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From Dust to Compost: Eco-Disposition Methods and a Changing Religious Landscape in the United States

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requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy in Religious Studies

by

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by

Courtney L. Applewhite

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ABSTRACT

From Dust to Compost: Eco-Disposition Methods and a Changing Religious Landscape in the United States

by

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People die in many ways, but once dead, their bodies have been treated much the same way for the past 200 years in the United States. Most people have been buried in simple graves; if they died in the 1900s or later, they will likely have had a "conventional" burial in which they were removed from the home or hospital, embalmed, placed in a casket, and buried in a vaulted grave, encased in cement. Some may have been cremated, and the likelihood of cremation increased over time, rapidly growing in the 1980s and 1990s until, in 2016, the number of people cremated surpassed the number of burials. Since the late 1990s, some have turned away from conventional burial, embalming, and cremation to advocate for more ecologically friendly and meaningful alternatives. This dissertation examines the development of, and values associated with three eco-disposition methods that are becoming more popular in the U.S.: green burial, alkaline hydrolysis, and natural organic reduction. This dissertation relies on ethnographic interviews of providers and others involved in promoting or choosing eco-disposition, supplemented with survey data from secular individuals regarding disposition preference, to determine the cultural, religious, and legal implications behind their growing popularity and the values associated with these emergent practices. Drawing from these data, I found that eco-disposition options are being vetted in some states and municipalities where, if approved, they open up new spaces for people to

develop rituals focused on the dead body and express deeply held, but not necessarily religious or spiritual, values that center on the enduring importance of the deceased individual. The physical spaces cultivated for green burial, alkaline hydrolysis, and natural organic reduction reflect and reinforce the values of the regions and time in which they were created. Both these spaces and the practices themselves shape the ways in which people ritually engage with the deceased body. Approaching eco-disposition from the field of religious studies, these findings demonstrate that individuals bring a variety of beliefs, values, and practices to the deceased body itself, many of which are increasingly found outside of traditional religion. As there is greater diversity among individuals who identify as not religious, secular, or nothing in particular, I observe people are choosing death practices that focus on values that include the environmental, embodied experience, and the importance of the individual deceased person. Drawing from theorists in ritual studies, secular studies, and religious studies, I contend that the site of the deceased body itself is one in which beliefs, values, and practice are ultimately reckoned with for both individuals and providers.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction: Not Another COVID Dissertation 1
Background and Context 4
Research Problem and Question 13
Methods 14
Literature Review 17
Eco-Disposition 18
Valences of Belief 22
Findings and Chapter Outline 25
Chapter 1: Implementing Eco-Disposition: Where Legislature, Culture, and Region Meet 28
Development of Eco-Dispositions 30
Green Burial 30
Alkaline Hydrolysis 37
Natural Organic Reduction 44
Cultural and Social Forces 49
Regional Norms 51
Niche death practices 57
Return to traditional death ways 63
Careful avoidance of “greenness” marketing 66
Openness to all kinds of belief 69
Breaking New Ground 73
Chapter 2: If you build it, they will come 74
Engaging with Available Facilities 76
Green Burial 76
Alkaline Hydrolysis 80
Natural Organic Reduction 83
Recognizing the Specialness of the Body 87
Making the Process Special 91
Ritualization of the Process: Natural Organic Reduction’s Concept Shift 98
Place and Space 103
Chapter 3: The Valued Natural Body 105
Materiality and Secularism 107

Evidence for a Material Turn ... 111
Relational-Deictic Approach ... 113
Spirituality and Religion ... 115
Nature Spirituality ... 116
Judaism ... 118
Catholicism ... 122
Other faiths ... 125
Environmental ... 128
Climate Change and Land Protection ... 129
Personal connections ... 132
Greenwashing to Become a Tree ... 134
Embodiment ... 137
Conclusion ... 142
Chapter 4: The Ritualization of Eco-Disposition ... 145
The Ritualization of Lived Experience ... 146
Tradition in the Ritualization Process ... 151
Novel Ritualization in Eco-Disposition ... 154
Natural Organic Reduction Ritualizes the Transformation ... 158
Decisions on the Margin ... 161
LGBTQ+ Communities ... 162
Black Americans and Ritual Significance ... 165
Conclusion ... 169
Conclusion: The Compost Made Sacred ... 171
Six Feet Under ... 171
The Entangled Corpse ... 171
To Take to the Grave ... 175
What is Left Behind ... 176
Any Last Words? ... 180
References ... 182

Accept death in a cheerful spirit, as nothing but the dissolution of the elements from which each living thing is composed. If it doesn't hurt the individual elements to change continually into one another, why are people afraid of all of them changing and separating? It's a natural thing. And nothing natural is evil. — *Marcus Aurelius, Meditations 2.17*

When the first living thing existed, I was there, waiting. When the last living thing dies, my job is finished. I'll put the chairs on the tables, turn out the lights and lock the universe behind me when I leave. — Death, in *Sandman* #20: "Façade"

"The most serious problem facing humankind is climate change. All of these people breathing and burning our atmosphere has led to an extraordinarily dangerous situation. I hope the next generation will emerge and produce technology, regulations, and a worldview that enable as many of us as possible to live happy healthy lives." — Bill Nye

Introduction: Not Another COVID Dissertation

In 2020, as the COVID-19 pandemic surged forward, it became increasingly clear that the United States had a body problem. Center for Disease Control (CDC) recommendations and local guidelines placed restrictions on gathering sizes, and beyond their impact on the public, these restrictions also shaped how I could responsibly engage with the experiences of the deceased and the bereaved. The recommendations and guidelines limited the number of people attending dying loved ones in the hospital, resulted in small or unattended funeral services, and saw a surge in popularity of streamed last moments and memorial services.[1] The impacts on the bereaved were well-reported by the media, but fewer

[1] Kim Bojórquez, "Cremations Surpassed Burials among California Latinos during the Pandemic. Here's Why," *The Sacramento Bee*, May 13, 2021, https://www.sacbee.com/news/california/article251127769.html; Margot

popular sources covered the other logistical issue that arose from the substantial number of deaths attributed to COVID-19: what to do with the deceased bodies? In places where the virus hit most aggressively, from Texas to New York, officials brought in freezer trucks to store bodies until dispositions were available.[2] Los Angeles temporarily lifted its smog limit to accommodate increased emissions from cremations.[3] We developed technology, like Zoom celebrations of life, live-streamed burials, and virtual grief support groups to aid the bereaved, but what to do with the bodies?

In the U.S. today, there is a new conversation unfolding around death and dying. Long criticized throughout the 20th century as a death-denying culture, there has been a contemporary effort to talk more about death, dying, and end of life planning.[4] Yet here too only a small portion of the conversation centers on decisions about what to do with the body after death. Scholars and death workers refer to the post-death processing of a deceased body as the manner of disposition. While there were two primary options for the disposition of bodies in the U.S. throughout the twentieth century (conventional burial and cremation), a number of new options emerged in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries. These

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Boyer-Dry, "Online Funeral Services Take Off: The Question Is Whether the Pandemic Will Permanently Change Memorials," *Wall Street Journal, Eastern Edition*, May 11, 2020, sec. Small Business (A Special Report); Brittany Wong, "Zoom Funerals Are Now The Norm In The Wake Of The Coronavirus Pandemic | HuffPost Life," Huff Post, May 7, 2020, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/zoom-funerals-coronavirus-pandemic_l_5eb31887c5b63d125aba2d5b.

[2] "Covid-19 Deaths and Infections in Texas Force the Contracting of Refrigerated Trucks to Store Bodies," *MercoPress*, July 23, 2020, https://en.mercopress.com/2020/07/23/covid-19-deaths-and-infections-in-texas-force-the-contracting-of-refrigerated-trucks-to-store-bodies; Mirna Sanchez and Ray Alsharif, "Bodies of Covid-19 Victims Are Still Stored in Refrigerated Trucks in NYC," CNN, May 7, 2021, https://www.cnn.com/2021/05/07/us/new-york-coronavirus-victims-refrigerated-trucks/index.html.

[3] Julia Carrie Wong, "Los Angeles Lifts Air-Quality Limits for Cremations as Covid Doubles Death Rate," *The Guardian*, January 18, 2021, sec. US news, http://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/jan/18/los-angeles-covid-coronavirus-deaths-cremation-pandemic.

[4] Philippe Aries, *Western Attitudes toward Death: From the Middle Ages to the Present* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1974); Sigmund Freud, *Reflections on War and Death* (New York, NY: Moffat, Yard and Company, 1918); Geoffrey Gorer, "The Pornography of Death," *Encounter* 5, no. 4 (1955): 49–52; Martin Robert and Laura Tradii, "Do We Deny Death? I. A Genealogy of Death Denial," *Mortality* 24, no. 3 (2019): 274–260, https://doi.org/10.1080/13576275.2017.1415318.

options include green burial, alkaline hydrolysis, and natural organic reduction. I have chosen to focus on these three emergent methods as these are the most widely promoted and accepted of contemporary "alternative" dispositions. People may consider other methods, such as the mushroom suits and Capsula Mundi tree pod, but these are not widely practiced. These options, which are all promoted as environmentally friendly, constitute what I refer to as the "eco-disposition" movement.

This movement is in its nascent beginnings. Natural organic reduction has been developed only since 2017. In this same time, the number of states that have legalized alkaline hydrolysis has nearly doubled, from fourteen total states in 2017 to 24 in 2023. This alongside the increase in the availability of green burial grounds, from hybrid grounds embedded in conventional cemeteries to full conservation burial grounds. There are three key ways in which this movement is manifesting: in the introduction of new processes and spaces in which dispositions are taking place, changes in key values associated with the deceased, and ritual adaptations and innovations.

Disposition is a tricky place to begin. Deceased bodies have troubled humans for millennia and decisions to care for the dead–often in the form of disposition–are a place at which many archaeologists and other scholars point to as the first traces of society and civilization. The paradoxical nature of the deceased body causes swings in perception: the body is important and worthy of respect, but it is also polluting and to be concealed. The body is religiously sacred, but it is also the site of great sin. The body is material, but the body is not *simply* atoms. These challenges extend to the level of government, for bodies belong to the family, but they are still beholden to the state and state regulation. It is through this multi-layered lens that I sought to answer the questions of how and why people are

providing these options at this moment, and then why people are choosing (or not choosing) eco-disposition for themselves and their loved ones. The dissertation explores the availability, accessibility, motivation, and outcome of these eco-disposition options.

Through the subsequent chapters, I will argue that eco-disposition options are being vetted in some states and municipalities where, if approved, they open up new spaces for people to ritualize disposition itself and express deeply held, but not necessarily religious or spiritual, values that center on the enduring importance and specialness of the deceased body. The physical spaces cultivated for natural burial, alkaline hydrolysis, and natural organic reduction reflect and reinforce the values of the regions and time in which they were created. Both these spaces and the practices themselves shape the ways in which people ritually engage with the deceased body.

Background and Context

Although there are many regulations around the deceased body when we encounter them in the context of the funeral industry and the medical establishment, there are no federal guidelines for how bodies should be treated after death.[5] States regulate the handling or disposition of the dead, including the guidelines around proper treatment of the dead body, and, as a result, disposition practices are regulated state-by-state or municipality-by-municipality.[6] To introduce new methods, multiple parties—including legislators and their constituents, disposition innovators, funeral industry representatives, religious leaders and organizations, and the public—weigh in to determine if novel (i.e., not conventional burial or

[5] Tanya Marsh, *The Law of Human Remains* (Lawyers & Judges Pub Co., 2015).
[6] Alex Brown, "More People Want a Green Burial, but Cemetery Law Hasn't Caught Up," *Stateline*, November 20, 2019, https://pew.org/2qrRK36.

cremation) disposition options should be approved. Thus, body disposition becomes a site at which government regulation, business interests, theological concerns, and individual belief and preference meet and have long been entangled.[7]

Of the three forms of eco-dispositions, green burial was the standard and continues to be the most usual form of disposition in places around the world and within certain religious communities. In green burial, one buries the unembalmed body in a three-foot-deep grave, encased in a simple, biodegradable casket and/or shroud.[8] This contrasts with more recently developed "conventional" burials in which embalmed bodies are buried six feet deep, encased in concrete grave vaults and liners, and in elaborate non-biodegradable caskets.[9] In the U.S., the first so-called "natural burial ground" was established in 1998, but both Muslim and Jewish communities have continually practiced burials without embalming. The Green Burial Council defines natural burial in the context of eco-dispositions, as opposed to a traditional practice, as "caring for the dead with minimal environmental impact that aids in the conservation of natural resources, reduction of carbon emissions, protection of worker health, and the restoration and/or preservation of habitat. Green burial necessitates the use of non-toxic and biodegradable materials, such as caskets, shrouds, and urns."[10] I refer to "green" burial as opposed to "natural" burial, despite the latter being the preferred term

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[7] Aries, *Western Attitudes Toward Death*; Nancy Isenberg and Andrew Burstein, eds., *Mortal Remains: Death in Early America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003); Gary Laderman, *The Sacred Remains: American Attitudes Toward Death, 1799-1883* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996); Gary Laderman, *Rest in Peace: A Cultural History of Death and the Funeral Home in Twentieth-Century America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); Tony Walter, "Three Ways to Arrange a Funeral: Mortuary Variation in the Modern West," *Mortality* 10, no. 3 (August 2005): 173–92, https://doi.org/10.1080/13576270500178369.
[8] Christopher Coutts et al., "Natural Burial as a Land Conservation Tool in the US," *Landscape and Urban Planning* 178 (October 1, 2018): 130–43, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.landurbplan.2018.05.022.
[9] Elena Michele Slominski, "The Life and Death of Funeral Practices: Persistence and Change in the Death System and the Rise of Eco-Funerals in the United States" (Master's in Development, Environment and Cultural Change, Oslo, University of Oslo, 2020), https://www.duo.uio.no/handle/10852/79252.
[10] Green Burial Council, "Mission & Organization," Green Burial Council, accessed December 10, 2020, https://www.greenburialcouncil.org/our_mission.html.

among my interlocutors, because the Green Burial Council distinguishes between hybrid, natural, and conservation burial grounds. The organization certifies burial grounds, burial products, and funeral homes as adhering to their standards for each of these three types of burial grounds. Hybrid burial grounds must at minimum have a section that contains no concrete grave vaults or liners and only accepts bodies that are not embalmed. The next level of certification, natural burial grounds, include all these criteria as well as more strict guidelines about ecological wellbeing and maintenance, and a restriction on memorial placards. The most stringent guidelines are for conservation burial grounds in both the U.S. and Canada, of which there are only about a dozen. Conservation burial grounds must, in addition to the requirements for hybrid and natural burial grounds, set aside at least 20 acres of land, or five acres if contiguous with other protected land, and be in contract with a non-profit or other agency to protect the land easement in perpetuity.[11] As of early 2023, there are over 400 hybrid, natural, and conservation cemeteries in the U.S. and Canada,[12] a massive growth from 300 documented in 2020.[13]

[11] "Green Burial Council Cemetery Certification Standards" (Green Burial Council, 2019), https://www.greenburialcouncil.org/our_standards.html.
[12] See https://www.nhfuneral.org/green-burial-cemeteries-in-the-us-and-canada.html
[13] Slominski, "The Life and Death of Funeral Practices."

