

Association for the Study of Death and Society (ASDS) 15th Annual Conference Social  
**Context of Death, Dying and Disposal: Diversity and Decolonisation**

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**Re-imagining the Feast: ritual commensality and funerary experience**

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**Slide 1 / Introduction**

This presentation shares the beginnings of my doctoral research, in which I aim to explore the meaning and performance of funerary practices in increasingly secularised and spiritual but not religious (SBNR) societies, focusing in particular on food and the potential re-imagining of the feast.

We are seeing increasing trend for '*individualisation*' pervading the funeral, with the communal rituals of religious practice replaced by personally tailored experiences.

Though these rituals of religious practice often bear little or no meaning to the deceased or to those left behind, and indeed have the capacity to leave us further bereft, without them, I suggest we have lost essential loci in which to collectively experience, and move through, shared stages of grief.

Ultimately I intend to explore whether feasts, an 'impoverished rite' (Scheff, T., "Unresolved Grief," *The Center Magazine*, January/February 1980, 13, 18.), can be re-imagined to once again form part of '*what must be done*' to support the communal restoration of social fabric rent by death.

**Motivation – the personal**

You might well ask why I want to conduct research into this area - though perhaps all here might not question this at all! I've always thought and indeed taught, that the research journey is an exploration of the self, an existential exercise which can help one make and understand, one's way and one's place in the world.

For me, this all started as an attempt to make sense of my experiences as unwilling attendee at funerals. Funerals which were designed by those left living. Funerals which were designed and directed by the dead, community based theatrical performances, with stage directions, protagonists, costumes and props. Funerals which replaced weddings. Funerals which featured the bare essentials required to mark the end of a life. Funerals which should have been but never were.

**Slide 2 / Motivation – the professional**

This attempt to make sense of funerary experiences is further fuelled by my role as an event studies academic. In recent years I became increasingly aware that these are not yet often considered on the standard and accepted 'list' of planned and unplanned events that I aim to make sense of in our teaching and research. The design, meaning and management of

funerals and memorial events are still only taught in the smallest minority of institutions in the UK.

In recent years, events academics have more broadly been pushing at the boundaries of what have been considered legitimate areas for research, with the result that event studies has become, for some at least, whatever the researcher wants it to be, a site of *'neutral territory, erected upon the ideals of epistemological freedom and academic creativity'* (Pernecky 2016:4).

Whilst this critical era of events scholarship is new, the study of events is not; they have been the object of scrutiny in a number of other disciplines for many years, most notably perhaps, social anthropology, in which the analysis of the events around death has long provided rich commentary on meaning, structure and value within societies.

Prior to the mid 2010s, research in the field of events, still a subset of leisure and tourism, was predominantly focused on management, with studies providing a 'technocratic view of events, focus[ed] on the nuts and bolts in the machine and when and where to oil the parts' (Rojek 2013: xii). Event management professional practice stood accused of having sacrificed awareness, understanding and inclusion of ritualistic elements in favour of artificially manufacturing events to satisfy stakeholder demands (Brown & James 2004).

In a newly constructed critical events studies, an event is constructed as a point of rupture. It is related to, or the cause of, a tear in established social fabric. An event is a contested space, a potentially heterotopic site of transgression and inversion.

### Slide 3

The final factor was an invitation by the research collective, Moth, based in the School of Communication at Falmouth Uni, to deliver a workshop on experience design to Graphic Design undergraduates as part of their project, An Extra Place at the Table, which asked students to explore how food and feasting can be used to positively impact and disseminate creative exchange around loss, mourning and bereavement - not only loss of life, but of any experience within it for example, the loss of one's virginity, or a favourite pair of jeans...

We explored experience design as an interdisciplinary practice, melding theory from Architecture, Dramaturgy, Anthropology, Psychology, Management, Moral Philosophy, and Design, and used commensality, the practice of eating together, as the central shared act.

We discussed the ritual, liminality and communitas of Van Gennep and Victor Turner and the habitus and cultural capital of Bourdieu, alongside the contested notions of nostalgia and authenticity. We explored the reality that events, experiences, planned or unplanned, designed or spontaneous, are contested sites, layered palimpsests, replete with symbolic acts, performed by all, and denoting multiple meanings.

Using the critical events studies lens then, funerary events are transitional mourning spaces: they can be deliberately designed to reflect or reject belief systems, and to host the rejection or acceptance of, these systems. They can include ritual practices that support the

performance of social, collective strategies for addressing loss, practices that might be disturbing and contradictory but also transitional and transformative.

Beyond disciplinary evolutions though, there are of course also particular societal contexts informing my research.

#### **Slide 4 / Global context**

In 2019, the US Global Wellness Trends Report named 'Dying Well' as its 8th trend, evidenced by research into the rise in popularity of 'death doulas', the 'green burial wave' and 'death acceptance tourism', all acts conducted in response to what author Beth McGroarty notes as our 'death denying society'. (The other 7 trends include increased interests in sustainable fashion, wellness tourism, meditation, and the role of scent on emotional and physical wellbeing.)

