaret Benston (2019 [1969]) writes about preindustrial production units, which are "[…] in some way kin-based and they are multi-purpose, fulfilling religious, recreational, educational, and sexual functions along with the economic function," (Benston 2019 [1969], 5). This reproductive labour did not create commodities for any market, and it was not labour that could be bought or sold. This is the embeddedness of deathcare that builds on Polanyi's (2001 [1944]) concept, before death and deathcare was commodified in the professionalisation of death.

Benston argues that 'kin-based production units' (2019 [1969], 5) are eliminated in favour of efficiency, which is provided by industrialised production. This serves only economic functions, and involves a move from the private sphere to the public sphere. Her argument is that the increased focus and importance of commodity and commodity exchange in a capitalist society necessitates the efficiency that makes kin-based production incompatible.

This moves us into the second aspect that deserves further attention in understanding the changes in ways of death. Philip R. Olson's (2018) article *Domesticating Deathcare: The Women of the U.S. Natural Deathcare Movement* looks at the natural deathcare movement in the U.S., the subject of the latter part of this thesis, how care of the dead moved from women's work to male professionals in the 19th century, and how women are leading the natural deathcare movement in the 21st century.

> […] in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, as Americans increasingly turned their sick, diseased, and pregnant bodies over to the authority of professional, male physicians, so too they began to abdicate authority over their dead to professional, male mortician. (Olson 2018, 195)

This shift is linked to scientific and technological introduction to childbirth and deathcare, and as women were seen as unfit for these expert areas, their access was denied (Olson 2018, 199). The skills and knowledge of women in childbirth and death were minimised or erased in the medicalisation of these areas. The exclusion of women from areas of science and politics because they have been deemed unfit was examined in Sherry Ortner's "Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?" (1972). In it, she argues that women have been seen as closer to nature, more "rooted in nature," (Ortner 1972, 12), while men are seen as closer to culture.

Those processes that are developed in the cultural sphere, such as science and technology, thus are assigned to men. Through the professionalisation of deathcare, the knowledge that women held within the field was dismissed as caring for the dead became technical and scientific. The next chapter delves deeper into notions and meanings of care, but this is clearly a step toward de-familiarising and disembedding death. The production of knowledge in the field of death moved into the authority of men and science.

In *History of Sexuality* Michel Foucault (1978) introduces the concept of 'biopower', a concept to explain how political authorities influence areas of health, life, and death through the production of knowledge and control of information. The field of medicine gained authority over the processes and knowledge of death, and the body – both dead and alive – became increasingly the subject of experts. This is what we have witnessed in the shift from Benston's kin-based production units (2019 [1969]) to the institutionalised death, and to the industrial funeral industry.

But what, exactly, could science and technology offer the bodies of the dead?

EMBALMING AND REMOVING THE DEAD FROM THEIR KIN

Embalming is one of the key factors that contributed to the professionalisation of deathcare in North America. While practiced in other forms throughout history, the contemporary American embalming does not originate in religious or spiritual ritual and belief, but as a psychological and practical measure.

Jerome J. Salomone (2003) divides embalming into three phases in the Western world. The first phase is in the case of Egyptian mummification process which preserved bodies so they could continue their lives in the afterlife, which he identifies as the first embalming practices in history (Salomone 2003, 3), though James Langman (2001) writes of the Chilean Chinchurros whose earliest 'man-made' (that is – not a result of elements preserving a body without the intent to do so) mummy has been carbon-14 dated to 5050 B.C (Langman 2001, 18). The second phase took place in Europe in the 17th and 18th century, where the aim was to preserve bodies in order to study anatomy – a primarily medical and scientific endeavour (Salomone 2003, 3).

The third phase is the rise of embalming in the U.S. during the Civil War, beginning in 1861 (Salomone 2003, 3), in order to delay the decomposition of dead soldiers.
Though the link between the second and third phases of embalming may appear more clearly, it was already an established scientific practice when it grew from research and study to funeral custom, Salomone does not link the Egyptian mummification to contemporary practices. In the mid-1800s Egyptian mummies were of great public and scientific interest (Moshenska 2014), with their embalmed bodies displayed and analysed, just as modern embalming was being introduced in the U.S.

The contemporary practice of embalming, emerging in the latter half of the 1800s in the U.S., involves draining the body of blood and replacing it with a chemical solution, mainly the carcinogenic formaldehyde, dyed red for a more 'natural' look. Several litres of embalming fluid fill the empty veins and capillaries of the body, slowing decomposition and (temporarily) preserving the body (Chiappelli & Chiappelli 2008).

Though some funeral homes still market the service for health and safety reasons, as the Ontarian MacIntyre Family Funeral Home does by claiming that: "embalming sanitizes and preserves the body"[3], or as Barton Family Funeral Service in Washington write: "the primary purpose of embalming is disinfection"[4], dead bodies are safe to be around in most cases. Embalmed bodies, however, can cause problems *after* the funeral, as well as to the embalmer themselves, as repeated formaldehyde exposure can cause cancer. If an embalmed body is cremated, the chemicals are released into the atmosphere, and even make the ashes carcinogenic (Chiappelli & Chiappelli 2008). And if it is buried, even an embalmed body eventually decomposes, and those chemicals are introduced to the environment. The environmental concerns around this is one of the aspects I will return to later in this thesis, and the alternatives introduced by activist groups as well as some funeral homes.

[3] https://www.macintyrefamilyfuneralhome.com/frequent-questions

[4] https://bartonfuneral.com/funeral-basics/history-of-embalming

The embalmers of the American Civil War were nothing if not efficient; they were set up in the field of major battles by the Union Army to provide their services for the fallen (Williams 2003, 9). Transportation of dead bodies during the war occurred infrequently, and only some families could afford to even have their dead returned home – meaning dead bodies were kept around soldiers' camps – and there was no refrigeration on the trains tasked to bring the dead soldiers home to their families.

Embalming, then, served a dual purpose: the first was to slow decomposition as much as possible as the bodies were stored and transported (putrefying corpses do not a pleasant environment make), and the second was to preserve the bodies as much as possible to lessen trauma and make identification easier for family members upon their return.

However, the practice of embalming did not end with the Civil War. Embalmers had established themselves as carers of the dead, and the professionalisation process had begun. Introducing the specialisation of embalming meant that families could no longer prepare their dead for burial. This is a technological advance that allowed male embalmers (and they were all male at the time) to take over the task of caring for dead bodies, where previously the family – usually women (Olson 2018) – were expected to wash, house, and bury their dead.

As the embalmers became undertakers, and undertakers became funeral directors, the services needed to care for the dead slowly expanded and congregated into the funeral homes (and eventually deathcare conglomerates – more on that later) of today. Rowland-Maguire and Maguire (1993) put it even more sharply by saying that:

> By persuading family members to use their spacious parlors, undertakers appropriated even more funeral duties. […] Toward the end of the nineteenth century undertakers also became apt at sales. […] plain coffins were increasingly replaced by elaborate and expensive caskets. (1993, 23).

Here, the rise of the funeral industry is framed as a result of undertakers purposefully expanding into areas they had not previously occupied, and developing into a cohesive set of services under one roof, introducing new aesthetics to deathcare and funerals.
From this time, as undertakers are becoming the carers of the dead, there is little information on what the public reaction was. It is possible, however, that the way the undertaker has often been portrayed in film and media reflects some of the attitudes to this change.

Undertakers are portrayed almost as an extension of the grim reaper; take for example Mathias Bone from the comic Lucky Luke, where he follows around with a vulture, waiting for someone to die. Western films were abundant with this portrayal of an eager undertaker, ready to fulfil his duties; often measuring people for their coffins before they were dead. *High Noon* from 1952, *A Fistful of Dollars* from 1964, and *The Outlaws IS Coming!* from 1965 are just a few examples featuring the (morbidly) enthusiastic undertaker, eager for their next customer to drop dead.

This character is intended to be unsettling and opportunistic, and the mortician and funeral director has remained in much popular culture with a similar image. The imagery developed early around the time where undertakers were expanding their businesses and becoming the sole handlers of the dead could reflect a resistance to part with this final rite. It can be understood as a cultural expression of a business that people distrusted that has remained in much of U.S. media portrayal through to today. Sometimes in horror films as sinister murderers such as *The Undertaker and His Pals* from 1966, *Phantasm* from 1979 and *Mortuary* in 1983; and sometimes as people with an unhealthy fascination with dead bodies in *Monty Python's Flying Circus* (1969-1974), in 1993's *Body Bags*, and in *My Name is Earl* (2005-2009).

It is possible that these portrayals of undertakers reflect a strong reaction to the disembedding of death, rituals and customs tied to death and dying were quite drastically changed with the introduction of embalming and deathcare as a commodity.

Embalming played a large part in allowing for a change in funeral ritual. Until the Civil War, funerary rituals would take place over a short period of time; the dead would be kept in the home until the grave was dug and the coffin or shroud prepared, before being placed in the earth. Salomone points out that delaying decomposition for a time allowed "funeral services to be invented, lengthened, and elaborated for those who desired such arrangements." (Salomone 2003, 5).

While this view is more ambiguous on whether these services were a sales tactic – as Rowland-Maguire and Maguire (1993) suggest – or fulfilling the wish of consumers, it nevertheless allowed new rituals to be constructed around deathcare and funerals. Ariès identifies embalming as a key aspect to commercialising death (1974b, 98-99), by making death more 'friendly', and that the changing role of the new funeral directors were not simply selling a service, but "aiding the mourning survivors to return to normalcy," (Ariès 1974b, 99),

again implying that death is a disturbance to a normal life; rather than a part of it. As I mentioned in the introduction, we can also view the introduction of embalming as creating an extension to the liminal phase of mourning; the time between death and burial widened, allowing for new rituals, practices, and products to enter deathcare.

While the Civil War in America had introduced embalming, 'only' an estimated 40,000 soldiers had been embalmed by the end of the war (Walsh, 2017), and would receive less great public attention until the death of American president Abraham Lincoln. After his assassination, Lincoln was embalmed and viewed by the public as he was transported from Washington DC to his home state of Illinois, drawing great crowds to see the body; "this was the first time most Americans saw an embalmed body, and it quickly became a national sensation," (Walsh 2017). As embalming was introduced to the public, and accepted by it, funeral homes and their embalmers were intertwined and became the institution of post-mortem deathcare.

THE INTRODUCTION AND (SLOW) RISE OF CREMATION IN NORTH AMERICA

Another aspect of body disposal that is essential in understanding the development of deathcare and attitudes towards death in North America is the introduction of cremation. As with embalming, this practice is common and has a long history outside of Europe and North America. There is also some historic evidence of it being a common practice in various parts of Europe up until the spread of Christianity – varying in parts of Europe from ~100-1000 CE (*Britannica Academic*, s.v. "Cremation," read May 21, 2021).

Religious studies scholar Stephen Prothero (2001) covers the history of cremation in America, but also covers other aspects in the development and changes of American funeral and burial traditions. Cremation was controversial when introduced in seventeenth-century Europe and North America, as it was linked to pagan and savage rituals, unfitting of civilised society. As cremations at the time were common practice with some Native American tribes and colonial India, amongst others, the racist connections are hard to miss.

Despite the efforts of cremationists, much of the sentiment that cremation was a cruel, barbaric practice remained, and cremation was still fairly uncommon in the mid-20th century. The steep incline leading it to eventually surpass burial in the U.S. by 2017 (Cremation Association of North America 2020) began in the 1970s (Kearl 2004).

The beginnings of cremation in North America can be traced to the middle of the 1800s, when a sanitary movement began where "[…] sanatarianism was viewed as a battle against a grave social problem," (Prothero 2001, 46). The 'grave social problem' was primarily connected to concerns regarding health and hygiene, but closely tied to a battle against poverty (or poor people), imbued in racist ideas of many immigrant groups, which I will return to shortly.

The sanitarians' understanding of an America in rapid progression was contradicted by its disease and poverty-ridden cities. "In this case the enemy was dirt," (Prothero 2001, 46). The poor, and especially the large faction of immigrant poor living in tight quarters and with little access to sanitation and health care, were a source of this *dirt*, blamed for bringing the diseases with them when they immigrated, and for spreading them to the outside communities.

While Prothero does not specify which immigrant groups this is referring to, the immigration of mid 1800s America was mired in racism. Matthew Frye Jacobson writes in *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (1999) of the different categories of whiteness in the U.S., as well as how non-white groups were placed within the racial hierarchy. Whiteness at the time was not monolithic: "[…] the multitudes of European immigrants who arrived in waves in the 1840s, it was said, posed a new threat to democratic institutions. This emerging political crisis lent a new, multifaceted character to whiteness itself," (Jacobson 1999, 44).

There were degrees of whiteness, and the 'Anglo-Saxon' white was ranked the highest. Irish immigrants, who arrived in the U.S. largely in the mid-1800s, peaking in the 1860s (Jacobson 1999, 43), were seen as less intelligent, brutish, even savage (Jacobson 1999, 48, 53). The Massachusetts State Board of Charities attributed the Irish immigrants' poverty and public dependency on their "inherited organic imperfections, vitiated constitutions, or *poor stock*," (Jacobson 1999, 48. Emphasis in original).

Italians were often seen – especially in the American South – as a category between white and black, as their willingness to work with black people excluded them from full whiteness. Italians were sometimes referred to as 'dago', "[…] a word whose decidedly racial meaning was widely recognized at the time and was underscored by the more obviously racial 'white n****r'[5]"

[5] Though the quote uses the word written out, I have chosen not to, as I think it is still clear what the meaning is.

(Jacobson 1999, 37). This classification built not only on the colour of Italian's skin, but on their social behaviour; they socialised and worked with black people, practicing an ethnic behaviour at the time that excluded them from whiteness.

In the introduction to *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* (1969), Barth puts forth an argument that ethnic identity is created and upheld through inclusions and exclusions of other individuals and groups. He says that "[…] the principle that ethnic identity implies a series of constraints on the kinds of roles an individual is allowed to play, and the partners he may choose for different kinds of interaction," (Barth 1969, 17), and this is the kind of behaviour that Italian Americans were breaking in the eyes of Anglo-Saxon white Americans that excluded them from whiteness and categorised them closer to black people.

In 1882, the Chinese Exclusion Act prevented Chinese immigrants from entering the U.S., preceded by several racially motivated attacks, until its repeal in 1943 (Wu 2021). These are just a few examples of the tensions at the time, and attitudes toward immigrants while sanitarians are carrying out their 'purification' of America.

The point I am making here is that the sanitarians' view on hygiene and disease is intertwined with race and ethnicity, at a time of heightened racial tension. The abolishment of slavery was still recent at the time of their purification project, the state was actively excluding specific ethnic groups, and there had been created subcategories for whiteness that determined purity. Again, Prothero (2001) does not connect the sanitarians' purity movement to the larger cultural shifts happening at the time beyond the perceived health crisis stemming from immigrant communities, but it is interesting to observe the dead body become a symbol for the cremationists' project of purification.

The cremation movement, then, was heavily tainted by racist elements – a purification sentiment that seems eerily close to the eugenics movement that emerged soon after. Though Prothero (2001) does not make any explicit connections between these movements, the language and ideas certainly speak to a similar origin, and possibly some degree of overlap. The purification or sanitation movement made an explicit link to the spread of diseases to unsanitary immigrants, and these diseases were thought to have been brought by the immigrants themselves (Prothero 2001, 56-57). "[…] in the 1880s and 1890s, genteel Americans were working hard to purify America, feverishly separating themselves from what pollutes. The U.S. cremation movement capitalized on and contributed to those cultural preoccupations," (Prothero 2001, 58).

Pollution and Purification

In *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concept of Pollution and Taboo*, Mary Douglas' (2005 [1966]) argues that dirt is a part of an integrated system of organisation; pollution occurs when something is not where it belongs, does not fit within a category, or is handled improperly according to the system. Dirt is *matter out of place*. When something is out of place, it brings feelings of discomfort; it carries a sense of unease. The organisation and categorisation process, Douglas argues, are foundational for social life. The handling of dead bodies and purification rituals, while connected to germ theory and knowledge of pathogens, clearly does not originate from that system. The body had shared a space with the living (in the home), and became a pollutant *before* germ theory was introduced and accepted in the late 1800s. This is clear in the case of the American sanitarians, as their project of purification began in the era where 'miasma' was believed to be behind the spread of disease. This was a noxious gas that could infect anyone who breathed it in, which is why it was often linked to foul smelling objects or areas. For the sanitarians, the poor city dwellers and immigrant groups were a polluting force in a larger project of purification in the U.S., and the idea of 'miasma' links to the issues of body disposal. Prothero (2001) discusses the links between the idea of 'miasma' and immigrants, the ways that sanitarians sought to clean up the cities. This spread to the dead body, another origin of dangerous, disease-ladened miasma. Cholera, amongst other illnesses, was believed to spread through miasma, and dead bodies were certainly believed to be contributing to the spread.

Similarly to the point that Douglas makes that Western practices and ideas of dirt and hygiene has a longer history than germ theory (2005 [1966], 44), the idea of segregating and purifying dead bodies emerged before pathogens were discovered. In the next chapter, I show that embalming is promoted by in contemporary U.S. funeral homes as a public health measure, echoing the sanitarians' idea that the dead body is a dangerous pollutant which requires segregation and purification.

