Deep Science Publishing
https://doi.org/10.70593/978-93-49910-50-8_2

DeepScience
Open Access Books

Chapter 2: Learning to die: Creative voices of acceptance

Section 1. Death Phobia, Death Acceptance, And Death Positivity in The Twenty-First Century

1.Introduction

The renowned philosopher Martin Heidegger penned an influential tome titled Unterwegs zur Sprache or On the Way To Language. In this work, he delves into the significance of language as a fundamental element in comprehending the concept of Being and explores the philosophical challenges that arise when examining it. Although the focus of this section is on the topic of death phobia, which could be discussed at length, I cannot help but draw attention to a particular passage that caught my attention. In it, Heidegger writes that mortality is a characteristic unique to humans, as they possess the ability to experience death as a definitive end. Conversely, animals lack this capacity, yet they also lack the ability to communicate through language. The fundamental correlation between death and language is a concept that has yet to be fully explored. However, it has the potential to guide us towards an understanding of how language's intrinsic nature involves us in its preoccupation, and consequently, how it relates to us, particularly if death is intertwined with that which seeks us out and makes contact with us (1971: 107-108).

Unlike animals, can we experience death because we can describe it, or is this only a matter of self-awareness? Ernest Becker combines the two into a "human animal" and writes that "the idea of death, the fear of it, haunts the human animal like nothing else" (1973: ix). Regardless of the philosophical answer to this question, one thing is clear: there is no closer realm to what death and language create together than literature. Even if it happens for a split second, we are face to face with the biggest fear paradox of all: the fact that we are frightened by something inevitable, and yet we believe that we

can avoid it by stalling or burying it deep inside our subconscious. What is this fear that we all have but refuse to acknowledge? The fear of death, or death-phobia. This has been a part of man's life since the beginning of time, since the first discovered death rituals 95,000 years ago. Naturally, society has been changing ever since, and with it, our relationship with death and death culture. This chapter discusses death as a taboo in modern Western society, modern people fearing death, and the generally positive effects of the death positivity movement.

"We begin dying the day we are born" (Doughty 2015: 222), yet we are never prepared to do so. We sweep death under the rug with nervousness and fear that someday we will have to take that rug away and look at the heap of anxiety collected over the many years of denial. The experience of death "represents the possibility of the impossibility of existence in general" (Agamben 1991: 1). Existence cannot be comprehended outside of it simply because everything physical must have a beginning and an end. This tells us that our representation of death is flawed. Psychologically speaking, we can only see it outside of our existence (Kübler-Ross 1986, 1997), and the only road we can take is through the night, feeling around for some answers that leave us partly satisfied and accepting of our mortality, with the help of approaches that stem from positive psychology (Compton 2005; Sheldon & King 2001), spirituality (Marryatt 1891), and logotherapy (Frankl 1985), among many others.

The cultural mindset plays a critical role in establishing the relationship we want with death. Culture is such a complex realm, such an individual experience, that we could not choose one definition and work within its walls without trying to look outside of it and find another perspective that we could use. Burnett Tylor (1920) states that culture is a complex whole that consists of habits, customs, traditions, behaviors, laws, beliefs, and capabilities that man follows within his social frame. The frame of reference here is somewhat traditional, compared to the semiotic concept of culture presented by Geertz, who argues that man is just an animal suspended in manmade "webs of significance" (2014:14), nearly trapped in them as if they were the spider webs of culture. Of course, we must also consider the psychological dimension, which can be described as consisting of psychological structures that man has to follow to be accepted in a social group (Goodenough 1961: 522). For us to discuss the concept of culture in the twenty-first century, this paper and ten more would not suffice. All the changes, all the shifts happening right now in the world, modify our perception of culture every single time something moves inside of it, and a significant part of those changes occur within the frame of a globalizing movement, a subject tackled in the following sections.

Therefore, death is something that should be avoided, according to our present cultural mindset. However, there appeared a movement (silent in the beginning) that made people from all over the world "push back against that oxymoronic idea" (Booth 2019), and this is the death positivity movement. This movement was popularized on

Twitter and YouTube by Caitlin Doughty as a play on the phrase "sex positivity." It is a social and philosophical movement that seeks to break the silence around death-related topics. In 2011, Doughty founded The Order of The Good Death, whose website lists the beliefs of the movement, some of which being: "I believe that by hiding death and dying behind closed doors we do more harm than good to our society," and "I believe that my open, honest advocacy around death can make a difference, and can change culture" (The Order of the Good Death). In time, organizations such as End Well and Death Over Dinner joined the movement, encouraging other people to do the same (Raphael, 2019) through art, literature, and open conversation. More on this in the following pages. Its goal is not to make death obsolete or belittle its cultural importance. "This way of thinking simply argues that cultural censorship of death isn't doing us any favors" (Booth 2019). On the contrary, it sets us up for a life of subconscious fear and anxiety that ultimately dictates our decisions. Death phobia is, above all, the child of human nature, but it has recently been adopted by modern society and raised as if it were its own.

2. Death as a Modern Taboo Subject

In 1955, Gorer expressed precisely the problem in the twentieth century in discussions about death and dying. The author noticed the taboos of sex in the previous century and how they shifted to become taboos of death in the twentieth. The phenomenon of corruption and decay in nature has acquired a repugnant connotation, akin to the perception of birth and copulation a century ago. The preoccupation with such processes is deemed morbid and unhealthy, and should be discouraged among all individuals, with punitive measures imposed on the youth (51). We can imagine the harm done by this view upon what today seems to be natural curiosity and open conversation about the most natural thing next to birth. On the one hand, the modern denial of death might have begun in the nineteenth century (Leaney 1989), but collective death experiences such as World War Two have been the actual trigger (Jupp 2006). On the other hand, some sociologists argue that, after Gorer's article, there appeared a constant proclamation of death as a modern taboo (Walter 1991), which might have given the subject the popularity that made it anything but a topic that must not be tackled publicly. (As advertisers have always said: bad publicity is still publicity.)

As a cultural whole, we create this aura of mystery and misery surrounding death and its constituents: dead bodies, death practices, rituals, grieving, and mourning. Consequently, "death avoidance is not an individual failing; it's a cultural one. Facing death is not for the faint-hearted. It is far too challenging to expect that each citizen will do so on his or her own" (Doughty 2017: 232). Death acceptance should not be a mission we must accomplish alone but a community practice, even though modern culture offers

us no help in this regard. Western societies, globalization, and modern man's immense desire to live forever can make starting a discussion about death impossible in most parts of the world. In some parts of Romania, for instance, rural communities are more open to discussing what will happen to their bodies after death. The elders build their caskets and place them in front of their houses to prepare not only themselves but also their loved ones for the moment of death. This practice does not only help them reach a stage of acceptance but also breaks the taboo surrounding death and dying and creates a proper environment for conversation within the community.

Psychologically, the taboo around death is an active part of our lives, kept on an unconscious level. Even if it lurks in the background of our psyche and we do not always feel its presence, it still motivates us in certain aspects. It is commonly believed that individuals do not actively contemplate mortality. Nevertheless, the apprehension of death subconsciously impacts various facets of their existence and propels numerous behaviors. The avoidance of death anxiety is manifested through diverse means (R. Firestone & Catlett 2009: 19). How does this avoidance take place? Caitlin Doughty (2015) explains that the fear of death is the catalyst that pushes us to build cathedrals and have children, so understanding how we react to death and why we do so may bring us closer to understanding ourselves and each other. Death is the engine of our every action, conscious or unconscious. Consciousness can at times be perceived as a curse, leading to a significant fear response. The manner in which an individual manages their anxiety surrounding mortality, as they progress through life and gain a deeper understanding of existential concerns, is a crucial factor in shaping their psychological well-being.

However, it does not necessarily have to be a curse. It can also be the catalyst that inspires us to live in the moment meaningfully and to live a good life so that we can die a good death. Viktor Frankl, the father of logotherapy, wrote Man's Search for Meaning, describing his experience in concentration camps. There, he finally understands that meaning, life, and death go hand in hand. He writes: "Live as if you were living for the second time and had acted as wrongly the first time as you are about to act now" (1985: 175). In the camp, death was laughed at, and the taboo was shattered using "a grim sense of humor" (34), and this led to finding "some sense in my death" (69). This sense was found by opening himself up—psychologically, socially, culturally—not only to the verbalized thought of dying but also to the prospect of it happening.

Another matter that became taboo is the image of the corpse, not as portrayed by the twenty-first-century media —which encourages the public obsession with the Hollywoodian side of forensic science (Penfold-Mounce 2016)—but by professionals who work for funeral homes, by doctors and nurses, and by people who encounter death in its raw, unglamorous state. The body found at the beginning of each episode (no matter

the series, they always find it in the first five to ten minutes) looks nothing like a real-life version: the mouth is always perfectly closed, the skin porcelain-pale, the body limp, and the eyes always shut. Of all the crime and mystery series I have watched (not a small number), I have only seen representations that come close to reality in the series Elementary (starring Lucy Liu and Johnny Lee Miller). This distinction between the fashioned image of death and the raw and real one is expressed in the following paragraph, in which Doughty, as a young mortician, cannot decide whether the dead body is merely flesh or something much more than this. The protagonist engages in a self-dialogue, stating, "I reminded myself that this was merely a deceased individual, decomposing flesh, Caitlin. A lifeless animal carcass" (2015: 2). However, this approach proves to be ineffective in motivating her. She acknowledges that Byron, the deceased individual, was more than just a decaying body. He possessed a noble and mystical essence, akin to that of a unicorn or a griffin. Byron was a hybrid of the sacred and the profane, and his presence lingered with the protagonist at the threshold between life and eternity.

These opposing views on dead bodies can also be translated into the opposition body-as-object versus living body (Ricoeur 2004; Botîlcă 2021) and corpse versus cadaver (Scott 2008). Is it just rotting meat, or is it a magical creature? Doughty seems to find the via media: "a hybrid of something sacred and profane" (2). Thus, the body becomes both an object of external manipulation (through ritual) and a relic that holds meaning (through belief) and the image of the dead body as a product consumed via mass media, lacking visible and realistic death images (Hanusch 2008), disappears and is replaced by this mélange between ritual and belief, which holds meaning for both the individual and the community and helps them approach death from a physical and visual point of view, without any misguidance.

Doughty also discusses her first interaction with death when, during her childhood years, she witnesses a little girl fall from the balcony of a building onto the pavement. She acknowledges that: "I had seen worse on television, but this was reality" (2015: 30). Therefore, the question arises: how are real-life atrocities different from what we see in the media? The answer lies within the question: it is indeed real life. The screen acts as a protective shield when the media depicts a dead body, usually making a show out of death (Florea & Rabatel 2011). Likewise, when we see this in a movie that we unconsciously perceive as something fashioned by somebody else, the impact is different because we are more of an observer than a participant. However, when death occurs in our circle, in our reality that we always believe is locked and shielded from tragedy, we develop "a thick layer of denial" (33) to live on. Doughty wonders: "Sometimes I think of how my childhood would have been different if I had been introduced directly to death. Made to sit in his presence, shake his hand. Told that he would be an intimate companion" (33). This is the question we should all ask ourselves. What if we had begun

reading books about death earlier? What if we had had that conversation with our parents or grandparents, who always turn their backs on us when we ask them what they want us to do for their funerals (or ours)? And what if we had dared to speak up about our fear without shaking at the thought of someone judging us for being "frail"? Perhaps our relationship with death would have been less uncomfortable today, and we might have even become frenemies.

Death being introduced to us mostly depends on the culture we contribute to. That is why cultural relativism is essential in understanding why some cultures have such different views regarding what the dead body means to them. For instance, Christianity tells us that the living body holds the spirit; without it, the body is just a carcass (Geary 2013). But some cultures treat the dead body as if it were still living, as the Torajan people in Indonesia do (Koudounaris 2015), interacting with their dead even long after the burial has taken place since they mummify the bodies and preserve them in such a way that the corpses can be exposed to the natural elements without the fear of decomposition. By interaction, one might understand communication, but it is a ceremony of remembrance when the bodies are dressed up, cleaned, and involved in the activities of the living. For the Torajan people, this is a vital part of the grieving process that reminds them there is no taboo in discussing and interacting with death.

More than this, because culture and taboos also encompass language, it is necessary that we mention the importance of communication in conversations surrounding death. Firstly, language produces thoughts and meanings whose reflections turn into the rituals we create around death and grief (White 1995). Secondly, the relationship between language and death—beyond the ontological meaning of the end of one's existence being put into words, thus into existence—can be transported into a literary device whose purpose is to ease the encounter with the awareness of death. Not translating our pain into words contradicts the relation between the "faculty for language" and "the faculty for death" that only human beings possess (Agamben 1991: xii). Is there a possibility for death to exist outside language? Probably not, considering there would be no way for it to emerge, develop, and linger. Language is what brings it into existence, and vice-versa. Without death, language would resonate into an eternal void of nothingness, missing significance, and intention.

In recent times, a new literary branch has emerged, known as contemporary death-acceptance literature, which centers around discussions and reflections related to death. This genre aims to highlight death positivity through creative nonfiction works authored by individuals who explore the topic in a manner that allows readers to witness their own mortality from a unique vantage point. With a blend of nonchalant sadness and humor, these authors present death in a way that eases the impact of its unavoidably painful nature. This literature compels us to confront the uncomfortable and often taboo subject of death, ultimately helping us to come to terms with our own mortality.