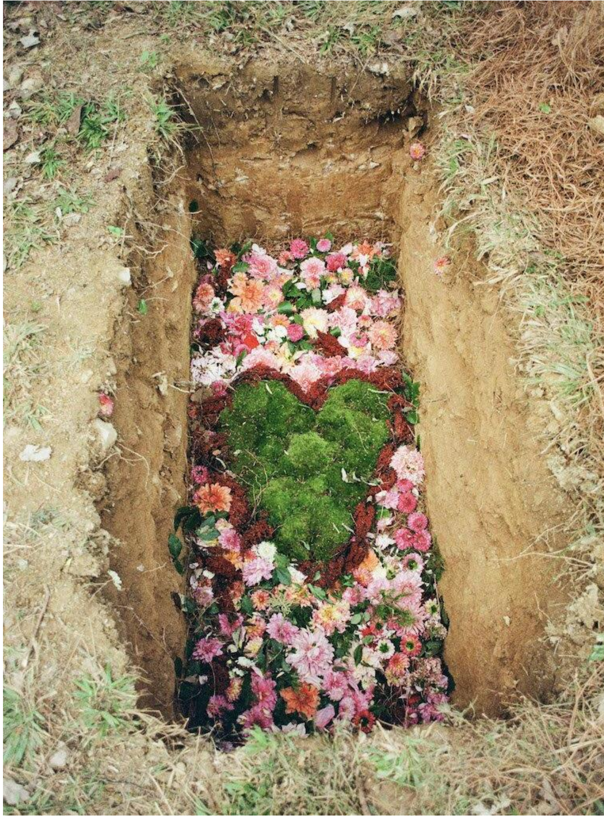

Figure 1: An example of a grave in a conservation burial ground, sourced from a public Instagram page @naturalburial, 2022.

The technology underlying alkaline hydrolysis has existed since the late 1800s. Its use to dispose of human cadavers and deceased pets has been available in the U.S. since the 1990s, but it was in 2003 that it became available for funerary practice.[14] Alkaline hydrolysis is a reductive chemical process in which the tissues are dissolved in a heated solution of water and a strong basic substance (such as potassium hydroxide or sodium hydroxide) that leaves brittle bone material behind. The body is placed in a stainless-steel cage or tray that is sealed in a stainless-steel vessel to which a 95% water and 5% alkali solution is added.[15]

[14] Emily Atkin, "The Fight for the Right to Be Cremated by Water," *The New Republic*, June 14, 2018, https://newrepublic.com/article/148997/fight-right-cremated-water-rise-alkaline-hydrolysis-america; Jonah Engel Bromwich, "An Alternative to Burial and Cremation Gains Popularity," *The New York Times*, October 19, 2017, sec. Business, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/19/business/flameless-cremation.html; Philip R. Olson, "Flush and Bone: Funeralizing Alkaline Hydrolysis in the United States," *Science, Technology, & Human Values* 39, no. 5 (September 1, 2014): 666–93, https://doi.org/10.1177/0162243914530475.

[15] Olson, "Flush and Bone."

System developers claim that the process destroys all RNA, DNA, and pathogens and breaks down embalming fluids, cytotoxic agents, and biological and chemical agents into harmless materials. The resulting material contains amino acids, peptides, sugars, and soap that can be disposed of through municipal sewer systems if certain water regulations are followed. The brittle bone material retained in the chamber is dried and crushed and may be returned to the decedent's family.[16]

Figure 2: An example of an alkaline hydrolysis internal chamber. The body is placed inside, and then this is placed into the larger chamber seen in the top left of the image. Publicly available image, 2021.

Natural organic reduction is the most recent technological development in eco-dispositions. While people have been using a form of natural organic reduction with livestock on farms for a long time, the science of human composting was developed on body farms in university settings, with innovator Katrina Spade piloting the first urban application of the process. Spade's architectural thesis on ecologically friendly urban death pathways led to the founding of her Seattle-based company, Recompose, in 2017. In 2018, Recompose led the

[16] Olson.

efforts to pass Senate Bill 5001, which made Washington State the first place in the world to legally approve natural organic reduction, defined as "the contained, accelerated conversion of human remains to soil."[17] The process places a high-nitrogen mulch product into a metal or wooden vessel, atop which the deceased is placed. The mulch interacts with the carbon in the body and the combined chemical process, heat, and gentle movement of the vessel aids in the process of decomposition. The result is a compost-like product that family members can use in gardens or the remains of which can be placed in conservation areas.

Figure 3: An example of a vessel used in natural organic reduction. Image used with permission of Return Home, 2021.

While the mechanisms of these eco-dispositions are straightforward enough to describe the path to legality is less clear. To receive approval in most states, alternative disposition advocates must receive legislative approval, but often face other kinds of dissenters. In many of these proceedings, Catholic leadership has vocally opposed eco-dispositions, specifically arguing that the processes of alkaline hydrolysis and natural organic reduction desecrate the body. A spokesperson for the California Catholic Conference argued that "we believe that the 'transformation' of the remains would create an emotional distance

[17] Recompose, "FAQ," Recompose, accessed December 10, 2020, https://recompose.life/.

rather than a reverence for them."[18] Also in California, a Jewish spokesperson argued that, while they would not recommend that Jewish people use alkaline hydrolysis, they agree that people should have choices. News articles and comments from my interlocutors depict leaders within theological communities as eyeing practices like alkaline hydrolysis and natural organic reduction with skepticism, but a growing number of Catholics have expressed interest in green burial.[19] Few studies have spoken at length with different representatives within the larger religious traditions to understand their perspective about eco-disposition methods, but some people associate a secular or nonreligious worldview with acceptance of these innovations.[20] Despite this tacit connection, few studies have directly examined this relationship between theological belief and eco-dispositions.[21]

Another point of tension exists between eco-disposition advocates and the existing funeral industry. Several studies have looked at the history and development of the funeral industry, which culminates in a twenty-billion-dollar business today.[22] Although not as

[18] Marissa Garcia, "Dust to Dust: Will California Lawmakers Legalize Human Composting — Transforming Bodies into Soil?," *CalMatters*, August 9, 2021, sec. Politics, http://calmatters.org/politics/2021/08/human-composting-california-law/.

[19] Valerie Zehl, "More Catholics Choose 'green Burials,' Hoping for a Lighter Footprint," *U.S. Catholic Magazine - Faith in Real Life* (blog), April 21, 2020, https://uscatholic.org/articles/202004/more-catholics-choose-green-burials-hoping-for-a-lighter-footprint/.

[20] Emma Green, "Burying Your Dead Without Religion," The Atlantic, August 19, 2014, https://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2014/08/burying-your-dead-without-religion/378711/; Tony Wolf, "The Changing Face of Death: A Countercultural Perspective," *Patreon* (blog), September 8, 2020, https://www.patreon.com/posts/changing-face-of-41254160.

[21] Sydney Ederer, "To Dust You Shall Return: A Theological Argument for the Human Compost Movement" (Undergraduate Honors Thesis, San Diego, CA, University of San Diego, 2018), https://digital.sandiego.edu/honors_theses/61; Helene Herman Krupnick, "The New-Ish Jewish Way of Death: Contemporary Trends in Death and Funeral Customs among Liberal American Jews" (Doctor of Hebrew Literature, New York, Kekst Graduate School of the Jewish Theological Seminary, 2020), https://search.proquest.com/openview/29c6050bbdcdf7a04cd33e9732a2908c/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=18750&diss=y.

[22] Luc K. Audebrand and Marcos Barros, "All Equal in Death? Fighting Inequality in the Contemporary Funeral Industry," *Organization Studies* 39, no. 9 (September 1, 2018): 1323–43, https://doi.org/10.1177/0170840617736934; Laderman, *Rest In Peace*; Mark Shelvock, Elizabeth Anne Kinsella, and Darcy Harris, "Beyond the Corporatization of Death Systems: Towards Green Death Practices," *Illness, Crisis & Loss*, April 7, 2021, 105413732110068, https://doi.org/10.1177/10541373211006882.

financially impactful on lobbying efforts as, for example, pharmaceutical companies, the funeral industry has personal stake in maintaining the status quo at a state government level. And as private equity firms have begun investing in greater shares of the funeral industry, groups with deep pockets may begin to have outsized influence. Private equity firms have been increasingly interested in purchasing funeral homes, especially as fewer mom and pop shops have children who are willing to take on the business.[23] Scholars have posited two separate models historically to account for the changes in the funeral home industry: (1) Jessica Mitford's critique that the funeral industry is driven by profits and operates unethically has driven changes to business models or (2) that the changes are consumer-driven.[24] In a meta-analysis of 128 world news articles about the changes in the funeral industry, Beard and Burger (2017) found that the "greening" of the industry was driven nearly equally by Business-Related Motivation (BRM) and Consumer-Related Motivation (CRM). Scholars engaging with the BRMs have discussed the ways in which the funeral industry preys on grieving families, expands to offer additional goods, or provides new and attractive services. CRM, which Beard and Burger (2017) describe as economic, environmental, individualistic, and consumerist behaviors, have also been widely discussed. Canning and Szmigin approach body disposition from a cross-cultural consumer perspective, examining key environmental issues of land use, land space, and pollution implications.[25] Their work situates these spatial controversies at the intersection of consumer, business, law,

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[23] Markian Hawryluk, "Death Is Anything but a Dying Business as Private Equity Cashes in on the $23 Billion Funeral Home Industry," *Fortune*, September 22, 2022, https://fortune.com/2022/09/22/death-care-funeral-home-industry-private-equity/.
[24] Virginia R. Beard and William C. Burger, "Change and Innovation in the Funeral Industry: A Typology of Motivations," *Omega: Journal of Death & Dying* 75, no. 1 (May 2017): 47–68, https://doi.org/10.1177/0030222815612605.
[25] Louise Canning and Isabelle Szmigin, "Death and Disposal: The Universal, Environmental Dilemma," *Journal of Marketing Management* 26, no. 11–12 (October 2010): 1129–42, https://doi.org/10.1080/0267257X.2010.509580.

and religious interests. While their contribution approaches this question from a consumer culture theory perspective, this project considers the importance of the legislative frame as a place in which competing values are considered.

The extent of the diversity of disposition choices depends on where you live, but in the U.S. today many people have access to multiple choices with respect to the disposition of their dead body or the dead body of a loved one. In addition to, or perhaps alongside, the realities of access and cultural norms, having choice means that people must make decisions about what to do with deceased bodies. There is no longer a clear option or a clear set of options. Disposition has expanded. Our decision to care for our dead is one of the behaviors that separates us from other animals and has been long touted as a marker for early civilization.[26] The choice of what to do with a dead body sheds light on the values and priorities of the decision-maker as well as the culture in which they are being made, and the increasing diversity of choices reflects a changing demographic and self-image in the larger landscape of American cultural and religious traditions. While the disposition of the dead body used to belong to the church and the immortal soul to the afterlife, people are now more concerned with how the body represents the individual, and how their legacy impacts the world they've left behind.[27]

[26] Claire White, "Mortuary Practices," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Cognitive Science of Religion*, ed. Justin L. Barrett (Oxford University Press, 2022), 0, https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190693350.013.8.
[27] Matthew Engelke, "The Coffin Question: Death and Materiality in Humanist Funerals," *Material Religion* 11, no. 1 (2015): 26–48, https://doi.org/10.2752/205393215X14259900061553; Kathleen Garces-Foley, "Funerals of the Unaffiliated," *OMEGA* 46, no. 4 (2003 2002): 287–302; Tony Walter, "Judgement, Myth and Hope in Life-Centred Funerals," *Theology* 119, no. 4 (July 1, 2016): 253–60, https://doi.org/10.1177/0040571X16640217.

Research Problem and Question

The recent explosion of theses and dissertations addressing these eco-disposition methods demonstrates that death studies as a broad field is on the verge of deeper analysis of these practices. So far, the studies have primarily examined green burial, with some providing brief overviews of the newly approved methods of alkaline hydrolysis and natural organic reduction.[28] A part of my inquiry was to lay the groundwork for scholars to examine these new practices more closely—gaining a greater understanding of the mechanisms and modes of operation. Of these studies of the eco-dispositions, few have considered changing and emergent death practices alongside changes in religious affiliation, and only one considers the explicitly nonreligious. Brenda Mathijssen's dissertation examines the ritual expressions of Dutch people with Catholic, Protestant, or religiously unaffiliated backgrounds with respect to green burial and their situational beliefs that emerge from these practices.[29] Her study centers burial and cremation in the Dutch context. I extend this research by turning focus to the U.S. and the novel practices of alkaline hydrolysis and natural organic reduction.

To this end, this research aims to answer the following questions:

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[28] Hannah Rumble, "'Giving Something Back': A Case Study of Woodland Burial and Human Experience at Barton Glebe." (PhD dissertation, Durham, UK, University of Durham, 2010), https://core.ac.uk/reader/86074; Amber Golding, "Green Is the New Black: Understanding Current and Prospective pro-Environmental Activities in Ritual and Practice on Death" (Master's Programme, Lund University, 2022), https://lup.lub.lu.se/luur/download?func=downloadFile&recordOId=9085249&fileOId=9085252; Hannah Catherine Palko, "Place Co-Creation in Death Care: Opportunities to Overcome Obstacles to Green Burial in the United States" (Doctor of Philosophy, Charlotte, N.C., The University of North Carolina at Charlotte, 2022), https://www.proquest.com/openview/73d1401d7d54461623f3e58bf9f17fbf/1.pdf?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=18750&diss=y; Kaja Emilie Walsh, "Reclaiming Death: How Eco-Friendly and Alternative Deathcare Movements Are Challenging the United States Funeral Industry" (Social Anthropology, Oslo, Norway, University of Oslo, 2021), https://www.duo.uio.no/bitstream/handle/10852/91240/19/Walsh--Kaja-Emilie.pdf; Slominski, "The Life and Death of Funeral Practices."

[29] Brenda Mathijssen, *Making Sense of Death: Ritual Practices and Situational Beliefs of the Recently Bereaved in the Netherlands* (Zurich, Switzerland: Lit Verlag GmbH & Co., 2017).

1) What are the cultural, religious, and/or legal motivations behind the popularity of eco-disposition?
2) What values are associated with eco-dispositions?
3) How are eco-disposition practices and changing demographics in the U.S. related?

Building from the existing literature, and inviting discussion about motivations, cultural context, and driving forces therein, this research will explore the dimensions of religion, spirituality, and nonreligion in eco-dispositions as they relate to the spaces, values, and rituals expressed and developed within these new practices. My theoretical framework draws from explorations of secularism and nonreligion. Scholars have explored the historical and philosophical roots of American secularism, as well as the ways in which secularism has been expressed and contested in various domains, such as education, media, and popular culture. They have also examined the cultural and social significance of secularism for individuals and communities, and the impact of secularization on religious identity and practice. This work will contribute to this latter point.