We can understand, building on Ariès' (1974b) analysis that by the early 20th century all death has become bad death, that all death is polluting, but that there are degrees of pollution that can be mediated through how the dead body is handled. Cremation and embalming, practices presented as sanitary and public health measures as well as ways to negate the traumatic experience of seeing the reality of death in a (decomposing) body, are ways of controlling the polluting influence of death.

As science moved away from theories of miasma and into germ theory, the sanitarians moved with them. Fear of the dead remained, a fear of *contamination* from dead bodies. The belief that dead bodies posed a threat to the living grew alongside the development of germ theory, and "in books, tracts, articles, papers, and lectures, sanitary scientists attacked the tradition of earth burial as unclean, unsafe, unsanitary, and impure," (Prothero 2001, 50). Dead bodies, in the eyes of cremationists, had to be annihilated entirely, for fear that they would pollute the earth – in addition to making the living sick.

The first step in lessening the polluting dangers of the dead body for the sanitarians was moving cemeteries out of the cities:

> The goal of the rural cemeterians was to do with the dead what public health officials were doing with the sick. Mimicking the quarantine strategy, these reformers separated the dead from the living by banishing graveyards from the cities to suburban areas. (Prothero 2001, 48)

We can see the remnants of this policy today, where many U.S. cities have kept their dead on the outskirts – out of sight, out of mind, out of danger. This is a very clear instance where the dead are literally moved away from the living, to the outskirts of social life. Michael C. Kearl calls cemeteries "[…] these islands of solitude that we have set aside for the dead," (1989, 49); they are disconnected from the living, they are places that are visited, but not inhabited. This exclusion or isolation from the spaces of the living differ from what we see in many European cities, where cemeteries are often more integrated, or at least geographically centred, as Gorer (1955) points out.

For the sanitarians, the fear of pollution from dead bodies was not eradicated through quarantine, perhaps because unlike the sick, dead bodies could not 'recover' from their pollution simply by being moved. Douglas (2005 [1966]) argues that rituals of purification lessens or eradicates polluting forces and the danger they pose to the system, and here is where the purifying quality of fire was seen as the solution to the problem of dead bodies.

We see here a rhetoric developing around the dead body leading to the type of highly sanitised, highly professionalised body disposal of the mainstream contemporary funeral industry, though this movement alone is only one of the factors contributing to this.[6]

Solutions to this polluting problem were many; there were ideas put forth of burial vaults and air-tight coffins ("fitted with 'subterranean ventilating tubes with shafts rising high above the ground to carry off the putrid gases," (Prothero 2001, 52). Imagine if this idea took off), caustic lime to speed up decomposition, deeper burials, deep sea burials, pulverising the body (drying the body first, then grinding the remains, similar to what happens to bones after cremation), literally cementing the body (Han Solo-like), electrocuting the body, converting bodies into gold plated statues to be put on display in domestic galleries. Of course, what was settled on as the most sanitary, the most moral, practical solution was cremation by fire.

"Burial remained a crime against the living, but cremation was now promoted as 'the great purifier', 'the greatest of all disinfection', and 'the only true germicide'" (Prothero 2001, 53). While the cremationists were strong in their convictions, it was still fairly uncommon for Americans to choose cremation for their dead. It was not until the 1920s (Prothero 2001, 215) that cremation rates reached even one percent in the U.S. [7]

As was mentioned earlier, it would take until the 1970s for cremation to begin its rise to popularity, building partly on the popularity of Mitford's (2000 [1963]) book, coinciding with the Catholic Church declassifying cremation as a sin (Prothero 2001, 165), and as an act of violation toward the sanctity of the dead body (Kearl 2004, 16).
While Mitford was not the first to question some of the practices of the American funeral

[6] Later, even the suburban and isolated cemeteries became problematic, said to pollute air and water (Prothero 2001, 51). The connection to the very real problem of the carcinogenic embalming fluid formaldehyde – used to sanitise the body both literally and metaphorically – and fumes from cremation contributing to an unhealthy atmosphere and greenhouse gases is perhaps ironic.

[7] Both Jessica Mitford (2000 [1963]), a British journalist, and Prothero (2001) speak of the lavish practices that became common in funerals after the Second World War's economic boom. As the (white) middleclass grew, funerals became an area for wealth display in the U.S. "Just as the Civil War had ushered in the golden age of the embalmer, World War II brought on a period of prosperity for the undertakers," (Prothero 2001, 164). Since cremation had been touted as simple, natural, economic – along with its important job of purification, the post-war extravagance seemed incompatible.

industry – there were several magazine articles and books written in the post-World War II era that were critical of the industry – Mitford's writing was accessible and biting, it incorporated humour, and caught the attention of a wider audience.

In Mitford's (2000 [1963]) book, cremation was portrayed as a more sensible option; it was less gaudy and more financially responsible than the extravagant burials that had become the norm in the post-WWII boom. There is no one factor, or group of factors that point conclusively to the (continued) rise of cremations in the U.S., but the ones I have presented here are contributors that certainly had an influence in how cremation entered the acceptable realm of body disposal options, and eventually equalled burials. The examination of how cremation and embalming were introduced and received are vital in understanding the historical background to contemporary rituals and what the alternative deathcare movements are reacting to, as well as revealing the ethical, moral, and social priorities of the culture through reflections on death and the dead body.

THE CONCEPT OF A 'GOOD DEATH'

We find in Ariès (1974a) the argument that there was a closer relationship to one's own death until the 19th century, an awareness and acceptance of it. The sudden death was the only one feared, because it "*deprived a man of the experience of death,*" (Ariès 1974a, 538. Emphasis mine), and so the sudden death was not mourned for the loss of *life*, but arguably the loss of a *good death* – that which is felt, known of, and experienced.

There are alternative interpretations of what a 'good death' means in the contemporary U.S., for example in Kearl's (1989) writing on the topic of good and bad deaths in North America. He writes of the premature good deaths: heroes dying in battle, after achieving one's life's work, dying for one's principles or in sacrifice of others (quite a high bar to pass for most of society); and the 'on time' good deaths "following full and completed lives, and with the survivors-to-be fully prepared," (Kearl 1989, 121). Other than through martyrdom, good deaths seem to have less with how one dies, and much more to do with the life they have lived – and how well they prepared others for their death. In the next chapter I will look at how this interpretation of good deaths may be seen in practice at funerals, and may help to explain what aspects are focused on.

Kearl also includes some of the deaths that are classified as ‘bad deaths’: labour and pregnancy related, mental illness and substance abuse; and of the postmature deaths: one of suffering in old age “maintained in an institution where the convenience of the staff, not the residents, determines the quality of care,” (Kearl 1989, 121).

These deaths reflect a lack of agency for the dying, where both the circumstances of the death in premature cases and the painful lead-up in postmature deaths classify them as bad deaths. Going even further, social workers Alice Boateng and Linda Anngela-Cole (2016) argue that:

> […] two interrelated concepts predominate European American understandings of the biological aspects of physical death. First, European American attitudes about death lack the concept of a good death. Second, the European American puritanical history is one of denying death. (Boateng and Anngela-Cole 2016, 39)

The first point is important because if there is indeed a lack of a concept of ‘good death’ in Europe and North America, it stands to reason that death can only ever be bad, tragic, a failure of society, and the second point of death denial only reinforces this belief. Boateng and Anngela-Cole (2016) argue that American culture is one where the death of any young person is tragic because of the remaining life they were to have lived, and the death of an old person reflects a failure in medical science to extend and sustain life.

This theory disregards entirely that good deaths are possible in Europe and North America, which is fairly close to Kearl’s (1989) standpoint, as good deaths are almost unachievable for most people.

While in the above examples people can rarely be in control of whether their deaths are good or bad, we find an alternative to this framing where the act of dying can determine if a death is good or bad with the Yolmo people of Nepal. Robert Desjarlais (2014) did fieldwork among the Yolmo, and their approach to a good death emphasises the dying process rather than the circumstances of the death. He writes of the techniques for dying well, often involving the friends and family of the dying, where they prepare for their deaths, give their last testament, and work toward “[…] forging a calm and peaceful state of mind in the hours of their demise,” (Desjarlais 2014, 103). The role of the family and friends is to assist the dying through the process, fostering a calm mind and environment, and “help him to sever his attachments to his life,” (Desjarlais 2014, 103).

The approach and attitudes of the Yolmo as portrayed by Desjarlais (2014) hold many similarities to the types of death that Ariès (1974b) described in Europe through the middle ages, leading up to the professionalisation process, where preparation for death and the community gathered around the dying made death familiar, awaking little fear.

Conclusion

"Death, so omnipresent in the past that it was familiar, would be effaced, would disappear. It would become shameful and forbidden." (Ariès 1974b, 85). The process that Ariès is describing in the quote, what's occurring slowly over the course of time, is disembedding death from life, from society. This disembedding, I have argued, is what creates a culture of death denial. Once death is no longer integrated in the social sphere, there is the lack of familiarity that Ariès describes, as well as a fear of death itself because it has become unfamiliar.

I have shown how embalming was introduced to American funerary rites, and how it was established as a practice, arguing that it served a dual purpose of delaying decomposition and to mask the realities of death. I further argued that this extended the role of the undertaker, moving towards the contemporary funeral director. With this came new rituals and practices, moving the funeral out of the home and into the parlours of funeral homes, where more elaborate caskets and funeral goods were introduced.

I have examined how the project of purification by the sanitarians expressed a fear of contamination from dead bodies, and how this is linked to mass immigration in the U.S. and ethnic tensions that frame the beginnings of the modern U.S. cremation. I argued that the fear of contamination pushed cemeteries out of the cities, creating a further distance to death.

Ariès describes the sense of avoidance in acknowledging death "[…] no longer for the sake of the dying person, but for society's sake," (1974b, 87) that is present in Europe and North America, where death is seen as an interruption of an otherwise happy life, a private affair and a failure of medicine. The next chapter looks at how this is on display in the language of contemporary funeral homes. The historical processes described in this chapter have produced the conditions that the new natural and alternative deathcare movements are critiquing, and chapter three looks at how they are attempting to challenge the established practices, In the next chapter I examine what the contemporary U.S. funeral involves, and what the funeral industry looks like as a result of these historical processes.

‘The’ American Funeral – And Its Critics

In chapter one I looked at the historical prelude to the contemporary American funeral. This history allows for a comprehensive understanding of the modern U.S. funeral industry, and why some aspects of this funeral industry have been criticised since the mid-20th century. The criticism will additionally be relevant as I move onto chapter three, and how the death positive movement and alternative funeral industry are addressing the issues identified here. This chapter focuses more on contemporary funeral rituals in the U.S., and the funeral industry. I argue that the emergence of the professional funeral home has commodified death and the dead body through embalming and funeral goods. Using a selection of funeral homes[8] as a case study, I look at how kinship and the concept of care is still integrated and central in the deathcare industry, and how the language of care and kinship is used.

This chapter looks first at how and where death occurs, examining how the disembedding of death has influenced dying and care of the dead body in the contemporary U.S. I argue that death and the dead body have been commodified (Polanyi 2001 [1949]) through the extended rituals made possible by embalming, as well as through embalming itself.

The next section looks at the various aspects of the American funeral, and how the language of kin and care are still central within the funeral industry. Then, I look at embalming’s place in the industry, and the ways it impacts relationships to death. The last part introduces the criticism that the deathcare industry has received, crucial to understanding what the movements in chapters three and four are responding to in their activism and alternative deathcare.

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[8] This chapter includes, amongst others, two funeral homes with similar names: the Barton Funeral Home and the Barton Family Funeral Service. They are not affiliated, and located in different states, in Washington and Georgia respectively. Both were empirically relevant and unique, being funeral homes that offer more information around many of their services than most of the funeral home websites I have visited, which is why I have chosen to include them both, despite the (frustratingly) similar names.

THE (UN)SOCIAL LIFE OF THE DEAD BODY

The history of death and funerals in the first chapter saw the dead body disembedded from close kin through professionalisation of the funeral. But it is not just the dead body that moved away from the home. A majority (~60%) of deaths in the United States occur in either a hospice, a nursing facility, or a hospital (Cross and Warraich, 2019).

What are the consequences of death happening outside of the home? William R. Wood and John B. Williamson (2003) write that death in the United States and Western Europe has become a very private affair; it happens within institutions, funeral homes, and mortuaries. Few people living in these countries are present or spend any significant time with the dead, and "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 and Williamson 2003, 2).

We see the familiarity with death that Ariès (1974b) speaks of fade and fracture, as death and dying is pushed into the private sphere – no longer a social event. Ethnographic work done in two US hospitals only a few years before Ariès' book shows that the unfamiliarity and private nature of death extends to hiding death in hospitals, from both patients and visitors. David Sudnow (1967) describes the many ways one hospital hides death from the patients, including removing the body from their room when sharing with other patients; relegating dying patients to private rooms; hiding dead bodies during transport through the hospital; and placing the morgue as far away from the public and patients as possible. The nurses or aides moving the body to the morgue would sometimes speak to the patient as if he or she were still alive, "Let's go to X ray," (Sudnow 1967, 46) is said to one particular dead patient, fearing that acknowledging his death would alarm the other patients. These smaller acts reflect an institutionalisation of death, where it is an unsocial event. Death is something that causes upset and unease, to be kept away from the living to the largest extent possible. By institutionalising dying, as well as death, it becomes further alienated from life.

Ariès (1974b) reflected over why death commonly occurs in hospitals, and it builds on the point made in chapter one on how death is seen as a failure of society and medicine. Death occurs because doctors and hospitals decide to no longer administer *care*, hospitals are where deaths happen because "the doctor did not succeed in healing," (Ariès 1974b, 87).

This observation and analysis has been noted by others, some more specifically applying to the U.S., for example: "[…] hospital death came to be considered a socio-medical failure in the U.S.," (Kaufman and Morgan 2005, 327). In this medicalised death, there is a breaking down

of the 'moment of death'; death is extended over a long period of time into "little silent deaths" (Ariès 1974b, 88) such as loss of consciousness or breathing arrest. "They [doctors] are the masters of death – and it has been observed that they try to obtain from their patient 'an acceptable style of living while dying'," (Ariès 1974b, 89).

The grand death, the awareness of its approach, the final moments where the dying are surrounded by their kin and community is, according to Ariès (1974b), replaced by a series of lesser events leading to the clinical death. And, importantly, death belongs here to medicine and is the responsibility (and failure) of doctors. Another step in the disembedding of death occurs when dying is hidden and broken down into technicalities, more ambiguous and drawn out.

Taking use of Arnold van Gennep's rites of passage ([1909] 1960), the dying exist in liminality – separated by their approaching death from the rest of society. When Ariès (1974b) makes the observation that doctors are the masters of death, he doesn't connect it to van Gennep's (1960 [1909]) 'master of ceremonies'. However, I think there is a way of connecting the ritual master – the authority on what will happen and when – in van Gennep's (1960 [1909]) analysis, to what Ariès (1974b) is pointing to with the expert authority of the doctor in death and health. The liminal phase of dying may often last a long time, whether from a degenerative disease such as ALS, cancer patients, or the slow worsening of someone's health in old age. Death may not be the end of this liminal phase, as the funeral, burial, or cremation can be the marker that the person is no longer a part of the (living) community and belong more to the ancestors.

And as the doctor can be understood as the 'master of ceremonies' for the sick and dying, I later argue that the funeral director has become the 'master of ceremonies' for the dead.

THE PURPOSE OF THE FUNERAL

> In the USA, where public viewing of the body is still common, the concept of 'the private' enters the funeral in a different way, namely in the therapeutic idea that the funeral's prime function is to assist 'the grief process' of the closely bereaved, rather than any function benefitting the group or society. (Bailey and Walter 2016, 150)

Tara Bailey and Tony Walter's (2016) analysis suggest a paradigm shift in comparison to what Ariès (1974a & 1974b) described in chapter one of the deathbed and community

procession to visit the dying and dead. The focus on grief makes the funeral more about the individual, or a smaller group of individuals, than the community. In this section I look at the influence on the funeral the rise of funeral homes have had, and how the changes in practices and purpose influence a culture of death denial.

When someone dies in North America, the funeral home is usually involved from the time shortly after death. The body is picked up and transported to the funeral home, unless identification, an autopsy, or other circumstances prevent the body from being released. The funeral home will often complete a lot of the practical and legal issues, such as notifying authorities, sometimes notifying relatives of the deceased, posting the obituary, and preparing death certificates for banks, social services and other necessary notifications.

The funeral understood as the 'standard' contemporary American funeral typically comprises of three elements:

1) The visitation or viewing
2) The funeral
3) The burial

I mentioned in chapter one the argument that Huntington and Metcalf (1991) make in their book: that there is a large degree of uniformity in US funerals, despite cultural diversity amongst its population. Despite Huntington and Metcalf's (1991) proclamation, I struggled to accept that there really could be so little variation that it is largely not worth mentioning in their book, but I found very little evidence to the contrary. This confirms that there is still a lack of data in this field, as Huntington and Metcalf (1991) also point out, although there also seems to be supporting evidence for the ritual uniformity of funerary customs in the U.S.

In his book *Death, Grief, and Mourning: Individual and Social Realities* John S. Stephenson (1985) argues that funerals in the U.S. shifted to become less about the deceased, and more for the benefit of the bereaved during the process of professionalising death, which is similar to the observations of Bailey and Walter (2016). This era – from the early-20th century to the mid-20th century – prolonged the funeral, and is characterised by a sombre atmosphere. This is still observed today, for example social workers Alice Boateng and Linda Anngela-Cole write of the funeral that "The setting and mood for European American funerals are generally somber, with slow organ music and a steady tone of speaking," (Boateng and Anngela-Cole 2016, 39).