3. Modern Man Fearing Death

A study by Chapman University in 2018 shows that the fear of death is among Americans' greatest fears. The survey tells us that 56.4% of the people interviewed said they were afraid of people they love having to die, and only 27.9% expressed their fear of their death, exponentially more than in 2016 (Chapman University 2018). The same university redid the survey in 2022, when the fear of someone dear dying reached 58.1%, while the fear of dying themselves is only at 29% (Chapman University 2022). It is remarkably interesting to look at the top fears that Americans had in 2022: corrupt government officials (62.1%), people I love becoming seriously ill (60.2%), and Russia using nuclear weapons (59.6%). The second two are death-related, although the first one too has oftentimes caused the death of many innocent people. As we saw in the previous section, most conversations about death are taboo, so we may presume that the number of those who admitted to having such fears might be even higher. In the United Kingdom, however, a study conducted in 2021 by YouGov shows that Britons are split over their thanatophobia: only 41% of the general population is afraid of dying (Dinic 2021). Consequently, we know some anxiety exists, but now let us discuss why the modern man might dread death.

In 2015, Mahdi Rezapour embarked on a journey to discover what factors contribute to our fear of death. He asked almost two thousand people from various countries worldwide why they feared dying, and in 2022 he published the following results (6). The arrows show how the factors interact, leading to one final affirmation: "My death frightens me." His research shows that death is a more significant concern for younger people and that married individuals fear death less. As you can see in the illustration below, factors such as not being remembered, having a dreadful death, and knowing that death is final are three factors that interact. Also, the shame that comes together with others seeing you suffer might be enough not to want to reach the dying stage of your life. Another thing that contributes to thanatophobia is (as paradoxical as it may seem) not knowing what loss of consciousness feels like. Through this study, Rezapour shows us that there is no sole reason one might fear death, but a multitude of factors involved in this natural and normal feeling, though I might add one to the list: our society's obsession with everything young.

Our modern world's obsession with being and staying young for our entire lives triggers a chain reaction of conscious avoidance, anxiety, and fear (Howarth 2013). As part of the young generation, I can argue that we have "zero death literacy" (Doughty 2017: 167), but we also do not seem to mind. Romanian historian Lucian Boia (2000) admits that today we live in the mirage of adolescence, whose values and attitudes seem to have been imposed even upon seniors. So, it is impossible for someone who lives in this youth culture not to fear ageing and eventually dying.

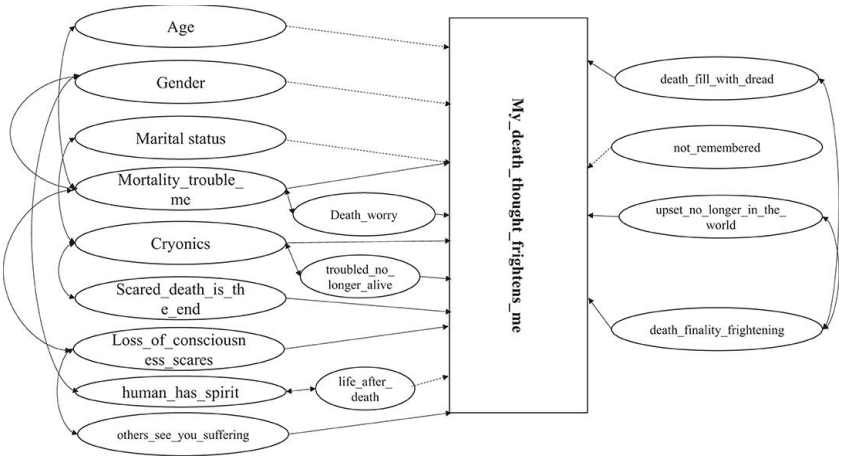

Fig. 7. Rezapour's visual representations of the factors that contribute to death phobia.

Modern times involve not fighting the uncomfortable. Younger generations—especially in Western Europe and America—choose not to get involved in the process of burying a loved one (Parkes et al. 1997) not only because they are not connected to rituals anymore but also because death has become an industry that keeps us from contributing in any way. For example, Christian-Orthodox traditions say that the body needs to be bathed by the family before it is buried. However, even in rural Eastern Europe, funeral homes insist that they do it, taking away from us the possibility of interacting with the body as part of the grieving process. Doughty draws a harsh conclusion when she writes about the differences between a "now" and a "then": "What is most surprising about this story is not that an eight-year-old witnesses a death, but it took her eight whole years to do so. […] When the first European settlers arrived, all they did was die" (2015: 30-31). Blauner (1966) argues that this difference exists because modern social systems do not miss their dead as much as their pre-modern ancestors since life expectancy is now longer; also, there are larger populations, so the vacant positions in society can be easily filled by someone else. However, the bereaved individual is even more isolated than before. We are asked to both accept death and, at the same time, reject it (Dumont & Foss 1972): accept it because it is a part of our reality, and deny it because we must go about our lives as if it did not exist. More than this, the meaning of death has become overwhelmingly scientific (Prior 1989) and less spiritual. Because of this secularization of death, modern man has no choice but to follow the existing path of death phobia. The irony that we witness is that "the deepest need is to be free of the anxiety of death and annihilation, but it is life itself which awakens it, and so we must shrink from being fully alive" (Becker 1973: 66). Peter Berger (1967) argues that this duality is natural and that death is essential for the human condition because it

forces us to find coping mechanisms rather than neglect a universality that constructs man and society.

The choice should be open to conversation, which can contradict a cultural trend that harms us. But perhaps culture can be manipulated. Perhaps culture creates expectations that reality can never meet. Is it not possible for modern culture to be harmful? According to Doughty, there exists a profound disquietude regarding the transformation of our attitudes towards death, and our society has undergone a complete rupture from conventional practices of corpse disposal and the associated beliefs concerning mortality (2015: 214), and we currently find ourselves inside a "spiritual supernova" (Taylor 2007: 300), i.e., we have a multitude of choices that overwhelm man precisely because of their large number.

However, if culture is made of webs of significance, then significance is made of beliefs. Beliefs are transmitted from generation to generation, and some may come out wrong (based on the individual's definition of right and wrong). In contrast, others have been around for a long time and have proven to work, heal, and keep the family and the community together. Today, my generation breaks away from what tradition tells them, away from ritual and meaning/significance, and we do not even know that we are doing so. Unconsciously, we swim forward in the cultural stream dictated by our surroundings—books we read, movies we see, people we meet. Swimming against the current is frowned upon but clearly not impossible. It is clear that modern culture is somewhat flawed for not focusing more on belief and ritual. Before being part of a culture—a mechanism of significance and meaning—we hold our personal beliefs, and this infallible relationship that we have with our bodies forces us to have a relationship with their mortality too. You cannot possibly have one without the other, and if you do, the lack of the latter will propel you into a time of shock and despair when you face death, whether your own or somebody else's.

Herder captures terrifically well the essence of the modern man, without even knowing what society would be like in the twenty-first century. The experience of hearing the cries and moans of a victim of torture, a dying being, or even a suffering animal can elicit a profound emotional response that penetrates the heart. The horror and pain of such situations can be felt deeply, affecting not only the bones but also the entire nervous system. The language of nature is thus characterized by a chain of sensations that resonate with the sound of death and destruction (1806: 48). I trust that the "living machine" (48) accurately predicted how man was expected to behave, be, and exist in a way that perfectly matches mechanical constraints. When you feel tired, "update" or "uninstall" something from your mind and "restart." Even language stimulates this mechanism, with phrases such as "I am going to recharge my batteries at the weekend" or "I have to reprogram for success." However, this system has feelings and consciousness, and gods. Did man become the ultimate machinery that overturns the

very system that created it? Perhaps not yet, as we are still aware of something that only we can be aware of: death. If that sets us apart from every being is debatable, but one thing is sure: death holds onto us with a grip that cannot (will not) let us forget who and what we are.

By extension, the modern industrialized world plays a significant role in changing death practices. Industrialized cremation and embalming are two processes that changed how we look at death and dead bodies in Western society. Whilst families are rarely present during cremations in the West, in Japan, they are offered a massive part in the ritual: the cremation machine is started by a family member, and close relatives pick the remaining bones during the ritual of kotsuage (Doughty 2017: 165-166). This change translated into a shift of attitude toward scenes of death. Gorer acknowledges that during the twentieth century, there has been a notable shift in societal attitudes towards prudishness. Specifically, while discussions of copulation have become increasingly acceptable, particularly within Anglo-Saxon cultures, death has become increasingly taboo as a natural phenomenon (1955: 50), because the emancipation of man is characterized by an effort to master life. "Death is seen as the terminator of purpose […], the antithesis of the modern celebration of life" (Lee 2020: 91). But what we do not know is that celebrating life also means celebrating death. Going hand in hand, these halves of the same whole cannot be separated; until we learn that, death will be the enemy of life instead of its companion.

4. Cultural Sensitivity and Death Acceptance in the Context of Globalization

Cultural sensitivity aims to increase understanding between diverse cultures and decrease rigid and stereotyped attitudes towards others. But it can also be a source of inspiration, a proverbial window to another cultural realm that treats death differently. In today's constant and irreversible globalization, we must learn to rediscover these windows and pay attention to our culture (Raikhan et al. 2014). Unfortunately, borders between cultures have begun to disappear and make room for a universalized attitude toward death, which might—or might not—be destructive (Cowen 2020), especially for those local cultures that built their death practices on ritual and belief. Walter (2005) argues that modern death attitudes have less to do with global modernity than national and local cultures, religions, and history. However, he might fail to see the connection between the center and the periphery of global culture. The center will always influence the margins, and these margins will stray farther from themselves or grow even deeper roots into their own beliefs.

Often "we invoke belief to denigrate others. […] We consider death rituals savage only when they don't match our own" (Doughty 2017: 12). This does not only widen the already existing pit between cultures, but it neither offers help when it comes

to finding inspiration for death rituals. Culturally insensitive behavior can never lead to the reformation of the death industry. I agree that there will always be the Other, the non-I, who scares us and seems to threaten somehow to take away something of our own, to change us in one way or another, but perhaps there can be a way of communicating with a different culture while also trying to understand and value the differences that are bound to exist among people. Anthony Appiah agrees that "conversations across boundaries can be fraught, all the more so as the world grows smaller and smaller and the stakes grow larger. It's therefore worth remembering that they can also be a pleasure" (2006: xx). This is the choice of cosmopolitanism, which involves guarding your values and being curious about and respecting the world's values (Gunesch 2004).

Cosmopolitanism in the sense of cultural sensitivity might be the answer to our death-denying Western society. Even though it has been associated with a one-world government that would end nationalism (Heater 1996), I believe that a culturally sensitive cosmopolitanism will bring a certain balance between "I"—curious, unjudgmental—and the Other—willing to let me experience their culture as a source of inspiration for my own. Boia (2000) wonders whether it would be better if the reality of the Other were shaped by dialogue and mediation between cultures. Conversation without judgment seems to answer the question of alterity, but although we might believe that the latter disappeared when the twenty-first century began, all is. However, a new arrangement, an arrangement that hides these differences in the deep layer of culture, the one that we never get to see but we all get to feel.

In this sense, globalization has erased all borders between cultures, creating (paradoxically) a more significant resistance to the Other within the said cultures (Lieber & Weisberg 2002). However, some scholars dismiss the idea that there could ever exist a hegemonic culture taking over and insist that those "who blame Western modernity in general for all the ills of the world […] usually do not bother to learn about other cultures and languages, to begin with," (Huyssen 2008: 4). This is partly right. Not all ills can be traced back to Western lands. But what happened to death culture could be—consider industrial cremation—see Caitlin Doughty's *From Here to Eternity*, pp. 130-133. She tells the story of how Lodovico Brunetti, an anatomy professor, attempted to create the first modern cremation machinery in the late 1800s. In a paper published in 1884, Brunetti describes industrial cremation as "a solemn, magnificent moment, which has a sacred, majestic quality" (132)—and chemical embalming—See John Troyer's "Embalmed vision", published in *Mortality*, 12:1, pp. 22-47—, which were both tested and advertised first in the Western community, then slowly the rest of the world had to follow—because what is the West if not the center of cultural, economic, and, after all, the living world (Appadurai 1996; Featherstone 1995)?

To exemplify these changes, Doughty discusses the use of the word "dignity" in Western death culture, writing that the term "dignity" holds a significant place in the

Western funeral home industry, with the largest American funeral corporation having even obtained a trademark for the term. However, the manifestation of this concept often entails a sense of solemnity, where silence, a constrained posture, and a strict formality are commonly observed. The wake, typically lasting for a duration of two hours, is followed by a procession leading to the cemetery. It is noteworthy that the family departs from the cemetery even before the casket is lowered into the ground (2017: 102).

Dignity can sometimes prevent us from grieving on our terms and starting the healing process. Does grieving mean breaking down and bursting into tears in front of a crowd at your mother's funeral? Does that help you ease the pain? If so, you should not feel any sense of guilt. Unfortunately, modern society starts resembling more and more Norbert Elias's *société polie* (2002): the courtier is a master of self-control, and that is why he appears as the ultimate rational person. However, some questions arise, Elias says. Passions and tensions will strengthen and make the individual fight himself, not the others, as in war-led societies. This means the superego constantly fights the id about manifesting emotion, creating huge tensions for the individual. These contradictions within our psyche—one may also call it "soul"—will subsequently sprout into emotional problems.

The question is: "In our Western culture, where are we held in our grief? Perhaps religious spaces, churches, temples—for those who have faith. However, for everyone else, the most vulnerable time in our lives is a gauntlet of awkward obstacles" (Doughty 2017: 232). Religious people perceive death differently because they already possess a toolbelt that helps them confront some of their fears, but not all people are religious or spiritual. Moreover, Western culture offers them no support. They cannot even find meaning or relief if they refuse religion or spirituality.