Methods

In speaking with the leaders of organizations, I have been able to outline eco-disposition structures and practices in a way that illuminates how people are perceiving, approaching, and using these eco-disposition sites as well as suggest areas for future study. The timing of this research, which was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, did not allow me to fully explore these eco-dispositions as sites of secular practice. [30] In the primary

[30] Research exploring these sites as secular practice would have centered speaking and interacting with people choosing these sites or exploring secular communities' choices around death ritual. As I look to expand this research, this will be part of my future direction.

part of my research phase, I conducted interviews and analyzed eco-disposition sites virtually, through presentations, website presence, and social media. Some of these events were hosted by the providers and organizations that offer these eco-disposition services, while others were hosted by individuals with the aim to educate and provide information about disposition options. In the last few months of research, I went to these sites for in-person tours with owners and operators but was unable to attend any disposition services. I visited in-person six green burial grounds total that included at least one at each "level" (hybrid, natural, and conservation) of Green Burial Council designation, two alkaline hydrolysis facilities, and four natural organic reduction facilities. During these visits, I spoke with operators and owners in both semi-structured interviews and informally throughout the visit. There were two in-person group tours in which I was able to speak to a few people who were interested in choosing eco-disposition options for themselves, but only in conversation and no interviews were conducted.

The data collection for this project focused primarily on the leaders and providers within the eco-disposition and wider death work movements in the U.S. Using a multi-sited approach, from February 2021 to June 2022, I was a participant observer at dozens of (primarily virtual) conferences, workshops, legislative proceedings, social events, and guided tours centered on eco-disposition methods or innovative death practices.[31] These sessions provided access to death professionals, advocates, and laypersons with interest in eco-disposition and other green practices. From these events, I connected with these individuals in eco-disposition via Zoom chat or publicly available email. All virtual sessions were open to the public by either direct link or registration. Although in most cases I functioned as

[31] George Marcus, "Ethnography in/of the World System: The Emergence of Multi-Sited Ethnography," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24 (1995): 95–117.

participant observer, in some cases direct participation was not permitted. In the last part of my research period, as restrictions around COVID lessened, I conducted in-person visits to eco-disposition sites and facilities in California, Colorado, Oregon, Washington state, and throughout the Southeast as both participant observer in groups tours, and interviewer when I met with providers individually.

During the research period, I conducted forty-three semi-structured interviews with operators and managers of burial grounds, funeral directors, owners and operators of alkaline hydrolysis and natural organic reduction facilities, legislators advocating for eco-disposition legalization, other death professionals, religious leaders, and a small selection of recently bereaved individuals. I conducted most of these interviews by Zoom due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite the limitation of face-to-face interaction and rapport-building, Zoom enabled me to speak with people throughout the U.S. that may have otherwise been inaccessible. Six of these interviews took place in person, during in-person site visits, in mid-2022 when we thought the end of the pandemic was in view. I reached out to many of my interlocutors directly–using publicly available website request boxes to find contacts in these new companies–and eventually I reached additional sources by chain-referral and virtual introduction. During these interviews I asked questions about the interviewees' own journey into death work, their organization's history, legal and cultural challenges and push-back, and the values and practices they were observing in the people choosing these eco-disposition options for themselves or their loved ones.

Throughout this work, I have anonymized individuals to the extent possible, in keeping with the norms of ethnographic inquiry. Because the community of eco-disposition providers is so small, following other scholars, I have generalized their roles to "providers"

instead of using official titles.[32] I use the word provider generously, including funeral directors who provide services and creators of eco-disposition technology. When I am quoting a person who was a bereaved participant, I indicate that difference. Furthermore, I generalize the disposition sites, naming only their manner of disposition and situating them generally in a region. There are so few sites for eco-disposition, and for natural organic reduction, that this generalization is necessary to maintain anonymity.

Literature Review

The development of these eco-disposition methods has been addressed to a degree in both scholarship and popular literature. However, with the landscape constantly shifting and new sites just now opening, this dissertation is a timely examination of the initial stages of these new practices, which I call eco-dispositions. This dissertation will engage with this wider literature in death studies that examines disposition practices, especially eco-disposition practices. My inquiry will center the U.S. context, with particular attention to changing U.S. demographics and parallels to an increasing number of people who do not identify with religious traditions, some of whom identify as secular, nonreligious, or nothing in particular. This engagement situates me in the scholarship on secular individuals, and particularly the lived experience of nonreligious people. In this way, this dissertation is an intervention in the budding area of research that examines the practices of nonreligious people in the U.S., while offering a wider scope of eco-disposition practices as neutral places for application of values and beliefs.

[32] Joseph Blankholm, "Making the American Secular: An Ethnographic Study of Organized Nonbelievers and Secular Activists in the United States" (Doctor of Philosophy, New York, Columbia University, 2015).

Eco-Disposition

Scholars from the United Kingdom and Europe have grappled with these eco-disposition methods, although natural organic reduction is only available in the United States. Hannah Rumble's dissertation offers an early case study of what is called woodland burial in the U.K. and her subsequent co-authored book with Douglas Davies sets the stage for arguments about the bridge between the traditional, secular, and spiritual that I explore in this study.[33] Rumble and Davies argue that a shift to new forms of disposition comes from a place of environmental, aesthetic, religious-spiritual, consumer, family, and romantic values. Since green burial became much more popular in the U.K. in the 1990s, we may have similar kinds of valuations in the U.S. as we learn more about these choices. However, the historical and cultural association with religion is distinct in the U.S. compared to the U.K. and other areas of Europe.

Tony Walter takes a slightly different approach and describes modern death as characterized by secularization, medicalization, privatization, and individualism. And certainly, these factors are critical to examine the systems around death and dying.[34] The emergence of eco-disposition options is in part driven by these processes that he sees as driving cultural change. In particular, I engage with the conversation about secularization insofar as these sites are frequented by secular individuals. There is also a clear movement toward individualism, which has also been documented in the U.S. context as part of an emerging spirituality.[35] Brenda Mathijssen's work centers on the Netherlands, and she is

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[33] Rumble, "'Giving Something Back'"; Douglas Davies and Hannah Rumble, *Natural Burial: Traditional-Secular Spiritualities and Funeral Innovation* (London: Continuum, 2012).
[34] Tony Walter, "Death in the New Age," *Religion* 23, no. 2 (1993): 127–45.
[35] Robert Wuthnow, *After the Baby Boomers: How Twenty- and Thirty-Somethings Are Shaping the Future of American Religion*, First Edition (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007); Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Restless Souls: The Making of American Spirituality* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005); Wade Clark Roof, *Spiritual*

attentive to the continued relationship that people have with the deceased individual and the role of disposition in that process.[36] Recently, Mathijssen argued that the deceased is a liminal entity that has a specific materiality, biography, and self-referentiality for both the bereaved and death care professionals.[37] I, too, think about the ambiguous role of the deceased body, but specifically in thinking about the process of decomposition and in the context of the process of natural organic reduction, which is currently unavailable outside of the U.S.

Green burial, alkaline hydrolysis, and natural organic reduction are each valued for their lower environmental and economic impact, but only a few studies in the U.S. context have examined other values that may influence people to choose these options.[38] However, many of these studies have happened recently, as these practices have gained popular notice and attention, and most are theses. Kaja Walsh's 2021 master's thesis discusses how these eco-dispositions and alternative care are challenging the existing funeral industry in the U.S., emphasizing the notion of care as a central frame.[39] Taking a systems perspective, Gregory Craig addresses both the environmental and logistical challenges of pro-environmental death practices.[40] His thesis is oriented toward creating a model for a new environmentally sustainable memorial park. Meanwhile, Elena Slominksi's thesis provides a rich overview of

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Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

[36] Brenda Mathijssen, "Transforming Bonds: Ritualising Post-Mortem Relationships in the Netherlands," *Mortality* 23, no. 3 (July 3, 2018): 215–30, https://doi.org/10.1080/13576275.2017.1364228; Brenda Mathijssen, "The Human Corpse as Aesthetic-Therapeutic," *Mortality* 0, no. 0 (January 21, 2021): 1–17, https://doi.org/10.1080/13576275.2021.1876009.

[37] Mathijssen, "The Human Corpse as Aesthetic-Therapeutic."

[38] Shannon Lee Dawdy, *American Afterlives: Reinventing Death in the Twenty-First Century* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2021).

[39] Walsh, "Reclaiming Death."

[40] Gregory A. Craig, "Memorial Earth Park: An Environmentally Sustainable Public Space: Synthesizing Burial Mounds, Family Trees and Human Body Composting in North Texas" (Thesis, 2020), https://rc.library.uta.edu/uta-ir/handle/10106/28906.

the state of eco-funerals in the U.S., with a primary focus on green burial.[41] Her analysis provides insight into the environmental, ritual, and psychological implications of green burial, but does not focus on the elements of spirituality, religion, and secularity nor does she delve deeply into alkaline hydrolysis or natural organic reduction. Olson's article highlights the multiple ways in which the dead body is conceptualized in alkaline hydrolysis and the role that plays in the debates over whether this technology should be approved. Each of these values-laden conceptions can be wielded by different parties in debates surrounding alkaline hydrolysis, but, eight years after this study, the breadth of the options has expanded, along with the implications with respect to values and beliefs.

Most recently, Shannon Dawdy argues that the eco-disposition movement signals a shift from a collective, American death ritual to an individualistic approach to death practices that focus on the personal and spiritual.[42] There is a great deal of methodological overlap between Dawdy's work and this dissertation. However, my data, collected several years later, draws from settings in which these eco-disposition options have grown and are more widespread. This led me to offer a different interpretation, more specifically oriented toward eco-dispositions and based on a slightly larger sample size. For Dawdy, the rise of eco-dispositions, alongside practices like embalming and cremation goods, are all driven by a desire for ritual significance and a connection to values.[43] People want the deaths of their loved ones to reflect their own values, which for increasing numbers are disconnected from institutionalized religion. Dawdy views this trend as predominantly spiritual. While my findings also indicate a shift to focus on the individual deceased person in these new rituals

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[41] Slominski, "The Life and Death of Funeral Practices."
[42] Dawdy, *American Afterlives*.
[43] Dawdy, 212.

around eco-dispositions, it is not necessarily a turn to the spiritual, but rather driven by values that are not only environmental but also secular, embodied, and related to identity.

Scholars of American religion have examined the cemetery as a site at which the definition of religion has been contested.[44] In this study, I extend this to include eco-dispositions more broadly. In her study of a nondenominational cemetery in Florida, Winnifred Sullivan uses the disposition site to demonstrate how difficult it is to define religion legally, when there are so many competing interests and definitions. Furthermore, the permitted disposition and memorialization practices are indebted to protestant reflection and culture.[45] Because disposition practices have been associated with religious representatives who are enlisted to conduct rituals, these same conflicts may impact the legislative approval process. MacMurray and Futrell demonstrate that "ecological death activists" are advocating for eco-disposition practices to better align with personal needs.[46] In this, they find that they are carving out cultural and political space for these more ecologically friendly death care options. Within this carving out, the marketing, participation, and leadership of the organizations offering eco-disposition often identify as not religious. That is not to say that spiritual or religious values are absent altogether, but that the content of the rituals may be religious, spiritual, or secular.[47]

[44] Winnifred Fallers Sullivan, *The Impossibility of Religious Freedom* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).
[45] Sullivan, 7.
[46] Nick MacMurray and Robert Futrell, "Ecological Death Reform and Death System Change," *OMEGA - Journal of Death and Dying*, August 19, 2019, https://doi.org/10.1177/0030222819869485.
[47] Engelke, "The Coffin Question."

Valences of Belief

Drawing from Peter Berger's notion of the sacred canopy, Walter points to a resacralization of death by the New Age movement in which they reclaimed death as a personal journey of an individual soul, creating a small canopy for individuals.[48] However, in the twenty-first century, sociology has shifted attention from the New Age and instead focused on the individual characteristics of the "unaffiliated," which, by extension, includes the secular. Kathleen Garces-Foley found that unaffiliated funerals are spaces in which the bereaved can explore a shared meaning in an increasingly secular culture.[49] These rituals are characterized by creativity rather than standardization and lay participation prioritized over clergy-led services. Matthew Engelke demonstrates that British Humanists have reclaimed the ritual of the funeral as a site of remembrance, and the coffin becomes a place for them to frame immanence.[50] Rather than the body being present for religious purposes, it has been refashioned to underscore the body's materiality. In a comparable way, Copeman and Quack examine body donation in India as a form of moral materialism and a "good atheist death."[51] The way in which these groups are reshaping death practices are reflecting and reflective of changing religious and afterlife beliefs. However, there are a limited number of studies focusing on these key moments of death among the secular.

Contemporary secular people may self-identify as atheists, agnostics, humanists, freethinkers, or nonbelievers, and they are a distinct subset of the larger category of "Nones,"

[48] Walter, "Death in the New Age."
[49] Garces-Foley, "Funerals of the Unaffiliated."
[50] Engelke, "The Coffin Question."
[51] Jacob Copeman and Johannes Quack, "Godless People and Dead Bodies: Materiality and the Morality of Atheist Materialism," *Social Analysis* 59, no. 2 (2015): 40–61.

the fast-growing religiously unaffiliated population.[52] Much of the existing scholarship on secular and nonreligious people focuses on the "negative" aspects of their belief: they do not believe in God, or they do not believe in an afterlife. Johannes Quack argues that there should be a fundamental shift in the scholarly approach to nonreligion that instead focuses on the study of "positive" diversity in nonreligious ways of life, which has been the aim of emerging scholarship.[53] Recent studies have pivoted to a focus on characterizing nonreligious or secular people in a nuanced way and determining what they do believe rather than what they do not believe. Frost examines the Sunday Assembly and argues that its members are attempting to create a positive identity, this means constantly negotiating what it is they should affirm as part of their fundamental beliefs.[54] Sunday Assembly purposely avoids the political valence of nonreligion and instead considers how they can grow in a space of "communal secularity."[55] Frost's recent article demonstrates that Sunday Assembly members are now actively constructing ritual practice in ways that suit them, an interesting parallel to my findings in eco-disposition spaces.[56] My findings add to the work of Frost and other

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[52] Joe Blankholm, "The Political Advantages of a Polysemous Secular," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 53, no. 4 (2014): 775–90; Joseph Blankholm, "Secularism and Secular People," *Public Culture*, 2018; Alfredo Garcia and Joseph Blankholm, "The Social Context of Organized Nonbelief: County-Level Predictors of Nonbeliever Organizations in the United States," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 55, no. 1 (2016): 70–90; Michael Hout and Claude S. Fischer, "Why More Americans Have No Religious Preference: Politics and Generations," *American Sociological Review* 67, no. 2 (2002): 165–90; Michael Hout and Claude S. Fischer, "Explaining Why More Americans Have No Religious Preference: Political Backlash and Generational Succession, 1987-2012," *Sociological Science* 1, no. 24 (2014): 423–47; Lois Lee, "Locating Nonreligion, in Mind, Body and Space: New Research Methods for a New Field," in *Annual Review of the Sociology of Religion, Vol. 3: New Methods in the Sociology of Religion*, ed. Luigi Berzano and Ole P. Riis (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 135–58.

