

RESEARCH REPORT

‘Thoughts on Mourning’ Audio Walk Exploring Mourning Heritage and Death Positivity in a Victorian Garden Cemetery

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Abstract

In this paper, I explore the evolution of Anglo-American mourning practices from the Victorian era, through the death-denying culture of twentieth century, to today. As a methodology for introducing these themes to visitors to Abney Park cemetery, in Stoke Newington, north London, I have crafted an audio walking practice to engage with these provocations within the space of a Victorian garden cemetery. Throughout my audio walk ‘Thoughts on Mourning’ I interweave Victorian attitudes towards death acceptance into my narrative of the contemporary turn, in certain circles, towards a more accepting view of death, termed the ‘Death Positive’ movement. This audio journey back and forth through time aims to illustrate that the contemporary ‘Death Positive’ movement is actually rooted in, and has similarities to, the Victorian ‘Cult of the Dead’. These concepts of bringing an intimacy with the processes of death back into the processes of mourning are the groundwork on which I built the premise of ‘Thoughts on Mourning’: that Victorian mourning practices help with the grief process more than contemporary death practices of commercialisation, outsourcing, and sequestering of death away from loved ones into an institutional setting. The audio walk format of ‘Thoughts on Mourning’ creates a space for visitors to engage with these themes in a private way, with the environs of the Victorian garden cemetery serving to offer an embodied engagement with death positivity concepts as they walk through the space.

In this paper, I explore the evolution of Anglo-American mourning practices from the Victorian era, through the death-denying twentieth century, to today. My site of research is Abney Park cemetery, located in Stoke Newington, north London. As a methodology for introducing these themes to visitors to the cemetery, I have crafted an audio walking practice to engage with these provocations within the space of a Victorian garden cemetery.

The practice-based element of my research is a project comprising four audio walks written and recorded between 2014 and 2017, titled ‘Abney Rambles’.¹ These audio walks were created with an aim to engage the local community of Stoke Newington, in north London, where Abney Park cemetery is located, with the cemetery and offer perspectives on what a cemetery can represent within its local community. Visitors can take these audio walks independently in their own time, which allows for a more private experience and space for personal reflection than a guided walk usually could allow. The audio walk and attending research analysed in this paper is ‘Thoughts on Mourning’, wherein I interweave Victorian attitudes towards death acceptance into my narrative of the contemporary turn, in certain circles, towards a more accepting view of death, termed the ‘Death Positive’² movement. This audio journey back and forth through time aims to illustrate that the contemporary ‘Death Positive’ movement is actually rooted in, and has similarities to, the Victorian ‘Cult of the Dead’.

I foreground the process of creating my ‘Thoughts on Mourning’ audio walk by first unpacking the development of Anglo-American society’s relationships with death. Beginning with Ernest Becker’s study of why humans have a denial of death (based on a fear of death), I look at the basis for why mourning practices are important to processing the human experience. Analysing the works of James Steven Curl, and

¹ My four audio walks through Abney Park cemetery and other side projects are available to download for free on my website <https://abneyrambles.com/>. Community feedback data on the audio walks is currently being gathered (October 2017) and analysis is ongoing.

² Further information about the Death Positive movement can be found on The Order of the Good Death website: <http://www.orderofthegooddeath.com/death-positive>

Elizabeth Hallam and Jenny Hockey, I present a picture of the values and rituals associated with Victorian mourning practices.

I continue with twentieth-century mourning practices and death-relations analysis by Philip Mellor and Jane Littlewood. Through Geoffrey Gorer's study of "The Pornography of Death" (1955) and Caitlin Doughty's memoir *Smoke Gets in Your Eyes* (2015), I further delve into what I have termed the attitudes of the twentieth century: the 'Phobic of the Dead'. I then introduce 'The Order of the Good Death' and the 'Death Positive' movement as a comparison to the 'Cult of the Dead', which offers contemporary perspectives on how to incorporate death and mourning into our current culture by their endeavours to bring this discourse out into the open.

These concepts of bringing an intimacy with the processes of death back into the processes of mourning are the groundwork on which I built the premise of 'Thoughts on Mourning': that Victorian mourning practices help with the grief process more than contemporary death practices of commercialisation, outsourcing, and sequestering of death away from loved ones into an institutional setting.

I conclude with how the Victorian setting of Abney Park cemetery informed the crafting of my audio walk mediation on mourning within the space and what a walking practice within a garden cemetery can offer the experience of this kind of reflection.

Walking Practice in the Context of a Death-Denying Culture: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives

Is death really the final taboo? Incest is a taboo. Death is 100% universal.

- John Troyer³

³ John Troyer, director, Centre for Death and Society, University of Bath, paper presentation, Death Salon 2014, personal notes from researcher.

Through my walking practice, I use the space of Abney Park cemetery as a physical reminder of death processes through the graves and monuments themselves, but also as a temporal touchstone to a time in the past (the Victorian era) when mourning practices were codified by societal ritual that gave a voice and a visual presence to grief, which gave structure to the individual experience. By addressing common twentieth- and twenty-first-century Anglo-American mourning practices, and attitudes towards dying, death, and the treatment of the corpse, I aim to illustrate that these distancing practices, that comprise the mainstream twentieth-century processes of mourning, are part of what is fuelling death denial. I posit that disconnecting from our dead, sequestering the corpse away from the bereaved, denies a final piece of closure for the living. There is a growing movement towards death acceptance called the 'Death Positive' movement, or 'The Good Death' - a movement that has much in common with Victorian views on the place of death within one's own life, family, and society before the advent of commercialisation in twentieth-century death processes.