It is advised that the grieving process should happen behind closed doors, making sure that no one hears our cries of sorrow, and this perception spreads all over the world, touching all cultures. Thankfully, in this flood of globalization, some small islands have arisen. In Romania, for instance, the tradition of *bocitoare*—wailing women or professional mourners—can still be found in the northern and western parts of the country. In Maramureș, people sing the following couplet: *Draga maichii, după tine, / Îmi pare și rău, și bine* (The fact that you died, my lad, / makes me both happy and sad). The belief is that life does not end, that the dead person goes on living in spirit, shedding away the human body, and this helps the entire community come together and heal—no taboo, no fear of being judged by other cultures, no hiding away from death.

So, why is cultural sensitivity so important for death acceptance? It is important to be mindful of cultural sensitivity when it comes to dealing with death. This is because we all incorporate various aspects from the diverse cultures we encounter in our lives. By observing and participating in various rituals and practices, we can find comfort and

inspiration. This allows us to give ourselves permission to grieve when needed and confront mortality with the help of diverse interactions and experiences. Through embracing cultural sensitivity, we can enhance our own acceptance of death and also develop greater empathy and understanding towards others who may be going through their own unique grieving process. Buddhist monks find liberation through discomfort (also called cognitive behavioral therapy, a psychotherapeutic treatment that helps people find coping strategies to help them with their negative thought patterns), staring right into the heart of their fears, and finding the strength to break away from them. We are not Buddhist monks, but stepping onto this proverbial bridge between denial and acceptance can change how we live and, more importantly, die.

5. Death Acceptance

I cannot even begin to list the many theories that have been put forth in the last two centuries about life after death (or lack thereof), about what happens to the soul (that is, if there *is* one), and whether there is a cyclic nature of things that brings us back into physicality (with or without memories from past lives). Each culture, sub-culture, and individual has a personal theory they hold on to for soothing purposes or because their belief is pure and authentic. After all, "ideas are the most migratory things in the world" (Lovejoy 1940: 4), but at the root of all this, there is one word that I found to be the most significant: meaning.

Samuel Butler writes that "if life is an illusion, then so is death—the greatest of all illusions. If life must not be taken so seriously—then so neither must death" (1917: 375). The meaning one finds in life is the same as the meaning held by death. As Butler puts it, we have two options: to believe that there is no death at all or to believe that death happens to someone else, not to ourselves, because "we cannot blow hot and cold with the same breath" (355). By death not happening at all, he means that there is a change, a movement in our mortal condition, but that movement is not permanent; it is only a shift—we get rid of this mortal coil—and we move on as something else. Meaning holds a permanent place in our psyche. The question "What if all is meaningless?" seems more haunting to some than the idea of permanent disappearance. I want my life and death to mean something, and I cannot comprehend that it might be in vain. One of the authors I find the most representative of this topic is Viktor Frankl, the father of logotherapy, who wrote *Man's Search for Meaning* after three years spent in four different concentration camps during the war, losing all his family to the Nazis. After his excruciating experiences, he concludes that the meaning of life and death is suffering: "To live is to suffer, to survive is to find meaning in the suffering" (1985: 11-12), writes Gordon Allport in the preface to his book. Frankl wholeheartedly believed that "without suffering and death human life cannot be complete" (88). This is the opposite of what Caroline

Myss (who wrote the preface to Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's *On Life After Death* and who published *Anatomy of the Spirit* in 1996) says in her books and workshops, where she states that we put ourselves in places of suffering so that we can have an excuse for being lazy. I do not know how much this applies to people who are abused or suffer injustices at the hands of others, but it is interesting to see the difference between two people I find to be death acceptance activists. For him, death comes as a final stage of growth, a last step towards accomplishing a life lived with meaning. He even addresses the negative impact of modernity (he calls it "industrial society") on finding meaning in our lives and deaths: "a more general mass phenomenon, namely the feeling of meaninglessness resulting from a frustration of our existential needs which in turn has become a universal phenomenon in our industrial societies" (164). How will we find meaning in our lives if we cannot find meaning in our deaths? This is one question that is impossible to answer today when death acceptance seems outrageous, such an easy renunciation at first glance when it might solve or at least ease our fears of ourselves and our loved ones dying. So, according to Frankl, meaning is what might fix our thanatophobia (death phobia or death anxiety), while suffering may be able to give us meaning. Now, this does not mean that we have to put ourselves in situations where we know we will suffer, but we have to take whatever hardship may come around as an answer that life is not in vain. As paradoxical as this sounds—because everywhere we look today, we see and hear people advocating for suffering as being the anti-hero of our carefree and comfortable lives—we all suffer one way or another, no matter how much or how little it might look like from the outside, so knowing that sufferance is not in vain might help us pull through more quickly and even give us a more rewarding and self-sufficient view of life (and, why not, death).

Elizabeth Kübler-Ross is another loud voice of the twentieth century militating for death acceptance by telling her stories about her patients. She popularized the five stages of grief. She is also famous for her deathbed literature—she chose to work in end of life care to help patients die with peace and dignity—and her advocacy for dying at home instead of in a sterile and cold hospital. She was even audited before the Special Committee on Aging of the United States Senate in 1972 on dying with dignity and the freedom to choose death at home. During the hearing, senator Frank Church quotes Kübler-Ross in saying that "the machinery of the modern medical institution sometimes crushes the dignity and the comfort of a patient" (2), while Kübler-Ross focuses on "the loneliness of the dying patients" (12), the fact that "children are not allowed to visit patients in hospitals"(10) and that we live in a "death-denying society" (12). Allowing terminally ill patients to die with dignity and refusing to artificially prolong life and suffering were two of the most discussed subjects during the hearing. She never misses an opportunity to let us know that our Western society is on the wrong path towards death acceptance and might never come to terms with dying unless we are open to discussing it. In *On Death and Dying*, she painfully admits that "we would think that our great emancipation, our knowledge of science and of man, had given us better ways and

means to prepare ourselves and our families for this inevitable happening" (2014: 7), but "the more we are achieving advances in science, the more we seem to fear and deny the reality of death" (7). Her most piercing question is, "Are we becoming less human or more human?" (9) and I believe the answer is clear. Our society values masses and numbers regarding such a delicate thing as death instead of emphasizing the individual: human interaction is left behind, and what we see today is a "more gruesome, more lonely, mechanical, and dehumanized" (7) death. Her answer to this is contemplation: "If all of us would make an all-out effort to contemplate our own death. […] perhaps there could be less destructiveness around us" (13).

Her view of the future is bleak but not very different from what science-fiction books predicted would happen in the twenty-first century: an examination of the future reveals a society in which an increasing number of individuals are sustained through the use of machinery that replaces vital organs, and computers that monitor physiological functions and replace them with electronic equipment as necessary. The proliferation of centers dedicated to collecting technical data is anticipated, where a signal may be triggered upon a patient's expiration, prompting the automatic cessation of equipment. Additionally, centers that specialize in the rapid cryogenic freezing of the deceased are expected to gain popularity. These individuals will be stored in specialized facilities with low temperatures, awaiting the day when scientific and technological advancements have progressed sufficiently to enable their revival and reintegration into society. The potential for an alarmingly overpopulated society may necessitate the formation of special committees tasked with determining the number of individuals who can be defrosted (2014: 15-16). Wonderfully well, she predicts what is already happening in the United States. Peter Ward shows us the steps towards and the desire for immortality originating from Silicon Valley in his 2022 *The Price of Immortality: The Race to Live Forever*. In it, he says that Aubrey de Grey is the primary representative individual for the immortalist community and that CEOs of the biggest companies in the world invest in research to stop ageing. Aubrey de Grey co-authored *Ending Aging* (2007) and is well-known for his view that technology will and should allow people to stay alive and not die from age-related issues. He is also a cryonicist and a partner of the Alcor Life Extension Foundation in the US, which advocates for freezing human corpses and brains to restore them when technology will allow it in the future. Naturally, the scientific community sees cryonics as quackery and pseudoscience (Butler 1992; Steinbeck 2002). Needless to say, I find this (as objective as I would like to be, this is impossible) to be the ultimate snake oil tentative; evading something that is bound to happen to everyone—ultimately, nature—will never bring meaning to people. As much money as there is to be spent in ten lifetimes, death will always come: bitterly to those who have not prepared for it and sweetly to those who embrace the inevitable.

However, five years after initially publishing *On Death and Dying* (in 1969), she wrote *Death: The Final Stage of Growth* (in 1974), where her prediction of the future is much brighter. In the forthcoming decades—she wrote—it is plausible that a single universe, a unified humankind, and a solitary religion may emerge, leading to a harmonious world. The responsibility of laying the foundation for this future generation rests upon individuals who must endeavor to comprehend and exhibit compassion towards their fellow human beings, irrespective of their beliefs, ethnicity, or ideology. By acknowledging that we all share a common destiny, that is, the inevitability of death, we may also realize that in life, we must strive for unity, acknowledging and valuing our differences while accepting our shared humanity (1986: 3). She predicts that the future will happen under the sign of cosmopolitanism, that people will be primarily citizens of the world, respecting the traditions of others and caring for them when they are in need. This view is, nowadays, excessively optimistic, yet entirely far from what the world of the twenty-first century looks like. Thanks to globalization and multiculturalism, we seem to be closer than ever. Yet, we could not be further apart because of capitalism, social media, and consumerism (aspects related to profit and power). Kübler-Ross lived to see the dawn of the twenty-first century. However, not even she could predict that spirituality would subside, or at least would become part of secluded proverbial islands surrounded by an ocean of secularity.

I believe there is only one answer to why man fears death, and Ernest Becker explains it all too well in his book *The Denial of Death*. He suggests that man is captive in an existential paradox: "the condition of individuality within finitude" (1973: 27). In other words, man is split in two: "he has an awareness of his splendid uniqueness is that he sticks out of nature with a towering majesty" but "he goes back into the ground a few feet in order blindly and dumbly to rot and disappear forever" (27). Unlike animals, who are spared of this contradiction, man seems to be the only one suffering from it. And death phobia is what naturally follows; believing that you are a grand being destined for great deeds and at the same time fully aware that you die—no questions asked—is the only contradiction living within us all; it is a pain that we share as a community, the one thing we have in common that should bring us closer together to try and understand the least we can before this fear stops us from living life to the fullest.

Our relationship with death should be one of "comfortable camaraderie" (Black 2018: 328). Cryogenics and other such futile endeavors will never make this happen; on the contrary, the pit of desperation will grow bigger and deeper, and we will hold on to the physical life with all our puny strength, making things even more difficult for ourselves when the time comes. In the end, as Sue Black writes: "There is only one way to discover the truth about dying, death and being dead, and that is to do it" (2018: 338). So, if we want total clarification, I suppose we wait.

6. The Death Positivity Movement

Any social (thus cultural, literary and everything this might encompass) movement never has one starting point, but many paths converge into a wish for action and activism. However, let us uncover a relatively chronological order of the event leading up to one of the most significant movements in the 2020s. The death positivity movement started in 1974 through the hospice movement in the Unites States—triggered by the same movement happening in the United Kingdom—when the first hospice was officially opened. Four years later, the Department of Health, Education and Welfare acknowledges that the hospice movement promotes caring for the terminally ill while reducing costs and supporting families during this tough time. Today, hospice care is more fueled than ever by the death positivity movement, showing that Americans are on the right path to palliative care and organized health service (Bryant 2019). In 1976, legislation in the States gave individuals the right to decline unwanted medical interventions to sustain life. Still, in the 1970s, the Chicano movement took their *Día de Muertos* rituals into the public sphere through protests where they embraced their roots and defied the American assimilation process. (Chicano artists use this celebration to express their pride and politics.) This way, Americans are confronted with their death and are shown a different approach towards accepting it. Today, *Día de Muertos* is a symbol that sparks discussions about mortality in an imaginative and ritualistic way, but also about becoming increasingly commoditized—transformed into objects that can be exchanged on the market for monetary gains and other advantages—through marketing. Nonetheless, it offers a unique perspective regarding death culture, lamented or praised by observers (Marchi 2009). In the 1980s, palliative care was introduced widely in the United States, offering professionals an interdisciplinary approach to what it means to care for people suffering from life-limiting illnesses, the only goal being enhancing the patient's quality of life in hospice care. Death acceptance activists argue that the focus should be shifted from quantity to quality: attention to enhanced care rather than unnecessary and artificial means of prolonging life and suffering (Callahan 2009). Daniel Callahan is all for restoring death as a public event. In his article, he tries to persuade his readers that "nothing will do away with death and the need for mourning" (2009: 113), even if today's medical field seems to condemn ageing and illness and fiercely look for a way out of them.

When the AIDS crisis took hold of America in the 1980s, public health agencies and the Reagan administration refused to acknowledge the epidemic. Hence, AIDS activists started organizing protests where masses lay on the ground in public places and feigned death—also called "die-ins." One myth according to which AIDS victims' bodies are a health and safety hazard starts to circulate. In the meantime, community death care providers fight to restore the dignity of the dead victims when many hospitals and embalmers refuse to care for them. This triggers the change of the (erroneous) view

that all dead bodies are infected, gross, and should be kept away from the public sphere unless they are famous or part of the public's interest, forcing medical professionals to come forward and explain that this myth is triggered by the individual's fear of acknowledging death by interacting with a dead body in ritualistic manners or simply during the initial stage of mourning or early grief.