[53] Johannes Quack, "Outline of a Relational Approach to 'Nonreligion,'" *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 26, no. 4–5 (2014): 439–69.

[54] Jacqui Frost, "Rejecting Rejection Identities: Negotiating Positive Non-Religiosity at the Sunday Assembly," in *Organized Secularism in the United States*, ed. Ryan T. Cragun, Christel J Manning, and Lori L. Fazzino (Boston: De Gruyter, 2017), 171–90.

[55] Jesse M. Smith, "Communal Secularity: Congregational Work at the Sunday Assembly," in *Communal Secularity: Congregational Work at the Sunday Assembly* (De Gruyter, 2017), 151–70, https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110458657-009.

[56] Jacqui Frost, "Ritualizing Nonreligion: Cultivating Rational Rituals in Secular Spaces," *Social Forces* 101, no. 4 (April 1, 2023): 2013–33, https://doi.org/10.1093/sf/soac042.

scholarship that indicates there is a careful navigation around ritual by secular people, who use different methods to avoid, completely change, or adjust rituals to align with their secularity.[57]

While my inquiry centers on the secular, this is not to say that religion and spirituality do not persist in these eco-disposition methods. The category of spirituality emerges as an interesting alternative to this perceived binary between the religious and the secular. Some arguments point to the emergence of spirituality from liberal branches of Protestantism,[58] or as alternative to institutionalized religion that were centered in conflict.[59] Spirituality today has roots in metaphysical belief and practice and is a way in which individuals express their eclectic beliefs and practices, both inside and outside organized religion.[60] For my interlocutors, there is a wide diversity of "spiritualities" that they talk about when they describe their beliefs around death, some of which place them firmly into a metaphysical lineage, while others draw from more materialist frameworks. Now, spirituality is present in both "religious" and "secular" settings.[61] Candi Cann points out that "deathcare goods and services, then, both reflect and embody individual and communal understandings and assumptions of the divine, while simultaneously providing practical disposal of the body."[62]

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[57] Joseph Blankholm, *The Secular Paradox: On the Religiosity of the Not Religious* (New York: New York University Press, 2022).
[58] Leigh E. Schmidt and Sally M. Promey, eds., *American Religious Liberalism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012); Schmidt, *Restless Souls*.
[59] Peter Van der Veer, *The Modern Spirit of Asia: The Spiritual and the Secular in China and India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014); Robert Wuthnow, *The Reconstructing of American Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988).
[60] Catherine Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit: A Cultural History of American Metaphysical Religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007); Courtney Bender, *The New Metaphysicals: Spirituality and the American Religious Imagination* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010); Wade Clark Roof, *A Generation of Seekers: The Spiritual Journeys of the Baby Boom Generation* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993).
[61] Courtney Bender and Ann Taves, eds., *What Matters? Ethnographies of Value in a (Not so) Secular Age* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).
[62] Candi K. Cann, ed., *The Routledge Handbook of Death and the Afterlife*, Routledge Handbooks in Religion (London; New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2018).

For both the funeral industry and the eco-disposition movement, these disposition methods necessarily represent a mix of the secular and religious.

Findings and Chapter Outline

From the many hours of interviewing, observing, participating, and reading about eco-disposition providers and their services, this dissertation takes a step into describing an emergent secular space in the United States, but also the nuances of the development of these spaces. I found that eco-disposition options are being vetted in some states and municipalities, where, if and when approved, they open new spaces for people to ritualize disposition and express deeply held, but not necessarily religious, values that center on the enduring specialness of the deceased body. The physical spaces themselves reinforce the values and perspectives of their owners and operators and are a reflection of the regions in which they are found. The spaces, as well as the disposition methods, shape the specific ways in which people ritually engage with the deceased body.

The importance of nature, of tradition, and of respect for the body are key factors in determining if each eco-disposition method is approved legally and accepted culturally in various parts of the country. In Chapter 1, I describe how green burial, alkaline hydrolysis, and natural organic reduction are preferred in different regions of the country and marketed in light of quite different values. My research suggests that green burial grounds are found in places that have available land or existing cemeteries and where people hold values that make them open to such developments, making them most common in the Southeast and Midwest. This contrasts with alkaline hydrolysis and natural organic reduction, which must be legally approved. Legally, both alkaline hydrolysis and the initial reception of natural

organic reduction has been overrepresented in the West. The acceptance of alkaline hydrolysis and natural organic reduction, legally and popularly, reflects the resolution of competing interests including business or market-share competition, differences in vision or marketing, and regional differences. This chapter delves into the driving forces behind the popularization of these practices in their distinct regions, as well as the implementation and legal hurdles they have faced and surmounted.

In Chapter 2, I consider the question of space. In visiting these spaces and attending to the way they have been discussed in presentations and on social media, I found that green burial grounds and facilities for alkaline hydrolysis and natural organic reduction have been mindfully cultivated by the owners or operators to distinguish them from funeral homes by showcasing their "natural-ness" or connection to nature and their efforts to encourage active participation in the disposition. The way in which these spaces are constructed reflects how the owners want them to be viewed by the surrounding community, which in some places, means avoiding associations with "left-wing" environmentalism. However, the initial design of natural organic reduction facilities did not anticipate family needs, and the facilities subsequently adjusted their architecture, creating new norms for designs in response to consumer demands.

Chapter 3 explores the values associated with eco-disposition practices. I found that individuals who choose natural disposition options do so not only out of concern for the environment, but more fundamentally because they view their bodies as part of the natural environment. For those who view themselves as religious or spiritual this may manifest as an embodied notion of spirituality that integrates the values of materiality and spirituality, regardless of whether they view themselves as religious or secular. These findings extend

those observed by Dawdy and Mathijssen, who have noted the importance of the environment in these kinds of practices.[63] Furthermore, by including the experience associated with natural organic reduction, I provide novel data about this type of disposition.

The last chapter turns to the question of ritual practice. The focus is not on funerals or celebrations of life, rituals documented by many others, but rather how, in the space of eco-disposition facilities, people are ritualizing the process of disposition itself. In this context, they are free to do so unencumbered by existing religious or spiritual norms, thereby emphasizing the individual and their values beyond those religious. In the tradition-conscious South people are creating "new" traditional practices in natural burial grounds. They blend notions of tradition into more contemporary individualized practices that may or may not include religious beliefs. In alkaline hydrolysis facilities, managers are adapting ways in which they might more closely mimic something like a witnessed cremation. The output, similar to cremated remains and otherwise a "tea" that families can use as a fertilizer, provides families with an additional ritual step of scattering or contributing to their gardens. In natural organic reduction facilities, with a novel form of disposition, people are free to follow value-based inclinations and embodied experiences to create a laying-in ritual and an extended visitation that ritualizes decomposition itself. It is through these examples that I analyze the ritualization of eco-dispositions as expressions of values of people who are free to innovate outside of traditional belief and identity structures.

[63] Dawdy, *American Afterlives*; Mathijssen, "The Human Corpse as Aesthetic-Therapeutic."

Chapter 1: Implementing Eco-Disposition: Where Legislature, Culture, and Region Meet

Across regions, people cited the need for choice. In the process of legalization, the proponents of the new methods of body disposition provide a variety of reasons for adopting these practices, from the progressive and environmental to the traditional and economic, but the primary argument for adopting them is that people deserve different options in death care. The generality of this claim makes for easier passage into law, and then allows the different organizations to market themselves in ways that are suited to the people within their area of reach as well as the local municipality that is charged with approving implementation. The general emphasis on choice in some of these states overrides the underlying differences while also allowing people of different political, as well as religious or secular views to come together. Scholars have paid little attention to the intersection of values and beliefs associated with eco-dispositions as they appear in different regions. Tanya Marsh, cemetery law expert, has written about the legalization process from a more logistical perspective.[64] Her work points to how death practices are complicated to understand legally because death regulations have been part of U.S. legal code since its early adoption. When governments adopted and approved these laws, with varying levels of influence of English Common Law, each state has its own legal structure around the deceased. In this chapter, I will argue that the different practices of green burial, alkaline hydrolysis, and natural organic reduction are preferred in

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[64] Tanya D. Marsh and Daniel Gibson, *Cemetery Law: The Common Law of Burying Grounds in the United States* (God's Acre Publishing, 2015); Tanya D. Marsh, "Greening the American Way of Death," *HuffPost*, December 6, 2017, sec. Environment, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/greening-the-american-way-of-death-_b_7092806.

different regions of the U.S. for both material reasons, such as land availability and soil composition, historical context of burial sites, and current views about notions of tradition, environmentalism, and locality. This all despite each having a similar impact on the environment relative to cremation or conventional burial.

During the process of legalization and once legal, these eco-dispositions are subsequently discussed and promoted in light of distinct values, which include tradition, religious or nonreligious beliefs, and connection to nature. These values sometimes also include their environmental impact. Green burials are legal in every state, and they tend to pop up in places with more available land and where they are championed by individuals who want to protect the land. These burial grounds are most abundant in the Southeast where land-protection is driven by aversion to development and where residents have created pre-industrial family cemeteries that also happen to be "green" burial spaces. The process of establishing a green burial ground contrasts with alkaline hydrolysis and natural organic reduction, which must be legally approved at the state level. There have been many more states in the West to legalize both alkaline hydrolysis and the natural organic reduction compared to other areas of the country. The acceptance of these practices, legally and popularly, hinges on their presentation as an artisanal approach to death practices, a return to different forms of "traditional" death ways, and a demonstrated openness with respect to belief, each of which are colored by their regional cultural influences.

To understand the way in which these practices are presented and approved in legal settings, I will outline the development of green burial, alkaline hydrolysis, and natural organic reduction and their initial receptions. But of course, politics do not exist in a vacuum, and so I will address the factors that have helped to drive acceptance and relative popularity

of these methods as they are embedded in particular regions. Although the U.S. is not a monolith politically or regionally, the themes addressed in legislation and marketing are broadly similar. And yet, the way in which both organizations and individuals discuss these practices roughly reflects the nuanced differences in the norms and traditions of four broad regions: the South, Northeast, Midwest, and West.

Development of Eco-Dispositions

Green Burial

In 1998, Lindsay and Chris, partners in marriage and in their professions, opened the first conservation burial ground in the U.S. The aim for both founders was to connect people to the land, and when I spoke with Lindsay on the phone, her enthusiasm was evident in each reply. Our simple introductory phone call extended into an hour's conversation, complete with me scribbling down notes as I had no recording in place, and with Lindsay commenting on aspects of green burial that her extensive experience has given her. I never spoke with Chris directly, but his vision and words seeped into many of my conversations with green burial providers. He has frequently discussed in news interviews and on panels his desire to save large areas of land using the concept of woodland or conservation burial that had been piloted in the United Kingdom. Their model has since been adopted at over a dozen conservation burial grounds throughout the U.S. today. There are, in addition, a wide range of hybrid cemeteries, natural burial grounds, and green burial practices that make up the spectrum of green burials, from conservation to tints of green.

On the opposite side of the country, Sarah Jane operates a natural burial ground located in the West. She, like many others who have been involved in green burial, have

benefitted from Lindsay and Chris's example and advice. Sarah Jane is much younger than the progenitors of the movement, but her enthusiasm about the practice was just as palpable as Lindsay's. As we walked through the winding trails, Sarah Jane, clearing stray branches from the path by habit, pointed out that because they are "land rich," her phrase, they should use that land for burial, as opposed to turning to practices like cremation, or natural organic reduction. And indeed, the grounds that I visited on both sides of the country were well off the beaten track.

Figure 1: An example of the area surrounding a conservation burial ground. Centered is a rusted metal sculpture that represents the burial ground, per the provider. Personal photo, 2022

In the early 1600s in the northeastern U.S., burial practices were spartan. The bereaved buried a body within two to four days and there were no burial markers. By the late 1600s, colonial practices began to diverge from their austere, Puritan English origins, adding such features as headstones with increasingly elaborate carvings.[65] Throughout the 1700s, new laws were put in place to regulate the deceased body. In 1786, Boston officials ordered that coffins be placed three feet under the ground due to complaints about health hazards

[65] Erik R. Seeman, *Speaking with the Dead in Early America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019); David E. Stannard, *The Puritan Way of Death: A Study in Religion, Culture, and Social Change* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977).

associated with the burial of corpses.[66] From this period in the late 1700s into the mid-1800s, there was a proliferation of denominations in the U.S. that has been described as an "antebellum spiritual hothouse."[67] These emergent religious groups developed their own relationship to the afterlife and ideas about relating to the dead. These views could affect burial practices. In the mid-1800s, for example, Shaker funerals featured the corpse dressed in shirt and winding sheet, handkerchief, and added cap and collar for women.[68] Most of these elements remain consistent with what we understand to be a green burial today, and, like the antebellum Protestants, demonstrate care for the deceased body. However, the similarities diverge once the body is lowered, as it is less common today to see people communicating with the deceased at the burial site. What we today think of as "green burial" was the norm prior to the 1860s, although burial then more often took place in a church or frontier cemetery rather than in the flat, grassy, and manicured lawn of a memorial park as is more common today.[69]

To continue the transition from then to now, in the 1830s, the beginnings of the rural cemetery movement led to the emergence of pristine memorial parks outside of towns and cities. The procession from town to the rural cemetery allowed for a show of wealth and initiated a practice that eventually trickled down to the middle classes.[70] Embalming became popular in the U.S. following the Civil War, and people began adding concrete vaults and liners to burial plots in the 1920s. This was an important transition linked to the professionalization of the funeral industry. The technical skills required for embalming

[66] Isenberg and Burstein, *Mortal Remains*.
[67] Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990).
[68] Seeman, *Speaking with the Dead in Early America*.
[69] Laderman, *The Sacred Remains*.
[70] Laderman, *Rest In Peace*; Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Routledge, 2010).

created a need for the role of combined undertaker-embalmer-cemeterian. This individual took over into the traditional roles of family members, largely women, who previously performed many of these end-of-life duties.[71] This marked a transition from folk knowledge to professionalization, which required formal training and limited women's access. As a result, the embalmed body and elaborate grave preparation became key aspects of the budding commercialization of death and what would become the modern funeral industry.[72] Both embalming and vaults were promoted based on sanitation and, to some degree, the preservation of the body for the benefit of the bereaved. To the former point, there were concerns about groundwater contamination and other health hazards. The sanitarians of the late 1800s considered both embalming and underground entombment, along with cremation, to be much more sterile ways to dispose of the body. Proponents assured the bereaved that the additional protection of the body was necessary, even as it added to the overall cost of the burial.