The inspiration for my 'Thoughts on Mourning' audio walk was sparked by these observations on the evolution of approaches to death and mourning from the Victorian 'Cult of the Dead', through the twentieth-century, up to today. Nineteenth-century mourning holds an iconic status within contemporary minds. The Victorians and mourning are often presented as synonymous in the cultural retrospective eye. Today, we have numerous photographs from the era of theatrical funeral processions with plumed horses, black lacquered hearse carriages, banner-holding mutes, and overflowing flower arrangements all comprising the slow, long parade through town to the cemetery that people would stop and line the streets to see. Due to the tiered progression of regimented socially appropriate mourning dress customs, from 'deep mourning' to 'half-mourning', museums now house the copious ornate mourning ephemera of fans, jet jewellery, post-mortem photography, and black-bordered

handkerchiefs, to name but a fraction of these items.⁴ All of this, to the contemporary eye, can appear fetishistic. I challenge this perception. I offer the inverse perspective that the Victorians did not have a ‘cult’ of the dead, but rather it is the contemporary mindset that is the ‘phobic’ of the dead.

At the end of the Victorian era entered an age of ever-growing death denial throughout the beginning of the twentieth-century, brought on by the two-pronged forces of advancement in medical science and a societal decline in religion. Throughout the first few decades of the twentieth-century, the general turn in society was to no longer feel comfortable with death as merely a ‘passing on’, or another phase. Rapid medical advancements fought back disease and prolonged life. At the rate of scientific progression at the beginning of the twentieth-century, if the trajectory were to have continued, it seemed to suggest people might not have to die at all. Victorian views on the cycle of life and the processing of grief began to be seen as unnecessarily maudlin – and dubbed the ‘Cult of the Dead’. Historian Joanna Ebenstein was director of the Morbid Anatomy Museum in Brooklyn, New York (until its closure in 2016) and an activist in the Death Positive movement. She asks us:

Why is it morbid to think about death? People argue all the time about what makes us ‘human’ as opposed to ‘animals’, but the one distinction I think that has not broken down is that human beings are uniquely aware that they are going to die. And the fact that we’re not supposed to think about it or talk about it with any kind of dignified discourse I find really perverse. (Ebenstein 2012.)

⁴This research encompasses lower, middle, and upper class funerary ritual, however not that of the lowest impoverished classes, who would be interred in ‘pauper’ or ‘common’ graves. Even a lower class family would further impoverish themselves to put on as lavish a funeral display and mourning adornment as they could stretch to afford, as having a pauper’s funeral and not embodying ritualised mourning etiquette would be an unacceptable embarrassment to the deceased’s family in the Victorian era. As such, only those of the bottom economic strata, either those without families, or victims of the high death rates in the slums and workhouses, would be conscripted to common graves. My research focuses on the funerary rituals and statuary housed in Victorian garden cemeteries. While there are copious common graves in Abney Park cemetery, their revolving nature of multiple use and lack of attending ritual creates a very different angle of inquiry that does not fall within the purview of this research and is deserving of a thesis in its own right.

This observation is the basis for what, of late, could be seen in certain circles as a resurgence, or neo-renaissance, in death acceptance. From Ebenstein's museum that explored the intersection of death, art, and oddities in New York City, to The Order of the Good Death (that started in Los Angeles and has since gone international), which is a consortium of death industry professionals, academics, artists, and armchair philosophers who ask these questions: Why is an experience so universal considered in today's Western culture the last taboo? How can we crack through this fear into acceptance?

According to their ethos, by accepting the inevitability of our death, and the eventual death of everyone who we love, we are being more honest about the way we live life. Confronting these questions is not an obsession with the macabre or a wish to die - it is the opposite of this: boldly staring death in the face, holding these moments of life while we can, and living without fear. The Death Positive ideology is about embracing life, not living a circumscribed life cowering from death. In contemporary Anglo-American society, we have distanced ourselves further and further from the processes of death. My assertion is that this distancing is the source of this fear: when we became the 'Phobic of the Dead'.

With the advent of embalming at the beginning of the twentieth-century, the bereaved began having their loved ones prepared for burial at funeral homes, as opposed to being washed and dressed and laid out at home. Instead, the deceased would be taken off premises rather quickly and the rest of the care of the corpse would be handled by professionals, with the final presentation of the deceased to their living loved ones the result of chemicals, plastic facial scaffolding, and cosmetics - all of this lending the appearance of 'sleep' and distancing the family from the realities of putrefaction.

In his paper "Ghost Babies", post-mortem photography historian Mark Dery (2011) noted that, in the nineteenth-century, families prepared their own dead for burial by laying the body on a board and washing and dressing it for the wake, which was

traditionally held in the front parlour of the family home. By the first decade of the twentieth-century, however, death was disappearing from everyday life, swept aside in the cultural housecleaning called modernism.

In Geoffrey Gorer's seminal mid-twentieth-century study on death denial, "The Pornography of Death", he posits the reason for the taboo nature of death discussion (in daily life, or in art) is its removal from our personal experience:

In the 20th century [...] there seems to have been an unremarked shift in prudery; whereas copulation has become more and more 'mentionable', particularly in the Anglo Saxon societies, death has become more and more 'unmentionable' as a natural process. I cannot recollect a novel or play of the last twenty years or so which has a 'deathbed scene' in it [...] this topic was a set piece for most of the eminent Victorian and Edwardian writers. [...] One of the reasons, I imagine, for this plethora of death-bed scenes, apart from their intrinsic emotional and religious content, was that it was one of the relatively few experiences that an author could be fairly sure would have been shared by the vast majority of his readers. (Gorer 1955, 50.)

This is echoed by Caitlin Doughty⁵ in her memoir on her time working in a crematorium, *Smoke Gets in Your Eyes*.

If decomposing bodies have disappeared from culture (which they have), but those same decomposing bodies are needed to alleviate the fear of death (which they are), what happens to a culture where all decomposition is removed? We don't need to hypothesise: We live in just such a culture. A culture of death denial. (Doughty 2015, 165.)

⁵ Mortician and death industry veteran Caitlin Doughty is owner of Undertaking LA, Death Positivity activist, and founding member of The Order of the Good Death.

The general consensus through my research, and empirical observation, has been that we are, indeed, in an era of the ‘Phobic of the Dead’.