In 1969, Elizabeth Kübler-Ross published interviews with her dying patients, helping us understand how death affects not only the terminally ill but also their families, friends, and medical staff. *On Death and Dying* instantly becomes one of the bricks that make the foundation of the movement. In 1973, Ernest Becker wrote *The Denial of Death*, a Pulitzer Prize-winning book arguing that human behavior is wholly motivated by our fear of death. He makes a great point about the twentieth century as a time of awakening in matters of death: "And here we are in the closing decades of the 20th century, chocking on truth" (1973: x). His work greatly influenced today's death positivity activism. In the 1990s, green burials and home funerals (which have always existed as a practice, so they are nothing new and glamorous) started to become a point of interest for many people. The refusal of concrete and metal vaults in which the casket is placed in many cemeteries around the world and the encouragement for hospital care when the patient is terminally ill and chooses to let go and return home to die surrounded by family and friends, these are now beginning to cause a stir for the funeral industry. While climate change is a topic brought up increasingly in the public sphere, green burial advocates voice the need to refuse "traditional burials," and the modern age acknowledges them and returns to a more environmentally friendly option. In 1998, the first conservation cemetery opened in the United States; by the 2010s, the number of dedicated spaces for green burials had grown significantly.

We skip to 2011, when the concept of death cafés was developed by Jon Underwood in London (inspired by the Swiss *café mortel* movement). In an interview for a blog, Underwood explains what such a space entails: "At Death Cafés, people come together in a relaxed and safe setting to discuss death, drink tea and eat delicious cake" (Ryan 2013). This practice was adopted worldwide, reaching 82 countries on almost every continent and hosting almost 15,000 Death Cafés (Lucas 2023). And the reasons why they are still growing so fast are: (a) today's medical field treats death as a purely medical event; (b) after the COVID-19 pandemic, which brought along intense death anxiety, people need a safe space to discuss their fear of death and not be judged for it; (c) cultural movements such as death positivity, green burial, and palliative care might sometimes create more questions about what happens (if anything, that is) after death has occurred; (d) more and more people are considering medically assisted death—also called assisted suicide and dying with dignity—rather than opting for hospital care in a sterile environment when medical professionals know and communicate to the patient

that they do not have much longer to live; (e) the simple human need to talk about what frightens us.

In 2018, headlines from prestigious journals announced that death is having "a moment" (Leland 2018) and is now "cool" (Meltzer 2018). After Caitlin Doughty founded The Order of the Good Death in 2011, a colossal movement ensued—both on social media platforms (more on this in the section about multimodality) and offline—attracting people of all ages and backgrounds; the community that sprouts from her work and continues to do what she started spreads in all corners of life (not to mention death). Talking about death and dying is no longer reserved for "the goths" or "the hippies" but for ordinary individuals who, for the first time, can use digital tools to learn more about the crippling anxiety we all have. The internet is no longer a space exclusively for young people and fun distractions but for healing and accepting what cannot be changed. The movement is also propelled by: (a) the opening of the Morbid Anatomy Library and Museum in Brooklyn, New York, where there are many events dedicated to exploring death and beauty; (b) TED Talks pushing the death positivity topic to the forefront; Some very interesting death TED talks that contributed to the expansion of the death positivity movement are: "There's a better way to die, and architecture can help" by Alison Killing (a very suitable name), "We need a heroic narrative for death" by Amanda Bennett, and "My mushroom burial suit" by Jae Rhim Lee; (c) the Black Lives Matter movement, militating—among many other things—for acknowledging and fighting against the erasure of burial grounds and the unnecessary death of the people; In a tweet from 2020, The Order of The Good Death writes that "It is impossible to consider what constitutes a good death while so many are forced to endure the constant reality of bad, violent deaths, and exist in a perpetual state of fear and mourning". This does not only refer to the pandemic that was happening at the time, but to the racism and homophobia pandemic happening worldwide and not showing any signs of giving in; (d) transgender rights: in this case, between the increase in violence (sometimes fatal) against transgender people and their rights being restricted and sometimes even eliminated altogether, thus making it difficult for them to receive healthcare, there is the fear of not honoring the identity of the person in death (or deadnaming), which the death positivity activists are completely against—we always militate for honoring the wishes and the identity of the dead; (e) the cemetery becomes a cultural space where communities can gather, reminisce, and remove the stigma surrounding it. In an article from 2018, Jennifer Billock explores how a cemetery can become a place for yoga lessons or film projection nights. One such example is the Graceland Cemetery in Chicago, which has now become a park with more than 2,000 trees for people to use as a picnic spot or for walks.

It is essential to highlight that this is in no way a complete chronology of what led to the death positivity movement today, but only a drop in the ocean that allows us

to comprehend better the events and the movements that converged into such a noble and welcomed endeavor of the twenty-first century.

On the 29th of April, 2013, Caitlin Doughty tweeted the following question:

Fig. 8. Caitlin Doughty's tweet that allegedly named the movement

And the response was tremendous: the naming of a movement already happening in the Western part of the world (and by this, we understand America and Western Europe). Despite the name, death positivity does not entail being happy or positive that someone died; it means being positive about opening up the conversation and being curious about death. In other words, it is "critical of medicalization, displays anti-institutional sentiments, champions personalized care, and sees dying as an opportunity for personal growth" (Koksvik 2020: 4). Activists have always militated for people to be informed and have the possibility to choose the desired body disposal option, without feeling constrained by the modern capitalist funeral industry, as well as the mourning rituals that are right for them (following health and safety rules, of course), not fearing that they will be judged by the community they are a part of.

6.1 Caitlin Doughty

Caitlin Doughty joined social media in 2011: first, on YouTube, with a video called "Salton Sea: Decomposition Zen", a short film bringing tribute to decay; then, on Twitter, with a post recommending people to read one of her articles on the website *The Order of the Good Death*, where she had been active way before her social media debut. Her website (where she also advertises her books) presents her as follows:

Caitlin Doughty is a mortician, writer, and advocate for funeral industry reform. In 2011 she founded the non-profit The Order of the Good Death, which spawned the death positive movement and is working to legalize human composting and aquamation in all fifty states. Her educational documentaries as "Ask a Mortician" have been viewed over 250 million times and all three of her books–*Smoke Gets in Your Eyes*, *From Here to Eternity*, and *Will My Cat Eat My Eyeballs?*–were New York Times bestsellers. She founded a Los Angeles funeral home, Clarity Funerals, and currently lives in upstate New York.

She has almost two million followers on YouTube, and her videos have surpassed 250 million views. Here, she describes herself as a "funeral industry reformer," "green death advocate," and part of the "morbid history club." Many news outlets, such as Vice, The New Yorker, and The Atlantic, have picked up her work, making her voice even more potent and her message more widespread. Her advocacy is based on what we have already seen in this chapter: death positivity and death acceptance; so many times, in so many interviews, Doughty has never missed the opportunity to validate our need for an open and honest conversation about death and, despite any form of criticism received from big funeral companies whose primary goal might be profit and nothing more, she has permanently moved forward into convincing us that our relationship with death has been flawed for so long.

I was first introduced to her YouTube channel in 2016 when my morbid curiosity got the best of me, and I binge-watched all her previous videos in less than a week. I was captured by her ease around topics that would usually bring me great anxiety and intrusive thoughts, and I wanted to know more about her work. After reading her books and joining the death-positive community, I realized that death-positivity is genuinely a fantastic shift in how we perceive mortality and grief. Did it take away the gut-wrenching fear of someone I love dying? No, it did not. But it gave me some tools to help me survive in case it happens.

Doughty has written three books so far: *Smoke Gets In Your Eyes: And Other Lessons From the Crematorium* (2015), *From Here to Eternity: Travelling The World to Find The Good Death* (2017), and *Will My Cat Eat My Eyeballs? And Other Questions About Dead Bodies* (2019).

Smoke Gets in Your Eyes is a memoir containing the beginning of Caitlin Doughty's journey as a mortician at a crematory. First published in the United Kingdom by Canongate Books in 2015 and in the United States by W.W. Norton & Company in the same year, the book opens with the following haiku: "To my dearest friends/ So supportive, so gracious/ A morbid haiku" (vii) and contains nineteen chapters—each having a story that changed the author's path on her journey to becoming an "alternative" mortician, such as the first time shaving a dead man's face for the viewing, the one time she wept when she cremated a baby, and the time her boss left her in charge of the crematorium when she was only beginning to work there—plus the author's note, the acknowledgements, and notes on sources. Helen Davies from *The Times* describes it as "upbeat, brave and brilliantly, morbidly curious" (2015), and Daniel Szczesniak from *US Urns Online* writes that Doughty "paints a disturbing picture of the modern American or Western culture of death, dying, and funerals" (2015). Unlike the other two of her books, this one is not illustrated, although I would have loved to see representations of the raw descriptions scattered throughout it.

From Here to Eternity is a travelogue about Doughty's journey around the world to find and understand distinct cultural approaches to death and the disposal of dead bodies. It was first published in 2017 and begins with the following dedication: "For mom & dad—& all the parents who let their children be weird" (vii) and a quote from Irvin Yalom, existential psychiatrist and professor of psychiatry at Stanford University, author of the famous *Staring at the Sun: Overcoming the Terror of Death* (2008):

> Adults who are racked with death anxiety are not odd birds who have contracted some exotic disease, but men and women whose family and culture have failed to knit the proper protective clothing for them to withstand the icy chill of mortality. (2008: 117)

From this opening, we can build expectations about what we will read in the book: we expect to be inspired by other cultures' "protective clothing" in the face of mortality. In the ten chapters—the first being an introduction and the last an epilogue—Doughty travels to Colorado, Indonesia, Mexico, North Carolina, Spain, Japan, Bolivia, and California to watch and understand different cultural rituals around death, such as outdoor cremation, green burial, the *ma'nene* festival, and the *ñatitas*. At the end of the book, Doughty includes all the sources she mentions in the book, a vital characteristic of the nonfictional element. The book is wonderfully illustrated by Landis Blair (more about illustrations in the two books in chapter 4, part 2, and short interviews with the illustrators), who gives the text an extra element of artistic representation. Blair illustrates many cases of raw description in the book, easing our interaction with uncomfortable descriptions of real corpses and decay. In *The NY Times*, Libby Copeland writes that "her dispatches from the dark side were doing us all a kindness—offering a picture of what we're in for, even if we'd rather not know" (2017). Kathryn Poe admits that she "would also totally want to get a drink with Doughty, and those are absolutely the best kind of non-fiction books" because she is "incredibly funny and easy to spend time with" (2019), which were also my findings when I first read her book.

Will My Cat Eat My Eyeballs? differs slightly from the other two because it contains less firsthand experiences and more scientific, historical, and cultural information about many death curiosities. First published in 2019, the book starts with a dedication "To future corpses of all ages" (vii) and with a mock mini-interview between an imagined interviewer who asks Doughty what the book is about, why people are asking her all these questions, and whether this is all a bit morbid. She explains that she collected thirty-four questions, most of them from children, and she does her best to answer them by using science, history, and culture while listing her sources at the end of the book. Around each question, Doughty builds a short chapter accompanied by illustrations created by the talented Dianné Ruz. Some of the more interesting questions are: "Can we give Grandma a Viking funeral?", "What would happen if you swallowed a bag of popcorn before you died and were cremated?" and, of course, the book title

itself, “Will my cat eat my eyeballs?”. Pamela Kramer talks about the book in terms of its “unusually conversational tone”, “profound thoughts, real humor and a significant dose of brilliant wit” (2019), and Margaret Wappler from *The Los Angeles Times* says that “Caitlin Doughty is dead-set on changing the American funeral industry” (2019) with her books and online activity.

All three books are staples of the creative nonfiction genre. However, in the following chapters, I will focus on some specific characteristics that I think make her writing stand out from the other representatives of contemporary death-acceptance literature: (a) scene construction; (b) raw description; (c) dark humor; (d) breaking the fourth wall (metatextuality); (e) multimodality and digital extensions of the text; (f) illustrations; (g) cosmopolitanism. All these seven characteristics will be dissected in the following three chapters and accompanied by excerpts from the texts for exemplification purposes.

In order to gain a deeper understanding of the current state of death acceptance and death phobia in the modern Western world, it is important to turn to experts in the field. To this end, I had the opportunity to interview several professionals—to whom I will always be grateful for taking the time to talk to me about death acceptance and death phobia—, including Kenneth Ross, famous photographer and son of renowned psychiatrist and author Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, as well as Lauren Carroll and Erin Merelli, co-founders of The Deathwives; this female-founded organization is dedicated to expanding the conversation around death and dying, with a mission to educate individuals on the history and customs of death work, honor sacred traditions, eliminate negative stigmas associated with death, encourage communal mourning, and provide a safe and supportive environment for community, camaraderie, and assistance. Through their work, The Deathwives strive to create a more open and accepting dialogue about death and dying, while also honoring the unique perspectives and experiences of all individuals.

7. Interviews

7.1 Interview with Kenneth Ross

Kenneth Ross is a proficient independent commercial photographer hailing from the United States of America. His area of expertise lies in travel, location, people, and corporate photography. He is currently stationed in Scottsdale, Arizona. Recently, he has been actively involved in his non-profit organization, The Elisabeth Kübler-Ross (EKR) Foundation. The EKR Foundation has established foreign chapters in twelve countries, which aim to carry forward the legacy of his mother. The foundation primarily focuses

on hospice, palliative care, and grief. These areas are of utmost importance to the foundation and are given significant attention.

Cristina Botîlcă: You are on the board of directors for the non-profit Open for Hope. How can we find hope in grief when we subconsciously know that it all leads to one thing: death?