The uniformity in funerary rituals that Huntington and Metcalf (1991) speak of seems to be so taken for granted that many who write about the American funeral do not describe the funeral and burial itself. Boateng and Anngela-Cole (2016) describe the emotions on display in typically European-American and African American funerals, but not the proceedings. In their article "The American Funeral" Heyslip Jr, Sewell, and Riddle (2003) describe the purpose of the funeral as "[…] completing the final placement of the remains (its secular function) and confirming public recognition of the deceased person's transition from life to death (its sacred function)," (2), but again focus less on what this process looks like. Ariès' book (1974b) describes in details of the rituals of the past, but says far less on the contemporary funeral. In Mitford's (2000 [1963]) "The American Way of Death" she focuses more on the funeral industry and their practices in relation to customers and the bereaved. Author of "*Grave Matters: A Journey Through the Modern Funeral Industry to a Natural Way of Burial*" (2007) Mark Harris describes the modern burial as such:

> […] and that is the chemical embalming of the remains, the burial of the body or placement of the body into a casket and then the placement of that casket and embalmed body in the bottom of the grave that we call the burial vault[9]. So that's pretty much the American way of death. (0:23-0:38) [10]

Drawing from these sources, as well as the websites of funeral homes, there are a few key elements to 'the' American funeral that are useful. Firstly, as I mentioned above, the funeral director is likely involved shortly after death has occurred. Families rarely spend time with the body outside of the funeral service and viewing/visitation, and only after the body has been prepared through embalming and/or make-up. The funeral service occurs outside the home, where the expected mood is sombre, before the body is taken away to be buried or cremated.

Funeral homes in North America, as well as many in Europe, offer 'package deals' for funerals, and while many funeral homes are still individually owned, the industry offers very little variation in the services and products they offer. While many offer different ways of personalising the services, some of which I will describe, they are offered within a very tight frame of options mostly centred around extra products available to purchase.

[9] A burial vault is a metal or concrete container for the casket, intended to prevent the casket from sinking. They are often required in cemeteries.

[10] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o2dvXWX3Sdw

In order to show how we can understand the funeral director as the 'masters of ceremony' (van Gennep 1960 [1909]), I look at several funeral homes, how they describe their work, the language they use, and how they shape the funeral.

First, there's the Oak Grove Funeral Home in Michigan, who describe funeral directors' work as such:

> They provide support to the family, guide the arrangement of visitations and funeral ceremonies, prepare the deceased according to the family's wishes, and ensure that everything goes according to plan. They also arrange for the removal and transportation of deceased throughout the process, and assist families with any legal or insurance-related paperwork they might need to file[11]

The funeral home is where close family will see the body, often for the first time after death and before the funeral, which is called a wake, visitation, or viewing. By this point, the body has been embalmed, made up with special mortician's make up to cover any remaining signs of death, dressed, and placed in the casket. This viewing is a sort of pre-funeral – a private affair for those closest to the dead.

I introduced Service Corporation International in "The Field" chapter of this thesis, and the next quote is from one of their brands: Dignity Memorial. This is the general brand for most of their funeral homes, offering insight into how a majority of their funeral homes compare to others. On viewings, their website writes:

> A visitation (sometimes also called a viewing) is an opportunity for the family of a loved one to receive visitors and spend some time talking with and being comforted by friends. This is also a time to pay respects to a loved one and gives a sense of closure to both family and friends. Visitations often have an open casket. Many times, a visitation period occurs the day before a funeral and again immediately preceding a funeral service[12].

Aside from the mentioned open casket, it is easy to miss the presence of the dead at all here. The purpose of this ritual is centred less around the dead themselves, but to the social ties that remain; an occasion to establish or reaffirm close relationships that are more exclusive than the funeral service itself. In fact, these visitations play into the culture of death denial, as Ariès (1974b) argues that embalming creates the illusion that visitors "are not visiting a dead person […] but an almost-living one who […] is still present, as if he were awaiting to

[11] https://www.oakgroveludington.com/resources/faqs

[12] https://www.dignitymemorial.com/plan-funeral-cremation/traditional-funeral/what-is-a-funeral

greet you or take you off on a walk," (Ariès 1974b, 101-102). Additionally, there are some funerals that take the focus off of death by having 'celebrations of life' rather than, or in addition to, funerals.

Celebrations of life – denying death?

A celebration of life ceremony is either a common way to view the funeral, or an entirely separate occasion that can happen in addition to the funeral – depending on who you ask. Boateng and Anngela-Cole (2016) write that European American funerals are often viewed as celebrations of life, an occasion to honour the person's life and the connections they made, and less focused on mourning.

Dignity Memorial separate the funeral and the celebration of life, where the latter is "[…] oftentimes more celebratory in nature than it is somber and formal,"[13] and "[…] a bit like a party with a purpose – and that purpose is to remember a loved one in a personal, festive or fun way. Sometimes a casket it present, but often a celebration of life takes place weeks or months after burial or cremation,"[14]. The phrasing 'a casket is present' somewhat befuddled me – I have concluded that they most likely mean that the dead are present (and inside the casket), but it is illustrative of the backseat death and the dead body often takes in the contemporary funeral – here the dead are not even mentioned.

In another funeral home, Oak Grove Funeral Home of Ludington, the personalisation feature is emphasised in the celebration of death, to "honor your loved one's individuality," [15] and the emphasis lies on tributing the life and uniqueness of the deceased. This is similar to what Ferfolia Funeral Homes include on their page, where it is described to: "Honor, recognize, and celebrate the life of the deceased,[16]"

If we look at what Kearl posited would be required for a good death in North America, "following full and completed lives," (1989, 121), perhaps this can help to explain where the emphasis of celebrating the life of the deceased arises from: their death is made good by focusing on the fullness of their lives, their accomplishments, and the human connections they fostered – made visible by the gathering at the funeral. The focus on celebration, paired

[13] https://www.dignitymemorial.com/plan-funeral-cremation/traditional-funeral/what-is-a-funeral
[14] https://www.dignitymemorial.com/celebration-of-life/how-to-plan
[15] https://www.oakgroveludington.com/services/celebrating-life
[16] https://www.ferfoliafuneralhomes.com/planning-guide

with the repulsion expressed of decomposition, are perhaps features of death denial. It may be an expression of the implicit death denial that Ariès points to when he says that the contemporary attitude toward death is "[…] so frightful that we dare not utter its name," (1974b, 13). Celebrations of life fit within the tendency for avoidance of death often observed in the U.S. This is found in the euphemistic language of obituaries, where a person has not died, but 'passed on', in using 'slumber room' for where the body is visited at the funeral home during the viewing, and in referring to graves as 'final resting place'. These are all in service of shielding mourners from "[…] the ugly realities of death and decomposition," (Hayslip Jr, Sewell, Riddle 2003, 4).

THE FUNERAL HOME, NOTIONS OF CARE, AND THE LANGUAGE OF DEATHCARE

With the funeral home at the centre of American deathcare, it is useful to analyse how they view themselves and their work, and to look at similarities and differences to past practices. In this section I focus mainly on how care exists within these spaces, and how funeral homes practice I argue, what Asif Agha (2015) calls chronotopic formulations: "reflexive models of kinship behavior […] to establish kin relations, real or imagined, […] at varying degrees of spatial and temporal remove in social history," (2015, 549). This behaviour allows a group or individuals to connect themselves – through space and time – to specific social groups and communities. This is observable in many funeral homes, and I use some of these cases to show what this looks like within the funeral industry, where they use a variety of methods to place themselves in the community both past and present.

The disposition of the dead has in the United States almost entirely become the responsibility of the funeral homes, although there is no legal requirement for this (Salomone 2003, 2). One interesting aspect of contemporary funeral practice is that while the dead are rarely cared for by their kin, kinship and community still has a strong presence in the funeral industry and language used. Most funeral homes, even those owned by the large deathcare conglomerates, bear family names, emphasise rooted histories in the community, and blend the professional aspects of their business with kin aspects and behaviour. For example: "Since 1936, R. Dudley Barton & Son Funeral Home, Inc. has been offering full service funerals and attending to the needs of our community with compassion, caring, and efficiency,"[17] and the same

[17] https://www.bartonfuneralhome.net/history

funeral home also writes: “We believe in treating your family like our own to ensure your comfort and ease during this difficult time,”[18].

They are emphasising their ties to the community, engaging in kin language to build a relationship with potential customers. There is a sentiment present in a lot of the following cases that speak to the narrative of funeral homes being more than a business or providing a service. In the case above, R. Dudley Barton & Son Funeral Home Inc. are blurring the lines between personal and professional relationships, practicing a form of ‘reflexive kinship’ (Agha 2015).

The McBride Funeral Home in Texas integrates the service and professional side of their business with the community by locating them in both past and present:

> “We have years of experience caring for families, from all walks of life. Each family comes to us because they know we are leaders in our profession, dedicated to excellence in service, and have the highest integrity.” [19] “We invite you to discover who has made McBride Funeral Home the ultimate provider of creating healing experiences in the community. This section contains the *heritage*, *vision*, and the people behind McBride Funeral Home's reputation of quality, sincerity, and trust.”[20] (emphasis mine)

Another example of a funeral home creating temporal ties to the community around them, is the SCI owned Crawford-Bowers Funeral Home, which also centres themselves within the community as active members:

> Since 1972, Crawford-Bowers Funeral Home has provided funeral and cremation services to families in Bell and Coryell Counties. […] The relationships they built during their time in the military provided a great advantage to continue to serve people through funeral service. They built upon those relationships by being active in the community and building strong relationships with people of all walks of life.[21]

The inclusion of their military service may serve as a way to incorporate the values associated with the military: notions of brotherhood, honour, servitude, self-sacrifice. These values are incorporated, or at least meant to provoke association to, their work in the funeral home.

[18] https://www.bartonfuneralhome.net/
[19] https://www.mcbridefuneralhometexas.com/who-we-are/history-and-staff
[20] https://www.mcbridefuneralhometexas.com/who-we-are/
[21] https://www.dignitymemorial.com/funeral-homes/copperas-cove-tx/crawford-bowers-funeral-home/1796

There is a sentiment present in a lot of these text that speak to the narrative of funeral homes being more than a business or providing a service, seen clearly in Ferfolia Funeral Home in Ohio:

> Our job is not to just arrange and direct a funeral. It is to explore, guard and completely carry out the wishes of the family to celebrate their loved one's life. We are proud that so many have turned to us in their time of need. 92 years and four generations of family later we are committed to continue to provide the finest of funeral services to our families. [22]

This funeral home lays a lot of emphasis on their ties to the community; the use of '*our families'* creating and reaffirming their kin status (Agha 2015) by connecting their families to customers – though note that they do not refer to them as such. Ferfolia, too, locate themselves in the community temporally by referencing the generational nature of their business, and this also serves to integrate and associate their family to the service they provide, bringing kinship to the fore of their business.

Perhaps the clearest of all the examples so far in chronotopic formulations (Agha 2015) is the Ohio Tribute Funeral Home:

> Since the establishment of our first funeral homes, we have continued the *time-honored* tradition of exceptional service to our community and we are proud of our *long standing* [sic] history that spans *multiple generations* of care. […] In December 2015, Joe sold Oliver Floyd Funeral Home to Eric Fee, long-time local minster [sic] and owner of Braund-Pope Funeral Home in New Madison, Ohio. On February 1, 2018, the name of the funeral homes were changed to Tribute Funeral Homes to reflect what we do. This has allowed the funeral homes to continue to serve as Darke County's only locally owned funeral homes.[23] (emphasis mine)

Here, they use three phrases in one sentence establishing their temporal connection to the space, and then providing a sort-of family tree of the funeral home. The last sentence is to separate them from the other funeral homes in the county as the only locally owned, which is another way of connecting themselves to the community.

The Floridian Martin Funeral Home and Crematory also separate themselves from the larger chain funeral homes and deathcare corporations, where their intention of communicating this is more explicit:

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[22] https://www.ferfoliafuneralhomes.com/about-us
[23] https://www.tributefuneralhomes.com/who-we-are/about-us

> At a time when many funeral homes are owned by mega-corporations listed on the national stock exchanges, Martin Funeral Home and Crematory is bucking the trend by remaining the only locally/family owned and operated funeral home and crematory establishment in Martin County and southern St. Lucie County. The owners feel strongly that they can serve Treasure Coast's families better if they remain locally/family owned and operated.[24]

All the examples above use language of care and kinship, implicitly and explicitly, to suggest that funerals and deathcare is more than just a service. Many are, as we have seen, family owned and generational, and they emphasise this; the importance of kin in deathcare is obviously still present today. This could be an expression of a reluctance to completely disembed death on a cultural level, and that the dead body is still social on a level that requires an aspect of care in its handling.

Building on Foucault's (1987) 'biopower', which I mentioned in the first chapter, Stephen Black (2018) writes that "biomedicine is characterized by an especially hierarchical caregiver (doctor)-care recipient (patient) communicative relationship," (89), and this is applicable also to post-mortem care. The American public are largely unaware of the rights and options they have in regards to their own deaths and the death of loved ones, this is one problem that the FTC investigation, Mitford (2000 [1964]), and the new deathcare movement have identified and addressed; this stemming from the same era where bodies were medicalised and relegated to authorities. While Black (2018) emphasises the impact on health and illness as a consequence of this unequal relationship between doctor and patient – where one part holds most of the knowledge and therefore, power – I think applying it to post-mortem care can also be useful in understanding the dynamic of a funeral director and a client.

Notions of Care

This word, care, is used generally and ubiquitously in the institutions of death – both pre- and post-mortem. The anthropology of deathcare has largely focused on palliative care, hospice care, assisted-living facilities and similar areas. Janelle S. Taylor writes of her experience with her mother's assisted-living facility that "care […] begins in gaps that it strives to bridge: the terrible distance between present suffering and hoped-for well-being, as well as the experiential gulf separating caregiver from the object of care, whose suffering can never be fully

[24] https://martin-funeral.com/wp/about-us/

shared," (Taylor 2014) but how do we conceptualise the care that happens when suffering has ended? There is no hope for recovery, but care does not cease at the moment of death – whatever the understanding of that moment is.

In "The Anthropology of Aging and Care", Elana D. Buch (2015) defines the English language understanding of the word 'care' – both as an act and an emotion (caring about and caring for). This is true in Norwegian too, where *omsorg* carries the same double meaning. How we care, and who we care for, is shaped by the cultural context we live in (Black 2018, 82).

What has the deathcare institution changed in the language around death? Many of the linguistic choices seem to work to soften death, in a way. Funeral homes use phrases such as 'passed on' instead of 'died'; when they speak of the benefits of embalming and making-up dead bodies they say it gives bodies a 'life-like' appearance, literally changing the face of death; the physical shape of the coffin (which more closely resembles the human form) to a casket – bedding included.

The established funeral and deathcare industry is not alone in using these kinds of emotive language and emphasising aspects of care, as the alternative deathcare industry, green burial groups, and activism organisations are also active users. These groups, however, are often using these tools in a different context and with different goals in mind. I will return to this for further discussion in chapter three.

Kinship, then, has not entirely been untangled in the professionalisation process. The language of care has a heavy presence in the professionalised sphere, and many funeral homes emphasise long ties to the community. When Barton Funeral Home writes that "our business prides itself on growing with the families it serves and having deep roots in the community,"[2] they are practicing a form of the 'reflexive kinship' (Agha 2015) I discussed earlier.

PERSONALISATION WITHIN UNIFORMITY

Sheila Harper (2012) carried out fieldwork in two funeral homes, one in Britain and one in the U.S. Her focus was the practice of leaving items in caskets for the dead, as well as dressing them in specific items. Harper (2012) argues that these objects and choices for the dead are a continuation of their identity and their relationships with the mourners. One

example from the American funeral home is the deceased Mr. McGloughlin, who is in the casket wearing socks, but not shoes, because his wife says: "that's what he's most comfortable in," (Harper 2012, 48). Letters, jewellery, photographs, and other objects placed in caskets were imbued with meaning, symbolic representations of who the deceased person was and the connections they made. Harper's (2012) work suggests that there is value for mourners in including aspects of personality and personhood in physical objects on or with the dead.

Offering personalisation in funeral services began in the mid-1990s (Sanders 2009), with things like jewellery, photo arrays, candles with photos of the deceased, specialised tribute videos, online memorials, and the above mentioned option of a 'celebration of life' as opposed to a traditional funeral. I observed this in many of the funeral home websites I visited, and I wondered how these emerged as fairly common practice in the U.S. They differed from the observations Harper (2012) made of the practice of grave goods, as these are not items or clothing brought by the family, but specific funeral products sold by the funeral home.

According to George Sanders (2009) in the *Encyclopedia of Death and the Human Experience,* these funeral products were an introduction of 'cultural' goods (311), as opportunities to "[…] symbolically represent, to themselves and others, the lives and social relations of the dead," (Sanders 2009, 311). What these goods also introduced is a funeral good that is entirely independent of the dead body; these can be produced and reproduced – a commodification of death that extends beyond the body.

Most of the funeral home websites I visited offered various ways to personalise a funeral service. Unfortunately, a lot of them were not specific about the options they provided without registering with their site or calling them directly.