In Philip Mellor’s paper “Death in High Modernity: The Contemporary Presence and Absence of Death” (1993), he grounds the basis of our modern practices of banishing death from view in an avoidance of existential chaos. Referencing Anthony Giddens’ views on where humans gain feelings of ontological security, Mellor asserts that these feelings find their emotional and cognitive anchors in a “practical consciousness of the meaningfulness of our day-to-day actions. This meaningfulness, however, is always shadowed by the threat of disorder or chaos.” (Mellor 1993, 12.) He goes on to link to Søren Kierkegaard’s concept of ‘dread’ and Giddens’ assertion that humans face an ever-present danger of being overwhelmed by anxieties concerning the ultimate reality and meaningfulness of day-to-day life. Ernest Becker attributes this existential crisis as that which foregrounds humans’ denial of death in his (appropriately titled) work *The Denial of Death*:

Man is literally split in two: he has an awareness of his own splendid uniqueness in that he sticks out of nature with a towering majesty, and yet he goes back into the ground a few feet in order blindly and dumbly to rot and disappear forever. It is a terrifying dilemma to be in and to have to live with. [...] It is only if you let the full weight of this paradox sink down on your mind and feeling that you can realise what an impossible situation it is for an animal to be in. I believe that those who speculate that a full apprehension of man’s condition would drive him insane are right, quite literally right. [...] Pascal’s chilling reflection: ‘Men are so necessarily mad that not to be mad would amount to another form of madness.’ (Becker 1973, 26-27.)

Referencing Erich Fromm, Becker wonders why most people do not become insane “in the face of the existential contradiction between a symbolic self, that seems to give man infinite worth in a timeless scheme of things, and a body that is worth about 98¢.

How to reconcile the two?” (Becker 1993, 27–28.) This tension between our daily constructed realities and the dread of the grand existential question is something our complex societies (mostly) successfully help us to navigate (or avoid) through distraction. Mellor asserts that society strives to keep this dread at bay by ‘bracketing’ out of everyday life those questions that might be raised about the social frameworks that contain human existence. As humans, we have developed complex societies that occupy our minds with day-to-day tasks, and religious or spiritual belief systems that occupy our thoughts otherwise. These multilayered buffers keep most of the debilitating existential thoughts from slipping society into chaos.

However, the social ‘bracketing’, as Mellor terms it, process is not always successful. Death is a potent challenge to this bracketing process. Confronting one’s own death, or the death of others, creates a fracture in the normal daily processes of life. As society has progressed, death has become a less frequent occurrence in our lives, due to medical advancement, and has further been closed off from view and from embodiment by the rise throughout the twentieth century in hospitals and care homes as the site of death. This makes death, when encountered in contemporary Anglo-American culture, all the more poignant for its perceived rarity. These encounters break the bereaved person involved out of his or her day-to-day systems of meaning, raising questions of the reality of the social frameworks in which they participate, “shattering their ontological security”, as Mellor describes it.

Death is therefore *always* a problem for *all* societies, since every social system must in some ways accept death, because human beings inevitably die, but at the same time social systems must to a certain extent deny death to allow people to go on in day-to-day life with some sense of commitment. (Mellor 1993, 13.)

For an increasingly secular contemporary society, much of the denial of death stems from a fear of the unknown. Without the comforts of religion as a bulwark against existential crises, and with societies increasingly fracturing – with the current trends towards frequent moves of house and of children leaving their town or even their country of origin – there is a separateness experienced between individuals in many communities. Added to the individual stress that accompanies these community structures beginning to disperse, there is the secular fear of being forgotten, that is added to the spiritual fear of annihilation.

My audio walk ‘Thoughts on Mourning’ addresses these themes in the space of a garden cemetery to emphasize the Victorian approach to this fear of annihilation – creating a peaceful space for remembrance through the longevity of stone and beauty of gardens. With the fracturing of societies, many of these mourning ‘hubs’ no longer offer the same sense of community and communal grief that they once did. As Sarah Rutherford (2008) notes in her study of Victorian garden cemeteries:

Interest in Victorian cemeteries waned in the twentieth century as mortality became more remote from everyday life. They have become consistently underrated for their visual and architectural qualities and contribution to the quality of life. Fortunately, interest is growing again, prompted by thriving studies in family history, by the threats from a recurring acute need for more burial space, and by an appreciation of their value as cultural landscapes and ornamental open spaces. (Rutherford 2008, 6–7.)

While this is good news for the taphophile, saving garden cemeteries for ‘ornamental’ or historical preservation reasons does not address the personal need people have for these spaces. Cemeteries serve a vital purpose in bereavement, however the communities who use them are dispersing. There is a need for the reintroduction of

death into our community discourses. The necessity of societal scaffolding of ritual and mourning practices in human cultures throughout the ages seems quite clear.

In Hallam and Hockey's study (2001) on the role of material culture in mourning practices, they have noted the disappearance of the body in modern experiences of death and mourning ritual. "At the time of death, and for many also the time leading up to it, embodied persons disappear from view, their relationships with other non-dying persons in greater society, outside of the cloistered realm of the hospital or care home, come under threat and their influence may cease." (Hallam and Hockey 2001, 4.)

Hallam and Hockey found that when individuals need to confront intangible themes, recourse to metaphor has provided a means by which these themes are made accessible:

Recent studies have stated that the use of metaphor is essential if memories are to be grasped. Similarly death, as a field of experience that cannot be 'known' in a direct sense, has been elaborated extensively through metaphors and cultural representations. Here we can note that metaphor is, at its simplest, a way of proceeding from the known to the unknown. (Hallam and Hockey 2001, 23.)