Kenneth Ross: People often ponder the concept of their own mortality upon the death of a loved one. The emotional and spiritual pain of loss is so significant that many *hope* that the pain of grief subsides more quickly than not. Many people are surprised to find that they do eventually recover from deep suffering caused by the loss of a loved one, so therefore they don't relate it to death per se, they relate it to permanent physical separation and change that subsequently occurs. Furthermore, grief isn't solely related to death. Therefore, the spiritual and emotional processes of grief show us that there is indeed hope as we learn to navigate our feelings of loss—regardless of cause, which includes separation, job loss, change of marital status, financial devastation, and so on.

C.B.: In the last two decades, technological advancements and scientific discoveries have made us think that immortality or at least the prolongation of life can be achieved in the near future. Does this possibility dwindle our hopes for death acceptance?

K.R.: Yes, increasing medical technology does give people a false sense of immortality, which is highly promoted. However, it's false narrative. Indigenous communities are by-in large much healthier emotionally and intellectually when it comes to being realistic about the finite nature of life. In Western society, doctors are taught they have "failed" if an elderly patient dies and hospital executives cringe when their hospital's death rate increases, but death is the natural part of all lives, regardless of where one lives. Furthermore, in the time between 1969 and 2022, US life expectancy has gone up roughly 15%. Are our lives that much better now? Sadly, we are almost always taught in the West that quantity is better than quality. We will not have a mentally healthy society until we can correct this perversion of the truth.

C.B.: Your beloved mother's books helped so many people overcome death phobia and grief. In the current century, books written by death industry professionals have gained more traction and popularity among the young, who are getting increasingly curious about death and dying. What is the future of death acceptance literature, in your opinion? How can it change so that it can keep up with the societal and cultural changes we witness nowadays?

K.R.: One big problem I see today is that many claim they are experts at everything, including death and grief work. The public doesn't seem to understand the difference between an individual's opinions and research. Consequently, anyone who

reads something on social media thinks they suddenly understand complex conditions and experiences such as the fear of death. People read a dozen posts that criticize the Five Stages of Grief® and suddenly they are an expert on Kübler-Ross' entire body of work. It's baffling. I also don't see many people in the field promoting their excellent research on social media, so where is the expert opinion coming from? One case? A family member? 100 clients? Research? Critical thinking is well… critical!

C.B.: Grief is such a personal matter for so many people. It is so complex and confusing, that most of us refuse to acknowledge its presence. There are so many resources out there, that it is impossible to choose the right way in which to navigate grief and mourning. How can we make sure we are on the road to recovery after the death of a loved one?

K.R.: First, my mother would say that we all need to "do our own work." Basically, that means that at some point when one is ready, he or she needs to begin externalizing feelings of grief. This can be a long process that may even last a lifetime. The problem in most Western countries is that people want and expect immediate solutions. Doing "the work" as described above, includes a lot of self-assessment, community and more. It can also include reaching out for professional help via a therapist if need be. I've found that many people inherently sense that they are on a path that works for them. The real question is whether the grieving individual will stay the course of actively participating in his or her own grief journey.

C.B.: You are a well-known professional photographer, and you have been to more than one hundred countries to capture the essence of the people and places you visit. How can photography help us deal with our mortality? How did it help you?

K.R.: Dr. Kübler-Ross felt that most people are afraid to die because they have been afraid to live fully. Her thought, and I agree, is that when people get to the end of their lives, they are filled with regret at not having lived out their dreams. I do not feel those regrets because my life has been filled with extraordinary experiences and people. Photography has been a way for me to express my love of being alive—all of the colors, cultures, and richness of the diversity of life. I've gotten to live my dream by hanging out of helicopters, photographing Indigenous tribes, celebrities, and everyday people—all living their lives. It has offered me an extraordinarily wide array of experiences in this one lifetime and because of that I feel fulfilled emotionally, intellectually, spiritually, and physically.

7.2 Interview with Lauren Carroll and Erin Merelli

The idea for Deathwives sprouted in 2019 from the minds of Lauren Carroll, a funeral director, and Erin Merelli, a death doula who also specialized in home funeral

education. The duo initially intended it to be a personal project, but soon discovered that their in-person workshops and retreats were in high demand. In response to this, they launched their virtual Deathfolx platform in 2020, which featured an online workshop named "Community Grief" that allowed participants to pay what they could afford. This workshop proved to be a valuable resource for individuals coping with grief, as it helped them integrate their experiences and move towards personal and communal healing. Deathwives remains committed to promoting equity, access, and community and will continue to offer the "Community Grief" workshop to all those who seek healing. In 2021, the organization expanded the community platform to include workshops and a program that provides clients with the opportunity to delve deeper into deathwork and explore advanced topics in-depth. Deathwives is dedicated to enhancing the lives of individuals and communities and remains committed to providing resources and support to all those in need.

Cristina Botîlcă: In the media and in the film industry, the portrayal of death is seldom realistic. On some social media platforms, if the creator uses the word "die," the video is demonetized. (Some of them resort to using "un-alive" instead of it.) In this case, how can one think positively about death and dying in the twenty-first century?

Lauren Carroll and Erin Merelli: I think the film industry and media viewpoints in general are just a true reflection on our society's view on death. Gross, scary, painful. Death has been hidden from us in nursing homes and funeral homes for so long that it's very easy to use the imagination. I bet many of the filmmakers and content creators themselves have never been present for a death, and that's the problem. It's been so far removed from life (even though we have a 100% chance of experiencing death) we have no knowledge, so we create fear from the unknown. When, in reality, it is as normal and natural as childbirth.

C.B.: There are many fiction and nonfiction books written about death and dying, some presenting a more realistic perspective than others. How can literature contribute to death acceptance?

L.C. & E.M: I love literature and its power to transform you. I think there have been many good non-fiction books about death and grief. For example, The Fault in Our Stars, a love story; and death is a main character. Or any book by John Irving (he is my favorite author so I am biased). Fiction literature is magical in many ways, as it creates a place to reflect on ourselves, our lives, our relationship with death and grief without it actually happening to us directly; we see ourselves in them. I love Caitlin Doughty and how she has made Death mainstream. Her books are non-fiction and full of short stories and interesting facts about Death and Dying. Her books are easy to digest and are not intimidating, so people are more open to reading about death.

C.B.: When industrialization began, body disposal methods changed as well, and the modern man's preoccupations shifted from the spiritual sphere to the material one. What happened to our relationship with death since the eighteenth century?

L.C. & E.M.: I think what happened here is that families and communities separated. Deathcare always took place in the home. A community member would build a casket if necessary, and there were women who tended to the body, but as people moved away to the cities as industrialization began, those traditions and communities started to become rarer and the once internal death care had to be outsourced. And over time that outsourcing turned into tradesmen and then businessmen, which turned to corporations, which is very common here in America. We also had the dying leave their homes; this too was outsourced to hospitals and nursing homes.

C.B.: In the last decade, there has been a surge in the number of green burials and other alternative body disposal methods, such as aquamation and body recomposition. Do you think that embalming hinders our death acceptance? What future does it have in this case?

L.C. & E.M.: An interesting thing about embalming is that it's not popular around the world. It is a very American way of death and I do believe that it has hindered our death acceptance by masking death and creating the illusion that somebody is just asleep. I have had many people in my career tell me that the dead person they were looking at did not look like their mom or that there was so much cosmetics on them. Why? That disassociation, not knowing if that really is your dead loved one, because they do look like a heavily made-up sleeping person, doesn't do any service towards the grieving of a dead person. I do believe that the art of restoration, the art of embalming, is a tool when a body has been badly damaged and the family needs that closure to be able to see them whole again. I do see embalming falling out of fashion as more and more people realize the damage that we are doing to the planet with our conventional disposition methods such as fire cremation and conventional burial with embalming. When we learn that our death, our bodies, can be restorative to the Earth it's very easy for people to make that change and choose water cremation or green burial in lieu of the conventional methods that most people thought were available because they aren't good for the environment, and our Earth is already hurting.

C.B.: Grief is unavoidable. The sadness and the confusion that come with it are frowned upon in a society led by toxic positivity. Some of us want to grieve in private, others in public. Is there a grief pattern that you have noticed since you began your work in the death industry?

L.C. & E.M.: I would say the biggest grief pattern that we see here in America is the lack of grief, the lack of space to grieve, and I don't know if that's because we are a capitalist society and that moving and staying busy and working is very much the

backbone, and grief doesn't want to be busy, grief wants to be slow, grief needs to take its time, grief needs to be messy and maybe the workplace is the best place for grief to show up, so people continue to swallow it down, keep working, keep moving along until the grief returns and it shows up as abuse, as addiction, as cancer. I do think more and more people are becoming aware of this epidemic here in America and there have been some great authors and podcasts out there addressing grief and how we can do better. We strongly believe that grieving in a community is one of the most powerful tools that we have, and that is why funerals are so important to have. When we're grieving in a community, we're witnessing someone else's grief and sometimes that opens up our own heart, so that we feel like we have permission to grieve too, and that is something that we've been lacking here in America for a very long time.

C.B.: When the thought of dying crosses our minds, we usually shoo it away and distract ourselves. Seldom do we think about our funerals, especially when we're young (not to mention the funerals of our loved ones). Do you have a clear image of how your funeral should look like? Do you mind sharing it with us?

L.C. & E.M.: So, I started in the funeral industry relatively young I was 20 and I'm really glad that I planned my funeral then because death felt so far away and I could make it fun and I could make it "me". That's what I've learned: the most important part of a funeral is to bring the person who has died to that center stage. You want to go to a funeral where you could feel them and their presence, their personality, their life, so you need to think about it now. How do you want people to remember you? I personally know that I want it to be fun. I want there to be lots of '80s songs to dance to. I want a Margarita fountain. I want there to be streamers and confetti and glitter. I want there to be all my favorite songs, slideshows of me with all of my friends and family, just a space for people to think of me and grieve and cry and laugh in a space that really feels like I'm there.

C.B.: Multiculturalism is one of the main characteristics of our century. We interact with different cultures, and we are curious about others' cultural practices and rituals. How do these interactions affect our relationship with death?

L.C. & E.M.: I think we're often jealous of the different cultures out there and how they practice death and dying because here in America I can feel very empty and lost. Because it's been so far removed, we've lost many of our traditions. We've lost that knowledge of how to care for our dead or our dying. We started teaching on this because of that fact, and as we started to uncover more information, we saw that what we were teaching is still common knowledge and in many places around the world they still do keep their family member at home to the very end, they are still the ones to bathe them and dress them one last time. Death is seen as sacred for as long as we can remember. It's not something scary; it's something to do as a community, as a loved one, and as a

family member, because they understand. They too will be dead someday, and that is a rite of passage and something that should be done with dignity and love.

8. Conclusions

In today's society, the topic of death is often met with discomfort and avoided altogether. However, it's important to acknowledge and accept death as a natural part of life. Seeking guidance from professionals who specialize in death acceptance, such as Kenneth Ross, Lauren Carroll, and Erin Merelli, can provide valuable knowledge and insights on how to approach death with a more open mindset. These experts can help us understand the true meaning of death and how to navigate the emotions that come with it. Unfortunately, as a society, we've lost touch with this understanding, which is why it's crucial to have new resources available to help us reevaluate our relationship with death.

Modernity entails some disenchantment (Taylor 2007), even if "only humans can hallucinate their way out of danger […]. The ego regresses to a more primitive state of magical thinking in the attempt to restore the safety and security of symbiotic bliss" (Piven 2004: 128). This kind of magical thinking is discouraged nowadays. Looking mortality in the eye becomes an exercise that is too uncomfortable. However, if accepting death means interacting with it and with our thoughts behind the modern culture's back, the islands I mentioned will grow bigger. Or they will completely sink under the flood of a forced universalization of culture.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, two great currents seem to collide, and there are many names for them, some carrying political meanings that I do not intend to discuss. These two currents have clashed since the dawn of time: the Old and the New. If the New has sometimes been more beneficial to us than the Old, nowadays, it seems that the former became a levelling tool that has little to no awareness of what it destroys in the process.

I believe that death positivity is not just the trend of 2020 (Izadi & Rao 2019) but a life (and death) style that will save many people from the despair of facing death. The solution is to come into contact with as much information as possible. Authors who openly talk about their experience with death have been creating the contemporary death acceptance literature that we so badly need, the environment that allows open interaction with raw and real images of death and dying. We only have to show up.

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Section 2. Death-Acceptance Creative Nonfiction Voices: Carla Valentine and Sue Black

1. Introduction

In the death industry, literature has always aimed to answer questions that most people are afraid to ask: What happens behind the curtain—or the mortuary doors—in reality? How are the lives of the people working with the dead? How do they have the courage to look death in the eye and remain sane and socially functioning? Creative nonfiction allows us to look both into the private lives of these people and their exciting work with all things death related. This section aims to discuss how Carla Valentine's *Past Mortems* (2017) and Sue Black's *All That Remains* (2018) tackle the topic of death acceptance and death phobia in modern Western Europe. Because in the rest of the thesis I will focus on American death acceptance creative nonfiction, I find that it is important to briefly look at two important representatives of the British branch, not because there are significant differences between the two, but because what we discuss here eases our way into Caitlin Doughty's work and prepares us for what we will encounter in the following few chapters. It is interesting to observe that the United Kingdom and the United States of America have had a significant influence on Western culture as we know it today. Although there may be some slight differences in how these two nations view death and the fear that surrounds it, the similarities are quite remarkable. It's incredible to think about how these countries have shaped our culture in such a profound way.