For example, the McBride Funeral Home from earlier had a section on their website labelled 'merchandise', where they directed: "Feel free to call us anytime to explore the variety of ways you can care for both your loved one's memory and their physical remains."[25]

Martin Funeral Home, also from earlier, state that "In addition to the emotional healing that the funeral service provides, there is another, equally important dimension to funeral planning: It is personalization,"[26]. The personalisation here means displaying possessions of the deceased at

[25] https://www.mcbridefuneralhometexas.com/resources/merchandise
[26] https://martin-funeral.com/wp/services/

the funeral, offering tribute videos, photo arrays, and special music selections. Commodifying death by offering certain products to memorialise the dead is not inherently bad, and that is not what I am suggesting. However, when these funeral homes emphasise the importance of personalisation in order to 'properly' remember and honour the dead that are centred around buying the extra products that they offer, it illuminates the consumer focus of a large part of the industry and the further commodification of death.

To illustrate one aspect of this, I want to look at one funeral home which offered a lot of detail on the personalisation options available, as it speaks to some of the larger points I am arguing. The Barton Funeral Home use videos to inform their potential customers of the products and options available, through a video called 'meaningful selections'[27].

If you've ever seen TV Shop, you have some idea of what the video looks like. A salesperson, in a soothing voice, presents different options for the buyer, while the various casket options glide through the video. There is an emphasis throughout on the various options for personalisation available with their caskets:

A corner cut out can fit a statue-like symbol for your dead loved one; the examples used are a fish, trees with the letters 'dad' carved onto mountains above it, a duck taking flight over bulrush – simple, fairly generalised decoration.

Additionally, tribute panels embroidered into the inside top-lid (on display with the open casket funeral) are available; landscapes, a sowing kit, or a 'meaningful saying' used as examples here. Then, there is the registered trademark memorysafe [sic] drawer, where loved ones are 'encouraged to participate', for photos, letters and the like, sending the dead with tokens from the living. While sending the dead with grave goods can offer meaning and significance to mourners, as we saw in Harper's (2012) fieldwork, the video emphasises "the ability to personalise the casket can be important for expressing your loved one's individuality," (1:03). When describing the caskets, the salesperson emphasises various attributes of the different materials and designs (though not the price), describing their resistance to rust and deterioration, (2:40) "Virtually all bronze, copper, and stainless steel – and many steel caskets – are designed with features that help to resist the entrance of air, water, and other gravesite substances,". I wonder what this is referring to? Other decomposing bodies? What exactly is it that the dead body needs protection from?

[27] https://www.bartonfuneralhome.net/merchandise?selectionsPath=L2VkdWNhdGlvbg==

The next section looks at embalming's place in U.S. funerary customs today, and a cultural fear or discomfort with the idea of decomposition. This, I think, can explain why Barton Funeral Home is marketing caskets that are supposed to protect the dead body, sealing it in and preserving it.

EMBALMING AND ITS CONTEMPORARY ROLE IN NORTH AMERICAN FUNERALS

After looking in chapter one at how embalming was introduced and adopted to funerary customs in the US, as well as how it contributed to the professionalisation of deathcare, this section takes a closer look at its cultural impact today.

There is no registry or official estimate of how many are embalmed in the US every year, though in the article "Drinking Grandma: The Problem of Embalming" Jeremiah Chiappelli and Ted Chiappelli (2008) write that The National Funeral Directors' Association estimated that it was around two million (24). If this estimate is correct this is a vast majority, as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) death toll for 2008 was just shy of two and half million[28]. This also indicates how integrated this practice is within American deathcare, evolving from the battlefields of the Civil War through the medicalisation and professionalisation of the dead body.

On the subject, Ariès comments that contemporary embalming practices in North America serves "[…] to play down the death of the person and to create the illusion of a living being," (1974a, 558), where the role of the mortician is to create this illusion to soften death, and Ariès even goes so far as to say that death and sadness have been banished from funerals. "It is the first time that a society has in a general way honored its dead while refusing them the status of death," (Ariès 1974a, 558).

To further explore how embalming is presented and understood, I looked at funeral homes that offer information on the subject (many listed it as an option but did not offer much information). For example, Barton Family Funeral Services write: "[…] embalming is seldom

[28] 2,471, 948
https://wonder.cdc.gov/controller/datarequest/D76;jsessionid=94064EF3C8A1ABF61B394531EF41

necessary. It is done primarily to facilitate funeral services where the casket is open to the public and to help achieve a desired cosmetic result,"[29] but only a few sentences later:

> The modern method of embalming is defined as the disinfection and preservation of the dead human body.
>
> It is performed for three reasons:
>
> - The primary purpose of embalming is disinfection. While some pathogens die soon after the death of the host, many dangerous organisms have the ability to survive for long periods of time in dead tissues. Persons coming in direct contact with the un-embalmed body can become infected as well as there being the possibility of flies or other agents transferring pathogens to humans.
> - The second purpose preservation. The prevention of putrefaction and decomposition allows burial, cremation, or entombment to take place without the odors or other unpleasantness that accompany uncared for remains.
> - The third purpose is restoration. Returning the body to a life-like appearance has received many critics, but the custom of viewing the body after death in a state of rest remains a practice of proven psychological worth.[5]

Here, the dead body is clearly angled in a way that presents it as potentially dangerous. The third point makes it seem as though it would not be possible to receive the psychological benefits of seeing the dead body if it were un-embalmed. It also divides dead bodies into either 'embalmed' or 'uncared for remains', which I want to stay on to bring in notions of care and dead bodies. "'Care' in English-speaking places connotes both affective concern (caring about) and practical action (caring for)," (Buch 2015, 279), and I think the 'uncared for remains' is appealing to both of those meanings: that caring about someone means giving a specific kind of practical care, here, embalming. Note that this is the only time the dead body is referred to as 'remains' – the lack of physical care implied when a family does not choose embalming removes the dead body further from personhood. It can suggest that decomposition is understood and communicated as dehumanising in the literal sense of making someone less than human.

[29] https://bartonfuneral.com/funeral-basics/history-of-embalming

Barton Family Funeral Service also write that:

> The modern embalming process is designed to slow tissue decomposition for the period of time necessary for disposition as arranged by the family of the deceased. Under favorable conditions, modern processes have shown to be able to keep a body intact for decades. Rather than prevent the body from returning to natural elements, embalming allows the body to decompose by oxidation and dissolution rather than by putrefaction or rotting.[17]

This quote presents a controlled, delayed decomposition as the benefit of embalming, whereas the 'uncared for remains' would putrefy and rot. Why, precisely, the body would *need* to be kept intact is unclear, but picking up Stephenson's (1985) argument that the era of death avoidance in the U.S. involves an active denial of death that prompts revulsion of the idea of a naturally decomposing body could speak to this idea. The caskets offered in the video above from Barton Funeral Home also confirms this idea that the dead body must be protected, remain untouched by the realities of death and decomposition for as long as possible.

Purification rituals are about organisation, dirt is matter out of place – dead bodies must undergo purification rituals and are matter out of place almost everywhere. Embalming is one aspect of the purification ritual, but this takes place with most of the ritualisation of caring for dead bodies. What is interesting in this is that dead bodies have not always been a danger to the living – we see the change occurring over time and connected to specific ideas being introduced and the body moving from one sphere to another. The ritualistic purification through embalming happens concurrently with professionalisation, although more factors are at play that influence this shift.

Vilonia Funeral Home in Arkansas first link embalming to the ancient Egyptian practice, and then say that its main purpose today is temporary disinfection and preservation. One difference from Barton Family Funeral Service is that they say that embalming only slows the process of decomposition – though they phrase it as "returning to its natural state in the earth,"[30] – instead of embalming changing how the body decomposes.

> Families may choose embalming for a variety of reasons including the desire to have a public viewing and ceremonies with the body present. […] Does a human body have to be embalmed by law? There is no law in Arkansas that requires a human body to be embalmed. Arkansas law does require that if a human body is not embalmed, it must be refrigerated,

[30] https://www.viloniafuneralhome.com/is-embalming-required-by-law

> buried, or cremated within twenty-four hours after death. It is the policy of Vilonia Funeral Home, and most funeral homes that a body must be embalming [sic] for a Public Viewing, or ceremonies where the body is present. This is for public health concerns.[6]

The Funeral Consumer Alliance identify embalming as a way for funeral homes to increase profit, often combined with the special features of protective caskets[31], taking a clear critical stance against using methods of preserving a body as a sales tactic. The FTC, on their "funeral costs and pricing list"[32] specify that embalming is neither legally required or necessary for direct cremation, and that only certain situations legally require embalming before burial (such as transporting the body across state lines).

Below their checklist, they also say that there is no way to indefinitely preserve a body, and that funeral homes are prohibited from making this claim. No casket, burial vault, or embalming process will prevent decomposition, but the idea of putrefaction still seems to garner enough negative emotions that funeral homes try to negate this while (somewhat) complying with The Funeral Rule.

On a different part of their website, the FTC informs consumers that they have the right to make funeral arrangements that do not include embalming, and here they include that "*no state law requires embalming for every death,"*[33] (emphasis mine). In addition to direct cremation or burial, here they also say that for most bodies, refrigeration will suffice. Though some funeral homes have a policy of embalming in the case of public viewings, again they specify that there are no state laws that require it.[20]

Embalming is an important contributor in the commodification of death, in the case of the U.S. it was a major factor in the professionalisation process. The human body suddenly required a specialised service that families could not provide, and became a source of income for undertakers.

The other aspect, as was discussed in chapter one, is that it is for sanitary or disinfectant purposes – the un-embalmed body is understood and presented as *dangerous*. Even though the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) requires funeral homes to display on their websites that

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[31] https://funerals.org/?consumers=embalming-what-you-should-know
[32] https://www.consumer.ftc.gov/articles/0301-funeral-costs-and-pricing-checklist
[33] https://www.consumer.ftc.gov/articles/0300-ftc-funeral-rule

embalming is not necessary and that the dead body is very unlikely to be harmful, it is still presented as conducive to health and safety.

Additionally, death denial and fear of decomposition have made embalming a staple within much of the industry. This is partly why embalming is part of American funeral customs, as its purpose is to present the dead body as life-like as possible, and it is understood that a body that appears ‘too dead’ would traumatise the living, the ‘face of death’ is too jarring.

CRITISISM OF THE FUNERAL INDUSTRY

This section covers some of the criticisms that the funeral industry has received since the 1960s, some of which is directly linked to the natural and eco-friendly movement that follows this chapter. Unpacking and examining the practices that have been criticised, as well as the history of American deathcare from chapter one, is vital in understanding what the death acceptance, natural, and eco-friendly movements are responding to and rejecting.

In *The American Way of Death revisited,* Mitford (2000 [1963]) offers a sharp critique of American funeral practices, and the industry. One of the issues she points to, and for which she blames many of the problems within the industry, is the increasing monopolisation of funeral homes (Mitford 2000 [1963], 188-190). Her argument is that the monopolisation of deathcare is a significant factor in driving up prices and creating predatory and exploitative sales tactics.

Mitford also criticises the extravagant features of the funeral: highly ornate and embellished caskets, funeral parlours decorated lavishly, a wide selection of services available in handling the corpse (such as embalming), and various smaller aesthetic features common to the American funeral, and these are attributed more in the service of the capitalistic endeavours of funeral homes and funeral home corporations rather than serving the dead or their kin.

Mitford’s book (2000 [1963]) is written fairly accessibly to a large audience, and it resonated strongly with the public at the time. While some of her reporting reads as more anecdotal evidence than systematic intention to ‘trick’ customers, some of the criticism is supported by other sources, especially by an investigation by the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) that took place in the early 1970s.

The FTC found supporting evidence to many of Mitford's claims; there was a tendency among funeral homes to sell 'packages' or 'bundles', often including extra services that customers would not have chosen and did not want (Slocum 2017).

The prices were rarely disclosed by the funeral home, and customers already had little experience to compare with. While the discoveries of the FTC were naturally focused on consumer protection, this also speaks to a larger, cultural unfamiliarity with death, and deathcare services. Families and next of kin have lost the knowledge of caring for their dead. The hospital, hospice or nursing home is the most common place of death, and funeral directors are the expert authorities on post-mortem bodies.

As a consequence of the investigation, the FTC report launched what they called the "Funeral Rule", which went into effect in 1984 (Slocum 2017). This meant that funeral homes had to list the items and services they offered separately and with their price. Funeral homes also had to disclose their prices over the phone, presumably to encourage customers to 'shop around' and find a price that suited them.

The Funeral Rule was written with the intention of allowing more transparency for consumers, but there is a disconnect to the culture's relationship with death, where people do not buy funeral arrangements the same way they would purchase a car. One of the ways that show legislation was not sufficient in changing some of the practices criticised by Mitford (2000 [1963]), is that a 2017 report found the largest deathcare conglomerate in North America routinely engaging in them. The public outrage of the findings of the FTC report and Mitford's (2000 [1963]) book may have pushed people toward cremation rather than burial, but the practices that were criticised in the mid-20th century are still central to why some actors are looking to drastically change the industry and culture around death.

PUTTING A PRICE ON DEATH – THE COMMODIFIED CORPSE

Some of what we have seen in this chapter is a commodification of death, as well as the commodification of the corpse. Embalming, for example, has received much criticism as a practice often pushed on families as a necessity, when it rarely is. This is credited to increasing profits for funeral homes, thus literally commodifying the body of the deceased. Many funeral homes do not offer further explanation for embalming to be policy *in all cases*

(other than for public health reasons, which the FTC does not support), such as Vilonia Funeral Home from earlier.

The MacIntyre Funeral Home takes quite a defensive tone when discussing the cost of a funeral, comparing it to a birth (this is interesting, do they mean the cost of raising a child? Buying necessities? Hospital bills?) and weddings. They claim that wedding costs are "rarely criticised" – which is rather ridiculous, and patently untrue – because it is a "happy event".

> Additionally, the cost of a funeral includes not only merchandise, like caskets, but the services of a funeral director in making arrangements; filing appropriate forms; dealing with doctors, ministers, florists, newspapers and others; and seeing to all the necessary details. Funeral directors look upon their profession as a service, but it is also a business. Like any business, funeral homes must make a profit to exist.[34]

The arguments by MacIntyre Funeral Home[35] presents all these services as necessary; the cost is high, but only because all of these are needed in order to dispose of a body. It is both extensive and at times vague (I could not find out what they meant by 'dealing with doctors', for example), where the funeral home is the only way to ensure that everything is done correctly (remember the 'masters of ritual').

Additionally, the elaborate caskets with protective features can be seen as a commodification of the fear and denial of death, on top of the commodification of the corpse. The protective features of these caskets do not serve any practical function, and critics have argued that they serve only the bottom line of funeral homes.

Exceptions to the Uniformity

Before I conclude this chapter, I want to address that there are exceptions to the uniformity of American funerals. Metcalf and Huntington (1991) were more focused on the fact that, despite its diversity, U.S. funerary practices vary little across regionals, between ethnic groups, or between social classes. While this chapter has shown some of the reasons for this surprising lack of diversity, this section briefly covers some exceptions.

[34] https://www.macintyrefamilyfuneralhome.com/frequent-questions

[35] While I have used MacIntyre Funeral Home here, I found that the exact same FAQ section and answers feature in many other funeral homes, and the particular answer on why funerals are expensive even shows up on an Italian funeral home website: https://onoranzefunebrifabbri.it/resources/faq/. I have not been able to link these funeral homes to a corporation, e.g. SCI, or how, if they are, elsewhere connected

There is a difference between African-American funerals and European-American funerals (Boateng and Anngela-Cole 2016), but the largest difference is seen in how the memorial service is conducted, and less about how the body is handled before and after the memorial (this is the homogenic tendency we see in large parts of the US, barring certain religious and (more recently settled) ethnic groups). The marked differences are within the religious groups in the U.S., and I use Jewish and Muslim practices to illustrate that there are certain parts of the U.S. and groups who do not fall into the uniformity that Huntington and Metcalf (1991) describe. Alan R. Kemp's *Death, Dying, and Bereavement in a Changing World* (2019) provides the main source for this, though I also looked at descriptions given by Jewish Funeral Homes in the U.S. for cross-referencing purposes.

One important difference in Jewish customs is that the dead body is rarely left alone, the custom being that someone should always be with the body, or *mit* (Kemp 2019, 117). The *mit* is washed by members of the community, with women caring for women, and men for men. There is no embalming involved, the body is usually left as is with no make-up. Typically they will use a burial shroud instead of clothing to dress the body, and it will be placed in a simple wooden casket, importantly made without inorganic materials (nails etc). Burial takes place as soon as possible, within 24 hours.

While Kemp (2019) is describing the customs Jewish people should strive to follow, one Jewish funeral home in Texas described some situations where burial may be delayed: while waiting for the shroud or a proper casket to be delivered; wating for the eulogising rabbi; allowing relatives time to travel to the funeral; postponing until after Sabbath; situations in which the authorities require post-mortem examination or similar[36]. The funeral and burial can otherwise be said to follow many of the same steps as the standard American funeral, (funeral service at the synagogue or mortuary, with a eulogy, then the burial with mourners laying soil on the grave) with the important differences occurring around the handling of the dead body. Muslim practices in many ways are quite similar to the Jewish, with the body washed and cared for by the same gender (with the exception being spouses), the body is wrapped in cloth, and burial should take place as quickly as possible.

The ceremonies around a funeral that take place in religious or secular spaces follow a lot of the same steps, but the religious customs particular to Jewish people and Muslims require

[36] https://www.jewishfuneralsusa.com/jewish-funeral-traditions/

very different handlings of the body, and importantly have retained some of the community focused care that we observed in North America and Europe prior to professionalisation. Perhaps Metcalf and Huntington (1991), when they spoke of the uniformity of American ways of death, did not assign significant importance to the differences I have mentioned. The fact that embalming is a significant contributor and feature in American funerals, which is not allowed for Jewish or Muslim bodies, should mark a difference in the study of American deathways.