This rise of 'death positive' behaviours in the global north has been fuelled in part by the Silicon Valley biotech industry aiming to cure death, and a pervasive 'wellness' agenda, a '*21st century secular belief system ...fundamentally directed at avoiding death anxiety...[by] convincing oneself that the right regimen of diet and exercise will keep you perpetually young or ...perpetually alive*' (Soloman, cited in McGroarty 96: 2019).

The 2020 and 2021 reports continue to illuminate societal focus on living better for longer, with *Aging Rebranded: Positively Cool*, and the *Future of Immune Health* featuring amongst leisure and wellness trends, though of course these are still reserved for those privileged few who are fortunate enough to be able to pursue them...

In the UK, in December 2020, the Competition and Markets Authority completed the second stage of their enquiry into the UK funeral industry, a hitherto unregulated sector, accused of opaque pricing at best and financial exploitation at worst.

The report found that due not least to emotional distress; social pressures relating to visibly doing the right thing; and lack of basic understanding of the funeral process, customers experience impaired decision making, leaving them vulnerable to unethical practice, from which some in the industry have profited.

Of course concerns over industries involved in end of life services are not without precedent and not confined to the UK. In 1963, Mitford's text *The American Way of Death*, a seminal text for the then nascent white American death awareness movement, accused the US funeral industry of profiteering by the selling of unnecessary services to the vulnerable bereaved.

In the global north, in 21st century increasingly secularised and spiritual but not religious (SBNR) societies, the discourse around death has been '*privatized, secularized and medicalized*' (Simpson 7:2018). Death has become increasingly concealed, sequestered through health care and social services.

Fuelled by and fuelling this, is a persistent and pervasive reluctance to openly engage with conversations about death (though I appreciate that this is not the case in this space!).

In response to an increasing awareness of this reality, a number of communal initiatives have been created, including Swiss sociologist Bernard Crettz's Café Mortels, Jon Underwood's subsequent Death Cafés, Hebb and Macklin's Death over Dinner phenomenon, and The Dinner Party, events at which we are encouraged to openly discuss our own mortality in deliberate acts of de-sequestration.

The first Café Mortel took place in 2004 in a restaurant in Switzerland a restaurant in the Swiss town of Neuchâtel, hosted by Crettaz. Anyone could come, and the only rule was that there was to be no prescription: no topic, no religion and no judgement. In 2011, Jon Underwood, then a London based council worker, hosted the first UK Death Café, modelled on Crettaz' original idea. This has since evolved into a global phenomenon, a social franchise open to all, with over 12,500 cafes taking place in over 78 countries since its inception.

The Death over Dinner initiative, a simple set of tools for to support conversations about mortality over food, was inspired by the statistic that at that time, 75% of Americans wanted to die at home, yet only 25% of them did. Like the Death Café, Death over Dinner is now a global project, and over a hundred thousand Death over Dinner events have been tracked since 2013.

For me, what was important to note was that that each of these initiatives involves eating together...

### **Slide 5 /Funerary events**

The funeral is universal. *'Across cultures, spiritual beliefs, and value systems—where there is death, there is usually a funeral service'* O'Rourke et al 729:2011. And yet it is often the least discussed and therefore often ill planned event within our collective experience. The events after a death are the site of *'things which must be done'* (Mandelbaum 1959). But do we still know what these things are? And by whom they should be done?

Van Gennap observed that *'changes of condition [deaths] do not occur without disturbing the life of society and the individual and it is the function of the rites of passage to reduce their harmful effects'*(13: 1960). If we accept then that funerary experiences still can and indeed should provide (admittedly sometimes rejected, inadequate or unhelpful) sites for collective acceptance of loss, sites where the absence and presence of the dead can be acknowledged, how might these now be designed?

As Wilson states, *'the problem facing all who celebrate rituals in a fast-changing society is how to combine relevance to changing circumstances with the sanctity of tradition'* (cited in Rothenbuhler 46:1998)

The funeral manifests for many as a series of events that involve a combination of multiple spaces and related practices in an accepted order –

- a death
- a procession to a church, crematoria or burial garden
- an accompanying 'service' comprising traditional and bespoke elements (music, speeches)
- a post burial / cremation gathering, which may feature food, drink, etc, in varying guises

However, in recent years, the increasing trend for individualisation, and rejection of religious belief has pervaded the funeral in SBNR societies with collective rites replaced by personally tailored experiences (Singleton 2014). In 2018, 53.6% of UK's population is Christian, while 6.2% belong to other religions and 40.2% are non-religious (30.3% Agnostics, 9.9% Atheists).

The funeral is evolving, moving beyond traditional boundaries. Funeral directors, the bereaved, the dead and increasingly events professionals are co-creating funeral experiences, tailored to individual needs and requests, interpreting and re-interpreting meanings in a series of complex and bespoke designed and private events.