The softening effects and distance offered by metaphor presents a somewhat more manageable pathway for the bereaved to comprehend the incomprehensible, and to face the overwhelming emotion of grief and strenuous personal processes of confronting the unknown. Some denial of death is necessary to prevent full existential meltdown. We could not do our laundry or go to the bank if every moment was weighed down with the knowledge that we're going to die, and the attending questions of whether or not we will continue to exist after this inevitability. However, shutting out these musings completely, cutting ourselves off from our dead and living in a sterilised

death-free society, has meant that, in our modern whitewashed Western efficiency, we have erased death from public view; and, therefore, through foreignisation, increased our fear of death, not lessened it.

While the outsourcing of death can be seen to be part of a larger cultural progression towards civilised cleanliness throughout the twentieth-century, there is a psychological component to performing these practices by the bereaved that is mostly not addressed by Western mainstream contemporary death ritual practices.

In Jane Littlewood's paper "The Denial of Death and Rites of Passage in Contemporary Societies" (1993), she explores two questions related to the sociology of death, dying, and bereavement. The first question relates to the denial, and associated medicalisation, of our understanding of death-related issues. She argues that this process is relatively recent and has resulted in the removal of death and dying from the community and to its relocation in the hospital or similar institution. The second question relates to the role that rituals play in contemporary society. Littlewood argues that death-related rituals are still widely performed, but have been removed from the community and relocated into the personal realm of private grief. Quoting Ariès, she says:

The relative of the cremated person rejects the physical reality of the site, its association with the body, which inspires distaste, and the public character of the cemetery. But he accepts absolutely the personal and private nature of regret. For the cult of the tomb he has substituted the cult of memory in the home. (Littlewood 1993, 69.)

This echoes Caitlin Doughty's observations that during her time as a crematorium worker in California during the early 2000s, only rarely would family members attend a cremation; and of those who did, even fewer still wanted to be involved in the process logistically, by pushing the button on the cremator, for example.

Littlewood references Gorer and Peter Marris, flipping common perceptions on their head regarding Victorian mourning from a ‘cult’ to a ‘golden age’:

Gorer’s (1965) work has been extremely influential in portraying the Victorian era as a ‘golden age’ for grief. Marris (1986) continues this tradition in the following vein: ‘Traditionally, full mourning in England would begin with the shuttering of the house and the hanging of black crepe while the dead person was laid out in his or her old home. [...] When the period of mourning is over the family can take up the thread of daily life without guilt because the customs of society make this a duty’. (Littlewood 1993, 77–78.)

This highlights the paradox inherent in what we have termed the morbid ‘celebration’ or ‘cult’ of the dead in the Victorian era. These regulated customs were not in place to keep the mourner in mourning for perpetuity. The Victorians may have mourned extravagantly, but they mourned within a prescribed timeframe – and then stopped mourning. This system was not a life sentence of grief. It was, instead, the very system that helped them to move through clear societal pathways *out* of mourning. Anglo-American contemporary secular bereaved are mostly left to craft their own way through the mourning process, largely within a society that advocates the confining of grief to private space. The bereaved may not have a notion of when to try to move beyond their deep grief or, perhaps, due to keeping grief private and not shared outwardly in clothing and through community ritual, they may not be able to do so at all. These private and hidden mourning processes could further entrench and prolong grief for the individual, despite outward appearances to the contrary. As Hallam and Hockey point out:

[The Victorian] time of mourning was marked through the wearing of public and private costume, which was coded to convey the social status and rank of the bereaved. Here there was a transfer of emphasis

from the body of the deceased to the social body of those in mourning. By this stage in the death ritual the natural body was virtually forgotten and culture's concern was to support the accumulation of meanings attributed to the social body. Thus the 'natural' time of death conveyed through the decaying body was displaced by the social time of mourning registered through the living body, its attire and adornment. (Hallam & Hockey 2001, 69.)

This transfer of focus from the physical dead loved one, to the conceptual living ritual helped ease the focus from putrefaction and despair, to community, shared grief burdens, and pleasant reflections of the deceased. These processes are action-based and optimistic. The motivation for the Victorian mode of mourning does not show itself to be one of stagnation, but of transition.

There appears to be a general consensus in the area that the rituals of the past must be helpful to people who have been bereaved, but it remains undemonstrated exactly how such rituals might be rehabilitated in order to fit contemporary, complex, and secular societies. (Littlewood 1993, 78.)

Littlewood wrote the above rather despondent query in 1993; since then, contemporary Anglo-American society has undergone a quiet death acceptance revolution, where a secular response to death does appear to have found its avenue. In 1993, global communication was not what it is today; and with the advent of the internet (and all the associated social media avenues it has afforded) people are finding new forms of communication regarding death and community-building between people interested in these topics. From informal Death Cafe meet-ups (where strangers come together to drink tea, eat cake, and discuss death), to organised conferences in museums and universities, and lecture series in repurposed cemetery chapels, the Death Positive community has co-opted, in a way, a mode of ritualising these topics

that is a mash-up of the nineteenth century literary salon with the academic symposium structure. The communities that form in and around these events lead to offshoots of other secular activities, such as cemetery visits and trade shows, like the annual Ideal Death Show, where visitors who are in the death industry, academia, or merely curious, can learn about eco-funerals, shroud wrapping, and enjoy talks on wide variety of subjects surrounding death.

Allowing the trappings of death, and the professionals who work in the industry, to become tactile, immediate and conversational, lifts the mystique that usually surrounds coffins, urns, and private rituals, and brings them out into the open to be picked up and discussed. Stories of funerals and ritual are shared over drinks and accepting the naturalness of death becomes easier through these practices.

I have aimed through my ‘Thoughts on Mourning’ audio walk to create an avenue for visitors to Abney Park Cemetery to encounter these themes and hopefully look a death and mourning in a new way. My research into death denial showed me a void in acceptance and a need for people to have a space to think on these issues. My walk aims to offer a private, independent, personal space for visitors to listen and think on these themes through a walking meditation. In the following section, I unpack this process of crafting a Death Positive audio walking practice in the garden cemetery.