Conclusion

The cases I have presented in this chapter show how the professionalisation process that began in the 1800s has shaped the contemporary funeral industry. The commodification of death has happened through a commodification of the corpse, in addition to the myriad of services that critics argue are pushed solely for the profit of the funeral homes and conglomerates. I have showed that funeral homes practice 'reflexive kinship' (Agha 2015), and argued that this is an indication that death is not entirely disembedded from kin and community – though expressed within the sphere of commodification rather than practice.

The professionalisation of deathcare has also led to a larger degree of uniformity, spurred on the introduction of large conglomerations like SCI. These processes – the commodification of death and the corpse, as well as institutionalising the knowledge of deathcare – are key factors in creating the cultural death denial present in the U.S., as well as large parts of Europe. Importantly, this has resulted in a cultural unfamiliarity with death, where the knowledge of deathcare has been lost for most of the population. The consequences of this is harder to parse, but the next chapter covers some of the major arguments by activists and professionals who work in deathcare, who are working to change the cultures of death denial in myriad ways.

From Death Awareness to Death Positivity

Changing Our Relationships to Death

> "Our culture does not prepare us to cope with our own death or with the death of others." (Kearl 1989, 424)

The first part of this thesis provides not only important background for analysis of the second part, but has a more dynamic relationship to the new movements within deathcare. The practices of pre-Civil War America are being remade and reintroduced, and the contemporary mainstream funeral industry is what the alternative and green burial movements are reacting to. This chapter and the next show how new and old ways of disposing of the dead are meeting. Like the Levi-Straussian bricoleur (1966) who utilises the materials at hand and existing tools to create new methods and constructions, some actors behind a new movement within body disposal are utilising, recontextualising, and recombining tools and methods of the past to create new forms of death and burial.

The changes in culture advocated by many of the activists involve looking back at old traditions, blending the old with the new, and utilising previous customs to solve contemporary issues around death. This chapter focuses mainly on the activism and alternative ways of death that are attempting to change Americans' relationship to death, and meeting death in new ways. I argue that the activists and groups are approaching their goal of changing both the cultural and personal relationships to death in the U.S. by encouraging more kin and community involvement, by acknowledging and accepting one's own death, and by encouraging a closer physical involvement in deathcare. I compare the new movements to movements and practices of the past, and look at how new ideas and new roles to make knowledge of death and deathcare more available to the public are being introduced.

In the first chapter, I briefly covered the gendered aspect of professionalising deathcare. This moved care of the dead body from reproductive labour – that is, mostly female labour not involved in commodity market exchange – to expert male authorities that explicitly excluded women. While Benston (2019 [1969]) argued that industrialisation took over for kin-based production units in order to serve efficiency, in the case of deathcare this may be a feature rather than the explanation. There is no evidence to suggest that population growth, though rapid coming into the early 20th century, necessitated industrialised body disposal. It

seems a more likely explanation that it is tied to the medicalisation of the body, which disregarded female- and kin-produced knowledge.

While the U.S. is the main focus here, there are similar patterns of kin-based deathcare disappearing in favour of (mostly male) professionals in European countries, following the patterns of professionalisation and industrialisation. This happened largely after the second World War in Britain, at the rapid expansion of professional funeral arrangers, and in the 1960s in France when professional embalmers took over care of the dead body (Olson 2018).

One of the issues with the funeral industry raised in chapter two was that the American public is not well-informed when it comes to death and funerals (beyond a more surface level). If professionalisation disembedded death, the activists and alternative deathcare workers I amm looking at in this chapter are looking for ways to re-embed death and deathcare into kinship networks. To explore this, I am using The Order of the Good Death (I refer to this occasionally as The Order) and its founder Caitlin Doughty as a case study, as well as the recently emerged death doulas – some of whom are tied to The Order, and some outside of it. Many of the activists featured in this chapter use 'death positive' to communicate their goals, and so first I will look at where this movement comes from, and what it entails.

THE DEATH AWARENESS MOVEMENT

Though I have argued that the North American culture of death centre more around denial and fear, the Death Awareness Movement has existed in the US since the 1950s (Doka 2003). Its origin is within academia, including the anthropologist Geoffrey Gorer, whose 1955 essay "The Pornography of Death" I discussed in chapter one. Gorer was one of the first to analyse the death denial and fear of death in the U.K., though he extends his analysis somewhat to 'Anglo-Saxon societies' (Gorer 1955, 50), suggesting that his analysis of a cultural fear or obscenity around death is applicable to the U.S.

The death awareness movement included a wide range of fields: "medicine, nursing, philosophy, sociology, psychology, pastoral care, social commentary, funeral service, and theology". (Doka 2003, 3), and eventually became a public discussion outside of academia. This is partly thanks to the highly successful books *American Way of Death* by Jessica Mitford

published in 1963 which I have mentioned several times, and Elisabeth Kübler-Ross' *On Death and Dying* in 1969 (Doka 2003).

Ariès (1974a) also discusses the beginning of academic interest in the field, though he doesn't refer to the death awareness movement, where he argues that "sociology and psychology are supplying the first signs that contemporary man is rediscovering death," (1974a, 537). He even goes as far as to suggest that "the new sociology of death […] marks not only the beginning of a scientific bibliography on death, but very likely also a turning point in the history of attitudes toward death," (1974a, 538). Though much scholarship on e.g. grief emerged with the movement, hospice care became available to the dying, and cremation saw its rise, it is difficult to find any significant changes in the attitudes toward death, nor a great new academic venture. Culturally, neither Europe nor North America seems to have 'rediscovered death', but perhaps we see that emergence now – only a few decades too late?

One of the changes in deathcare brought about by the death awareness movement is hospice care. Kenneth J. Doka (2003) writes that hospice care was "[…] one of the most successful grassroots movements in the last quarter of the 20th century," (Doka 2003, 5), and that many approached caring for the dead in more homelike conditions, where the family was more involved and present. In addition to hospice, grief counselling grew as a service from many of the psychologists involved with the death awareness movement, and is now offered as a service through many funeral homes.

While the death awareness movement has certainly had an impact on death and deathcare, it is an amorphous movement without a clear focus or goal shared easily pinpointed. Much of the discussion around death awareness was concentrated within academia, and only later engaging somewhat with the public. One of the earliest organisations to form under the movement, still existing today, is the Association for Death Education and Counseling (ADEC). They describe their primary goal as "to enhance the ability of professionals to meet the needs of those with whom they work in death education and grief counseling"[37], focusing their attention on educating and providing information to their members, who in turn are supposed to do the same to the public [38]. Hospice care and grief counselling being seemingly the two biggest outcomes of the death awareness movement, and the ones most directly affecting the public and influencing culture.

[37] https://www.adec.org/page/Discover_ADEC
[38] https://www.adec.org/page/Discover_ADEC

I now want to look at some of the differences and similarities between the death awareness movement to the death *positive* movement. This is to show how the ideas of the mid-1900s have changed and developed, and also to compare the two movements in terms of goals and influence. The death positive movement takes a much more direct approach than the death awareness movement, encouraging the public to confront their death fears, accept their own and other's death, and deal with un unvarnished reality of death. The Order of the Good Death are a death positive group "working to bring death awareness and acceptance into a culture that is all too often death phobic,"[39], and "accepting that death itself is natural, but the death anxiety and terror of modern culture are not"[40], involving deathcare professionals, various artists, and academics, but also making active attempts to engage directly with the public. This is a collective of people working in many different ways toward the goal of changing cultural attitudes of death.

I mentioned Philip R. Olson's article "Domesticating Deathcare: The Women of the U.S. Natural Deathcare Movement" (2018) briefly in the first chapter, and will here look more closely at his findings, and how it fits into the larger movement happening in the U.S. Olson (2018) places the beginning of the natural deathcare movement in the U.S. at around the late 1990s – a movement which is decidedly spearheaded by women. Olson's (2018) focus is on the death doulas and home funeral guides, which he refers to collectively as natural deathcare assistants (NDAs). The following section introduces some of the work of death doulas in the context of care, and I return to my analysis of their project and work later in this chapter. I argue that death doulas are working alter the cultural relationship to death through re-embedding death to the kin and community sphere, using similar practices as seen with the Nepalese Yolmo (Desjarlais 2014).

CARING FOR THE DEAD

In chapter two I looked at the concept of care, which has often been used within the anthropology of death in Europe and North America. Largely, this work has focused on the concept within areas of palliative care, aging, hospice, and similar situations. In this section I want to look at care again, and how this concept can be understood as serving a new purpose within the alternative deathcare movement. Robert Desjarlais' "Liberation Upon Hearing:

[39] http://www.orderofthegooddeath.com/faq
[40] http://www.orderofthegooddeath.com/about

Voice, Morality, and Death in a Buddhist World," (2014) which I briefly mentioned in chapter two is used in this chapter to look at the many similarities between the observations he made and the work of the death positive movement, and particularly to analyse and understand the work of death doulas.

When it comes to caring for the dead and dying, the professionalisation process outlined in previous chapters arguably created a separation between physical acts of care, and emotional acts of care. Taylor (2014) speaks of the tension between "arduous and tedious physical tasks," (Taylor 2014) and the nurturing, spiritual elements of caregiving, drawn from her experience with her mother's care home. Caregiving (professional and not) can and is still both, but it is easier to see the divide when it is outsourced and professionalised.

We can contrast this understanding by looking at the Yolmo of Nepal, who have what Desjarlais describes as an *ethics of care* (2014, 104):

> The stories that Yolmo people tell of their neighbors' passings are narratives of tender accompaniment. They speak to a modest, abiding copresence in the hours of dying, where person sits and talks, or keeps quiet company, alongside a dying relative or neighbor.
>
> (Desjarlais 2014, 104)

This ethics of care also includes *techniques of care* (Desjarlais 2014, 104), which are spontaneous acts such as touching and holding the dying, bringing food and drinks, and speaking words of comfort. There is an integration of both concepts of care: the physical and emotional. Because the care is performed by the community, these two are integrated and inseparable.

The ethics of care is a community responsibility to assist in the dying process, where actions are less important than presence – dying is not a private affair, nor the sole responsibility of the family or the individual. If we consider the early nineteenth century deathbeds from chapter one that Ariès (1974b) described, where passers-by would visit and the dying delivered their final wishes to close family and kin, we see a similar, community responsibility between the Yolmo and nineteenth century Europe and North America. When I refer to the *bricoleur* (Levi-Straus 1966) of the death positive and natural deathcare movement, this is partly why this term is relevant: this way of dying is not new. Community responsibility and care was the old way of death in many places, and as seen with the Yolmo (Desjarlais 2014), exists in other parts of the world today.

DEATH DOULAS

The term 'doula' was introduced by anthropologist Dana Raphael in *The Tender Gift: Breastfeeding* (1976). The word is Greek in origin and referred to women who would assist in postpartum care through childminding, cooking, and general help to the mother (Raphael 1981, 13). The way Raphael took use of the word was to assist in breastfeeding, as the title suggests, when American mothers were returning to the practice after a period of mostly formula use. She identified that many American mothers were struggling with breastfeeding right after birth, and suggested the doula as a solution to this problem. "[…] the routine in most maternity units is so "efficient" it actually fosters an "anti-doula" effect," (Raphael 1981, 13). The medicalisation process coupled with the industrialisation of care under capitalism (Benston 2019 [1969]), if we follow Raphael's argument that efficiency can be detrimental to postpartum care, creates the need for someone outside the medical team "mothering the mother," (Raphael 1981) for a period following the birth.

The doulaship later evolved into someone who also is present leading up to and during the birth, as an advocate for the birthing person, often giving practical, emotional, and spiritual assistance. From this, we arrive at death doulas, who assist at the other end of life, again often in practical, emotional, and spiritual ways.

In "Describing the End-of-Life Doula Role and Practices of Care: Perspectives from Four Countries" (2020) Marian Krawczyk and Merilynne Rush split the types of services provided by death doulas into six categories: 1) coordination and navigation, 2) emotional and spiritual support, 3) death literacy and information transfer, 4) companionship and presence, 5) basic practical and personal care, and 6) after-deathcare. These categories included a wide range, from activism and workshops to cooking and childcare; from organising and arranging home funerals to facilitating the legal documents required. What each death doula offers varies, both depending on their skills and experience, and the needs of the family. What ties the work of death doulas together is an aspect of care that they have identified as lacking within the dying process.

Doulagivers is one of the death doula organisations in the U.S., though there are no official requirements or qualifications necessary, and each organisation gives the training they deem applicable to earn the title. They describe their work as: "[…] changing healthcare and providing the best holistic education for non-medical professionals that will bring the best

possible care to both patients and loved ones"[41]. Death doulas do not work specifically within or for an institution, but are hired by families, private institutions, hospices, and home health agencies. Doulagivers predict a much larger need for this type of work in the future, as "there is an elder care crisis that is happening now and is projected to become dramatically worse for decades to come"[10].

One of my interlocutors, Anna, a nurse who works as a death doula part time, asked: "You have the chapel, case manager, social worker, doctor, nurse. Why are we not tacked on as part of the [palliative] care team?"[42], arguing that what they can offer can supplement and provide something that is not covered by the palliative team. This 'something' is difficult to define, but similarly the International End of Life Doula Association (INELDA) say that:

> Hospice and palliative care programs don't have the structure or staffing to alleviate the care issues that arise from our cultural denial and avoidance around death. This is why the new role of doula has emerged. Doulas fill in the gaps. More than that, they help restore sacredness to dying, provide respite to exhausted caregivers, bring deep meaning to the dying experience, and prepare people for the last breaths of their loved one.[43]

There is evidence to support the gaps that both Doulagivers and INELDA speak of, for example research done by oncologist Barbara A. Given and sociologist and registered nurse Susan C. Reinhard, who say that "[…] patients and families continue to have concerns around cost, lack of compassion and dignity, fragmented care, pain and discomfort, and a drawn out dying process," (Given and Reinhard 2017, 50). They, similarly to Doulagivers, point to the aging population of the U.S., which requires, and will continue to require, greater access and quality of care in the future.

In their article "Caregiving at the End of Life: The Challenges for Family Caregivers" Given and Reinhard (2017) also identify that family caregivers have a need for emotional support themselves, in situations that can be physically and emotionally taxing, and that state and local resources for this can be fragmented and insufficient.

The medicalisation of death, Doulagivers and other death doulas argue, has removed the emotional aspect of caregiving in death, that the dying person requires more than pain relief in their final moments. Taylor's (2014) divide of the physical and nurturing aspects of care

[41] https://doulagivers.com/faq/
[42] Zoom call 29.11.2020
[43] https://www.inelda.org/why-become-a-doula/

again is applicable within this argument; these are the gaps in healthcare that doulas are referring to and stepping into, providing a support for families and the dying that they deem missing in the institutions of deathcare.

While there is no set of practices and services that all death doulas offer, there are certain tasks that she offers and roles she fills. Whether in the hospital, hospice, or home, the death doula offers techniques of care (Desjarlais 2014, 104) which are actions including touching, soft spoken words, supporting the body and giving comfort, responding to calls for assistance, listening to the final testament, and instructing what to expect in the encounter with death. Desjarlais (2014) says that with the Yolmo, these techniques of care make death less feared and people less anxious, and their dying process is in the company of family and friends.

I will now look at some specific acts that the Yolmo carry out in the dying process, and look at the work of a death doula to argue their similarities.

The Yolmo are read a Buddhist spiritual text as they are dying, preferably by lamas or dharmas, a text to explain and prepare the dying for what happens after death. "The coarseness of dying is steered into something sacred and transformative. When heard, the texts emit a semantic, syllabic, and emotional fullness which stands in contrast to the sparse banality of dying," (Desjarlais 2014, 108). The words of the text are not particularly important (and often only understood by the lama), but the rhythm of speech or the act of reading itself offers comfort and assurance to those who are dying. The texts exist to teach people how to die, preparing them for the process and for leaving behind the life they have had, an unmaking of the person in the dying process.

The Caitlin Doughty - Ask A Mortician YouTube channel had Alua Arthur, a death doula who previously worked as a lawyer, demonstrate and talk about her work, having a 'practice death' with Doughty[44]. I want to use this demonstration as well as an interview Arthur gave in *The Cut* (Cowley 2020) to draw connections between Artur's work and Yolmo practices described in Desjarlais' (2014).

In the interview and demonstration with Doughty, Arthur says that she tries to create the kind of atmosphere that a person would want to die in, and asks questions to Doughty about what she would want her room and deathbed to look like, such as if she wants flowers,

[44] https://youtu.be/vD8TA5OdJg8

incense, candles, and music. When the room and bed are prepared, Doughty lies in the bed with flowers decorating the headrest, on the nightstand, and on her chest. There is soft, quiet music playing, and Arthur sits next to Doughty on the bed, stroking her gently. Arthur offers words of comfort: "you're doing great, you're doing it right, you're safe," (7:01 – 7:05). She massages feet and hands, explaining that extremities often get cold as the body shuts down. As she's demonstrating the techniques of care (Desjarlais 2014), she says that for those who have been caring for someone who is dying, once they're gone there is a feeling of not knowing what to do, or a lack of a sense of purpose. Engaging with the dying process gives them a chance to care for their loved one, one last time. This may extend to post-deathcare, such as washing the dead body.