The primary areas of focus that I intend to explore are as follows: firstly, how Sue Black associates death with a type of closure, particularly in the context of forensic studies; secondly, Carla Valentine's unfiltered depiction of death, which compels us to confront uncomfortable images of mortality; and thirdly, Black's approach to managing her profession by dividing her cognitive self into two, and Valentine's conviction that she cannot differentiate between her professional and personal selves. These three sub-topics will facilitate our comprehension of how objective information, personal revelations, and imaginative storytelling combine to construct a manifesto that promotes acceptance of death and opposes death aversion.

In the following segments, I aim to provide a comprehensive analysis of how two authors, specializing in creative nonfiction (although it remains uncertain whether they identify as such), skillfully incorporate the topic of the death industry into their personal and professional narratives. Through the clever use of humor, wit, and a touch of intimacy, these writers manage to create compelling and engaging pieces that offer valuable insights into a topic often considered taboo or uncomfortable to discuss.

2. Sue Black's All That Remains. Death and Forensic Studies

Professor Sue Black is one of the world's most acclaimed forensic anthropologists and anatomists. Her expertise and passion for the death industry made her the lead anthropologist on the British Forensics Team after the 1999 war crimes in Kosovo and the Indian Ocean tsunami in Thailand in 2004. *All That Remains: A Life in Death* is an "unsentimental exploration" (Smith 2018) of what death looks like in forensic studies. Her account combines testimonials about her professional life and very few personal details she sprinkles throughout the book.

The main word that comes to mind when you finish reading the book is "closure." Black puts so much emphasis on finding closure after a loved one's death that she does her best to offer families intact bodies after war crimes, disappearances, or natural disasters. For instance, in chapter ten, she details her experience in Kosovo in 1999. The Kosovo War, from 1998 to 1999, ended with the death of more than 13,000 civilians of numerous nationalities, among whom there were children and women. Besides the fact that Black loudly states her opinion (with which I could not agree more) that no war, no matter the cause, justifies the killing of innocent people, she successfully gives us a glimpse of what death looks like behind the curtain of war: unfair, unjustified, and traumatic for those who are left behind to witness it. In chapter eleven, she talks about natural disasters, more specifically the 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami, after which she helped the professionals in their mission to assign identities to the found bodies. When something like this happens, "differences and egos have to be put to one side, and everyone must pull together for the common good" (2018: 259). This tells us that finding, identifying the dead, and giving them back to their families is above any interpersonal relation or personal interest. In the same chapter, she tells us about the importance of having a DVI (Disaster Victim Identification) program and team, so they can give the families the closure they need and obey each family's rituals, regardless of its cultural background. As Black states, ritualizing grief is essential for those suffering because the funeral is "a reassuring template for mourners to follow at a time of raw emotion" (96). This is why forensic studies allow for this framework to happen, whether that involves expressing the grief or hiding it in public settings.

Preserving the dignity of the dead is another thing that concerns Black in her work. She militates for dying at home, surrounded by familiar things and warm memories: "A hospital ward, devoid of warmth, love, character and memories, can be such a sterile environment for the dying and their loved ones to try to prepare themselves for the most personal, private and irreversible of moments" (83). It seems that, in Western cultures, dying at the hospital is the response we have in the face of death. We tend to "hide it away when maybe what we need to do is to embrace it and celebrate it" (85). Moreover, this acceptance involves treating the dead with the respect they deserve, especially in the death industry. We witness her behavior toward her uncle's body—an

experience that never allows her to fear death again—and we read about her small gestures of respect and preparation. Her father asks the author to check if her uncle's body is prepared for burial. In her recollection, she reflects on the cataclysmic shock that she experienced, which led her to realize the enormity of the request made by her father. Uncertainty loomed over her as she approached the coffin, with her heartbeat resonating in her ears. Upon peering inside, she was taken aback to find that the individual lying within the white lining was not her Uncle Willie. Instead, she observed a much smaller man with a waxy pallor and a blue tinge to his lips, devoid of any laughter lines around his eyes. The silence that pervaded the scene was inconceivable, leaving her to ponder the implications of this unexpected discovery (65). This is when there is a rupture between death as a process that leaves behind a carcass, the home of the person we still love, and the memory of the departed, still very much present in our minds and souls:

Willie existed for me on two planes: in the present as the physical form in front of me in the coffin and in my memory as the living person. The two manifestations of him did not match, and there was no reason for them to do so as they were not the same. The man I remembered was Willie. The other was just his dead body. (67)

She remembers checking whether his corneas were in place, whether his organs had not been stolen, and the most bizarre thing of all, whether he still had a pulse (after being in the funeral home freezer for three days). However, as she admits, "death and grief do strange things to a mind" (68). By letting us into her mind, by showing us her thought process behind her reaction to her favorite uncle being dead, we get a feeling of relief, a feeling that we might not be as alone as we thought we were on our death acceptance journey. And because of the realization that body and soul are two separate entities (one disappears, or so we think, and the other is left behind to teach us about the ephemerality of man), Black unequivocally affirms: "From that moment on, I have experienced no fear of death" (69).

"The changes brought about in the appearance of a human body are more profound than can be accounted for simply by the cessation of blood flow and loss of pressure […]. Something quite inexplicable is lost" (66). The author does not seem to promote death as a purely secular process fully. However, later on, she admits that "It is human nature to prefer a mystical or supernatural explanation rather than trust the logic of biology and chemistry" (71). I cannot see this as a counterargument to her reflections because she never puts forward a judgement on whether human nature is an obstacle when it comes to understanding and accepting death. Therefore, we find many instances in the book about her relation to the spiritual realm. Upon the passing of her grandmother, the individual with whom she shared the strongest bond, she recollects a poignant conversation in which her grandmother assured her that she need only lend an ear to receive her unwavering support. This pledge remained steadfast in her memory, and she has since lived in accordance with its guidance. Even now, she instinctively

inclines her head to the left when deep in thought, and her grandmother's voice continues to resonate within her, offering counsel whenever she requires it (74). So, there is a belief that there must be something after death. Her grandmother's promise bonded the secular and the spiritual sides of death together, and this link can seldom be broken by logic or science.

For Black, "consoling the bereaved" and "honoring the dead" (98) are two essential parts of her job. We notice her passion for this in chapter eight, where she talks about an unidentified body (after she already details two solved disappearance cases in chapter seven) whose family has not been found so far. He is called "the man from Balmore" (196). The undoubtable proof that Black still seeks closure and that we are dealing with nonfiction is the man's description at the end of the book, where we find information such as details about the remains and his clothing. The information is also found on the website Locate International CIO, which informs the public about missing people and unidentified bodies. Sue Black appeals to her readers: "Somewhere there must be a family who is missing the man from Balmore. It is our fervent wish to be able to give him back to them" (196). The case is still open to this day.

Solemnity, next to dignity, is crucial to Black. She is somewhat disappointed in the secularization of death. "Gone are the weeks of professional mourning of bygone years, the mourning jewelry worn from the Middle Ages until Victorian times, […] the doffing of caps as a funeral cortege passes, the memento mori" (97). It may be so. However, there are some remnants of these "bygone" times that resurface in the form of modern outbursts of creativity (usually, as coping mechanisms for those who create them). One example is Ashley Zhang, a New York-based designer who sells antique jewelry and who recently added a mourning collection to her website and confesses that, after losing her dear father, she stumbled upon a Victorian mourning piece which, instead of bringing her sadness, had the exact opposite effect on her, and this was the inspiration for her new creative endeavor. Another example is Stacey Fay, a jeweler from Philadelphia who believes that "mourning jewelry offer a way to wear your story" (Fay 2019) and has a line of pieces that honor the death of a loved one. So, secularization might happen on an individual and cognitive level; we refuse to believe in an afterlife or anything else that might come after death. We treat it unkindly; we see it as a "hostile stranger" (Black 2019: 2), and with all our modern sophistication, "we still opt to take cover behind familiar, safe walls of conformity and denial, rather than opening up to the idea that maybe death is not the demon we fear" (4). We do not trust it because we do not know it. And, in order to know it, we have to experience it. "There is only one way to discover the truth about dying, death and being dead, and that is to do it, which we will all get round to eventually" (338), so why fear inevitability?

At the beginning of her book, Black makes a central statement about what death positivity is supposed to represent in the twenty-first century: in contemporary society,

death has become an unfamiliar and antagonistic entity, rendering it easier to approach with hostility. Despite the advancements made by humanity, the intricate relationship between life and death remains elusive, with little progress made in deciphering its complexities over the centuries. In fact, it can be argued that we are now further removed from comprehending this relationship than ever before. Our understanding of death has been eroded, and we have lost sight of its purpose. While our ancestors may have regarded death as a companion, we have chosen to view it as an unwelcome and malevolent adversary, to be avoided or conquered for as long as possible (2). Today, she admits, we live in a kind of sophistication, and we prefer to take cover behind the familiar walls of denial or conformity rather than openly discuss the idea that death might not be the anti-hero we all fear so much. She gives us numbers: "153,000 people die daily on this planet" (70). This statement is made to shock, but does it really? What does a number as significant as 153,000 means to someone? The population of a city such as Oxfordshire or Hollywood, but the comparison stops there as long as one of those 153,000 people is not one of our own. I understand why the author gives us this number: for some, it is meant to show that death is as natural as birth. Today (December 17, 2022), as I am writing this, the website *The World Counts* tells me that 135,223,556 babies have been born since the beginning of the year 2022 (and the number goes up by 20-30 babies per minute) and 57,873,383 people have died so far. The number is shocking: almost 57 million death rituals and just as many mourning families who possibly believed they could not live after their loved one's death. This short sentence that Black throws out there is the most fertile seed for introspection I have seen in her book. Both terrifying and comforting (mainly because you know you are not alone in your grief), this fact is one of the many reasons Black's creative nonfiction is so poignant and impactful. Plain information such as this hides more complex webs of thought and contemplation.

The text penned by Black delves into the advantages of forensic studies not just for our education but also for our emotional well-being. By examining the intricacies of the human body, we can obtain a deeper understanding of life itself. One remarkable example cited in the book is the groundbreaking research of Walter Thiel, who dedicated his life to discovering a method of preserving bodies that would create an optimal learning environment for students. After 39 years of tireless experimentation, Thiel finally succeeded in formulating a solution that he was content with. His recipe involved a blend of water, alcohol, potassium nitrate salts, ammonium, formalin, and ethylene glycol. Such a discovery has been a boon for the medical community and has significantly contributed to the development of forensic studies. This is how Thiel submersion tanks appeared: to better preserve the bodies that anatomists and students will use to learn. At the end of chapter thirteen, Black admits: "I quite fancy the idea, when my time comes, of floating peacefully in the Black Tank. How cool would that be?" (325).

She encourages donating the body for scientific purposes. She remembers one man named Arthur, who wanted to donate his body to her students and asked to witness a dissection, so he could know what would happen to him after death. Black was so nervous and emotional that she tells us it was "an intense experience" that had "a wonderful impact on everyone involved" (116): students, professors, and Arthur. Here is how forensic studies can help some individuals to accept their mortality and to make decisions accordingly.

In terms of creative nonfiction, the difference that I find surprising is that Black does not list her sources anywhere (and I do not mean sources of general knowledge, but specific sources from where she takes surveys or studies). For instance, she mentions the bereavement theory developed by Margaret Stroebe and Henk Schut at the very end of the twentieth century (96), a "recent European survey" that shows the Netherlands as the country in which doctors are trusted the most (108), and the story of an apothecary who, in the seventeenth century, made jam from human blood as a cure for specific health conditions such as epilepsy and consumption (123). Not only does she mention these pieces of information, but she also synthesizes them for us. I expected to see a list of sources at the end of each chapter or the end of the book, mentioning the chapter in which that source was used for further research or to quench our curiosity and our thirst for similar information. This is not a drawback, which means that the book is still, in my view, creative nonfiction; it just means that it did not meet all the expectations I had when I started reading it.

More than that, the construction of the scenes is not as complex and multi-layered as we find in other creative nonfiction books. For instance, in chapter seven, Black talks about two disappearance cases without breaking the fourth wall or creating a pause in the narrative to introduce some other information. She details these two cases as much as possible. It all looks like an ongoing presentation that does not give us any break. The scene does not seem to change, and we do not get any window into the intimacy of the author's mind. However, throughout the book, we find attempts at adding comic scenes, especially at the end of the chapters and in places where the author might have felt tension or fear building up. "Death and humor have always been close companions" (217), she admits. For instance, after the emotional chapter ten—the one which describes Black's experience in Kosovo identifying the dead bodies of innocent people—the author remembers the time she thought she found a bomb in one of the scenes she was analyzing together with her colleagues: "I learned a great deal about life, death, my profession and myself as a person. And one other vital lesson that will always stand me in good stead: never, ever cut the blue wire" (252). This diffuses the weight of the information we have just received and is a common case of humor in Black's discourse.

So, combining information from the field of anatomy, forensic studies, and anthropology with personal information and memories, *All That Remains* stands as proof that talking about death with dignity, solemnity, and a small quantity of humor can be done and—because the book was a Sunday Times bestseller—that the readers expect more and more professionals to come forward and let us draw the curtain that protects us from something that we should be embracing. In the upcoming chapter, an alternative method for taking a daring action will be expounded upon, specifically, the unfiltered portrayal. Carla Valentine, as we will witness, abstains from hiding behind euphemisms, even if it results in discomfort, as her primary aim is to increase awareness. This approach is distinct from conventional methods that rely on sugar-coating or softening the truth to avoid offending or upsetting individuals. By presenting an unfiltered depiction, Valentine challenges societal norms and encourages individuals to confront uncomfortable truths. This approach has the potential to spark meaningful conversations and promote positive change in society.