Photo 1. Egyptian Gates main entrance to Abney Park Cemetery. Photo: Romany Reagan, 2015

Walking in a Garden Cemetery: The Aesthetics of Mourning

A cemetery can and should, by the exercise of art, be made as beautiful as possible.

- H. E. Milner, *The Art and Practice of Landscape Gardening*, 1890

The Victorian garden cemetery was developed as an artistic creation. The architects and landscapers worked together through symbolism of mourning trees, shrubs, and flowers, along with stonework, to create beautiful havens of remembrance. At its zenith, Abney Park cemetery eclipsed Kew Gardens with over 2,500 varieties of shrubs and



trees, and over 1,000 species of rose bushes. (Arnold 2007, 153.)

My walking practice through Abney Park cemetery is a layer of artistic creation over the original Victorian artistry that created it. Although now self-seeded and overgrown, the main original layout, and a few of the original species of trees and plants still exist.⁶

Photo 2. Abney Park today is a nature reserve woodland, but some of the original layout can still be seen. Photo: Romany Reagan, 2015.

⁶ A variety of 177-year-old veteran trees from the original arboretum are still standing and alive today. My audio walk 'Woodland Networks' explores these specimens. <https://abneyrambles.com/2017/07/07/audio-walk-abney-rambles-woodland-networks/>

This anachronistic experience through the temporal shifts of trees and stone gives a glimpse of the beauty that the original designers of Abney Park were creating. The garden cemetery is a quintessentially Victorian construct, when viewed within the context of their views on mourning ritual: that of a society who brought structure and beauty to loss and made space for this style of mourning through the structure and beauty of their cemeteries.

The Victorian era is distinctive from the preceding and following eras in many unique ways. However, perhaps the most iconic attribute of the era is its perceived preoccupation with death and mourning. The evolution of this sensibility has its roots in a few factors. The Romantic period of painting and literature of the late eighteenth century grew into the subgenre of gothic literature and sublime painting of the nineteenth century. This aesthetic in art progressed into the 'real' world in the form of landscape and garden planning in the theme of an 'Arcadia', which brought funerary thoughts of memorial into the garden. This had a direct knock-on effect of bringing the garden Arcadia aesthetic into the cemetery – a previously cramped and odiferous place – to instead create a pleasant environ for mourning and reflection. A memorial in a garden would not only evoke memories of the departed within a comfortable and pleasing setting, but ideas of Arcadia as well: most importantly, all references to the horrors of decay, bones, decomposition, and the dank, unwholesome graveyard were banished. Graves in beautiful landscapes, surrounded by honeysuckle, willows, and creeping ivies, were places where the living could linger over picnics and remember their dead in a way that almost suggested their continuing presence. Here was the peaceful, beautiful ideal, a place fit for reflection and memories, where death was 'civilised'. Images of the tomb were brought into the garden, and the garden was brought into the tomb: the concept of the 'garden cemetery' was born.

The garden cemetery movement began in France with Bernardin de Saint-Pierre. However, pinpointing the originator of this aesthetic is problematic. A profoundly delayed bouncing of ideas between Britain and France took place at the time: the

Arcadian garden originated in Britain in the late eighteenth century, which then inspired continental visitors to take these ideas back home. However, it was in France that de Saint-Pierre presented the plans for a Parisian garden cemetery in 1784 - however, the French government would not act on these proposals to found Père-Lachaise Cemetery until 20 years later, in 1804. The famous garden cemeteries of Victorian Britain were inspired by Père-Lachaise Cemetery; however, they were not begun until 30 years later - all of which was originally inspired by British ideas cultivated some 50 years previously. (Curl 2000.) Nonetheless, it took the glamour and fame of Père-Lachaise to give the aesthetic traction.

Père-Lachaise was the prototypical nineteenth-century funerary garden, and soon became world-famous. It was visited by many people interested in the problems of burying the dead in a civilised fashion, and its influence was enormous throughout Europe and America. Nothing less than a revolution occurred, and Père-Lachaise became the powerful exemplar of an entirely new culture of nineteenth-century death that transformed the disposal of corpses in many countries thereafter. (Stevens Curl 2000, 25.)

The Victorian 'Cult of the Dead' was not only housed in cemeteries, tombstones, and monuments. Expressions of social position and status could be infused into everything from hearses, mourning cards, and dress, down to coffin plates and handles. These traces are found among the faded, colourless leaves of wreaths long collapsed to dust. In the catacombs of Kensal Green Cemetery in London today, you can still see the scaffolding of Victorian wreaths placed against the coffins. Crumbling bits cling to these cages as a last vestige of the flowers once laid there. These artefacts have been left untouched, their placement frozen in time, left to crumble exactly where they were originally arranged.



Photo 3. Kensal Green Cemetery catacombs. Photo: Romany Reagan, 2008.

Other than grave flowers in catacombs, many commonplace mourning articles have survived intact: various small portraits, mounted mourning cards, linen handkerchiefs with black borders, mourning fans of black silk, and various items of mourning dress. One thing intrinsic to the mourning culture of this era is how objects could embody emotion. Not having the plethora of life traces that we now possess of passed loved ones (photos, videos, etcetera), items such as hair jewellery were a way to keep the lost loved one close, and the wearing of special garments broadcast your grief to the world more powerfully than a post on social media. Contemporary commentary that post-mortem photography or mourning hair art is ‘morbid’ or ‘grotesque’ is looking at these items from the myopic lens of the present day. Contemporary societies in the developed world capture memories and totems with offhand ease. I believe we are perhaps too quick to condemn the Victorians for using what they had available at the time for remembrance – and many of these items are very touching and beautiful.



Photo 3.5. Victorian mourning hair art shadow box, American c1840, from Reagan's private collection. Photo: Romany Reagan, 2017.

However, outside of a museum collections, the most impressive legacy of the beauty of Victorian mourning are the garden cemeteries.



Photo 4. Abney centre chapel in partially ruinous state at the beginning of renovation. Photo: Romany Reagan, 2015.



Photo 5. Abney centre chapel in partially ruinous state. Photo: Romany Reagan, 2015.