In the interview with *The Cut*, Arthur explains how she works with her clients, saying "Whatever they need, I will do," (Cowles 2020). She often works with her clients for weeks or months before death, helping them plan their dying process and death wishes, she helps them prepare their wills and other practical matters. As the client approaches death more imminently, Arthur visits with them every day, and stays with the family after the death has occurred.

> I may also help wrap up practical affairs — possessions, accounts, life insurance, documents. It's exhausting for a family to have to think about that when they're also grieving, and I'm equipped to help. I'll sit on hold with insurance companies, make funeral arrangements, all that stuff. (Cowels 2020)

The work Arthur describes here is a form of preparing for death; there is a process of unmaking meant to prepare the dying person for death in the plans Arthur helps them make. In her demonstration or practice death with Doughty, the soothing words and carefully crafted atmosphere serve much the same purpose as the reading of the text with the Yolmo; these practices are meant to create a calm and peaceful environment for the dying. Just as the Yolmo receive the final testament (Desjarlais 2014), Arthur provides the practical and legal assistance leading up to death, ensuring that affairs are in order.

> In Yolmo communities, some people are known to have died in great pain, while some in conditions of fear and distress. Others have died with a marked sense of peace of mind and attentive consciousness of their passings. Despite these differences in how people die, it's clear that the practices of care that people bring to the dying ease and comfort the dying most of the time. (Desjarlais 2014, 109)

The above also illustrates one important part of the argument that many death doulas make, including my interlocutor: that death can be scary and painful, but can be eased in the presence of integrated care that focuses on both the physical and the emotional. "Care involves an act of reaching out, in a gesture that seeks to comfort, to connect, to heal—to make whole. To *integrate,"* (Taylor 2014). The work of the new death positive movement and natural deathcare movement are, I argue, attempting to integrate the physical tasks of care with the nurturing and spiritual elements, for both the living and the dead.

Home Funeral Guides

Home funeral guides and death doulas are often categorised together, as with Olson's (2018) natural deathcare assistants, but they don't necessarily do the same work. Home funeral guides, as the name implies, specifically assist families who want to hold the funeral (and often wake) at home, and do not involve a licensed funeral director[45].

> As NDA Lee Webster puts it, though birth midwives and NDAs all work with bodies going through transition, the work of home funeral guides stands apart because lives are not at stake. There isn't much you can screw up. The skills required of home funeral guides are less demanding simply because 'The worst has already happened'. (Olson 2018, 198)

And here is an important difference between the home birth movement and home death movement, though they have grown out of the same spaces. A birth may require medical assistance, and there are risks involved when home births occur without medial professionals. In home funerals (and mostly in the work of death doulas), this risk is absent. I argue that this is significant when comparing the two situations and movements, and they have to be approached with this in mind. Their similarities are many, but this difference is substantial.

In "Speak Softly to the Dead: The Uses of Enchantment in American Home Funerals" Alexa Hagerty (2014) writes that the natural deathcare movement, associated with the home birth movement of the 1960s and 1970s, is a primarily made of white, middle-class 'hippy types' (2014, 429), especially the leaders of this movement. This is despite Hagerty's Los Angeles interlocutor describing the types of families she works with as diverse in social,

[45] There are exceptions, e.g. when state law requires a funeral director to carry out specific tasks (transporting dead bodies, signing death certificates, burying the dead). The nine U.S. states that require the funeral director to be involved at some point are Connecticut, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Louisiana, Michigan, Nebraska, New Jersey, and New York (Olson 2018, 209).

ethnic, and economic background. Olson (2018) similarly found that the home birth and home death movements have a strong connection, and that the visible faces of the natural deathcare movement are 'new age-y', white, middle-class women. The home birth movement advocated for natural and home births in the 60s and 70s, and now face their own and their loved one's deaths, looking for natural options in deathcare, too (Olson 2018, 199).

While I am not disputing their findings, I criticise their labelling of the movement as a whole this way. Especially since it, like the Death Awareness movement of the mid-20th century, is very much still amorphous and un-organised, and the interest for these options seem to be more diverse.

Additionally, Anna experienced the younger generation of Americans (millennials) as less death-phobic, and more conscious of climate concerns, leading them to ask about other options around death and dying. They may not be facing death for themselves yet, but are opening up this conversations with their parents and peers, which leaves room for the movement to grow in different directions, and be made up of other actors than Olson (2018) and Hagerty (2014) found.

The goals of death doulas, home funeral guides, and many within the natural deathcare movement, is not to replace the main actors within the funeral industry. In fact, Anna wants to teach people how to do this work by themselves. She speaks about empowering people to be able to provide the care, have the difficult conversations, and be a part of the process to a larger degree.

The Doulagivers website give short bios of their registered death doulas, and many of them came to the work through caring for a sick family member. They were dissatisfied with the larger medical institutions, or found the care they were able to provide very meaningful. The 'new age' roots of the founders and leaders of this movement are important to note, as well as what Olson (2018) observed where many of the women involved imply or state that women are more naturally suited to nurturing.

> […] these characterizations of women could be read as exemplifications of an empowering feminist standpoint theory, according to which women occupy an epistemically privileged point of view from which to know childbirth and deathcare, and for questioning existing birthing and funeral practices. But these characterizations may also be read as essentializing particular gender roles and characteristics, naturalizing women's association with traits that have been undervalued within patriarchal societies. (Olson 2018, 207)

The feminism (or sacred feminine, as one of Olson's interlocutors prefers) seen here is one that upholds and reinforces gender norms – by attributing specific traits to one gender and suggesting that it is lacking in another.

Irina, who has been a board member on the Green Burial Council also experienced the movement to be more white-centred and middle-class. Her experience was mixed, with a lot of the people she encountered being open and inclusive, while others seemed to have a very specific 'aesthetic' and target group that was less diverse.

Part of the project of the NDAs Olson (2018) worked with have similarities to the death positive movement; they are working to change the cultural relationship to death that is ingrained within the institutions. The removal of death from most of the public is understood as the cause of death denial, and re-introducing deathcare by families and loved ones are the solutions in both cases.

The healing within this venture by the alternative deathcare movement is not aimed at the dying or already dead, it is instead an approach to healing *through* acts of care that combine the physical acts of support, washing, touching, massaging, etc. that death doulas and death positive activists encourage family members to participate in, with the nurturing and spiritual element when caring *for* and caring *about* are combined. This looks more like the Yolmo and their community support for the dead. We see this in Olson (2018), who was told by his interlocutors that "[…] the act of caring for the bodies of one's own dead offers a meaningful, healing, and authentic encounter with death and grief that deathcare professionals cannot provide" (Olson 2018, 211). The separation of the physical tasks and nurturing elements is seen as harmful in the grief process and in relationships to death. In order to foster a better relationship to death, both personally and culturally, there is a sense that a paradigm shift is required.

As was mentioned in the introduction of this thesis, death is often understood as a disruptive event, a potential force for instability in the community (Hertz 1960, Turner 1967, Olson 2014, Huntington and Metcalf 1991). This disruption is mediated through death rituals, where the body is appropriately disposed of, and the social fabric reorganised. The new actors and alternatives in deathcare are identifying elements of the industry funerals that they find fall short in reconciling with death. But changing the ways of death can also be disruptive (this will be further discussed in the next chapter) and met with resistance. Some find the idea

of keeping the body at home morbid and disgusting, embodying the denial of death and disembeddeness of death in the U.S.

CAITLIN DOUGHTY, THE DEATH POSITIVE MOVEMENT, AND THE ORDER OF THE GOOD DEATH

Geoffrey Gorer's "Pornography of Death" (1955) posited that death became the new obscene topic in the 20th century, whereas sex became more public (as a topic, of course, rather than an act). The 'positive' in Death Positive is inspired by (and perhaps a cheeky nod to) the sex positive movement, whose beginnings is often attributed to Wilhelm Reich (1972 [1931]), and seeks to accept sex as a natural and healthy part of life rather than an activity open to judgement and shame. Actors within the death positive movement are working in various ways to destigmatise the topic of death, to bring it out of the private, closed-door affair, and back into the community.

The death positive movement is closely tied to The Order of the Good Death, whose founder is Caitlin Doughty. She also runs the YouTube page 'Caitlin Doughty - Ask A Mortician', and since she is an important figure, central to a lot of the public's knowledge of the movement, I will use her and her organisation as a case study to look at the work and the goals of the movement.

Included in the new movement are two aspects that are not seen in the death awareness movement: 1) a goal to change cultural attitudes toward death by reaching individuals – and not just those who are facing death more imminently, but a reckoning in society of the relationship to death and dying – and 2) a concern for nature and the environment that extends the circle of care to nature and the Earth, looking to find more climate friendly ways of disposing dead bodies. These two aspects of the new movement often overlap, but are two distinct features and I have therefore divided them into two chapters.

The 'death positive' term was coined by The Order of the Good Death, whose founder is mortician and death activist Caitlin Doughty. Part of her work includes creating and hosting the popular YouTube channel 'Caitlin Doughty - Ask A Mortician'[46]. The channel's videos

[46] The channel has more than 1.5 million subscribers https://www.youtube.com/user/OrderoftheGoodDeath

are part entertainment, part educational content, and part activism in congruence with The Order.

She uses her channel to answer questions around death, decomposition, burial, cremation, and funeral costs, and encourages people to engage with the topics as a way to lessen fear and anxiety around death. The channel is also used to open up larger discussions about moral and ethical concerns when it comes to dead bodies. For example, her 'Iconic Corpse' series features more of the extraordinary or unusual events that have happened to bodies after death, including the Argentinian First Lady Eva Perón, the founder of utilitarianism Jeremy Bentham, the Irish giant Charles Byrne, and former Soviet leader Vladimir Lenin. These videos combine entertaining stories with exploration of post-death agency over bodies, often using the sometimes thrilling, sometimes tragic stories of these iconic corpses to encourage watchers to think about what they want for their own bodies when they die, and who they will entrust them to.

I was intrigued by the idea of the agency of dead bodies, or what it means to retain agency after death. Here, agency lies in the individual's expressed wishes for their dead body being followed (or in many of the Iconic Corpse stories *not* being followed), and in the next section we will see what I argue are expressions of agency in the goals of The Order of the Good Death.

The Order of the Good Death

Anyone can join The Order's community through their website, committing themselves to eight points that sum up the Order's views on what being death positive means:

1. I believe that by hiding death and dying behind closed doors we do more harm than good in our society.
2. I believe that the culture of silence around death should be broken through discussions, gatherings, art, innovation, and scholarship.
3. I believe that talking about and engaging with my inevitable death is not morbid, but displays a natural curiosity about the human condition.
4. I believe that the dead body is not dangerous, and that everyone should be empowered (should they wish to be) to be involved in care for their own dead.

5. I believe that the laws that govern death, dying and end-of-life care should ensure that a person's wishes are honored, regardless of sexual, gender, racial, or religious identity.
6. I believe that my death should be handled in a way that does not do great harm to the environment.
7. I believe that my family and friends should know my end-of-life wishes, and that I should have the necessary paperwork to back-up those wishes.
8. I believe that my open, honest advocacy around death *can* make a difference, and *can* change culture.[47]

We see some clear connections to the death awareness movement in these eight points, but there are particular points that include more concrete goals of the death positive movement as a whole, and some shared with other organisations and groups that I will discuss later. The death awareness movement's impact on hospice care and the value of grief counselling contributed to a change in how the culture deals with care of the dying and the aftermath of death, whereas the death positive movement goes further to push people toward celebrating the fact of unavoidable death – their own and everyone they love – because it brings meaning to life. I think this is reflected somewhat in the 'acceptance' part of their statement, this notion that accepting death can make it less daunting.

Sheila Harper's "The Social Agency of Dead Bodies" (2010) argues that the dead body can be understood as an active agent in death rituals. She argues this through Alfred Gell's[48] theory on the agency of art. Harper (2010) applies Gell's theory to demonstrate various forms of agency at the viewing. By interacting with the body, mourners in the UK and U.S. funeral homes that Harper (2010) observed marked it as an 'active agent' – that is, beyond object or thing. Simultaneously, morticians abducted agency from the body through embalming and application of make-up, acts that attempt to lessen or hide the fact of death. In Harper's (2010) analysis the agency ascribed to the body is limited to the interactions that mourners engage in during the funeral, and the preparations the morticians make.

Harper's (2010) analysis includes a difference between the person before and after death: the pre-deceased, and the dead body. I want to build on and expand Harper's (2014) argument of the agency of dead bodies, and argue that agency is an integrated concept within the statements of The Order, particularly in points five and seven. Point five, where "the laws

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[47] http://www.orderofthegooddeath.com/death-positive
[48] Gell, Alfred. (1998). *Art and Agency*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

that govern death, dying and end-of-life care should ensure that a person's wishes are honored, regardless of sexual, gender, racial, or religious identity[6]" it is clear that they believe that the agency of the individual extends to their dead body. This understanding of agency suggests a personhood that continues after death, not just in the interaction with the living (mourners and morticians), but an aspect of the self that continues to be important post-mortem.

Irina, one of my interlocutors, brought up the fact that one of her transgender friends had been buried under the wrong name, i.e. the name they were given at birth (ironically also referred to as a 'dead name'). She explained that:

> Their family ended up burying them under the wrong gender and with the wrong name, and wearing clothes and being made up to look like someone that they're not. It's really traumatic for their friends and some of their family[49].

Here we have two expressions of agency in terms of the dead body: the first is a *lack* of agency with the deceased, whose expressed identity is erased, and agency in the dead body's capacity to affect their families and friends – either through the unmaking of the trans person's gender identity, or by witnessing the erasure of their gender identity. This leads into point seven: "I believe that my family and friends should know my end-of-life wishes, and that I should have the necessary paperwork to back-up those wishes[6]". Because kin are in most cases the ones with rights over the dead body (in the legal sense), this point encourages people to express and protect the agency of their corpse, especially important if kin are likely to go against the wishes of the deceased.

Unlike the examples Kearl (1989) put forth as good deaths accomplishable in the U.S: the martyr, the hero, and those who have completed their life's work, the points put forth by The Order suggest a paradigm shift in the cultural attitudes towards death, and importantly: a *good* death. What Kearl says here is interesting: "The ability of a society to allocate as many good deaths as possible to its members is a measure of its cultural adequacy. Death becomes good when they serve the needs of the dying, their survivors, and the social order," (Kearl 1989, 122). The good deaths that Kearl outlines as achievable at the time in the U.S. are unattainable for most, supporting the idea that the U.S. has culture of death that is inadequate in serving the needs of its society.

[49] Zoom call, 11.12.2020

> If we work towards accepting, not denying, our decomposition, we can begin to see it as something beautiful. More than beautiful— *ecstatic*. The ecstasy of decay begins as disgust and revulsion, the way we feel when we imagine ourself [sic] as a corpse. But disgust and revulsion turn to pleasure as we use that feeling to realize we are alive now. We will someday be dead, but today blood pumps through our veins and breath fills our lungs and we walk the earth.[50]

The view of The Order of the Good Death is a radical death, an understanding of death quite far from the cultural understanding in the U.S., as well as generally in Europe and North America. The celebration of life here is not the celebration of life from the funeral homes in the previous chapter; it does not shift focus away from death, but rather proposes embracing it.

The Order is also attempting to naturalise death; to change the attitudes toward death to make it a natural part of life, accepting by celebrating and integrating it into life, as well as tying it to nature and the environment in point six: "I believe that my death should be handled in a way that does not do great harm to the environment,[6] as an act of care toward the Earth. This is further developed in chapter four, where care for the planet, caring for the dead, and creating more spaces for the good deaths intersect.

The death awareness movement reached the professionals who were involved in deathcare, even playing a big part of creating a new aspect of deathcare, and it sought to aid those bereaved, but a large part of the public was not reached, and cultural attitudes toward death didn't change much. This suggests that a movement to change attitudes toward death requires a larger reach, it needs to connect with people who aren't necessarily facing death – their own or other's – or dealing with its aftermath. This is what The Order of the Good Death are attempting in their movement, though it is not clear if they are mostly resonating with people who are already seeking information and are open to this death positivity.

RE-EMBEDDING DEATH INTO KINSHIP NETWORKS

What we have seen in this chapter are attempts of re-embedding death. Many death doulas, including one of my interlocutors, have stated that they wish their work and even they themselves were not necessary at all; they wish that families and close friends could provide the services of a death doula, and that this would foster a healthier relationship to death. As

[50] http://www.orderofthegooddeath.com/naturalburial

my interlocutor explained it, they are working both to change individuals' relationship to death and encouraging a cultural shift where families and loved ones are more involved and informed in the process. In other words: they work towards re-embedding death.

I spoke of Anna, my death doula interlocutor, earlier whose aim was working towards death doulas eventually becoming obsolete, and Olson made a similar observation with the NDAs in his study: "The consented form of domestication advocated by the leading women of the natural deathcare movement is one that aims to empower all people to care for their own dead without the mediation of deathcare professionals," (Olson 2018, 200). Their aim is not to replace the funeral directors, but to act as teachers of lost knowledge in order to re-embed death to kin and community.

While many, or most, of the alternative and natural deathcare movement are working to "[…] free the care of the corpse from the exclusive control of state-sanctioned funeral professionals" (Olson 2018, 198), they are simultaneously engaging with the public in ways that democratises the knowledge held mostly by professionals for the past 150 years or so. The re-embedding doesn't require a complete disassembling of the funeral or deathcare industry, but it would require that the industry is no longer the purveyor of knowledge or the (virtually) sole carers of the dead.