3. Valentine's Past Mortems. Death and Raw Description

In the opening of her narrative, Carla Valentine employs the literary technique of beginning *in medias res*, creating the impression that the reader is interrupting a scene that is already unfolding on a stage. Her writing style is characterized by its abruptness, determination, and sharpness, conveying a sense of urgency and intensity:

Anorexic. Dentist.

They were two words I'd never seen written together before, but they were, in black smudged ink, on the 97A.

"Anorexic. Dentist."

I took a sip of my coffee while perusing the rest of the paperwork. I enjoyed this part of the morning: the calm before the storm. The mortuary's senior technician, Jason, was happily hunched over the latest edition of the News of the World with a cup of tea. As a veteran technician, he had seen it all, and he appeared less interested in the information we received on the day's cases than in the plot of EastEnders or the latest football scores. (2018: 1)

The first two words, "Anorexic. Dentist," tell us nothing. As if the author could read our minds, she admits: "They were two words I'd never seen written together before," so we get to discover who this dentist is and why he is anorexic. Another new piece of information we get is "97A". What is it? We must read on to find out (the explanation is two paragraphs below). This *in media res* beginning makes us want to go on reading; it does not allow us to get bored and close the book. Valentine drinks her

coffee and tells us that we are now witnessing "the calm before the storm." Now we *must* stick around and find out what happens next. We also meet another character in the book, Jason, and it seems we are interfering in their private little moment at work: she is having her coffee, and he is reading *News of the World* and sipping his tea. This little scene is the equivalent of a "hush!" as a play or a concert begins. We pay attention not to miss something important, but the scene does not last because the narrator creates a rip in the plot and explains to us what the 97A form is, what the role of a coroner in the United Kingdom is, what its etymology is, and what the criteria for a post-mortem examination are. Then, two pages later, we go back to the initial scene. This is what Hart calls "explanatory narrative" (2011: 16) or what Roland Barthes (1975) describes as catalyzers. In fiction, they represent constitutive events, but in nonfiction, they are pieces of information that help the story move forward just as raw description does.

An authentic and unedited account of a genuine observation in real life is what we refer to as a raw description. This type of writing typically employs active verbs and descriptive adjectives that effectively capture movement and vividly depict a physical scene that might otherwise be overlooked, shortened, or watered down to avoid making the reader feel uneasy or prevent the content from being considered graphic. The term "raw" implies the presence of a figurative wound that is open, painful, and vulnerable, which we must face head-on as it slowly heals. Additionally, raw descriptions have the potential to convey unfiltered emotions and provide honest, straightforward, and truthful depictions of reality that are not sugar-coated or embellished in any way. Besides offering us the opportunity to experience a form of cognitive behavioral therapy, raw description also satisfies our—slightly morbid—curiosity. One such example, among many others, that we can find in Valentine's *Past Mortems*, is the description of an evisceration:

First, some exploration, as he [Jason] used his non-cutting hand to feel behind each lung […] he tackled the bowel next, their slick, curled lengths removed in one long string […]. Jason returned to the lungs, using the PM40 to detach them, again with another scooping motion […] he loosened each kidney and its surrounding fat […] used the blade to make a nifty slice across the top of the lungs which effectively severed the lower part of the windpipe and the food pipe […] he pulled the heart and lungs down and away from the spine […]. Soon, he was holding aloft a mass of dripping viscera which contained most of the organs from the body cavity […]. (12)

The entire page is one big paragraph of raw description. Its form makes you want to read it while holding your breath. The naturalness of Jason's movements, paired with Valentine's vivid description, make for a horrific scene in the mortuary. Jack Hart writes that "verbs signify action. And, if you're going to keep a story moving, you'll need lots of good ones" (2011: 111). Verbs such as "to feel," "to detach," "to loosen," "to sever," and "to pull" create texture and make the narrative more 'muscular,' pushing

the action forward. Noun phrases containing adjectives such as "slick, curled lengths," "scooping motion," and "dripping viscera" are highly visual. Their effect is to create an image in the readers' minds that they cannot shake off, forcing them to observe and acknowledge the possible uncomfortableness that might arise and find a way past it.

When she dedicates almost an entire chapter to the process of decay, she warns us: "If you're the kind of person who can't watch gruesome horror scenes in films, or jumps when a spider or rat appears, then you might want to skip this next section" (88), which is a raw description of decay, split into five stages: fresh, bloat, active, advanced, and dry remains. In the fresh stage, she mentions rigor mortis (post-mortem rigidity), livor mortis (lividity or hypostasis), and algor mortis (the cooling of the corpse); in the bloating stage, she explains in detail how the body swells up and changes color because of the microbes; in the stage of active decay, Valentine uses comic relief to allow us a break from the visuals that we create in our minds; in the stage of advanced decay, the maggot makes itself at home in the body and is "encased in a hard material inside which it will remain for ten to twenty days" (102); and in the dry remains phase she leaves the narrative open by asking us why the skeleton is "more acceptable for general consumption than the other" (105). And as I noticed myself when I was reading her book, I became less tense when I reached the fifth part of the decay process. Probably because the skeleton is empty of human features, we do not assign any human-like characteristics to it. We see skeletons on display in museums and controlled environments, but we never see a collection of bodies in the third stage of decay that the public can easily access. This is why raw description is so powerful: it creates restlessness in the reader, which leads to even more curiosity and possibly introspection about man's mortal state.

Raw description might also be linked to voyeurism. Even Valentine admits that "watching someone carry out an autopsy is, in many ways, like watching someone have sex. This is what struck me the very first time I saw one. Before you close the book in misplaced disgust—or, conversely, read on with expectant carnal glee—let me explain" (107). She addressed the reader yet again, posting a disclaimer as to what we are about to witness, comparing death to sex in terms of a transgressive element, and using relief humor to eliminate some of the tension created by her statement: during the autopsy, "there is nudity (the cadaver; hopefully not the technician)" (108). The resemblance between the two can be found at the level of taboo. The need we have to cross the line between what society considers as uncomfortable, distasteful, and even villainous and what we are curious about—regardless of its nature—is one of the many arguments that support the use of raw description, especially in matters such as death, the dead body, and the processes it undergoes post-mortem.

However, what tells us that it is a creative nonfiction piece is the author's note:

This book contains names and identities that have been changed to protect the privacy of the staff and patients I encountered over the years, with many tales and conversations made up of remnants from various incidents. However, it is the truth. (x-xi)

Valentine tells us that, for protection purposes, she changes the names of the people she interacts with and presents conversation as she remembers them (which might mean that the information we are about to get is subjected to an imperfect reconstruction). But she insists that "it is the truth." Of course, the question that we might ask ourselves here is, "Which truth?." Far from defining truth (as that would be utterly dull and, quite frankly, impossible), we should add the word "my" to get "my truth": "However, it is my truth" or "However, this is the truth as I remember it." As we noticed in the previous chapter about creative nonfiction, the landscape does not have to be perfect; it might also consist of bits and pieces that do not seemingly fit together at first, but if we are guaranteed that this is the author's authentic self, then the reader can do the remaining work and put the puzzle pieces back into a coherent story. Another notable element is the use of external references or references from popular culture, such as: "Three Stooges" (7), "Starbucks" (21), "the film Hannibal" (23), "Muppets" (36), "Beyoncé's 'Single Ladies (Put a Ring On It)'" (36), "Rice Krispies" (53), and "Actimel" (96). Flashbacks are also clearly marked; for instance: "I zoned out again" (9); these interruptions create an exciting story rhythm.

Another interesting connection that I noticed (which might or might not be true) is between the title of the chapters and some film titles. The first chapter, "Media Most Foul," reminds me of a 1964 Miss Marple film, *Murder Most Fowl*, based on Agatha Christie's novel *Mrs. McGinty's Dead*. I thought this would become a pattern—because Valentine mentions films a lot throughout her book, so it must be one of her hobbies—so I looked at the rest of the chapter titles to see whether I could find some connection with films. Chapter two, "Grief Encounters," reminded me of the 1967 film *Brief Encounters* (produced by the Soviet Union) or the 1945 British romantic drama *Brief Encounter*. Chapter three, "Judging a Book by its Cover," sounds relatively similar—though I doubt this example is relevant—to a 2007 episode from Desperate Housewives: *Don't judge a book by its cover*. Chapter four, "Pulp Fiction," is straightforward, bearing the film's name. Chapter five, "Rose Cottage," did not take me to any movie in particular, but to a book: Mary Stewart's 1997 romance novel *Rose Cottage*. On page 120, we get an explanation for the name of the chapter, "Rose Cottage": Carla Valentine's colleague, June, explains: "'Rose Cottage' means 'mortuary' in hospitals" (120). Chapter six, "Home Isn't Where the Heart Is"—besides being a well-known saying and an Elvis Presley song—is the name of a 2013 drama. Chapter seven, "Pickled Punks," references a term used by travelling carnival employees to describe human fetuses kept in formaldehyde and used as an attraction. Most of these fetuses had

abnormalities, which is why they brought so many spectators to the circus. Another term for them (this time, fake ones, made of wax and rubber) is "bouncers"—because they bounced when dropped on the ground. Chapter eight, "Losing my head," could be connected to the 2013 drama film *Lose your head*—but it might just as well be only the English saying. Chapter nine, "Bitsa," bears the name of a 1990s British television program for DIY and arts and crafts. Chapter ten, "All the king's men," might refer to the 2006 drama with the same name or, more likely, to the nursery rhyme "Humpty Dumpty". Chapter eleven, "Sister Act," should remind everyone of the 1992 film with the same name. The final chapter, "The Angel's Share," could reference the 2012 Scottish comedy-drama of the same name.

Of course, some of these references are guesses in the dark (such as chapter five). However, others are obvious (such as chapters nine and ten, where the author talks mostly about fragmented remains and attempts at reconstructing bodies). At the same time, most of them are connected to what is discussed in that specific chapter. For instance, in chapter one, "Media Most Fowl," Valentine describes when she was invited to the set of a TV series called *The Death Detective* to consult on how real the dead dummies and the mortuary look. In the chapter "Grief Encounters," she tells us about the first time she was aware that death exists (when her grandfather died and she began to have a tiny obsession with dead animals and burying them). These titles create two bridges: a long one between the written text and the outside world, more precisely, the other arts (films, novels, widespread knowledge), and a short one, quite wide, between the chapter itself and its contents. (Of course, this is the purpose of a title, to contain the essence of the following text, but this is different. The title is not only a summary of what we are about to read, but it is also a path to something else outside the text. It makes the reader wonder: Why the play on words? What does this mean, and where does this come from?) We could call this intertextuality and see the text as something not necessarily written down but as something alive, spoken, or preserved in the public's general knowledge in the form of sayings and nursery rhymes. Thus, the written text of Valentine is similar to a wall with writings on it, where you find from time to time a smaller or a bigger door, behind which there hides even more information and ever more possible connections that the reader can make.

Valentine uses orality, similar to New Journalism, to create a dialogue that sounds like it was overheard at a London market. In this dialogue, two people are negotiating the purchase of a liver:

> 'Nah, this is lahvly liver, mate, exactly wotcha lookin' for.'
>
> 'Nah, sir, ya don't want the one up there—I'll do y'a deal on this one!' (32)

In addition to her already impressive discourse, she skillfully employs the use of onomatopoeia to create a more vibrant and resonant image. This technique adds a touch of auditory stimulation to her words, making her message all the more impactful:

It was an odd sight, this young woman thrusting reams and reams of white cotton wool into the old lady's anus while chatting about everyday things.

'Nice to be by the sea air, isn't it?' *Thrust*. 'I'm from Liverpool too and I feel the difference. It's just so much fresher down here.' *Thrust*. (116)

The orator's discourse was marked by a considerable amount of comicality, which served to endear her even further to her audience. This particular attribute was undoubtedly a charming addition to her persona, and it provided a welcome respite from the weighty and sobering subject matter that may have left some feeling disheartened or contemplative about the fragility of human life.

I often needed to remove maggots from my clothing during autopsies, and once even from my bra.

It was unusual.

The maggots themselves weren't unusual, just the fact that they had managed to access my bra. (85)

The most interesting fact that might keep the readers engaged in her story is represented by a somewhat detailed analysis of the five stages of decay: fresh, bloat, active, advanced, and dry remains. This is one of the most significant clues we are reading creative nonfiction: the information is accurate and presented non-academically. Here is a summary of this specific section, before which the author addresses the reader directly as a trigger warning: "If you're the kind of person who can't watch gruesome horror scenes in films, or jumps when a spider or rat appears, then you might want to skip this next section" (88):

(a) the fresh stage: she mentions *rigor mortis* (rigidity), *livor mortis* (lividity or hypostasis), and *algor mortis* (the cooling stage that the corpse enters) (89-95);

(b) the bloating stage: the body swells up and changes color because of the microbes (96-99);

(c) the stage of active decay: a "period of greatest mass loss because excess fluid will have been purged and gases will have left the body by some means (perhaps a we-behind-the-ears autopsy technician with a sadistic manager swallowed most of it, who knows?)" (99); this can be seen as relief humor (to ease the tension that might have built up in the reader's psyche while reading about such sensitive things); Valentine mentions

a mishap she had in the laboratory when she got drenched in somebody's bodily fluids during an autopsy;

(d) the stage of advanced decay: the maggot makes itself at home in the body and is "encased in a hard material inside which it will remain for ten to twenty days" (102);

(e) the stage of dry remains: here, she asks us the following question: Why is this skeleton stage "more acceptable for general consumption than the other?" (105) and answers using Christine Quigley's (1996) words: "the skeleton denuded of its facial features has less impact than the preserved head of a mummy, which in turn has less impact than the face of an intact corpse" (105).