Crafting an Audio Walking Practice in a Victorian Garden Cemetery

When taking the listening walker through Abney Park cemetery, and around the centre chapel ruin⁷, I offer a quote about garden cemeteries and invite the listening walker to consider modern mourning in relation to the garden cemetery aesthetic:

⁷ ‘Thoughts on Mourning’ was recorded in 2015 when the centre chapel was in ruin, it has since then been partially renovated.

‘The cemetery is an open space among the ruins, covered in Winter with violets and daisies. It might make one in love with death, to think that one should be buried in so sweet a place.’ Percy Shelley 1821. That quote reminds me of Abney. How beautiful and private death seems here. Instead of the sweeping flat lawn and endless tract-home stones of so many modern places of internment, here in this garden cemetery there are enclaves, spaces for privacy and reflection. Spaces for death to retain some of the romance and beauty that make mourning a bit more bearable.⁸

Enjoyment of these garden cemeteries was not relegated to only mourners. Beautiful monuments erected by the upper and middle classes to reflect their wealth and good taste when death visited the family added to the beauty of the landscaping. The locations of the ‘Magnificent Seven’⁹ placed them all fairly equidistant from London City centre, which proved a magnet for city dwellers, and the cemeteries became destinations for respectable weekend outings. Indeed, these were one of the very few places where widows and single ladies might visit unaccompanied. There could even be matrimonial possibilities. (Turpin and Knight 2011.)

I crafted the structure and layout of ‘Thoughts on Mourning’ to capture the essence of a stroll through a garden cemetery. Although my theme is one of reflection rather than socialising, I wished to illustrate the beauty of these cemeteries that would draw people to them for such purposes. I began crafting the audio walk by collecting various thoughts and stories from early nineteenth-century to present day. I then wove them together in a meditative arc, beginning with my personal reflections on the nineteenth-century perspective on death, the thoughts of William Godwin, and a line of poetry by

⁸ Reagan, Romany, ‘Thoughts on Mourning’ audio walk.

⁹ Up until the mid-19th century, London’s dead were buried in small parish churchyards, which quickly became dangerously overcrowded. In the first 50 years of the 19th century the population of London more than doubled from 1 million to 2.3 million. Overcrowded graveyards led to doubling up of grave use, resulting in shallow graves, where corpses could be pushed to the surface by shifting earth and animal interference, giving way to abhorrent smells and contamination of local water. In 1832 Parliament passed a bill encouraging the establishment of private cemeteries outside London. Over the next decade seven cemeteries were established, now known colloquially as the ‘Magnificent Seven’.

Percy Shelley. After this, I let the music that I chose¹⁰ for the meditative backdrop of the walk come to the fore, as the listening walker is asked to sit on a bench and observe a rather unusual horizontal line of cramped-in gravestones just across the path from where they sit. This is the first meditative prompt. After this, the listening walker is guided to continue past the statue of Isaac Watts, with a short selection of his history and connection to the woodland when it was Abney Manor, before becoming Abney Park cemetery, and then onto the centre chapel ruin, where I share contemporary reflections on today's attitudes by Mark Dery and thoughts from the Death Positive community.



Photo 6. Betsi Cadwaladr's gravestone and memorial bench. Photo: Romany Reagan, 2015.

After walking a ways deeper through the cemetery, I follow up these scene-setting musings with the story of the Welsh nurse Betsi Cadwaladr, who is buried in Abney Park. Betsi has been called 'the forgotten Florence Nightingale'. She was born in 1789

¹⁰ All of the music that I edited and spliced together throughout 'Thoughts on Mourning' was used with permission by The Black Heart Procession, with the exception of the full unedited song at the end of the walk, while the listening walker is prompted to find their own way out of Abney Park, to the accompaniment of 'Dance While the Sky Crashes Down', used with permission by Jason Webley.

near Bala, north Wales. She was one of 16 children and her mother died when she was only five years old. Betsi found employment locally as a maid where she learned housework, to speak English, and to play the triple harp. She was not happy there, though, and at age of 14 she escaped through a bedroom window using tied sheets, and left Bala. From there, she then travelled to Liverpool where she entered into domestic service. Later, she returned to Wales, but then quickly fled again, this time to avoid marriage, opting instead to live with her sister in London. In London, she first encountered the theatre, which became a great interest to her. In 1820, aged 31, she again returned to Bala - which by then she considered to be quite 'dull', so she ran off again, this time to become a maid to a ship's captain and travelled for many years, visiting South America, Africa, and Australia. At times she performed Shakespeare on board the ship. Despite her stubbornness and independence, Betsi herself claimed that in the course of her travels she was proposed to by over 20 men.

After acquiring nursing training, and at the age of 65, she joined the military nursing service with the intention of working in the Crimea, despite the attempts of her sister Bridget to dissuade her. Florence Nightingale, who came from a privileged background, did not want the Welsh working-class Betsi to go, saying that if Betsi went to the Crimea it would be against her will, and that Betsi would have to be made over to another superintendent. Betsi responded, "Do you think I am a dog or an animal to make me over? I have a will of my own."

Conditions in the Crimea eventually took their toll on Betsi's health, and she returned to Britain in 1855, a year before the war ended, suffering from cholera and dysentery. She lived in London, again at her sister's house, during which time she wrote her autobiography. She died in 1860, five years after her return, and was buried in a pauper's common grave with four others in Abney Park cemetery. In 2012, the Royal College of Nursing and the Welsh health board that shares Betsi's name installed the bench and headstone to mark Betsi's final resting place and share her story with visitors to the cemetery.