Looking back to chapter one and the concept outlined there of a good death, what we find among this group of actors is somewhat of a paradigm shift. The focus is not on the circumstances of the death, but suggests that a good death comes from acceptance, perhaps even celebration, and from what can be learned and reflected on upon the death of a loved one. I do not interpret any of the goals of the movement to deny grief or mourning – in fact Doughty in her videos often encourages people to not feel ashamed of their grief, or dismiss it. Instead, there is an encouragement to engage with and confront death more regularly in order to make it less frightening.

> The NDA is empowered by her possession of legal knowledge, as well as her possession of home funeral knowledge and skills, which are lacking (or latent) in the publics she serves. In her efforts to promulgate her uncommon knowledge, the NDA acts not only as a midwife to the dead and dying but also as a Socratic midwife, helping her publics to renew forgotten deathcare knowledge. (Olson 2018, 206)

Here we find the crux of the movement: bringing death back into the hands of the public. Not only that, but to reclaim and re-learn the knowledge previously held by kin – and particularly women. The movement is centred around building and sharing knowledge of the dying process, not just for the benefit of those dying, but a cultural reclaiming of this knowledge. The ethics of care described by Desjarlais (2014) with the Yolmo is arguably what the natural deathcare movement and death positive movement are working toward in their own society – one where the community bears collective responsibility in caring for their dead.

> Based upon profound personal experiences, NDAs claim that breaking down the physical barriers between oneself and one's dead—for example by caressing, washing, dressing, carrying the body, and simply by remaining in close physical proximity with the body—makes possible a deeper and more fulfilling form of grief. (Olson 2018, 204)

The practices that Olson (2018) are describing above are similar to the ethics and techniques of care that Desjarlais (2014) found with the Yolmo, with an understanding that these forms of care where physical acts and nurturing are intertwined provide care for loved ones and kin. To the natural deathcare and death positive movement, these techniques of care (Desjarlais 2014) provide opportunities to create good deaths for the community and society – as well as for the dying.

Conclusion

This chapter has focused on the ways various groups of activists and organisations are challenging and seeking to change relationships to death. I have argued that a core element of their work is re-embedding death, decentralising and spreading the knowledge of deathcare. I opened this chapter with a quote from Michael C. Kearl (1989) that American culture does not prepare its people to cope with death. We see attempts to change that explicitly in the project of The Order of the Good Death who encourage not just death awareness, but death acceptance.

A crucial point in this chapter is that the ideas promoted within these movements are rooted in and build upon ideas of the past. Ariès' (1974b) description of the deathbed scene from chapter one where the community gathers at the house, where the dying themselves have organised the proceedings, accepting the reality of their mortality is recognisable in the goals of the alternative deathcare and death positive movements. The NDAs of Olson's

(2018) study as well as death doulas Anna and Arthur, are all explicit in stating that the aim within their work is not to create a new set of practices and rituals, but to re-learn knowledge of the past and make it available for everyone.

I used Desjarlais (2014) and the Yolmo people to draw connections between *techniques* and *ethics of care* to how death doulas approach their work, practices which involve a larger degree of involvement from families and the community.

I expanded on Harper's (2010) concept of agency in dead bodies, using The Order and Irina's case to argue that there is not necessarily a separation between the pre- and post-mortem notion of personhood, and that the agency of the person carries on after their death. This differs from Harper's (2010) analysis of the concept, where the dead body inhabits agency and lack of agency depending on how it is interacted with.

Importantly, this chapter has shown how these various movements are, simultaneously with their other expressed goals, challenging the U.S. understanding of 'good' and 'bad' deaths. Finally, I want to stress the point that these actors and movements, as well as those covered in the next chapter, are working towards a paradigm shift in American culture when it comes to death, challenging the hegemony of the funeral industry that grew out of the professionalisation of death.

Eco-Friendly Death

How environmental concerns are entering the field of deathcare

> I don't think we can quantify what we've lost as a society when we've taken away, we've professionalised this whole after deathcare industry, and outsourced the care of our dead to an industry. That is what I think this movement is bringing back. What kind of healing, what kind of comfort will taking a step closer to having a real meaningful involvement with the care of our dead. How will that help our families and our communities sort of heal? (Marsh 2018, 35:53-36:44)

The quote above is from Sarah Crews, on the podcast "Death, et. seq."[51], hosted by Tanya Marsh, a professor of Funeral and Cemetery Law. Crews' statement is representative of a lot of the arguments within the natural and eco-friendly burial movement, and shows that the environmental aspect is wholly integrated with the dual goal of re-embedding death in communities to promote a better grieving process.

In the introductory method section of this thesis, I quoted Olson's (2018) statement that the natural deathcare movement has not received attention from academia. While not entirely true at the time of Olson's publication, there is still a significant lack of empirical data within this field. This chapter features some of the work that's been done on natural burials and new technologies of death. I also look at some of the reactions to these alternatives in comparison with particularly the reactions to cremation. Further, I continue with the language of care, and the expanding of deathcare to reach beyond the confines of human social relationships to each other, to human relationships to the planet. I argue that the eco-friendly and natural burial movement is centred around care – an expanded notion of care that includes kin and community from the previous chapter, but also extends to care of nature and the Earth. Simultaneously, motivations for those who offer natural burial are more diverse, and I argue that this broadens the potential for more mainstream natural burials in the future.

In chapter one I asked what science and technology could offer the bodies of the dead as deathcare professionalised, and this chapter poses the question anew in the eco-friendly turn of deathcare. Since the industrial revolution in the 1800s began, the population on Earth has grown exponentially (Eriksen 2016). The concern for an ever-growing aging population has

[51] https://deathetseq.com/

been expressed in regards to care for the elderly, briefly touched upon in the previous chapter. However, some are equally, or more, concerned about the impacts of modern burial and cremation on the planet and local environment.

To begin with some of the concerns argued by activists and organisations, we can start at the casket burial. One rather obvious concern as the global population continues its rapid growth, is land required for cemetery use. In the FAQ of Ferfolia Funeral home is the question "In a hundred years will the cemetery still be there?" and answer: "We think of cemetery lands as being in perpetuity. There are cemeteries throughout the world that have been in existence for hundreds of years," [52]. Right. But for how long will this be possible to sustain? Casket and coffin burials are common in large parts of the world, and while cremation has recently overtaken burial in the U.S., there is the issue raised in the answer Ferfolia gives above: that burial land is expected to remain untouched – no digging up the dead to build a Walmart or apartment complex.

Then, there are the special features of U.S. burial, with burial vaults that keep water, air, and soil from coming into contact with the casket and body; air-tight caskets that (temporarily) seal the body in; and embalmed bodies inside that delay decomposition. Combined, these factors contribute to a much longer process of breaking down the body, not to mention all the resources that go into each casket and vault.

According to the Funeral Consumer Alliance, the U.S. alone uses more than 30 million board feet of hardwood for wood caskets, 90,000 tons of steel in caskets, in addition to the 17,000 tons of steel and copper used for burial vaults, which also require 1.6 million tons of reinforced concrete every year.[53] And all of these resources are put straight into the ground, protecting the dead from turning to dust.

I've already covered some of the environmental issues tied to embalming fluid, which are concerned with the carcinogenic chemicals posing a threat to embalmers' health as well as possibly contaminating the areas around cemeteries that contain embalmed bodies, including groundwater (Chiappelli and Chiappelli 2008).

[52] https://www.ferfoliafuneralhomes.com/planning-guide
[53] https://funerals.org/?consumers=green-burial

Now, cremation is not necessarily a better option for those considering the environmental future of our planet, even though it requires no land use. Firstly, it is common in the U.S. to cremate a body in a casket – though some are cremated in cardboard boxes – which means that all the resources put into that casket are almost immediately destroyed. Some offer casket rentals for cremations, where the funeral service takes use of the casket, but the body is cremated in a cardboard box and the casket is reused. Of course, there is the burning itself. According to the Cremation Association of North America, an adult body usually requires around 2 hours at 800 degrees Celsius[54], a high-energy process that also contributes to the emission of greenhouse gases.

Neither cremation nor burial, even with embalming, pose a huge threat to the environment by themselves. Collectively, cumulatively, with all the other resource-draining, energy-consuming, and polluting behaviours of the population, they are contributions to an unsustainable pattern of human behaviour. The world's problems will not be solved by eco-friendly deaths, but they signify a desire for a holistic approach to preserve and protect the environment from human impact.

In *Overheating: An Anthropology of Accelerated Change* Thomas Hylland Eriksen (2016) writes about the contradictions of sustainability and growth in a neoliberal, interconnected, and interdependent world. I found that his chapter *Waste* (Eriksen 2016) offered some interesting connection to body disposal:

> In the rich parts of the world, recycling has become a concept sufficiently potent to fuel an election campaign. Today, in the Anthropocene, it is easier to conceptualise the planet as a spaceship than as an endless prairie or steppe; it has become a place where space is scarce and has to be allocated, and where the *matter out of place* concept comes into its own more than ever, since there are fewer and fewer places where this kind of matter might actually be appropriate. (Eriksen 2016, 107-108, emphasis in original).

This can be applied to bodies and cemeteries. In chapter one, the history of cremation in the U.S. pushed the cemetery away from social life, it was *matter out of place* – and as population continues to increase, less land will be available (and appropriate) for the permanent interment of the dead. There is too, an inherent contradiction in living sustainable lives with recycling and re-use – a privilege though it might be – followed by an

[54] https://www.cremationassociation.org/page/CremationProcess

unsustainable death. And, if these were concerns important to a person in their life, it follows logically that they would carry these concerns in regards to their death.

> In theory, if perhaps not in practice, there is a solution, namely a shift from the logic of spiralling growth that we associate with global neoliberalism, towards a logic of recycling and self-reproducing, sustainable circuits of resources. This holds true not only for waste in its human and non-human forms, but also with respect to other overheating phenomena. A shift towards cyclical reproduction has the potential, in principle, to turn all kinds of runaway processes into sustainable systems capable of reproducing themselves indefinitely. (Eriksen 2016, 116)

Eriksen, when referring to waste in human form, is not referring to bodies. We find, I argue, rhetoric and ideas of recycling within the natural and green burial movement, which will be discussed in the section 'The New Technologies of Death' later in this chapter. First, I introduce natural burials and the set of motivations for this type of burial.

NATURAL BURIALS

Natural burials, often also called green burials, are burials in which embalming is not allowed; caskets or coffins have to be made of biodegradable materials, or the body is buried in a shroud. They do not require or allow burial vaults or burial liners (similar to vaults, but without the top lid), and typically have grave markers instead of tombstones.

One of the organisations that work to promote green burials and certify green burial sites is the Green Burial Council. They are an organisation that is involved in the natural burial landscape, but do not own or operate burial grounds. Environmentally sustainable deathcare is part of their vision, as well as providing access and education on this topic.

On their website they state their values, which combine honouring the funerary rituals that provide meaning in death for the living and the dead with honouring the Earth and the environment, "[…] caring for her [the Earth] in how we bury our dead,"[55]. Again, in the Green Burial Council's values is the notion of deathcare extended beyond the dead body and the individual, to an act of care toward nature. This is also an act of naturalising death, similar to the argument I made in the previous chapter where the death positive movement is working

[55] https://www.greenburialcouncil.org/our_mission.html

to make death a natural part of life, and here it is literally tying death to nature and care for nature and the environment.

Land conservation

One of the more contemporary adaptions of natural burials, illustrating well how new ideas are combined with past practices, is combining it with land conservation. This involves setting aside a piece of land protects it from development, sometimes combined with returning the land to its pre-industrial past. One example of this is the Heartland Prairie Cemetery in Kansas, a non-profit run by Sarah Crews.

She was interviewed on the podcast "Death, et. seq."[56], hosted by Tanya Marsh, a professor of Funeral and Cemetery Law. Through this project, the goal is to combine natural burials with land restoration to the native prairie land. It is the first cemetery in Kansas that exclusively offers natural burials, rather than cemeteries with a section or option of natural burial.

Crews explains that she understands this project as "Returning to a simpler way of doing things […] that is more consistent with caring for the land, you know," (Marsh 2018, 12:43-12:54) and that the way they do this is "[…] intentionally reclaiming old ways of doing things with a new… an eye towards the environment," (14:25-14:37). What we find here again, is the idea of care extended to reach beyond just care of the dead body, it is the idea that deathcare can also be care for nature and the Earth. However, Crews is not solely focused on land restoration and preservation, I opened this chapter with a quote from her on how practices within the natural burial movement can re-introduce what was lost to the community in the professionalisation process. Crews' project, then doubles as a way to change and heal the community through a closer relationship to death and as a way to heal and care for the land they occupy.

[56] https://deathetseq.com/

Motivations for Natural Burials

Natural and green burials in North America and Europe are still an emerging field, and the movement is still fairly limited. However, the motivations for operating a natural burial ground are more diverse than just those who are concerned with the environmental impacts of traditional burial, and reveals a more complex set of driving factors within the movement. This section discusses what various groups in the UK have as motivations for owning and operating natural burial grounds.

Andy Clayden et. al., including anthropologists Jenny Hockey and Mark Powell, wrote the book *Natural Burial: Landscape, Practice, and Experience* (2015) on natural burials in the UK. They explored the motivations of several groups of natural burial providers, including farmers, funeral directors, private companies, charitable trusts, and local authorities. They found that local authorities owned more than half of the natural burial grounds in the UK (Clayden et. al. 2015, 57), and that these groups initiated the move toward natural burials themselves. An important part of their motivation for this is that the natural burial was more cost-efficient than traditional burials, and allowed for development of areas within the cemeteries that otherwise would have been unsuited for burial (Clayden et. al. 2015, 57-58).

In the group of farmers interviewed, one expressed dissatisfaction of the religious nature baked into the traditional funeral. The farmer, Ifor, and his wife incorporated a natural burial ground in the land they owned, using it to supplement and diversify their income. Media coverage had made Ifor aware of the alternative natural burial option, which he saw as a way to "[…] reconcile the need to generate income with an environmentally sensitive approach," (Clayden et. al. 2015, 60), contributing to diffusing the tension between nature preservation and commercial farming. This shows a more complicated set of motivations which combine a wish for a non-religious alternative in funeral rituals, environmental concerns, and diversifying income for landowners.

Interestingly, one of the motivations was "[…] to offer bereaved people a more personal and rewarding experience," (Clayden et. al. 2015, 66), which I think resonates with previous observations and statements in the alternative deathcare industry in the U.S. This implies that the professionalisation of death, and not just the more unique features of American ways of death, could have a more universal consequence in other places, and that going 'back to nature' and the old ways resonates with people in many contexts.

Of course, there were actors less enthusiastic about a turn toward natural burial; funeral directors represented a smaller ownership group of natural burial ground, and Clayden et. al. (2015) identified a fear that a low-cost body disposal option could threaten their business as a reason for their underrepresentation. Olson (2014) pointed out that embalming services and burial merchandise (such as those mentioned in the second chapter) still contribute significantly to the income of funeral directors, and so a move towards more natural burials are met with scepticism.

What we have seen in the study conducted by Clayden et. al. (2015) is that there are a host of motivations involved with owning and operating a natural burial cemetery; the actors involved are not purely driven by environmental concerns or seeking a change in the relationships to death. A more nuanced understanding of these various motivations are necessary within this field of study, and certainly in the U.S., where natural burials are becoming a real alternative option to traditional burial in many states. This may also help to explain some of the rapid growth, as many actors are finding a host of reasons to explore these options.

THE NEW TECHNOLOGIES OF DEATH

While we saw in chapter three and earlier in this chapter that some are turning to old ways of body disposal, others are looking for ways to create new technologies, sometimes combining the old practices with new inventions, 'neo-traditional' as Marsh (2018) calls it. This section looks at some of these new technologies, what the goals of the technologies and creators behind them are, and how they are entering the deathcare space. Some of these new technologies include:

- Recompose, a sped-up process of decomposition where the body is laid in a container on a bed of wood chips, alfalfa, and straw. Through heat created in the enclosed environment of the container, with the aid of the added components, the body fully decomposes in 30 days[57].

[57] https://recompose.life/our-model/#the-process

- The Infinity Burial Suit (and shroud), made of microorganisms and mushrooms that "[…] aid in decomposition, work to neutralize toxins found in the body and transfer nutrients to plant life,"[58]
- Alkaline Hydrolysis (AH), aquamation, or water cremation (and more): this is a process that breaks down the body using water and alkaline chemicals, and the liquid can be safely disposed of in the sewer. The bones remain – as most large bones do in a cremation by fire – and are ground into the ashes similar to those from cremation by fire.
- Promession, where liquid nitrogen is used to fully freeze-dry the body which can then be vibrated until it shatters, the remains are still organic matter and can be absorbed into soil.

My main focus here will be on Recompose, exploring the ways this invention is being tied to nature while working to become an accepted part of body disposal; and Alkaline Hydrolysis with Philip R. Olson's article "Flush and Bone" (2014) which looked at some of the reactions to the proposed adding of Alkaline Hydrolysis as an alternative cremation.

Decompose with Recompose

Recompose and its method of body disposal is being introduced to the U.S., and as of the summer of 2021 it is legal in Washington, Colorado, and Oregon[59]. Recompose is a company that, simply put, composts human bodies. Personally, my first reaction to thinking of humans as compost made me a little uncomfortable, as compost is often associated with food-production. But then I thought of my grandmother, who has always loved gardening, and I considered how I would feel if she could become nutrients for a beautiful rosebush. It felt a bit odd, still, but somehow also better than a grave to visit on special occasions; a garden feature I could remember her by, just looking out of my window.