Increasing funeral costs catalyzed influential critiques, including Jessica Mitford's claim that funeral homes sought to exploit grief for profit. Mitford's suggested alternative was for people to turn to direct cremation, which up until that point had occupied a small niche of the disposition choices and conversation in the U.S.[73] In her mind, cremation was not only environmentally practical–it did not take up unnecessary land space–but was also economically much more sensible. In the 1960s, the average cost of cremation was markedly

[71] Sarah Donley and Chardie Baird, "The Overtaking of Undertaking?: Gender Beliefs in a Feminizing Occupation," *Sex Roles* 77, no. 1–2 (July 2017): 97–112, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-016-0699-6; Georganne Rundblad, "Exhuming Women's Premarket Duties in the Care of the Dead," *Gender and Society* 9, no. 2 (1995): 173–92; Laderman, *The Sacred Remains*.
[72] Laderman, *The Sacred Remains*; Rundblad, "Exhuming Women's Premarket Duties in the Care of the Dead."
[73] Laderman, *Rest In Peace*; Stephen Prothero, *Purified by Fire: A History of Cremation in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

less than the average cost of $1,500 for a conventional funeral (which is equivalent to about $14,000 today).

Even as the popularity of cremations grew, especially during the 1990s, there were some groups who resisted. In general, the South has remained a place of burial. In 2021, the states with the highest percentages of people choosing burial were Kentucky, Tennessee, Mississippi, Alabama, and Louisiana.[74] For Lindsay and Chris, with their conservation land set right amid these burial-preferred locations, this allowed an easy transition to green burial. Throughout the country, most Jewish and Muslim communities continued to practice their own form of burial, eschewing embalming, and often choosing a simple shroud or coffin. However, even minority traditions were not immune to the growing popularity of cremation. Laura Levitt explains that Jews had to conform to Protestant norms to be accepted as citizens of liberal nation-states like the U.S. In this way, they were forced to reshape themselves and their Jewishness into a version of this Protestant frame.[75] This extended into burial practice. Thus, by the early 1900s, funeral directors had begun to play a significant role in shaping death rituals in Jewish communities and the roles of synagogues, lodges, and burial societies were, in comparison, less popular.[76] As the century progressed, more Jewish people were choosing cremation. This shift is attributed to both the perceived environmental impact as well as cost.[77]

In the last couple of decades, however, as people started to realize that cremation was not as environmentally beneficial as originally thought,[78] they began to consider alternatives.

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[74] Cremation Association of North America, "2020 Annual Statistics Report," Inudstry Statistical Information, 2020, https://www.cremationassociation.org/page/IndustryStatistics.
[75] Janet R. Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini, eds., *Secularisms* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).
[76] Jonathan D. Sarna, *American Judaism: A History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004).
[77] Krupnick, "The New-Ish Jewish Way of Death."
[78] The estimates for the impact of cremation on the environment vary. Manufacturers of cremation technology claim that the filtration systems reduce metal and particulate matter along with nitrous oxide, but they do not

The conversation began in educated, liberal circles, and this was the period in which Lindsay and Chris opened their burial ground. Their first wave of participants largely fit this description. Several of my interlocutors, including leadership of the Green Burial Council, explained to me that the first wave of people to popularize green burial in the United States were educated and liberal, concerned about the environmental harm of conventional burial and cremation. These early adopters were almost all driven by the same impulse that led to the popularization of bringing your own grocery bag to the supermarket and home composting–personal responsibility in fighting climate change. More conservation, natural, and hybrid cemeteries were opened and culminated as of 2021 in more than 60% of people expressing interest in "greening" their disposition.[79] As of 2021, the Green Burial Council has certified a total of 340 hybrid, natural, or conservation cemeteries in the U.S. and Canada.

In 2005, Juliette and Joe Sehee, another couple in work and marriage, founded the Green Burial Council as a standard-bearer for the industry itself. The Sehees funded the project with proceeds from the sale of their eco-retreat in Joshua Tree, California, which they described as being modeled on the pilgrimage sites of early Christian monastics. To me, it seems as though they transmuted this notion of pilgrimage into a project that would create nature-based sites for visitation and tranquility, but without the Christian frame. Centering nature rather than religion drew others into their project. Among them was Frank, a

neutralize CO2. Matthews Environmental Solutions estimates that the average cremation produces about 534.6 pounds of carbon dioxide, therefore accounting for about 360,000 metric tons of CO2 emissions each year in the U.S. (see Little, 2019). To put this in perspective, a flight from LAX to JFK emits ~1,537 pounds of carbon dioxide. Frequent flyers who take more than 75 long-haul flights throughout life will exceed their cremation impact.

[79] National Funeral Directors Association, "2021 NFDA Cremation & Burial Report" (National Funeral Directors Association, July 2021), https://dailymontanan.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/2021-nfda-cremation-and-burial-report.pdf.

gregarious member of the Green Burial Council who, like many, stumbled into green burial practices in the 2000s and has since become a leading voice in the burgeoning industry. He spoke to me on Zoom from his parked truck, flipping his camera around to show me that he was parked at one of his burial grounds, checking in on things. Frank has a long cemeterian background and has added roles on several green burial adjacent boards. He explained that the Green Burial Council's aim is to "certify organizations–cemeteries and funeral providers–to a certain level of standards. Kind of like the gold standard of what the families should be provided and how to safeguard the environment." The aim of the Green Burial Council is to certify organizations, while encouraging their development by providing clear guidelines. But Frank has also identified the most efficient way to increase the number of green burials:

> "Now, with that being said, the true low hanging fruit across this entire country is basically the existing cemeteries that we have now. Prior to around 1971, most states didn't have what are called cemetery boards that make up rules and regulations concerning cemeteries, so we have thousands upon thousands of historic cemeteries that may lay in ruin because the congregations that owned them disappeared... These are actually legal burial grounds that can operate and can serve their community now and they don't have to get any kind of permission because they are grandfathered non-conforming uses that existed prior to zoning regulation or state regulation."

Frank's commentary about the religious congregations' cemeteries is critical from the perspective of religious decline. First, he points to the denominational decline that has been documented in the U.S. across regions. Scholars have long argued about the nature of secularization at the level of the individual in the U.S. They have characterized it as a shift from traditional religion to spirituality or metaphysical traditions,[80] as an increase in people

[80] Duane R. Bidwell, *When One Religion Isn't Enough* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2018); Elizabeth Drescher, *Choosing Our Religion: The Spiritual Lives of America's Nones* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); Kieran Flanagan and Peter C. Jupp, eds., *A Sociology of Spirituality* (Ashgate, 2007); Paul Heelas et al., *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion Is Giving Way to Spirituality* (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell Publishing, 2005).

who are not religious,[81] or as not changing in quantity but in composition. This means shifts in religious behavior or relationship to religious authority, but not changes in belief.[82] However, more recent studies show that both survey and statistical data demonstrate a clear denominational decline, particularly among mainline Protestants.[83] Many churches have closed in the last years without being replaced and are therefore fewer in number. Of course, alongside the building itself is often a forgotten cemetery, meant to be supported in perpetuity by the religious congregation. Little attention has been given to these forgotten disposition sites, until recently.

Alkaline Hydrolysis

Alkaline hydrolysis is a newer method of human body disposition relative to burial, but the technology has existed since the late 19th century for disposition of dead pets and unclaimed cadavers. Unlike green burial advocates, who have only had to legally overcome local ordinances and municipal approval, proponents of alkaline hydrolysis have had to seek legalization by state legislation. Minnesota initially adopted the legislation to approve the human use of alkaline hydrolysis for the Mayo Clinic in 2003. The Mayo Clinic operated the

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[81] Ronald F. Inglehart, *Religion's Sudden Decline: What's Causing It, and What Comes Next?*, 1st edition (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2021); Jean M. Twenge et al., "Declines in American Adults' Religious Participation and Beliefs, 1972-2014," *SAGE Open* 6, no. 1 (January 25, 2016): 215824401663813, https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244016638133.

[82] Robert N. Bellah, *Beyond Belief: Essays on Religion in a Post-Traditionalist World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991); Linell E Cady and Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, *Comparative Secularisms in a Global Age* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); Daniel Suh and Raymond Russell, "Non-Affiliation, Non-Denominationalism, Religious Switching, and Denominational Switching: Longitudinal Analysis of the Effects on Religiosity," *Review of Religious Research* 57, no. 1 (March 1, 2015): 25–41, https://doi.org/10.1007/s13644-014-0197-7.

[83] Mark Chaves, *American Religion: Contemporary Trends - Second Edition*, 2nd edition (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017); Mark Chaves and Shawna L. Anderson, "Changing American Congregations: Findings from the Third Wave of the National Congregations Study," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 2014; Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America, 1776-2005: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy*, 2nd ed (New Brunswick, N.J: Rutgers University Press, 2005); Stephanie Kramer, Conrad Hackett, and Kelsey Beveridge, "Modeling the Future of Religion in America" (Pew Research Center, September 2022).

first single body human alkaline hydrolysis system, the adoption of which was likely influenced by the scientific claims that the process could safely eliminate prion diseases (brain diseases that can be contagious and are always fatal) and other pathogens that may be present in donated cadavers. Because legislators and proponents framed alkaline hydrolysis as a means of safely disposing of donated remains, there was less discussion about its ethical merits. The donated remains are depersonalized, and often family members do not request remains back after donation, although this is possible in some cases. In this way, early alkaline hydrolysis was permitted because it was disconnected from the disposition process as personal or ritual and instead was largely perfunctory. Alkaline hydrolysis has gained momentum since 2010 and is currently approved in 24 states. However, at least nine of those twenty-four do not have any active practitioners, suggesting that there is a significant gap between tacit approval and practical embrace of alkaline hydrolysis.

Fig. 2: An example of an alkaline hydrolysis chamber, personal photo 2022

Those who oppose alkaline hydrolysis focus on the value of the body and claim it is compromised by the process; they have a visceral reaction, as they say, toward “human remains to be flushed down a drain.”[84] This gut response has sparked challenges brought against alkaline hydrolysis during legislative hearings. One widely known instance of opposition to the bill was in Indiana, where much of the alkaline hydrolysis technology in the U.S. is developed and produced. During a legislative hearing, a legislator and casket-maker described how alkaline hydrolysis desecrates the corpse. He said, "We’re going to put [dead bodies] in acid and just let them dissolve away and then we’re going to let them run down the drain out into the sewers and whatever.” His speech was so convincing, the committee killed the bill.[85] The turn to emotional appeals in legislative settings draw attention to the deceased body as a site of revulsion or disgust. Religion has long counteracted these taboos around the corpse, providing order to an inherently disordered event (that is, death).[86] In these contemporary legal settings, eco-disposition providers instead try to highlight the scientific data or use language to make the process sound gentler to diminish this aversion.

Other states have raised similar concerns, with varying levels of success. Bills that have been accepted typically extend existing cremation law and facilities. As with green burial, there is a conventional analogue to the “new” practice. In states where legislation failed, such as Texas and New Hampshire, the norms were more difficult to overcome. In Texas, the bill to approve alkaline hydrolysis was renewed over the course of three years but died for the final time in 2017 after being put on the calendar for the chamber to consider. In

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[84] Norma Love, “New in Mortuary Science: Dissolving Bodies with Lye,” *Associated Press*, May 11, 2008.
[85] Tony Cook, “Casket-Making Lawmaker Helps Kill Bill Allowing Alternative to Burial,” *IndyStar*, March 20, 2015, sec. Politics, https://www.indystar.com/story/news/politics/2015/03/20/casket-making-lawmaker-helps-kill-bill-allowing-alternative-burial/25109443/.
[86] Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (New York: Routledge, 1966).

the House Committee Report from April 2017, representatives for the Texas Funeral Directors Association, BioResponse Solutions–the main producer of alkaline hydrolysis technology in the U.S.–and the City of Houston mayor's office were listed in favor of the legislation. One person from the Texas Catholic Conference of Bishops was against, along with a layperson with no additional identifiers. It is unclear why the legislation failed despite generally positive press coverage of the process and a change.org petition that garnered nearly 1,500 signatures. Most of the comments on the petition in support of the bill reflected the environmental benefit of alkaline hydrolysis. In the true Texas spirit, one comment in support read "Liberty," reflecting the importance of choice. In some of these locations, perhaps unsurprisingly, there is a disconnect between constituents and legal outcomes.

In New Hampshire, the legal battles have also been complicated. The New Hampshire state legislature voted to allow the process in 2006, but reversed itself the next year and disallowed the practice. In 2009, the bill was brought to vote again, but failed. The most recent attempt was in 2013 at which point, despite passing by a wide margin in the House, the bill was defeated in the Senate in a 16-8 vote. One of the Republicans who voted against the bill stated, "There was some concern that the human fluids would not get into the wastewater treatment facility but would be disposed of in-ground—our ground—affecting our groundwater and aquifers."[87] Concerns, when expressed, have so far been about contamination, a fear that transcends regional differences. Both scholars and practitioners attribute some of this resistance to the lack of public knowledge, lack of clarity in the existing legislation, and a lack of legislation in general.[88] However, there is also an inherited

[87] "N.H. Senate Kills Liquid Cremation," *New Hampshire Public Radio* (New Hampshire Public Radio, May 2, 2013), https://www.nhpr.org/post/nh-senate-kills-liquid-cremation.
[88] Michael Arnold et al., "Representing Alkaline Hydrolysis: A Material-Semiotic Analysis of an Alternative to Burial and Cremation," *Mortality* 0, no. 0 (February 6, 2023): 1–19,

sense of purity and contamination that pervades our relationship to the dead. Despite individual desires to do what is most environmental, or provide more choice, there is sense of uncleanliness that is difficult for people to overcome when debates arise about these practices. This is underscored in the online discourse around eco-disposition, as some practices give people a sense of unease, without those discontented being able to fully articulate the discomfort.

As discussed above, the purification by fire offered by cremation is absent in alkaline hydrolysis. While arguments about the body's purity as it interacts with the water table in alkaline hydrolysis feel more urgent, it is interesting that only now are people doubting fire's purification, and in fact pointing to how it is polluting–contaminating–our air. Now, many people who learn about the method do come to view it as an equivalent process with a smaller environmental footprint. In 2011, the Cremation Association of North America was the first association to change their definition of cremation to include alkaline hydrolysis. According to Colleen, a pleasant woman who lit up under the force of all my inadvertent cremation puns, "[the organization's] definition used phrases like the reduction of human remains by chemical or indoor heat spray, and so the point was that through mechanical means, we were reducing human remains. And so, we became inclusive of alkaline hydrolysis." As part of the team who made this change, Colleen sees the process of alkaline hydrolysis as a kind of reduction, without dwelling too emphatically on the environmental impact. This clarification is a step toward mediating what appears to be an educational divide

https://doi.org/10.1080/13576275.2023.2174838; Juliette O'Keefe, "Alternative Disposition Services: Green Burial, Alkaline Hydrolysis, and Human Composting" (Vancouver, B.C.: National Collaborating Centre for Environmental Health, April 2023), https://ncceh.ca/sites/default/files/2023-04/Alternative%20Disposition%20Services_EN_Apr%202023_FINAL.pdf; Olson, "Flush and Bone"; Jacob Steele, "Watery Grave: One of the Death Care Industry's Greenest Options Is Still Illegal in Thirty-One States and That Needs to Change," *Environmental and Earth Law Journal* 11 (2021).

to understanding alkaline hydrolysis. Perhaps because it is likened to cremation, or perhaps because the technology is unwieldy, expensive, and most often purchased by existing funeral homes, it isn't perceived as a threat by the funeral home industry, and they have offered little resistance to proposed legislation.[89]

However, the factors that make it a little easier to get the legislation passed have limited its availability once legalized. In California, where alkaline hydrolysis was legalized in 2017, there is only one facility exclusively for alkaline hydrolysis due to the thicket of regulations surrounding the processing of bodies. There are a few other machines in the state, located at crematoriums, but they are not the provider's sole focus or only available disposition method. To better understand why people are seeking out alkaline hydrolysis facilities, I spoke with Tiffany, who is a provider of these services. Tiffany is among the new generation of death workers who embrace a playful goth aesthetic. With purple hair and pride in her work with the dead, she was recruited into her current role for her skills as an admin rather than her funerary experience, which she didn't have. The owners of Tiffany's business originally wanted to open a crematorium, but they were told that their California city would not approve another crematorium in the area. This forced a pivot toward green options, which better suited Tiffany's preference anyway. She was very straightforward in her bias–she wanted to provide green services to people; she had no loyalty to the existing funeral industry. While they awaited approval for the alkaline hydrolysis machine, the funeral home facilitated green burials and transported bodies to a nearby state to undergo alkaline hydrolysis, while Tiffany drove the remains back to California.