There are a few aspects of Betsi's story that I felt made her important to include in my audio walk. First, hers is a fascinating story to tell, one that spans love, adventure, war, sacrifice, and bravery; but, also, it is the story of a woman initially conscripted to an unmarked grave. Her story accomplishes a couple things for my narrative: it humanises what could otherwise be seen as a rather theoretical or dusty reflection on what has the potential to be - and arguably should be - an emotion-filled and intimate space: the space of the garden cemetery. It also brings to our attention the importance of memorial. If Betsi's grave were to have remained unmarked, her story would fade into history and only be accessible to those actively researching it. Without the intervention of the Royal College of Nursing and the Welsh health board, her story would be lost to all but those who searched for her in archives. With the placement of her gravestone, and the addition of a carved stone bench, visitors to Abney Park Cemetery can sit for awhile and read a bit about Betsi, this woman that perhaps they had never heard of before, and engage with her sliver of history.

Her posthumous memorial journey is an example that illustrates the importance of marked history, and supports my audio walks in their aim to offer a variety of ways of engaging with cemeteries. Cemeteries are not only for private grief; they are also spatial libraries that house our societal narratives, which makes them key heritage sites. As the listening walker continues down the path away from Betsi's grave, I offer this thought to accompany them:

Stories like Betsi's exemplify the meaning of cemeteries for me. They underscore the importance of cemeteries as a space to house memory. Not only our memories of loved ones, but cultural memory. Cemeteries weave the disparate threads of our various lives between strangers and across time, into a tapestry we can all share and read. To spend time in a cemetery space is to be a part of a temporal fabric, and to feel a continuity through the ages. No matter your religious or

secular affiliations, or lack thereof, there is something of importance here. A cemetery is not only a spiritual space, it is a time capsule.¹¹

After Betsi's story, the listening walker continues on a winding path through some of the more narrow and overgrown parts of Abney Park. Here, I again let the music come to the fore, allowing the listening walker mental space for his or her own reflections and time to look around at the various gravestones and foliage, absorbing the atmosphere of what he or she is seeing, underlain by the mood I've created through the music of the Black Heart Procession.

From here, I then read a twentieth-century passage on grief from a memoir, followed by a Victorian perspective. I allow the music to lead the audio once again, until we come to the end of the walk, at the Isaac Watts memorial stone that lies in the far northeast corner of Abney Park. Here, I conclude the audio walk how it began, with my personal reflections. This time, instead of focusing on nineteenth-century mourning, I address the cemetery space as it is today, and the importance cemeteries hold for our communities and what thoughts and reflections they inspire. I then leave the listening walker to find his or her own way out of the cemetery, set to an irreverent and upbeat contemporary song about death.

I crafted the end of the audio walk to be as waking from a dream. The music throughout the entire walk has been very sombre and reflective, and I have built in sections for the listening walker to get lost in his or her own thoughts. I did not want the end of the audio walk to be a sharp division between a meditative walking reverie to suddenly an abrupt exit at one of the cemetery gates. I wanted to allow the listening walker space to come back to the present, to come out of the meditation, and perhaps as well to shake off some darker thoughts that may have come upon them during the course of the walk. As he or she exists, walking through the overgrown woodland, I hope the walk has given the visitor a new appreciation for the love and care that went

¹¹ Reagan, Romany, 'Thoughts on Mourning' audio walk.

into crafting Victorian garden cemeteries, and what place they can hopefully hold in our future communities.

Victorian Mourning Ritual in the Twenty-First Century

A key component in the Death Positive movement is a re-embodiment of the mourning process. Bringing the bereaved into tactile contact with the deceased, and into the process of creating their own mourning ritual, harkens back to the Victorian practice of these processes being taken care of by the family at home. What was once seen as archaic and morbid (the washing, dressing, and laying out of the corpse in the front parlour of the home all performed by the family) is today being seen as a helpful psychological tool for the bereaved to process their loss. Removing the sequestration of the dead body from loved ones and the re-embodiment of mourning ritual is bringing us closer to the Victorian way of processing grief and is advocated by practitioners in today's Death Positive movement.

Louise Winter, funeral celebrant, co-founder, and funeral director of Poetic Endings, and Anna Lyons, death doula and PSHE teacher¹², both of whom are co-founders of 'Life. Death. Whatever.'¹³ are activists in the Death Positive community, however they prefer the term 'Death Awareness'. They've found through their work as celebrant and death doula that people within contemporary Western society, by and large, are not having important end-of-life conversations due to the process of modern sequestration and outsourcing of the death process to professional third parties. As Lyons has found in her work as a death doula, people do not take necessary steps towards making end-of-life plans. And studies show that people are not having these end-of-life conversations. According to a 2012 report by the Dying Matters Coalition, part of the

¹² Teacher in Personal, Social, Health and Economic education.

¹³ Life. Death. Whatever. is a blog, annual events series, and "an initiative to redesign the dialogue around death and dying, to open it up and to find new approaches to this important subject". <http://www.lifedeathwhatever.com/about/>

National Council for Palliative Care (NCPC), 73% of UK respondents said they were “very comfortable” discussing death, but only 13% of those respondents had actually written a will or taken steps towards planning their end care. (Shucksmith, Carlebach and Whittaker 2012.) Even with the advent of death awareness groups, and a slowly growing cultural shift towards a desire for a ‘good death’, there is still a barrier towards taking definitive death preparation actions, which is apparent in even the self-professed “very comfortable”.

At the beginning of the twentieth-century, it was common for people to die at home. But, as the century progressed, the rate of home deaths fell while the rate of hospital deaths increased. According to a 2013 Public Health England report, while 67% of respondents stated they would prefer to die at home, with only 7% stating they would prefer to die in hospital, the vast majority of deaths (approximately 90%) occur in hospital, irrespective of the dying person’s wishes regarding the matter.¹⁴ Lyons has found, in her experience, that hospital death is not a ‘good death’.

Hospitals are not a good place to die. They don’t have the time. Unless you are on a very specific ward where people do die, and are expected to die, people go into hospitals for curative purposes, they go in to come out. And even though that is not the case, many times, even though many people do die, they haven’t addressed that. They don’t have the staffing levels.¹⁵

There appears to be a disconnect between what people assume, or hope, will happen to them when they die, versus the reality of this experience - for the dying person, as well as for the bereaved who are left behind. And this sequestering away of our dead and dying is largely what makes these conversations so foreign to contemporary

¹⁴ See the report “What we know now 2013. New information collated by the National End of Life Care Intelligence Network” http://www.endoflifecare-intelligence.org.uk/resources/publications/what_we_know_now_2013.