And yet, isn't there still a need for a shared collective ritual, one that is non sacred, yet offers part of what 'must be done' – the (re)bonding of the living and the gentle transformation of the dead over the threshold, from '*person to ancestor, from present world to beyond?*' (Andrews and Leopold p36).

Let us consider then the role of food, of commensality, and what place the formal feast might have in evolving funeral traditions.

#### The Loss of Commensality

Commensality, is the act of eating together and at the same table. It is not an automatic component in an exploration of experience design; however, its relationship with ritual is still for many, essential. Food is often one of the core aspects of the ceremonial, of ritual events.

The shared meal experience is part of the socialization process, providing an opportunity for the learning, and continual reinforcement of, social norms including what, how, when, and with whom to eat. Commensality, the sharing of meals, symbolizes and denotes social bonds and divisions. It draws boundaries between those who eat together and those who do not.

In some regions of the global North, particularly the UK and the US, shared meals, like funerals, are evolving due again to increasing tendencies towards individualisation. The ever evolving assertion of individual autonomy includes a rejection of social and cultural norms, including with whom, what and how one eats. And increasingly, eating has become, like death, medicalised, with discourses focused on food restricted to diet, nutrition and health, educating us on intake and content, rather than on its role as a fundamental social practice – there remains little to no commensal dimension.

#### Slide 6

Of course, the sharing of food as part of death rituals is already acknowledged as a common historical and current practice in many cultures, deep rooted in indigenous systems, some appropriated in Graeco Roman traditions, which later informed Christian religions, and some surviving independently of such imperial then colonial integration. There is significant diversity in the forms that funerary commensality takes, but it is a common ritual. However, it's role and meaning seems rarely unacknowledged, often hidden in the private and gendered domestic sphere.

Consider the Caribbean tradition of Nine Night, the last night of the period of mourning after a death, where family and community normally gather in the deceased's house to eat and celebrate and conduct various rituals to help the spirit, the duppy, pass to the next place. Here is a recollection from Annastacia, one of my MA students, who kindly shared her childhood experience in Jamaica:

*I remember my first nine night, my grandmother's. The women were there, in their white head scarves and robes, doing the kumina, dancing for the spirit. You see them at nine nights, women from the poca churches, the revivalist churches, the ones who believe that they can interact with the dead. All I could think was when is the food! Laid out in front of me were these traditional Jamaican dishes, curried goat, white rice and rum, lots of rum, lots – and the strongest rum too. But its only served at midnight, and first to the dead. (Steele, A. 2019)*

In Nine Night, the dead are included, placed at the head of the table and served first – both their absence and presence are acknowledged in the commensal circle. Their refusal of food is a refusal to interact, indeed a demonstration that the possibility for interaction is no longer present.

The empty place at the table allows for this contradiction. The dead are with us, but absent, they are within our social order but the hierarchy is shifting. The feast provides a site of the potential for this narrative. It is the experiencescape, carefully crafted. The absence of the dead at such a collective feast, enables survivors to experience separation communally.

## Slide 7

For van Gennep, French sociologist whose concept of "rites of passage" still provides many theorists with a basis for interpreting funerary ritual, the purpose of the funeral meal *was 'to reunite all the surviving members of the group with each other, and sometimes also with the deceased, in the same way that a chain which has been broken by the disappearance of one of its links must be rejoined* (van Gennep 1960:164)

Commensality can embrace presence and absence, an essential duality in early stages of grief, whilst at the same time reinforcing and sustaining life for those left behind.

Through my research, I want to understand whether the formal commensal act might be a means to re-introduce communal ritual and facilitate collective grief work in societies where

individualism, spiritual secularism and medicalisation continue to strip communal practices from the events of death.

Is it possible, or desirable to reclaim, to reframe, the feast for the funeral?

### **Conclusion /Slide 8**

The social restrictions placed on funerals during COVID19, some adhered to, some disregarded in the face of a sacrilegious 'bare death', have I believe thrown into sharp relief the reality that we still have a fundamental need for known and collective funerary practices.

The process of invention or re-invention of tradition and its associated rituals, occurs particularly when there has been a rapid transformation of society, an event, a point of rupture when society is weakened and altered, when social patterns for which the 'old' traditions had been designed, are forced to change.

Prior to COVID19, we would consider the impact of WW1 and WW11 on public and performed funeral rituals in the UK as our most significant points of reference – during these conflicts, death was so frequent an occurrence that visual mourning practices, including the wearing of black, were rejected, their prevalence considered too demoralizing to a fragile society. And so our ritual responses to death changed.

Perhaps we are now again at a point in time where due to multiple converging factors, COVID, the cult of the self, and the loss of every day commensality, we have need of a new shared practice for funeral experiences?

As Rothenbuhler comments, 'rituals, like all social conventions, must be at some point be invented...' (50:1998)