[89] Alkaline hydrolysis chambers can cost between $200,000 - $400,000 on average (Rylands, 2014).

Alkaline hydrolysis is slightly more common and popular in the West and Pacific Northwest, for reasons we will explore in the next section. That said, as of 2022, the Cremation Association of North America only lists twenty alkaline hydrolysis facilities, and this includes those for pets only and facilities in places in which alkaline hydrolysis is not legal, like Texas.[90] One Texas facility website explains, "Water cremation has not been legalized by the Texas Legislature. So, we have partnered with a Water Cremation service in St. Louis, Missouri...And please urge your local state representative to legalize Water Cremation in Texas." Although determined at the legislative level, the reality is that these services remain scarce. Providers often struggle to source places to perform alkaline hydrolysis even when families request it.

I spoke with an eco-disposition provider, Dawn, in depth about this challenge. We had several conversations, instantly connecting over our shared death work and open dispositions–personalities, that is. Dawn was constantly on the move during our phone call, I could hear her breathing and the shuffle of miscellany as she fiddled with things in the background. I got a slightly more sedate Dawn when I spoke to her in person for the second time in Spring 2022 about changes to eco-disposition practices. Since our first conversation a year before, Oregon had decreased the number of alkaline hydrolysis machines from 1 to zero, which increased her typical drive to process remains from 30 minutes to over 2 hours. So even though the legalization of the practice is greater in the West, the practice has not yet garnered significant support in any particular quarter.

From a logistical standpoint, the alkaline hydrolysis machines are large, and therefore are difficult to add as an option in some funeral homes with limited space. Moreover, it is

[90] Facilities are not required to register with the Cremation Association of North America, but they do have wide reach among alkaline hydrolysis providers.

also challenging to open an alkaline hydrolysis business independently, because the machines are so expensive that the start-up costs are difficult to recoup in the short or even medium-term. Similar kinds of barriers exist for the legalization and construction of natural organic reduction facilities.

Natural Organic Reduction

Because natural organic reduction was first approved in 2019, I was able to monitor the reception and state-by-state legislative proceedings during my research. After the initial success in Washington state, states that followed mimicked the language of the Washington bill. Bill passage in Washington was followed by Colorado, and then Oregon, both in 2021. Meanwhile, legislation failed twice in California and once in New York. Then Vermont successfully passed legislation in mid-2022 before California was finally able to gain approval in September 2022. As of this writing in early 2023, New York is the most recent state to approve legislation, becoming the sixth state to legalize human composting, no thanks to the complicated burial law and a resistant funeral directors' association that was one of the major opponents to the original bill in 2021.[91]

Finding inroads with political representatives was only slightly more challenging than I imagined it would be. During COVID-19 restrictions, many of the legislative hearings moved online and remained open to the public, so I was able to view many more than would have otherwise been possible had I needed to attend in person. I would often watch these state-level proceedings from the comfort of my studio bedroom/office/kitchen before

[91] To highlight how quickly this is developing, just before I submitted this dissertation in June 2023, Nevada passed a bill to approve natural organic reduction, bringing the total number of states that have legalized to seven.

contacting the legislator through their publicly accessible email. Most of the legislators that I reached out to were available through an assistant, and once the nature of my topic was revealed, and it clarified that I was not a reporter, the assistants were much more at ease to put me through to their representative. Representative Nestor chatted with me through Zoom from her district, part rural, part urban, and quite diverse in its political beliefs, and yet united in their lack of affiliation to traditional religious groups in a way that has been observed throughout the Pacific Northwest.[92] In our conversation, she spoke frankly about her own response to eco-dispositions, which ranged from personal excitement for natural organic reduction to hesitation about alkaline hydrolysis. I noticed that her stance was like her presentation at the legislative hearing, albeit delivered with slightly more emphasis on *respect* during the hearing. After all, we each of us have our preferences about what we do with our own bodies. As we discussed the success of the natural organic reduction bill in passing the first stages of legislation in her state, she explained how she aligned herself with legislators in other states who are also working to pass similar bills, "The driving rationale behind the legalization is to have choice." She ended our call optimistically, feeling sure that despite the one nay vote in the first proceedings, she would successfully pass the bill in the final round of legislature. And so, it was.

But Washington was the first state to create a bill for the approval of natural organic reduction. Washington was a natural fit for Katrina Spade, the person who spearheaded their natural organic reduction legislation. As a resident of Seattle, and aware of the type of legislation they would need to pass such a law, she worked closely with law professors, scientists, policy strategists, and policy makers to develop a successful bill. Although, at that

[92] Patricia O'Connell Killen and Mark Silk, eds., *Religion and Public Life in the Pacific Northwest: The None Zone* (Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 2004).

point, the concepts had been scientifically proven, the actual facilities could not be constructed until the bill was passed. Therefore, legislators were presented with the scientific information alongside hundreds of letters of support from people who were interested in adding this to the available choices for disposition in the state. After watching several of the subsequent proceedings, it is clear that the careful language that Spade used has been carried over into her public descriptions of the practice. The bill "Concerning Human Remains" passed the House by a vote of 80 in favor to 16 against, then the Senate by a vote of 38 to 11.[93] On May 21, 2019, Washington State Governor Jay Inslee signed the bill into law. The law went into effect on May 7, 2020. From this, the template for successful bill proposals was born.

A natural place for natural organic reduction–and a huge market to boot–seemed to be California, and not long after it was legalized in Washington a bill was taken up to approve the process in by far the most populous state.[94] The first attempt at passage, AB 2592, failed in the senate in 2020. In August 2021, AB501, the second bill aimed at legalizing human composting, was not brought forward for a vote in the California State Senate, despite strong bipartisan support, positive reception in several committee hearings, and over three hundred letters of support from constituents. This decision, which came as a surprise to the bill's sponsors, was likely influenced by the election, then underway, to recall the California governor. California is also much more diverse than Washington in terms of race and religious belief, so it is possible that the bill proved too controversial for this already volatile political moment. The bill's failure in California put Colorado into the position to become the

[93] Pederson et al., "Concerning Human Remains," Pub. L. No. SB 5001 (2019), https://app.leg.wa.gov/billsummary?BillNumber=5001&Initiative=false&Year=2019.
[94] US Census Bureau, "State Population Totals and Components of Change: 2020-2022," Census.gov, accessed March 28, 2023, https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/popest/2020s-state-total.html.

second state to legalize natural organic reduction in April 2021. Oregon followed closely thereafter, passing a bill in July 2021 with only one nay vote. Senator Heard, who voted against it, argued that the votes should not be done virtually, and therefore voted against the bill to protest the method of vote casting. And while this may have been connected to the content of the bill, it may have also been an expression of his beliefs around COVID restrictions. In February 2022, Senator Heard was removed from the state legislative floor for not complying with the facemask mandate. By December, he had prematurely resigned his position.[95]

The legislation that followed Washington in Colorado, Oregon, California, Vermont, and New York was based on Washington's "Concerning Human Remains" bill. Some legislators used this opportunity to tack on other provisions with respect to body disposition and environmental safeguards. For example, Representative Nestor explained that Oregon had legalized alkaline hydrolysis in rule, but not in statute, meaning it had not been approved through the legislature and signed into law. So, the natural organic reduction bill there enshrined both alkaline hydrolysis and natural organic reduction into law. The original New York bill was an outcome of the Climate Leadership and Community Protection Act in 2019, which aimed to eliminate net carbon emissions by 2050, so the language of the bill emphasized environmental protections and reducing carbon emissions.

Legislators described to me truly little public opposition to the idea of natural organic reduction. They attributed this to either a community-led action, which meant that the people who were most invested in getting the bill passed were the most active voices, or they had simply chosen the location and timing well. On the state legislative portals, there is an option

[95] Alex Hasenstab, "Oregon Republican State Senator Dallas Heard Resigns," *OPB*, December 16, 2022, https://www.opb.org/article/2022/12/15/oregon-politics-senator-dallas-heard-resigns-legislature/.

to review the publicly submitted letters about the hearing under discussion. In some of the hearings, few letters were submitted, but in places like California, hundreds of letters were available for review. As I reviewed the letters received in the first round of legislation for California, most of the letters followed a common template, and very few indicated any sense of hesitation or opposition. One of the most consistent and vocal opponents to these bills in popular media and in legislative hearings was the leadership of the Catholic Church in each region. Even in relatively secular states, such as Washington, the Catholic Church was not openly receptive to natural organic reduction, decrying it as a disrespectful form of burial during press comments and within the legislative process. In New York, with a greater percentage of Catholics (31% vs. 17% in Washington) the bishops' Conference proclaimed to media outlets that the burial method was "inappropriate."[96]

The legalization process for natural organic reduction is aided in part by the enterprising spirit of its promoters. Several of the organizations who have successfully set up shop in the Pacific Northwest are helping legislators in other states–the Northeast is a popular market–to draft and propose bills to legalize it in those states. Denise, a natural organic reduction operator who brings strong start-up energy to our conversation, was personally involved in legislation in Vermont. Denise wants to help to expand her company into these new regions. Interestingly, the managers of the natural organic reduction facilities said that people from all over the country have expressed interest in signing up for natural organic reduction, even if that means shipping their bodies across state lines.

However, these same organizations were not as interested in pursuing legalization in the Midwest and South, because they did not think the politics would be in their favor. There

[96] Pew Research Center, "Catholics," *Religious Landscape Study* (blog), 2012, https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/religious-landscape-study/.

is also the lingering specter of religion, which is much more consistently found to be greater in terms of participation and identification in the South.[97] My interlocutor Leighton had much to say in terms of the southern approach to eco-disposition. We chatted via Zoom for well over our allotted hour, laughing as my accent emerged to meet his. As a southern-born-and-raised traditional funeral director turned green burial provider, he sees a wide variety of people who are turning to these options. When I asked Leighton about the likelihood that people in the South would turn to natural organic reduction, he seemed skeptical, and believed that "traditionalists would be the ones that probably wouldn't buy into natural organic reduction here the way they would if they were on the West Coast or in Vermont, which just recently legalized it." But many of the natural organic reduction providers insist that this is something that appeals to everyone.

Cultural and Social Forces

The development and legalization of green burial, alkaline hydrolysis, and natural organic reduction has increased the element of choice among disposition options. With burial dominating most of white, settler U.S. history, cremation challenged and ultimately disrupted the funeral industry. Leighton has spent a lot of time in the funeral industry. He began in a traditional role, attending to the conventional burials and cremations for the first decade of his career before transitioning to working at a green burial ground exclusively. Reflecting on the industry, he explained that when cremation began to become popular and people asked funeral directors about it, "they [didn't] try to understand the people or why [they were

[97] Pew, "How COVID-19 Has Strengthened Religious Faith," *Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project* (blog), January 27, 2021, https://www.pewforum.org/2021/01/27/more-americans-than-people-in-other-advanced-economies-say-covid-19-has-strengthened-religious-faith/.

interested in cremation]–all they hear[d] is that you don't value me and my profession for what we do. All you want to do with your mother's remains that you love so much is burn them up. And it is like, we don't do that…And we lost control of it. They lost control of it." His reflection also shows the dual role that eco-disposition providers have, as both insiders and outsiders to the funeral industry. They want to support and honor death professionals, but they are beginning to see a fundamental difference between the eco-disposition options they are offering and conventional practices. The difference is one of values, but also of cultural change. During the latter part of the twentieth century, many funeral directors also resisted expanding their available services to include the lower cost options not only because it would decrease their profits, but also because, like many established industries, or even traditional religion, the funeral industry has also been slow to adapt and change.[98]

The emergence of specialty eco-disposition sites is poised to be the next big disruptor in the industry. Leighton readily affirmed that, "Oh yeah, this train is leaving the station and anybody that's in the funeral industry that's not at least watching the train or thinking about getting on the train or resisting it," he says, will go the way of those that resisted cremation–obsolescence. While these new independent providers of eco-disposal stress affordability as well as environmentalism, they are disrupting the conventional funeral industry by promoting a "hand-crafted" approach to disposition that not only stresses that the body is part of nature, but emphasizes natural beauty, personal involvement, and locally sourced materials. Providers of eco-disposal are rejecting the standard choices of cremation and conventional

[98] Virginia R. Beard and William C. Burger, "Selling in a Dying Business: An Analysis of Trends During a Period of Major Market Transition in the Funeral Industry," *Omega: Journal of Death & Dying* 80, no. 4 (March 2020): 544–67, https://doi.org/10.1177/0030222817745430.

burial offered by the funeral industry much as craft brewers and microbreweries rejected Bud Light and Stella Artois, Anheuser-Busch's characterless, mass-produced beers.

Although these new providers are all taking this hand-crafted approach, they are–at the same time–attentive to regional differences and demographic changes that affect both the legislative approval process and the way they market the new options. In the following section, I will discuss how providers of green burial, alkaline hydrolysis, and natural organic reduction are marketing their services. Across regions, providers are promoting eco-disposition options as a "niche" product that allows people to return to tradition in a way that is religiously open and inclusive and, at the same time, sensitive to regional attitudes toward environmental issues.

Regional Norms

We can think of these differences in regional norms as both a result of geological and natural elements of the region as well as dominant cultural and political narratives and a genuine expression of regionally-significant lived religion. If we simply look at a map of all the green burial ground options in the U.S., the concentration is highest in the Midwest, Northeast, and South with only a few scattered throughout the central parts of the country and the West. However, these maps do not have the full story. There are more green burial grounds in these areas because there are many conventional cemeteries, some of which have set aside space for green burials and are now certified as hybrid cemeteries. Leighton, gleaned from his own experience and conversations among other eco-disposition providers, points out that climate, soil composition, and seasonal changes also impact the ability to properly maintain a green burial ground. As a result, we see fewer green burial grounds in the West not only because there are fewer conventional cemeteries, but also because the soil is

not as biodiverse and therefore the biological demands associated with creating conservation burial grounds cannot be met. Although difficult to state definitively, I suspect that the demand for green burials may also be weaker in the central and western U.S., because people there were quick to turn to cremation, and have not changed course.[99] As a parallel, there may also be weaker ties to traditional religious structures, therefore lessening the burden for practices that have been tied to traditional funeral homes.