Eriksen's (2016) proposed solution of turning toward self-reproduction, recycling, and sustainability is clearly applicable to Recompose; bodies of the dead are literally able to contribute to the lifecycle of the places they are buried. The process used by Recompose is still being legalised in the U.S. As of 2021 it is legal in Washington, Oregon, and Colorado,

[58] http://coeio.com/faqs/#suit
[59] https://recompose.life/who-we-are/#history

and up for consideration in California and New York[60]. The promotion of the company is focused on the environmental benefits of this type of body disposal, but also integrates the naturalisation of death that I discussed in chapter three, where death, rather than being feared or denied, should be regarded as a natural part of life. We can see this clearly in the two following statements from their website:

> Death is profound, momentous, and beyond our understanding. With an approach that is as practical as it is meaningful, Recompose connects the end of life to the natural world. [61]

> Death is an essential part of life. It is as remarkable, in its own way, as birth. The end of life, though heart-wrenching, can be beautiful. Talking about our mortality can be comforting, and deathcare can be both straightforward and healing.[8]

Recompose is a part of The Order of the Good Death, and so it is perhaps not surprising that they find ways to understand and promote death as something that can be beautiful and natural. The death of a person is integrated into the life-cycle and health of the planet, seen here: "The breakdown of organic matter is an essential component in the cycle that allows the death of one organism to nurture the life of another. Soil is the foundation of a healthy ecosystem. It filters water, provides nutrients to plants, sequesters carbon, and helps regulate global temperature."[62] This is similar to the "logic of recycling and self-reproducing, sustainable circuits of resources," (Eriksen 2016, 116) from the chapter on waste and future of waste-management, applicable within the context of humans as waste.

We find additional language of sustainability and recycling in how Recompose describe their project:

> Healthy soil is vital for an ecosystem to thrive. It regulates moisture, sequesters carbon, and sustains plants, animals, and humans. Recompose was born from research on the soil cycle. Soil created by Recompose will nurture growth on the same forest floor that inspired its creation, allowing us to give back to the earth that nourishes us all our lives. [8]

There is the idea of extended care, which I have spoken about, and additionally this cyclical process that features heavily through Recompose's website; the cycle of life and death integrated into notions of recycling and ecology.

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[60] https://recompose.life/who-we-are/#public-policy
[61] https://recompose.life
[62] https://recompose.life/our-model/#environmental-impact

We see an expansion of care within the field of death; beyond caring *for* the dead, the dead become carers of future life – in fact, the way Recompose phrase it make the dead almost active in sustaining and encouraging the life of the forest. This project is attempting to create good deaths and 'good' dead bodies by nurturing the planet, again challenging the cultural understanding of 'good' and 'bad' deaths that we saw described by Kearl (1989).

Alkaline Hydrolysis: Cremation or Desecration?

In "Flush and Bone" Olson (2014) discusses the reaction to the introduction of a new form of 'cremation'. His article focuses on the political and structural rather than personal, and I use this to measure against the reactions sparked by the introduction of new forms of body disposal. Alkaline Hydrolysis has been in use for animal corpses and in some cases with medical cadavers, but only recently been introduced as an option for human body disposal. The process, as I mentioned above, breaks down soft tissue in water and alkaline chemicals which produce an effluent that can safely be disposed of in the sewer system. Olson (2014) identifies that the introduction of new technology in this space challenge questions of morality and rituals, and bring a host of emotions to the fore. They challenge what is deemed as ethical body disposal, and we can again turn to the difference between human *produced* waste and humans *as* waste.

Writing about the nature of dirt, Douglas (2005 [1966]) states that rejected objects begin as potential threats to good order, and importantly that this happens while they still retain identity and are recognisable, such as food items or packaging. Because they retain some identity, their out-of-placeness is obvious, and it is only once they have broken down beyond recognition that these objects become 'common rubbish', "so long as idenity [sic] is absent, rubbish is not dangerous" (Douglas 2005 [1966], 197).

Proposing Alkaline Hydrolysis as an alternative form of body disposal requires a rethinking of our understanding of waste or rubbish, particularly when it comes do remains of the dead. During an embalming, blood is drained from the body and replaced with the embalming fluid, and the blood goes down the same drain that the effluent from Alkaline Hydrolysis would go. But there is no outrage over blood of the dead going into the sewer; though both a liquid there is something about the previous form of the effluent that seems to make it more *human* – identifiable as such or not.

Olson (2014) is somewhat dismissive of the potential for change in the deathcare industry, as he was in his work with natural deathcare assistants (2018) and as Hagerty (2014) was with home funeral guides. What follows is a discussion of some of Olson's (2014) shortcomings in this particular research, using the framework I have built in the earlier chapters. At the same time, I draw connections to how other new forms of body disposal sparked public debate around their morality.

Olson (2014) covers some of the history of embalming and cremation in the U.S., including Stephen Prothero's (2001) work, which I discussed at length in chapter two. What Olson (2014) does *not* do, which I think would have enriched his observations, is draw the link between reactions to Alkaline Hydrolysis, and reactions to embalming and cremation when they emerged. When Olson says "[…] it is probably fortunate that new technologies seldom have substantial impacts on the ways people dispose of their dead," (Olson 2014, 667), although we have seen that both embalming and cremation are exactly that: new technologies that have indeed had substantial impacts on body disposal.

The introduction of cremation, though in and of itself not a new technology, was new and foreign, and faced public backlash. It was associated with savage practices, an amoral and unethical handling of the dearly departed. The Catholic Church argued that cremation violated the sanctity of the body and thwarted resurrection (Kearl 2004, 16), and did not retract its ban on cremation until the 1960s (Prothero 2001). If we compare the reactions of the Catholic Church to cremation and alkaline hydrolysis, they bear a striking similarity:

> […] the reason the AH portions of the bill were removed can be traced back to a letter from the Catholic Conference of Ohio, which declared: 'Dissolving bodies in a vat of chemicals and pouring the resultant liquid down the drain is not a respectful way to dispose of human remains.'' (Olson 2014, 674)

So, this is not the first time the Catholic Church has opposed to a new method of body disposal, and the arguments against both Alkaline Hydrolysis and cremation centre on the body's sanctity. Both of these technologies challenge the moral and ethical concerns around dead bodies, but as we have seen, it is possible to include and adapt new technologies into death rituals over time.

Embalming also fits as new technology within the framework Olson (2014) presents, though perhaps leaning towards more method, as it is an introduction of new science applied to body disposal.

The resistance to new ways of body disposal offers a lot of insight into how we understand the morality and ethical concerns that institutions (such as the Catholic Church) and the public grapple with, but I think it should be seen in context to the larger, historical development of burial and disposal practices. Negative reactions to these new technologies does not equal the dismissal of the technology, even if it takes a while to become acceptable, as we saw in the case of cremation. We may see some resistance and reaction to the undertaker's introduction to and eventual authority of American burials in the pop-culture portrayal of the profession, discussed in chapter one, still lingering today.

Concurrently with the debates about its morality, Alkaline Hydrolysis has slowly been introduced to the public as a valid option and alternative to cremation. Olson (2014) writes that:

> At present, AH is legal in only eight US states (Colorado, Florida, Illinois, Kansas, Maine, Maryland, Minnesota, and Oregon), and one Canadian province (Saskatchewan). Moreover, only six funeral service providers offer AH to funeral consumers, and all but one of these providers are located in the United States. (Olson 2014, 667)

In the seven years since Olson (2014) published his article, Alkaline Hydrolysis has made some progress in the legalisation process. In addition to the states and province Olson (2014) identified, AH is now legal in the U.S. states: Alabama, California, Connecticut, Georgia, Idaho, Missouri, Nevada, North Carolina, Utah, Vermont, Washington, and Wyoming, as well as under consideration in Texas; legal in the Canadian provinces: New Brunswick, Ontario, and Quebec, and under consideration in British Colombia, and Northwest Territories[63]. The legislative progress that has been made in the time between Olson's (2014) writing and now suggest that there *is* interest for this new technology, and in eco-friendlier options in body disposal.

> Though developers and providers of AH technologies hope to capitalize on increasing public interest in ecologically friendly disposition options, they face obstacles stemming from potent concerns about the sacred dignity of human remains, and concerns about the public health implications of more widespread AH adoption— particularly with respect to the disposal of effluent. (Olson 2014, 687-688)

What Olson is referring to – the 'effluent' – is the liquid that remains after the Alkaline Hydrolysis process, where the water and alkaline chemicals have broken down all soft tissue

[63] https://www.cremationassociation.org/page/alkalinehydrolysis. Accessed 10.05.2021

in a body. ‘Flushing’ this liquid into the sewer creates unease for some, and demonstrating that the polluting force of the human corpse is still very much present here. Alkaline Hydrolysis provides a challenge to how we understand the sanctity of the body, as well as being proposed as a potential threat to public health by introducing (more of) human waste to the sewer system.

However, Olson (2014) points out that Alkaline Hydrolysis is popular among the group of “environmentally conscientious funeral consumers” (Olson 2014, 688) which suggests that the concepts of corpse sanctity and new technology can co-exist. And, as I pointed out earlier, Alkaline Hydrolysis has just since 2014 become an available option for human body disposal in large parts of the U.S. and Canada, and eco-friendly burials may move further into the mainstream.

There is a marked difference in how eco- and natural burial advocates frame their projects, and how the traditional funeral industry relates to it. As this chapter and the last has covered, the natural deathcare movements and companies such as Recompose view their approaches as a holistic reimagining of culture’s relationship to death *through* the alternatives in body disposal. We can compare this to the kind of language that a traditional funeral home who additionally offers a green burial options uses: “A green burial service may be right for your loved one if they were an avid nature lover, worked in an environmental science field, or were passionate about living an eco-friendly lifestyle.”[64]

This frames green as another option available, but it doesn’t suggest changing any practices to move in a different direction – an option available that caters to a niche group rather than a part of a more sustainable burial practice.

A lot of these ventures, technologies and ideas are fairly new, in the sense that this movement and consideration for the environmental impact traditional burial and cremation is fairly new. In some cases, it is only just starting to become an option to choose these eco-friendly ways of death, meaning that there is much yet to discover in the ways they can influence the cultural and individual relationships toward death.

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[64] https://www.tributefuneralhomes.com/services/service-options

Conclusion

Throughout this thesis are expanding and contracting notions of care in death, and this chapter has focused on how green burials and the actors and organisations behind the movement lift care of the dead to include care of nature. I have shown that, while not always the case, this movement is both concerned with how burials impact the environment and how changing death practices can promote a new cultural relationship to death. At the same time, technologies like Alkaline Hydrolysis show that introducing new methods of body disposal challenge how we view the dead body and what qualifies as dignified treatment.

I have shown that there are complex sets of motivations driving the choice to offer natural burial, and argued that the diversity in these motivations provide a larger potential for future growth. This offers a potential for further research, expanding the anthropological field on funerary practices where there is still a lack of empirical data.

Conclusion

This thesis has been centrally concerned with tracing and analysing shifting attitudes towards and changing practices related to death and dying in the context of Europe and the North America. More specifically, the main research question that has guided my analyses in the preceding chapters has been this: *How are alternative approaches to death and burial changing relationships to death?* This question has been operationalised in a series of related subsidiary questions concerning the emergence of authoritative expertise within the field of death and dying; the ways in which attitudes towards death are reflected in funerary customs and practices that change over time; and, crucially, the ways in which new actors and movements work and manoeuvre as they attempt to change prevailing cultural attitudes towards death. While these questions have been addressed across the main chapters of the thesis, this conclusion seeks to summarise my finding and main answers, and to chart out possible avenues for future research on this topic.

Through the mix of online research, historical analysis, and ethnographic interviews, this thesis has sought to show how current alternative approaches to death and burial can change relationships to death through re-embedding it to the kin and community sphere. This is done first and foremost by naturalising death, as shown in the Death Positive movement where one is encouraged to embrace death as a part of life, not as a disruption; and by integrating the dead body with the preservation and care of nature and the Earth, as seen in Recompose and Heartland Prairie Cemetery.

These approaches are a reaction to the practices in the mainstream funeral industry, which I argued helped create a distance from death. Through the cases covered in chapter two, I argued that death and the dead body have been commodified through the establishing of the professional funeral director. The criticism that the funeral industry has received since the 1960s, including from journalist Jessica Mitford (2000 [1963]) and the Federal Trade Commission, has centred around the lack of knowledge by the consumer, allowing for expensive add-ons and unnecessary services and goods to the funeral. I used the example of the video from Barton Funeral Home to show how the commodification of the funeral is linked to death denial by offering services to delay decomposition and promote preservation and protection of the dead body through special caskets. I also argued that funeral homes maintain a connection to the kin and community origin of funeral practices, especially through kin-coded language as with R. Dudley Barton & Son Funeral Home, Inc., The

McBride Funeral Home, Crawford-Bowers Funeral Home, and Tribute Funeral Home, who practice "reflexive models of kinship behaviour" (Agha 2015, 549) by emphasising their ties to the community (both past and present), as well as using phrases such as 'our families' rather than 'customers'. These funeral homes stress kin aspects, while commodifying the funeral.

In the third chapter I used the death positive movement and death doulas to shows the ways in which these new actors are working to change cultural attitudes and relationships to death. This is done by encouraging open discussions and involvement in deathcare both in close relationships and on a larger social and cultural sphere, where death doulas focus most of their work on the smaller scale, and founder of The Order of the Good Death Caitlyn Doughty is engaging on both ends of scale through The Order and in her work as a mortician. Importantly, these actors and movements are not isolated, but bear similarities to deathcare practices of both past and present, argued through comparisons to pre-Civil War America and the Nepalese Yolmo (Desjarlais 2014). Therefore, although I analyse them as "new movements", the ideas and practices they advocate are not contemporary inventions, but resonate with ideas and practices of other times and places.

The final chapter brought environmental concerns into the field, and showed that motivations within this movement is diverse and multifaceted. Eco-friendly ways of body disposal range from high-tech options such as Alkaline Hydrolysis to simple shroud burials, with projects such as Recompose falling somewhere in between. The pushback to Alkaline Hydrolysis shows that body disposal can evoke questions of morality and sanctity, but by comparing these reactions to similar reactions to the introduction of cremation and embalming I have argued that these perceptions can alter with time. As the climate crisis grows more severe, environmental concerns are likely to be mainstreamed into many facets of life (and death), and the various options within green and eco-friendly ways of body disposal will become increasingly relevant to the overall population. The integration of embalming and cremation – despite pushback – shows that funerary practices are not stagnant.

Crucially, within the natural burial establishments and organisations, I have argued that care is a core theme, both as an idea and as a practice. This includes care for the dying and care for the dead, but also – among some organisations – care for nature. In other words, care is here extended beyond intimate social relations, to encompass nature and the Earth. In this way, these groups are working to change relationships to death by turning burial into an act

of care for nature and its preservation. These forms of burial are meant to aid healing in the family of the deceased, but also on a community level. In the case of Heartland Prairie Cemetery, the restoration of native land can also be seen as an act of healing in congruence with the goals of a change in the cultural relationship to death.

Suggestions for future research

Throughout this theses I have repeatedly referred to the disruptive nature of death and the polluting dead body as *matter out of place*. But what about the literal pollution of dead bodies – the consequences of the modern burial and cremation? Anthropology has considered the polluting force of the dead body, or death itself, on the social fabric of the community. Within the study of green, natural, and eco-friendly burials, I think there is great potential for further analysis and understanding of how relationships to death are formed and shifted with changes in mortuary rituals.

As I stated earlier, eco-friendly and green burials will not dramatically alter the human contributions to climate change – but they can certainly be part of the solution, to the extent that they are seen as part of a larger project that attempts to transform the ways in which we act in the present, in more environmentally sensitive and sensible ways. Relatedly, motivations for eco-friendly and green burials are, as I have shown, more dynamic and complex than we may think, and it would be premature to regard them simply as fringe 'hippy' or 'new age' movements. Indeed, doing so would run the risk of dismissing them as worthy objects of anthropological analysis.

As I have shown, there is much in the field of green burials and alternative deathcare that should be of interest to anthropology; and it is highly likely that the environmental aspects within the field of green burials and alternative deathcare will become increasingly relevant over time. While I think that both Olson (2014 & 2018) and Hagerty (2014) have done great and insightful work on alternative deathcare, I think that they could have seen the field's potential had they more carefully considered the history of the funeral industry, and the impact that environmental concern will have on people's lives (and deaths). Building on their work has allowed me to show that the field of green burials and alternative deathcare stretch beyond insular communities. Additionally, this thesis has shown that ways of death and body disposal are far from static, and attitudes toward death change alongside the rituals and technologies used.

The introduction of new rituals and technologies to deathcare provides a fascinating insight into how people understand and view death and the dead body. Studying this field as it is on the potential cusp of change is a source of valuable data and understanding of human relationships to death.

While the topic of death has been a staple of anthropological research, my thesis has shown that there is a growing section within the field that deserves further attention. In order to better understand the growing alternative and natural deathcare movement, future empirical on natural burials, new body disposal technology, and alternative deathcare practices is needed. The legalisation process of some of the new technologies in deathcare has moved swiftly in the past few years, suggesting that this topic is only likely to become more relevant in the future.

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