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GUEST EDITORIAL

DEAD IN THE FIELD: UTILIZING FIELDWORK TO EXPLORE THE HISTORICAL INTERPRETING OF DEATH RELATED ACTIVITY, AND THE EMOTIONAL COPING WITH DEATH

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Introduction

The articles in this issue of *Fieldwork in Religion* were generated by two one-day inter-disciplinary conferences held at the University of Winchester that concerned religion, death and bereavement. The conference sub-topics were wide ranging and provided a chance for academics, graduate and postgraduate students, and death professionals to come together and talk openly about a subject typically taboo in wider society. The articles here reflect this mix. Several are written by non-scholars who have unique access to research populations and research locations. Irene O'Brien and Angie McLachlan are both insiders able to speak to

two groups of subjects who would be reticent to be interviewed by those they see as outsiders, while Lucy Talbot is an insider able to gain access to a location closed to the general public and academia. Angie is a death professional well respected by fellow death-workers who daily witness the tears of mourners and the transience of the human condition; her article examines the mechanisms they employ in coping with second-hand grief. Irene was witness to the Aberfan disaster in 1966; as a young nurse she helped tend those pulled from the rubble of the man-made land slide that killed 144 people from the small mining community in South Wales, and she comforted the parents of the 116 children that perished beneath a 12-metre deep coal slurry. Her insights into the events of that day reflect the communities' relationship with their deeply held Christian beliefs. Lucy, as a member of the British Police Force, has access to the London Metropolitan Police Forces Crime Museum, a place closed to those outside the force. Its contents are highly sensitive and it graphically represents the horrors of murder by displaying, un-cleaned of human remains, evidence taken from crime scenes. Her article gives the academic community a glimpse into the restricted world of what the press has long termed London's Black Museum.

Further, the conference papers reflected a variety of geographical locations and a selection of time periods in which death was explored, and covered the understandings of death from a number of different religious perspectives; this too is reflected in the edition of the journal. Although predominantly focused on fieldwork in the UK, articles here include fieldwork conducted in Australia and Germany, interpretations of death from the late-Medieval era to the current day, and explore the Abrahamic traditions, contemporary Paganism, and more secular understandings of death and bereavement.

Although death is experienced universally, it is comprehended and coped with locally, and as such death must be understood as a social construct (Bauman, 1992), with the body acting as a microcosm of wider society (Hertz, 2004). Through rituals and rhetoric (Aries, 1980; Davies, 1997; Walter, 1994) death is transcended (Chidester, 2002) and the balance of *Eros* (the life drive) and *Thanatos* (the death drive) maintained (Freud, 2003); this way death does not overcome us as individuals, nor as a wider society. Thus, we can see that two main themes come from studying death, and these inform the layout of this edition of *Fieldwork in Religion*; the historical interpreting of death related activity, and the actual emotional coping with death.

Interpreting Death

In this section we find four articles that interpret death related activity. The first by Christina Welch draws on historical sources (artistic, medical, legal and

theological) to examine carved cadaver monuments of the social and religious elite in late-Medieval (and thus Catholic) England. Agreeing with existing scholarship that they worked to petition prayers for the dead in purgatory, this article argues that they also had a pedagogical function; to reinforce to parishioners, pilgrims and priests at the churches, chantries and cathedrals in which the monuments lay, that during the wet stage of death, whilst the body was decomposing, purgatorial punishments were physical as well as spiritual; the notion of post-mortem sentience was not uncommon in all ranks of society during this period. This reading of English cadaver monuments also draws on the anthropological work of Robert Hertz who noted that the wet and dry mediums of the deceased are often understood differently, and is backed up by fieldwork which critiques and complicates existing scholarship on these memorials.

Leading on from this, the article by Adrian Harris examines the contemporary use of the historic Cross Bones graveyard at Southwark, London, (an unconsecrated graveyard that held the bodies of the district's poor and outcast), by modern individuals who feel themselves marginalized by wider society. Drawing on psychogeography (where the physical environment interacts with the mind) to reinforce his fieldwork (which utilizes investigations of the felt sense as an interview technique), Harris reveals how a historic place for the outcast dead has become a site of acceptance and belonging to today's socially marginalized. Here we find material culture bridging the divide between the world of the living and the world of the dead making, to cite Harris, the distinction between them "somewhat meaningless."