Lindsay and Chris have long been in the eco-disposition scene and are known as the grandparents of the conservation burial movement. Back in 1998, they envisioned creating a burial space that simultaneously protected land and allowed people to return naturally to the earth. And, because they were based there, the two environmentalists chose the South. At that time, land in much of the southeast Atlantic states was still very affordable and much of their state was still rural. Chris dreamed of setting aside hundreds of acres of land across the U.S. as a place for conservation and burial. Their efforts inspired the formation of the Conservation Burial Alliance in 2017. Subsequent members joined from other areas in the South, as well as the West, Midwest, and Northeast.

Of the twelve burial grounds in the Conservation Burial Alliance, seven are in the South, one is in the Northeast, two are in the Midwest, and one is in the West. Again, we can see the patterns of land availability, soil biodiversity, and price at play. Western states have the greatest proportion of public, or federally owned, land.[100] So, despite the geographical size of most Western states, much of the land that may be ostensibly used for burial is designated for other purposes. We can add to this the role of the dominant religious

[99] Barbara Kemmis, "The Cremation Landscape," *Cremation Association of North America (CANA)* (blog), May 11, 2021, https://www.cremationassociation.org/blogpost/776820/370274/The-Cremation-Landscape.
[100] Dale A Oesterle, "Public Land: How Much Is Enough?," *ECOLOGY LAW QUARTERLY* 23, no. 521 (1996).

denominations in these areas. As colonists settled the U.S., congregations with constructed churches and church cemeteries were well-established throughout the Northeast and South. As people moved West, these congregations also migrated, but with a lesser number of church sites to match a more spread-out population. Other religious groups that settled in the West did not do so in such great numbers, establishing fewer traditional church sites with their accompanying cemeteries. By contrast, the South has a much greater number of churches with attached cemeteries and is littered with family cemeteries from farming lineages, which are, technically, green burial grounds, in addition to the wider, memorial-park style cemeteries.

This historical precedent was not salient with respect to alkaline hydrolysis and natural organic reduction. Six states in the south have legalized alkaline hydrolysis, although facilities only operate in North Carolina, Georgia, and Florida. In Tennessee, where alkaline hydrolysis is legal, but no facilities operate, funeral directors doubt that it will catch on very quickly. There are rarely requests for the process, but whether that is due to education or cultural preference, it is early to say. Natural organic reduction has not made any legal headway into the South, although natural organic reduction providers in Washington state have reported interest from several southern states for their process.

Due to space constraints, the Northeast has only one newly established conservation burial ground, which is in Maine. There are many more natural cemeteries or hybrid cemeteries, because, as we know, the practice prior to conventional burial with vaults and concrete was much like today’s green burial. Many of the historic cemeteries of the Northeast are therefore generally “green,” or at least in an advantageous position to be promoted as hybrid, since only some of the graves followed the post 1900s convention of

including vaults or grave liners. With land so much more valued for other uses—housing, transportation, or development—or already set aside for other kinds of conservation (like parks, etc.) in the Northeast, there is less opportunity to set aside new swathes of land for burial. So, while the Northeast is ideal for creating hybrid cemeteries or, as Frank suggests, reclaiming historical cemeteries, larger-scale conservation burial grounds are more difficult to establish. The other eco-dispositions are also difficult to establish. Due to complex burial law and a strong tradition of funeral home lobbying, alkaline hydrolysis is only legal in the Northeast in Maine and Vermont. Natural organic reduction has had slightly more rapid success and is now legal in both Vermont and New York. New York, as discussed above, was particularly tricky due to strong lobbying from the existing funeral industry.

The Midwest, like the South, is not known for its progressive approaches to environmental causes, but it has an abundance of available land. Although land is available, there are only two conservation burial grounds in the Midwest and few hybrid cemeteries. This may be due to the timing of the rural cemetery movement, in which large memorial parks were established around the same time as people began moving in earnest to the Midwest region. As more people were interred in these large cemeteries, it led to a stronger cultural precedent for conventional burial. However, by percentage, the Midwest is second only to the West for the number of states that approved alkaline hydrolysis. Alkaline hydrolysis facilities are available in Michigan, Illinois, Ohio, and Minnesota. Like the South, no Midwest states have legalized natural organic reduction, but legislation has been introduced in Illinois. And, again like the South, natural organic reduction facilities in the Pacific Northwest indicate that they get a lot of inquiries from farmers and outdoors enthusiasts from the Midwest.

In Western states such as Washington, Oregon, and California, where the political divide is between the eastern and western parts of the state, environmental options are widely embraced across the political spectrum and a foundational part of the cultural ethos. Although those who are politically conservative are more likely to identify as religious than their more liberal counterparts, other values like individualism often outweigh religious concerns. Many people are more interested in burying on their own land, having control over their dead, and doing things in their own way as opposed to conventional burial practices. Dawn, whose funeral services span from Eastern Oregon to Portland, has seen firsthand these political distinctions. She has clients that voted on a spectrum from Donald Trump to Bernie Sanders. Similarly, in her burial ground in the Pacific Northwest, Sarah Jane explains that they get their fair share of people from California who have a more "hippie" mentality, but they also bury local people who are connected to the area and the land.

The hippies, drawing from an earth-based spirituality and general environmental consciousness, in the Pacific Northwest represent a demographic through which both natural organic reduction and alkaline hydrolysis have taken root. The Pacific Northwest was an early site of religious conversion, with Protestants and Catholics sending missionaries in the 1830s to convert Indigenous People. From the mid-1800s until the 1920s, Protestants, Catholics, and Jews all attempted to tame the frontier culture, an ethos that was already deeply embedded in the culture by this point.[101] Despite efforts from mainline Christians to exert some control over the cultural norms, the combined work of trade and migration from across the Pacific Ocean and the draw of migrants, the culture of the Pacific Northwest remained decidedly eclectic. In early cultural studies, Oregon and Washington were

[101] Killen and Silk, *Religion and Public Life in the Public Northwest*.

described as having the least recognizable religious personality of all the nation's regions.[102] The Northwest's decided lack of religious affiliation has remained a defining characteristic of the region.[103] However, subsequent studies have shown that despite not having affiliation, there is a strong presence of variations of nature religion.[104] Grounded in awe at the landscape, these include experiences with the land from fishing to bird-watching, and collective action.[105] This impulse, which I will explore further in Chapter 3, is a key to understanding why the Pacific Northwest has been a fertile ground for eco-dispositions.

The legalization of natural organic reduction in the West and Northeast, which mirrored that of recreational marijuana, and to a lesser extent alkaline hydrolysis, reflects regional cultural differences. As with natural organic reduction, Washington and Colorado were the first states to legalize marijuana. Three years later in 2015, they were joined by Oregon, then California, and, not long after, Vermont. Some of the early adopters of legalized marijuana, including Massachusetts, Nevada, and Maine, have introduced legislation for natural organic reduction; natural organic reduction bills are still in process in Massachusetts and Nevada and did not pass in Maine. Similarly, early alkaline hydrolysis adopters (prior to 2014), included Oregon, Colorado, and Maine, but in contrast to natural organic reduction, alkaline hydrolysis has expanded into the Midwest and South to include Florida, Illinois, Kansas, Maryland, and Minnesota.[106] As these factors place and culture

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[102] Mark A. Shibley, "Sacred Nature: Earth-Based Spirituality as Popular Religion in the Pacific Northwest," *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature & Culture* 5, no. 2 (June 2011): 164–85, https://doi.org/10.1558/jsrnc.v5i2.164.
[103] Barry Kosmin et al., "American Nones: The Profile of the No Religion Population," A Report Based on the American Religious Identification Survey 2008 (Hartford, Connecticut: Trinity College, 2009).
[104] Catherine L. Albanese, *Nature Religion in America: From Algonkian Indians to the New Age* (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 1990); Bron Taylor, *Dark Green Religion: Nature Spirituality and the Planetary Future* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2010).
[105] Shibley, "Sacred Nature."
[106] Olson, "Flush and Bone."

come together, the eco-disposition providers are tailoring them to fit different regions of the country, but also encounter wide ranges of overlap in taste and preference.

Niche death practices

Eco-disposition providers are artisanal providers of death care. Artisan care–in which both the object and the framing of what is offered changes to suit the consumer–is part of what makes eco-dispositions attractive to many people. The careful curation of caskets or the hand-made shroud, an individualized service, and hands-on activities mimics the desire for a personal experience that we see in a variety of other arenas, which my interlocutors have described as comparable to "micro"-breweries, "natural wines" from small-scale vineyards, and Airbnb's.[107] In the context of death practices, they see a similar desire for experiences–if not goods–that are local, small-scale, and personalized. Although eco-disposition providers share this emphasis, it takes different forms for each of the three types of eco-disposition.

In the case of green burial, individually crafted artisanal coffins or shrouds are taking the place of metal and hardwood caskets and elaborate headstones. Niamh, for example, crafts willow caskets in the Pacific Northwest and resists scaling up production. Instead, she takes individual commissions for people or organizations that mean something to her. She has donated some caskets, but the purchased ones cost in the $1,000s as she cultivates and cuts the willow and weaves each casket herself. Compared to the burial containers offered by conventional funeral homes, this is relatively inexpensive, as those commercially available caskets begin at about $1,000 and can cost as much as $10,000. Niamh's Zoom background shows a wood cabin, with warm and textured objects dotting the walls and surroundings. She

[107] Personal interviews, 2021-2022

herself spoke to me wrapped in a shawl with an apparently Native design, which she gestured to as she emphasized the importance of lifting up the local Indigenous people while being mindful of her own Celtic heritage, from which she draws her practice of weaving. Niamh was one of the few people who commented directly on the indigeneity of eco-dispositions in that she recognizes that Indigenous people had specific kinds of burial practices that mimic some aspects of eco-disposition. She also spoke about a need to integrate Indigenous people into a cycle of local production for her own work. Despite turning to nature, tradition, and the past to evoke the ethos of eco-disposition, none of my interlocutors hinted at the connection to Indigenous practice. Perhaps because of the individual nature of her work, Niamh has more space with which to engage with her own positionality. There is certainly less risk in her doing so, as the eco-disposition companies must tread carefully as they discuss their relationship to the land and these practices.

On the opposite side of the country, Isobel showed me a similarly crafted willow casket. Isobel explained that it had been made just down the road, and while the materials were all sourced responsibility, her emphasis was instead on it being local. She gave no mention of Indigenous practice, or even the history of casket-making. Both Niamh and Isobel resist the idea of shipping willow caskets from the United Kingdom, where most are currently produced. One does so in the interest of lifting up artisans and honoring cultural practice and the other keeping it local. Either way, these providers are demonstrating a dedication to small-scale, niche production to further an environmental ethic. I observe that the extent to which they make this connection is related directly to how they respond to the local cultures in which they are promoting these services.

Alkaline hydrolysis does not require a container for the body before disposition–only a sheet, which does not necessarily need to conform to any environmental standards as providers remove it before the process begins. However, like cremation and unlike green burial and natural organic reduction, the remains are generally placed in an urn after the process is complete. An alkaline hydrolysis provider in North Carolina carries over two hundred urns in a variety of assorted styles for the remains. Their urn selection, which they specify is environmentally-friendly and locally produced by North Carolina artists, set their urns apart from "the urns offered through other funeral homes [that] all looked the same—seemingly mass-produced, imported products." Another alkaline hydrolysis facility in Denver offers clients a complementary "eco-burial urn," the option to plant trees with the remains, and types of urns including scattering urns, home urns, and patio urns (for bonsai trees or house plants). So, while the offerings on both sides of the country are specially crafted, the values emphasized are different. In alkaline hydrolysis facilities in the Midwest, there is a much more perfunctory approach–the websites often only feature the services and not a full experience. This might be because these facilities are arms of existing funeral industry providers, and the general trend of website and marketing engagement in these eco-disposition spaces is that the newer, eco-disposition-only companies tend to be most deliberate with making an accessible website that can easily showcase these products.

In the natural organic reduction facilities in the West, one uses simple, beautiful cotton shrouds created by an employee's mother for their laying-ins. The shrouds have little cotton spheres of assorted colors sewn into the front, personalized for each person. The garment itself incurs no additional charge and is included in the basic price of the composting process. This is an important note, as cotton shrouds can range from the price of a bedsheet

to several hundred dollars.[108] Dawn joked with me, as we sat outside her refurbished mill-turned-funeral home, that the most environmentally friendly way to dispose of a person would be for them to die at home, be wrapped in their own bedsheet, and then buried in the yard, but few people take this route. A sensible compromise, albeit a more expensive one, is natural organic reduction in which the shroud, and the eventual return home, are possible.

Figure 3: Cotton burial shroud for natural organic reduction, personal photo taken at Return Home, 2022

Beyond the disposal-related products, the providers are also selling eco-disposal related merchandise. As the newest, natural organic reduction has been at the forefront of this practice, with several facilities creating separate merchandise shops where you can buy everything from t-shirts to coffee mugs. One natural organic reduction shop, which is separate from its funeral home-centered site, is eye-catching. I first clicked on a t-shirt with a simple plant design complete with a rainbow background. If you prefer, you can get this logo on a tote, hoodie, coffee mug, or tiny dog sweater. The newest additions, as I scroll down, are

[108] Passages International, "Shrouds," Passages International, Inc., accessed March 28, 2023, https://store.passagesinternational.com/shrouds?page=1.

the irreverent images of skeletons in soil, with the tagline, "soil yourself." Such promotions appeal to the 'irreverent' younger generations. This method connects the companies with these people early, with the aim of facilitating a sea change within the industry. Similarly, if I click over to the merch shop for another natural organic reduction facility, I can find "When I die, please compost me," shirts and merch. This approach contrasts with that of a conservation burial ground across the country, which instead of focusing on merchandise, has instead funded a library and community center. These sites provide free resources like books and courses on coping with grief and loss and end-of-life planning. Creating a shared community and educational space, although also separate from their function as a funeral home, appeals to a more conservative set and is a more approachable way for older people to learn about the eco-disposition options.

Figure 4: An example of natural organic reduction "merch," with the phrase "soil yourself" written in the ground soil beneath a person reading a newspaper on a bench. Image used with permission from Return Home.