I mentioned that the author addresses the reader at one point in her discourse, but this is not a singular case in her book. I have noticed she likes using footnotes to carry on a one-sided dialogue with the reader. For instance, when the text says: "The fate struck when I met the eminent forensic pathologist Dr. Colin Jamerson, who was giving an evening lecture on Mass Grave Excavation in Srebrenica" (53), and the footnotes add in a humorous tone as if answering a question that might come from the readers: "Yes, that was the sort of thing that I did in my spare time: attended lectures on mass fatality protocol and capacity building in post-conflict regions rather than head out to the students' union for Red Bull and vodka" (53).

Another instance of addressing the reader—or rather breaking the fourth wall of the discourse—is when she talks about her great-grandfather, who was a Gypsy boxer with a long thumbnail: "He also pierced people's ears (no, not with his thumbnail)" (41). Here, the wall is broken using parentheses, not footnotes; nonetheless, I believe it is like watching a reality TV show, where we see the events unfold, but once in a while, one of the people is filmed in a separate room and comments upon what happens in the footage. This creates an even stronger emotional connection with the viewer/reader because we feel that, even if we do read what we know is a display of the author's thoughts and experiences—which we feel is high enough on the intimacy scale—we find there is another deeper layer, where the writer has more to say and share with us.

As we have noticed, Valentine uses a blend of scientific information referenced from books written by professionals and humor. She does not shy away from information that some might be bothered by but creates the opportunity to come face to face with a fear that has been haunting us since we first learnt about it. She answers some of our most hidden questions: What happens when the mortuary doors are shut? What happens to the body after the coffin closes? What does the life of a mortician look like? These three questions create an honest and open conversation about death. Their answers offer information that might help us feel less unprepared and more knowledgeable about what expects us all, eventually (and hopefully) leading to death acceptance.

4. Death and I. Two Different Versions of the Same Relationship with Death

Sue Black's literary work offers an impartial depiction of her father's passing, a fact that may strike some readers as unexpected. Nevertheless, the author expounds on her emotional response in the subsequent pages, providing a more comprehensive understanding of her perspective. The author recounts the passing of her father, recalling the gradual decline of his breathing until it ceased altogether. Despite a brief resurgence of shallow breaths and agonal breathing, characterized by gasping, the sound of the death rattle soon followed. This is caused by the accumulation of mucus and fluid in the throat, rendering it impossible to be expelled through coughing. The final gasp, a mere reflex of the brainstem, was followed by the appearance of foam on the lips and nose, indicating the absence of air in the lungs and confirming his passing. The author describes the experience as a peaceful and gradual relinquishing of life, devoid of any distress, pain, or urgency (93).

By offering us this raw and quite cold, I might add, description and ending it with "It was as simple as that," the author does two things:

(a) She presents us with a chance to confront death in its rawest form—the collapse of every organ and the termination of a life we cling to with all our might. All that remains is a lifeless shell, a mere husk that holds no significance except in the realm of customs and ceremonies. As the writer previously mentioned in her work, the physical remains of a loved one are but a shadow of the person we hold dear in our hearts and minds. This is exemplified in her poignant recollection of her beloved uncle's passing.

(b) She reveals to us the harsh reality that when we are forced to confront the loss of a loved one, our reactions can vary greatly. For some, the mere thought of a life without them sends them spiraling into a dark abyss of despair, unable to fathom a world without their presence. While for others, the inevitability of death is accepted as a natural part of life, an irreversible force that must be faced with stoic resolve. The complexity of human emotion never ceases to amaze us, and in the face of death, it is no different. There being no explanation for the last gasp but "nothing more than a brainstem reflex", not at all the last try of man to hang onto dear life, the daughter of the former military man raised in a family that she herself remembers not being used to showing their feelings or occasionally saying "I love you", has no other choice but to say "It was as simple as that".

Here is Black's attitude towards death in her book: detachment. While we might expect her to talk about her fear of death or dead bodies (accumulated over the years), she confesses that "I make it a rule never to get personally involved" (286). She also answers a question most of us might have for her: "How do you cope with what you see and do?" Her response is typically humorous, suggesting that her creative process involves copious amounts of alcohol and illicit substances. However, in reality, she has never consumed illegal substances and has lost interest in drinking, save for the occasional Jack. She does not experience any adverse effects such as night sweats,

insomnia, or intrusive thoughts related to her work (287-288). She explains that the secret is to separate professional life from private life as perfectly as possible, just as she teaches us to separate the dead body from the memory of the dead person who lives on in our minds. The secret to accepting death and learning not to be touched by its apparently unexplainable exploits is to be a master of cognitive compartmentalization, which she also uses when her favorite uncle Willie dies. At the time, he existed for her on two planes: "in the present as the physical form in front of me in the coffin and in my memory as the living person. The two manifestations of him did not match, and there was no reason for them to do so as they were not the same" (67). There is a—perhaps healthy—rupture between the body-as-object and the body-as-person. Black can differentiate between Uncle Willie's memory and what she saw in that coffin, indirectly teaching us that this is a valid and valuable method to accept death without being frightened by a dead body.

The cognitive compartmentalization I mentioned in the previous paragraph is explained later on by Black as "a detached, clinical box inside my head" (294), which she never opens, not even when she is surrounded by close friends and family, because "if forensic experts allowed themselves to dwell on the immensity of human pain or on the gruesome spectacles we encounter, we would be ineffective scientists" (294). She claims that she feels no need to address or talk about particular cases in her work, not even with a therapist. As I stated in the first section of this paper, Black feels that she must obey a certain solemnity and safeguard the vulnerability and the secrets of others, be them living or dead. She seems to have much self-control, which allows her not to access memories that might haunt or cause her some emotional and psychological pain. She reasons that she protects the privacy of those she worked with, their dead, and herself from "a Pandora's box-type meltdown" (296). However, I wonder whether this is the emotionally healthy choice when you carry such a burden.

When it comes to her death, only at the end of the book does Black dabble into this subject. And because she feels that our relationship with death should be one of "comfortable camaraderie" (328), she also seeks that sort of attitude in herself. Her father struggled with dementia and died in an asylum after forgetting to walk and talk, refusing to eat or drink anything. So, Black confesses: "I want to be independent and mobile right up to my last hour on this earth and for that, I would willingly sacrifice quantity for quality" (332). She also says she would take the assisted dying pill if available, and perhaps society would finally let us "plan our death rather than endure it" (334). She refuses any CPR, transplants, or drip-feeding, as she is somehow looking forward to finally experiencing death: "I would like to be properly alive to have my personal conversation with her unencumbered by pharmaceuticals" (335). She does not feel any fear or anguish because "I know I won't be alone. […] she [death] will show me what to do" (336). So, Black has complete faith in herself that she will not fall prey to the demons she continuously feeds in her work, but she will let herself fall into the arms of death when the time is right. This attitude tells us what a rigorous and self-controlled person she is, knowing when to differentiate between the personal and the professional sphere

so as not to live a tormented life and get to enjoy what life—but mostly death—has to offer.

On the other hand, Carla Valentine chooses to see her work as part of herself because her job does not involve so many violent deaths and war crimes. "Me the person and Me the caretaker of the dead are two entities that have become indivisible" (32). As opposed to Black, who explains that she does her best to keep the two personas apart, or else she would suffer from breakdowns, Valentine made peace with the side of her that interacts with death. We encounter more comic attempts in her book than in Black's, which proves a more playful and flexible attitude. For instance, she creates comic moments by separating the punchline from the rest of the paragraphs so that the reader has to take a short break while reading to enhance the element of surprise. Here, she is working as a consultant on the set of a crime series and is looking at a (what she thinks it is) a human-sized lifelike doll on an autopsy table:

Coffee in hand, I bend over to inspect her forehead and note that the visible slash—where her head was supposed to split apart—has gone. It's good that they sorted it over the last few days, I think. I take a look again. She's so realistic, even the eyelashes! And the little hairs on the arm! I idly wonder how much she must have cost while I give her upper arm a squeeze.

She sits up.

She howls so loudly and unexpectedly that I throw my coffee so far upwards it hits the makeshift ceiling. I scream three, maybe four times in a row before we both burst out laughing at my utter idiocy and at the terrified pale faces of the crew who have run on to the set in abject horror at the sounds we made. (29)

And many such humorous breaks can be found throughout the book, together with popular culture references, such as: "If Gallen could be considered the 'Mel Gibson' of anatomy and dissection (old has-been with some funny ideas) then the 'Ryan Gosling' (young upstart heart-throb) of the art would be Vesalius" (73). This shows us that Valentine does not take things too seriously (in a good way) and presents a different side of the Hollywoodian mortician who usually resembles Lurch from *The Addams Family*. However, the book contains some points that break the informal and playful rhythm of the discourse when she tackles emotional moments at work and in her personal life. For instance, our author has to take care of a little boy's funeral; in her eyes, he looked like a "cherubic child," like one of "Botticelli's angles" (219). She starts sobbing and listens to the echoes of her voice in the empty fridge room. "'I don't cry,' I thought. 'I have a job to do.' But even as I heard the words in my head I was scooping the cold, dead toddler out of the fridge and my tears were falling" (219). It appears that her attempt at Black's cognitive compartmentalization fails. However, she admits this is a rare moment: "When you work with the dead, you cannot weep for every single case you encounter—you'd be utterly useless. It's a defense mechanism that works perfectly well until something snaps" (219). It makes us wonder whether Black, beyond all her trials

and tribulations of keeping her so-called demons locked up in a box which she never opens, has such moments of defeat. However, while Black imagines what her death would look like, we never get such introspection from Valentine. Instead, she welcomes us into her most personal and private thoughts about her love life and miscarriage. She shares her deepest feelings and emotions with us and lets us fill in the blanks regarding how and when she would like to die. One thing is sure: she, like Black, is not afraid to experience it and does not dwell on the irrational death phobia that engulfs modern man.

The discourse of the two authors differs in terms of personality, tone, and attitude toward death. Their behavior is always respectful of the dead (this is where the two converge). However, when it comes to death itself, Valentine is always childishly curious, cheerfully talkative, and manifesting a knowledge of popular culture that would attract young readers worldwide. Black is more reserved; her humor in the book is never toward death but toward her life or something that happened to her outside work. These distinctions might be based on the age difference between the two, life experience, the everlasting generational gap, and their two slightly different professions: Valentine is an anatomical pathology technologist, and Black is a forensic anthropologist. There is a higher possibility that the latter hears, sees, and learns more disturbing things than the former, so the psychological burden might be more significant; thus, a more callous attitude is required and even encouraged. Moreover, Valentine uses the pronoun "he" (45) to talk about death (maybe because she also compares it to the Grim Reaper, who is usually considered to be male), while Black uses "she" (336). In some cultures (i.e., English and German), death is personified in male form, while in others (i.e., Romanian, Spanish), death is female. Valentine and Black are British: Valentine was born in Liverpool, and Black in Inverness. Their cultural background should be similar, but apparently, not only do they have different attitudes toward death, but they also personify it differently.

This shows us how large the spectrum is in terms of death acceptance. While some death industry workers need to self-regulate to avoid breakdowns and overexposing themselves to tragedy, others choose to adopt a more light-hearted attitude to keep themselves sane. As much as these outward behaviors differ, the inward feeling toward the dead and their families is still the same, characterized by respect and solemnity. Death, on the other hand, is a companion for both Valentine and Black, a co-worker who sometimes shows up late, who is often noisy and loud, and whose job is permanent.

5. Conclusions

Death-acceptance creative nonfiction is a powerful environment for death industry workers to talk about their job and attitude toward death without feeling restrained. Readers are looking for honesty, shock, and surprise, which Sue Black and Carla Valentine offer plentily. In *All That Remains* and *Past Mortems*, they show us what

life looks like behind mortuary doors, what happens to the human body after death (violent or natural), and what tragedy looks like for the people who must be the link between families and their dead. Black paints a solemn picture of her life as a forensic anthropologist, allowing us to peek behind the curtain of war, natural disaster, and murder. Valentine takes us on a rollercoaster filled with witty humor, riveting information, and moments of sentimental confession. They help us come closer to mortality by offering us choices and inspiration.

In the twenty-first century, such books are meant to change how we see death: an enemy that must be avoided at all costs and a criminal that always takes but never gives back. However, we forget that Death is a companion that has stayed with us since birth, and the more we know about her, the closer a relationship we could have. I am well aware that the era of technology and virtual reality tempts us to consider immortality achievable (not only in Silicon Valley), but death has been here long before us. Many wealthy individuals, including Jeff Bezos and prominent figures in Silicon Valley, are investing significant amounts of money into research aimed at extending human life, and even achieving immortality. However, it is important to consider the potential consequences of artificially prolonging life beyond its natural endpoint. In doing so, we may be distancing ourselves from the acceptance of death, which is an inevitable part of the human experience. This may lead to a bleak future, but it is a possibility we must acknowledge.

Death will be here long before we are gone, no matter how much we artificially and desperately postpone it. The only things that can help us manage its approach are information, honesty, and sharing what we know and feel with others, so they can find inspiration and comfort in the thought that they are not alone on their death-acceptance journey.

These two death-acceptance creative nonfiction books are meant to create a path for the main subject of this thesis: Caitlin Doughty and her three books about death phobia, dying, and her personal experience working in the death industry, *and* how she builds her discourse and her stories so carefully and meaningfully, that it is impossible not to see structure and purpose in them. Obviously, her cultural background is not the same as Valentine's and Black's (because the latter are based in the United Kingdom). However, their goal, passion, and use of creative nonfiction are reasonably similar. In the following chapters, we will dissect (pun not intended) her three books based on specific elements that I will discuss in the following pages.

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