¹⁵ Telephone interview with Anna Lyons, October 18, 2017.

communities, and through foreignisation, thus more intimidating to discuss. Winter has found that the processes of body removal in elderly care homes is very regimented and death is kept well-hidden. Care homes do not like exposing the residents to death. If someone dies in a care home, Winter and her team have to go out late at night in collect the body, and remove them very subtly out the back and not use the main entrances. “They just want the dead person out of there with as little fanfare as possible. Actually, death *is* a taboo in care homes.”¹⁶ This attitude makes death shameful, something to be hidden. Nothing could be further from the reverence shown for the deceased person by laying out in the front parlour. This form of sequestration of death from residents of nursing homes treats death as something shameful and infantilises elderly dying persons as not capable of handling the concept of death, even as they approach the process imminently themselves.

The Death Positive community has seen a wave of activism in the past decade combatting these toxic views. Demystification of the death process begins with open communication and talking. And talking is what people want to do – they sign up in sell-out numbers to do so. The Death Positive movement offers a platform for these conversations, whether that be a Death Cafe table, a conference podium, or a blog. As of 2017, there have been over 5,000 Death Cafes hosted internationally, The Order of the Good Death has just hosted their seventh annual Death Salon. The wide variety of blogs, books, and conferences on this subject proves that, while there may not yet be a sociological study on the effectiveness of these movements, they are very popular, across countries, genders, and cultural backgrounds.

Opening up these conversations to approach end-of-life without denial, offering personalised, bespoke ritual services, including body preparation, shroud-wrapping, coffin decoration, home funerals, and many other embodied practices of mourning ritual, are bringing the death process back into the hands of loved ones, and empowering the bereaved with choices and agency that was mostly lost in the twentieth

¹⁶ Telephone interview with Louise Winter, October 23, 2017.

century. The twenty-first century approach to death ritual is bringing our contemporary society back to an embodied Victorian way of mourning and interaction with the dead body – or at the very least offering the opportunity to do so, by making intimacy with our dead loved ones culturally acceptable again.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have explored the development of twentieth-century death denial and how I have crafted an audio walking practice within a Victorian garden cemetery with the aim to offer visitors a space to meditate on these themes. ‘Thoughts on Mourning’ hopefully shares new perspectives and opens a door to a conversation into how we can re-engage with these practices today. Through an analysis of Anglo-American mourning practices from the Victorian era, through the twentieth century, to today, I have presented a picture of the values and rituals associated with the Victorian ‘Cult of the Dead’ as a juxtaposition against the contemporary ‘Phobic of the Dead’. These concepts, of bringing an intimacy with the processes of death back into the processes of mourning, are the groundwork on which I built the premise of ‘Thoughts on Mourning’: that Victorian mourning practices help with the grief process to a greater degree than contemporary death practices of commercialisation, outsourcing, and sequestering of death away from loved ones into an institutional setting. My audio walking practice aims to not only offer an invitation to see the Victorian garden cemetery perhaps in a new way, but to use the mode of walking, and intimate interaction with the space, to present views of death positivity.

The Death Positive movement has been somewhat misunderstood in certain circles, sparking even confrontation and social media trolling by some people who view the Death Positive community as a group who look forward to death and wish for people to die. As this is the diametric opposite of what the community stands for – embracing life – it seemed that an invitation into the ethos of this caring and empathetic

community might serve as an educational tool without being ‘preachy’ or aggressive towards those who oppose death positivity, or who are put off by the straightforward approach towards death, dying, and end-of-life care of death awareness community. The sometimes surprisingly caustic reception of Death Positive activists online, to me shows a level of emotional investment that is perhaps more rooted in fear than anger. By crafting a welcoming, disembodied audio experience - to literally ‘walk’ a visitor through the themes of death positivity - I have aimed to offer a gentle hand into our ideology, which will hopefully engage more people than a mutually defensive debate on social media.

Research has shown that shutting out thoughts of mortality completely, cutting ourselves off from our dead, and living in a sterilised death-free society, has meant that we have erased death from public view; and, therefore, through foreignisation, increased our fear of death, not lessened it. There appears to be a disconnect between what people assume, or hope, will happen to them when they die, versus the reality of this experience - for the dying person, as well as for the bereaved who are left behind.

Setting my audio walking practice in a Victorian garden cemetery offers a visual reminder of how death was approached in the Victorian era and adds a multisensory aspect to the audio when embodied as a walk. My research into death denial showed me a void in acceptance and a need for people to have a space to think on these issues. My audio walk aims to offer a private, independent, personal space for visitors to listen and think on death through a walking meditation. The independent experience I hope will soften some fear-based misunderstandings to manifest instead into fruitful community discussion. The arcadian environs of Abney Park present an opportunity for a walking practice that addresses these emotionally charged themes in a setting where death contemplation is softened by beauty - just as the Victorians intended.

Bibliographical note

Romany Reagan is a final-year PhD candidate at Royal Holloway, University of London. Through the medium of an audio walking practice, her thesis explores the multiple layers of disparate heritages that coexist within Abney Park cemetery in North London. Areas of research encompass: psychogeography, mourning practices, 'The Good Death', anachronistic space, heterotopias, nonhuman networks, gothic sensibility, liminal spaces, the uncanny, and the Victorian 'Cult of the Dead'. Her walk "Crossing Paths/Different Worlds in Abney Park Cemetery" was published in *Ways to Wander* (Triarchy Press, 2015). Her site-based play *Borderland* will be produced in Abney Park Cemetery in Autumn 2019. Contact Romany.Reagan.2012@live.rhul.ac.uk.

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