The third article in this section also seeks to bridge the divide between the living and the dead, although here material culture is used to find significance in the deaths of murder victims, and the actions of those who murdered them, in order that the British Police Force can develop new methods of murder investigation. Drawing on theories of pollution (Douglas) and liminality (Turner), Lucy Talbot argues that by revealing the biographies of objects held in the museum, objects uncleaned of the human remains of murder victims, the taboo nature of items used to perpetrate murder can move their status from reflecting what threatens moral norms to items that can help enforce them. For everyday society these now liminal objects speak only of the ultimate socially "bad death" (Walter, 1994), as evidence of murder they cannot return to everyday society and continue their previous role, but nor can they be destroyed for they will help (or have helped) to convict the perpetrator. Thus, in the hands of the Police they become pedagogical; protecting these taboo objects intimately connected with violent death from wider society (and wider society from having to confront these objects) allows wider society to be increasingly protected from those who seek to do such heinous crimes.

The last article dealing with interpreting death is by Catherine Brew. Her fieldwork was carried out in Australia where the effects of colonialism and the vastness of the country are written not just on the land but under it. Brew posits that interpreting settler burial places reveals much about both the death of the deceased, and also their lives, whilst providing a link to a past that has helped shape the countries present. For Indigenous Australians, however, she notes that burial places are more than just a link with ancestors, for even accidental damage to a burial site can smack of disrespect when the history of colonialism is considered. For Brew then, understanding burial sites can “offer an opportunity to develop a dialogue...with the past and offer a window into the exploration of identity [and] belonging”; interpreting death then, tells us much about how life was lived.

Coping with Death

The second theme of this journal edition explores in more depth how death and life inter-relate. In the first of the four papers is an exploration of coping mechanisms when disaster strikes. In exploring the tragedy of Aberfan, South Wales, in 1966, Irene O'Brien draws on her own personal experiences as a young nurse sent to assist in the rescue efforts, and her recent interviews with others present that day, to question the role of God when terrible things happen; especially when terrible things happen to young children. As a priest often ministering to the bereaved, she leaves us with her assertion that even at Aberfan, where 114 children perished in a coal slurry accident, the knowledge that God was present has helped a devastated community come to terms with its loss.

Leading on from this, Angie McLachlan explores how death professionals cope with regular exposure to second-hand grief, and the ever-present knowledge that we all must die. From interviewing and observing 65 crematoria and cemetery workers in the UK, McLachlan discerned a variety of immanent and transcendent coping mechanisms utilized by the workers to assist them with dealing with the repetitive grief of others. Adapting Davies' notion of words against death (1997), which argues that a powerful combination of rhetoric and rituals are employed by individuals and societies to protect against the finality of death, she terms coping mechanisms such as gallows humour as works against death; these acknowledge the transience of human existence but are tools employed by an insider group regularly exposed to death which help make such knowledge bearable. Little academic work has been done on this particular group of subjects, and as such this article provides an interesting and original contribution. Further, given that previous studies into gallows humour have tended to see it as nothing more than

inappropriate sick humour, the fact that her subjects were professional and measured in their use of this form of coping mechanism complicates existing research and opens up a fascinating field of study.

From the UK we move to Germany but stay with death professionals. Antje Kahl's article examines a current shift in the German funeral industry. Previously it was common for the dead body to be understood as dangerous and dirty with most funeral directors discouraging families from viewing the corpse. However, a small new movement is occurring where funeral directors are beginning to understand the corpse as imbued with religious or spiritual quality. No longer impure, viewing can be understood as a kind of "spiritual experience." It is suggested by these new funeral directors that by confronting their deceased loved one, even performing the preparation of the body, families can rediscover and evaluate their own aliveness, even in the depths of grief. Kahl's fascinating study and interviews chart this growing trend where the dead are understood as teachers to the living, and where the funeral home in Germany is replacing the church as the place where the dead and the living have a relationship.

The last article takes us from such secular or semi-sacred ways of coping with death to the robustly religious ones, and from Germany back to the UK. Marta Dominguez Diaz has conducted field-research into the ways that attitudes and responses to death help British Jews and British Muslims to define their identity in twenty-first century multi-cultural Britain. Interviewing 41 British Muslims and 36 British Jews, Diaz has found that death acts as a distinct marker of social, ethnic and religious identity for these two groups. Her illuminating work reveals that death is, indeed, a cultural construct where both groups can understand themselves to be more concerned with death than the wider population, yet also, both groups tend to demonstrate a Western British reluctance to talk about the subject; Diaz notes this is not the case for Muslims and Jews elsewhere in the world.

Overall then, this collection demonstrates that despite the universality of death, each culture (different in time and geographic location) responds to death in different ways. However, despite cultural variations, cross-culturally the dead are important to the living, and as such there is a need for the living to study death and interpret not only material culture associated with death, but also how the dead impact on the identity of those who are alive.

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