Eco-disposal and those who choose them value a minimalist approach, rejecting the presumed excesses of a conventional funeral. Although eco-disposal generally cost less to provide, their niche, artisanal character has turned green practices into a premium service–there is "status" to the minimalism–and, thus, a distinction now between elegant, locally-

sourced simplicity and simplicity for the sake of saving cost.[109] Although some have argued that this eco-disposal is a shift away from consumerism, I argue that the shift is largely symbolic; people are paying more to curate a minimalist, anti-materialist experience that is simply another form of consumerism.[110] There is a bit of a paradox at play here in the way in which people are choosing environmental death options. There is a minimalist, anti-big business kind of mentality to many of these organizations, but the minimalism trend does not always translate to affordable.[111]

The grandeur of death used to be in the excessive flamboyance of the display, but in the culture driving this movement, the idea of permanence and ostentatious performances are excessive and unnecessary. In her discussion of Gwyneth Paltrow's brand goop, Dana Logan points out that "having few clothes and little food is a kind of poverty, and thus the modern ascetic comes into awkward juxtaposition with poverty as a socio-economic condition through sensations of scarcity…goop sells asceticism as a practice for those who have too much—thus the fantasy of "less" and the attendant practices of purging and limiting do not have the same power for those who start out with too little."[112] In this sense, the simplicity is a status symbol in that it evokes a kind of scarcity. However, this causes rupture and confusion when people discover that these practices are the cheapest options and can be on par with conventional burial and generally much more expensive than cremation. What you are then selling is not a "simple," practice in the sense of inexpensive, but the appearance or

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[109] Amanda J Baugh, "Nepantla Environmentalism: Challenging Dominant Frameworks for Green Religion," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 88, no. 3 (September 23, 2020): 832–58, https://doi.org/10.1093/jaarel/lfaa038.
[110] Dawdy, *American Afterlives*.
[111] Chelsea Fagan, "Minimalism Is Just Another Boring Product Wealthy People Can Buy," *The Financial Diet* (blog), January 20, 2021, https://staging.tfdiet.com/minimalism-just-another-boring-product-wealthy-people-can-buy/.
[112] Dana W. Logan, "The Lean Closet: Asceticism in Postindustrial Consumer Culture," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 85, no. 3 (September 2017): 613–14, https://doi.org/10.1093/jaarel/lfw091.

yearning for a simplicity in death. You are not paying for the flamboyant display, but you are paying what might be best understood as a carbon offset—something that you can't necessarily see, but provides some environmental absolution, which I will discuss more below. Because of the cost, cremation will continue to have a place in the United States, as is reflected in the high number of cremations in other highly economically developed countries.

Return to traditional death ways

When I talked to the operators and owners who were promoting these eco-disposition methods, they resisted my characterization of their practices as new, despite alkaline hydrolysis (for the public) and natural organic reduction being exactly that. At the beginning of this project, I used the term "traditional" to refer to the type of burial that was most common in the U.S. since the Civil War. "Traditional," as I and others were using it, meant a burial in which the body is embalmed, placed in a metal casket, and buried in a concrete vault and liner. However, as the project progressed, the providers of eco-disposition services actively pushed-back against the idea that this form of burial was "traditional." Instead, they viewed this as the "conventional" practice, and the eco-dispositions for which they were advocating as a return to tradition. In saying this, they are making a claim about their practices, but what exactly they are claiming differs by region, as do their reasons for claiming their practices are traditional.

Tradition has many different valences in the context of religious studies, and by extension, death ways. We can distinguish between types of claims that promoters might make: the claim that the practices have literally been handed down through a recognized chain of transmission, the claim that the practices connect or reconnect people to the past, and the claim that there is historical precedent for the practices and thus that they are not

novel.[113] The way in which tradition is wielded in these eco-disposition practices complicates this already nuanced picture. If we apply these categories to different regions for green burial, the South relies heavily on tradition as things handed down and as reconnection but is also remade for a particular purpose as it is lived. In some areas of Appalachia, close to several conservation burial grounds, there has been a more continuous presence of "old-time" religion.[114] The legacy of this tradition and the continuity of families in the same area might make green burial not only popular, but an uninterrupted way of life. Leighton has had religious people liken the practice of green burial to being buried like Jesus–reconnecting them to an important shared past. And indeed, the image of the burial shroud, not unlike the fabled Shroud of Turin, is a distinct evocation of Christ's experience in the tomb. It also may be that the lack of machinery and modern touches allows people to feel as though they have traveled back in time, going through similar motions that those who would have cared for Jesus would have done.

In some cases, providers view green burial grounds as a recovery of past practices. When the Green Burial Council hosts a conference that aims to "communicate that choosing green burial connects to a history of meaningful tradition," they are claiming a through-line to past practices. When I asked Taylor about the local community's response to her natural burial ground, which was located next to an Amish settlement in the Midwest, Taylor laughed and said, "I've had people call me for consultation and ask, so how do you explain what you're doing to your neighbors? And I'm like, they just think we're silly English and

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[113] Ann Taves, "Catholic Studies and Religious Studies: Reflections on the Concept of Tradition," in *The Catholic Studies Reader*, ed. James T. Fisher and Margaret M. McGuinness (Fordham University Press, 2011), 111–28, https://doi.org/10.1515/9780823292776-007.

[114] Richard J. Callahan, *Work and Faith in the Kentucky Coal Fields: Subject to Dust* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009).

like, why haven't you been doing this all along?" In contrast to the natural burial ground's recovery of "traditional" practice, the Amish, who typically remain in the same communities across generations, exemplify "traditional" practices that have been handed down through those generations.

Some view eco-disposition as "traditional" in light of their religious teachings. Olivia is a death educator and identifies as multiracial—growing up with a Muslim, Algerian father and a nonreligious, white mother. We met in a death discussion group, which largely focused on issues of diversity and inclusion in death spaces. From her family's history and tradition, she knew that a Muslim burial is "natural," so when "green" was presented as an new alternative in her death education courses, she thought, "hold on a second, this is not an alternative, this is being repackaged in a way that erases the people and cultures who have been doing this forever." The repackaging removed the liturgical or theological import of burial in contact with the earth, or with minimal adornment, and described the practice only in terms of the natural world. More providers are beginning to recognize this sense of "tradition," and acknowledge when they are drawing on particular traditions, such as the Jewish custom of placing three scoops of earth into the grave, which has been adopted at several conservation burial grounds.

Tradition can also refer to practices passed down within families. Leighton, for example, characterizes aging Baby Boomers as folks who are "not going to follow tradition in the sense of [following the same] burial practices as their parents. The only thing that will tie them to that is tradition…or what sometimes I hear called in the cemetery world: heritage. If you have someone already buried in that cemetery, that may be the thing that pulls you there." But many Baby Boomers no longer have that heritage connection–they have moved

away from the burial grounds of their parents, or don't want their children to have to go through the expense.

The connection to heritage is particularly tenuous in the West as people there tend to be more transient than in other parts of the country. In the West, few white settlers have generations of kinfolk who were buried in a nearby cemetery so it's harder to claim that sort of continuity as a rationale. Although people plausibly refer to continuity in practice and place in regions where natural burial grounds are common, it is thus less clear what is meant by "traditional" in the West. In the case of natural organic reduction and alkaline hydrolysis, tradition is more about connection to nature, and nature is viewed as the ultimate arbiter or source of "tradition." Nature has always known how to break down human bodies–it has been doing it long before any kind of technology or regulation has existed. This is the logic employed by both natural organic reduction and, to a lesser extent, alkaline hydrolysis–the tradition lies in the connection and uplifting of nature. Although home burials are possible and, in some rural areas, even common, natural organic reduction offers an alternative to establishing a family plot on your land, which is illegal in some states and requires extensive paperwork in others. In this framing, natural organic reduction is simply a sped-up traditional process.

Careful avoidance of "greenness" marketing

Although the essence of the approach itself centers the environment, eco-disposition providers are also aware that environmentalism looks and is received differently in different areas of the country. Providers are careful with their language when discussing the disposition's environmental merits. Connected with the embrace of traditional death ways, operators and owners of natural burial grounds have made a conscious shift away from

"green" burial, with its modern ecological associations, to the more neutral and presumably longstanding "natural" burial. Many conservation burial grounds, in particular, are located in rural areas of the country. Based on demographics of rural places, this often means that some of the people to whom the managers are marketing these services have a more conservative political affiliation.[115] Sometimes, although not always, this comes with a resistance or dislike of "liberal" environmentalism, which is often associated with decreasing industry.[116] Instead, the marketing focuses on the natural aspects, especially the connection to nature and land, which resonates with the farmers, hunters, fishers, and other outdoorsy practitioners more common in these rural spaces. In light of these concerns, the Green Burial Council is weighing changing the organization name from "Green" to "Natural" Burial Council.[117] For some, the emphasis on "natural" is a matter of education: it makes people aware that this practice is indeed a return to a more natural form of disposition when compared to conventional burial.

One of the hurdles that many providers of green burial must face is that, in general, an average person does not understand what people in the U.S. are permitted to do with a deceased body. Because conventional burial has for so long been the standard, it makes people feel uneasy to hear that green burial does not include many of the practices that they consider normal. As a result, there is a great deal of education that must go into the marketing of green burial practices. For some providers, this makes up a much greater proportion of their work than assisting families. Using "natural" instead of "green" conveys

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[115] James G. Gimpel et al., "The Urban–Rural Gulf in American Political Behavior," *Political Behavior* 42, no. 4 (December 2020): 1343–68, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-020-09601-w.
[116] Christopher Wolsko, Hector Ariceaga, and Jesse Seiden, "Red, White, and Blue Enough to Be Green: Effects of Moral Framing on Climate Change Attitudes and Conservation Behaviors," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 65 (July 1, 2016): 7–19, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2016.02.005.
[117] Personal interview, 2022.

the idea that this is a return to burial practice that preceded the conventional method and is perfectly legal, rather than a practice recently drummed up by liberals or eccentrics. This shift in language not only serves to educate people, but it also allows them to market their burial grounds in a way that is appealing to people who hold to a wide variety of political beliefs.

The desire to market their methods in a way that depoliticizes them carries over to some extent into both alkaline hydrolysis and natural organic reduction. There, however, the political associations are harder to avoid since both alkaline hydrolysis and natural organic reduction were actually dreamt up by both liberals and eccentrics. However, while the environmental advantages are prominent in providers' marketing of these practices, they are also quick to use other kinds of adjectives to describe their disposal methods. In describing alkaline hydrolysis, for example, Tiffany tries to emphasize the gentleness of the process, rocking the body slowly into dissolution. She also points out that the result is much nicer than cremated remains, almost a white sand kind of substance. In descriptions of natural organic reduction, the environmental benefits are touted, but several organizations are also trying to tap into a love of the natural world more generally and emphasizing that this seemingly novel method is just a sped-up version of a natural decomposition process. This works well for the more pragmatic customers. One interlocutor who works the front of house at a natural organic reduction facility described a phone call from a woman who was interested in natural organic reduction for her husband but requested that they tone down all that "liberal shit" that appeared on their website. Their website forefronts the climate and environmental impact of their process, but also speaks about equality, includes a land acknowledgement, and has deeply empathetic and therapeutic language. All these factors

likely signal to this person that these are “liberal” folks. Therefore, the disposition itself might be viewed as a liberal practice, which some people want to pointedly avoid.

Providers must be chameleons of sorts, tailoring their responses to questions and marketing pitches to these particular audiences. Because Leighton operates a conservation burial cemetery in the South, he is careful to tailor his explanation of the conservation land based on his audience. When speaking to conservative, religious people, he makes connections to the burial of Jesus. When speaking with more liberal environmentalists from the city, he emphasizes the importance of conservation of land, biodiversity, and returning to the earth. And while this could be attributed to savvy marketing, he also points out that “the way we choose language can prevent people from having a good end of life experience.” So perhaps this moment isn’t the best time to educate about climate change, and instead meet the consumer on their terms. So, while some providers, and indeed many seem to be, are liberal leaning, in their conscious presentation of the facilities and processes, they do try to treat them as nonpolitical. This, of course, can’t be the case, as the central issue of climate change, which is the underlying drive for most of these organizations, has become a politicized issue.

Openness to all kinds of belief

Because the demographics in the United States are shifting, eco-disposition options are expanding to encompass the growing diversity of beliefs, and non-belief, that are becoming more common. As the U.S. becomes less affiliated with traditional religious groups, eco-disposition providers are offering a nonsectarian approach to disposition, regardless of their regional demographics. Many providers acknowledged not only the changes in religious affiliations, but also the growing popularity of nature-based spirituality. Greg’s burial ground in the South even sees a fair amount of celebrants presiding over burials

that "have a spiritual tone to them…And sometimes that fits sort of perfectly with [our burial ground] because it'll just turn into, you know, nature-based, cycle of life, kind of obvious." Although Greg is nonchalant about the adoption of the nature-based processes, it is not necessarily as obvious as he suspects. The South has deep cultural norms around funerals and practice, so to encourage or even have a space in which those are not the first option is more than generically "open," it's creating a new kind of space altogether.

This nontraditional religiosity is represented among providers as well. Of the twenty-two interlocutors I asked specifically, six replied that they were religious. The only self-identified Christian affiliation was from the Midwest, while three others identified as Jewish.[118] One person identified as Muslim, from the East Coast; and one as Quaker from the South. Seven identified as spiritual, most referencing a connection with the earth, and another eleven identified as secular or nonreligious. If you're following the math, that's more than twenty-two people, because many people identified in multiple ways. There is a lot of overlap between people identifying as both secular and Jewish and as both spiritual and secular. The spirituality in the context of secular allowed for a sacrality or special part nature plays in their lives. So, these providers, despite wanting to create open spaces, are also bringing with them their own beliefs and norms.

If we look first at natural burial grounds, we find that many do not have any religious affiliation, but even those that do, are downplaying it and catering to a diverse clientele. For example, in the relatively religious South, based on both church attendance and beliefs, the green burial grounds are more likely to attract a diversity of religious and nonreligious beliefs, and as such they pivot to cater to those families. In the West, which is the least

[118] Two Jewish respondents included both secular and religious as key parts of their identity.

religious area of the country in terms of affiliation and beliefs, green burial grounds and their operators are not religiously affiliated but place an emphasis on the special role that burial plays in the cycle of life, a kind of material sacredness. Some of the conservation cemeteries that I visited were registered as 501-c3 religious organizations, but it was often difficult for me to identify the religion with which they were affiliated. The 501-c3 organizations, I eventually discovered, were Buddhist, another Quaker, and one was specifically Jewish, but none were attached to traditional Christian institutions that have historically colored our death spaces. And, aside from the Jewish cemetery that was reserved for people of that faith, there were no restrictions on who could be buried in any of these burial grounds. Isobel, who identifies as a Quaker, works to share this openness with anyone who visits and chooses to bury on their land. For their clients, "they can perform their service here–not as Luke does or Isobel does, or any church does, but as they want to create for their loved one. And then after that service is over, they leave and the whole place resets for the next person to come along." The idea of the "reset" mimics the pragmatic parlor at funeral homes, but without the institutionalized structure that reminds some people of Christian traditions. A Tik-Tok-famous funeral director created a skit of "hiding Jesus" when necessary, but in this case, Jesus is still in the room, he's just behind the curtain. The reset of natural burial grounds is more thorough, with little of the religious influence of existing organizations or buildings, and the impetus is then on the family to introduce those elements.

Alkaline hydrolysis facilities are also religiously ambiguous spaces. The operators see a range of beliefs, but most people attending do not have any overt religious orientation. At least, nothing that is readily expressed during the process itself. For the bereaved in the West, Tiffany found that even the ceremonies held later "didn't use any professionals, really it was

the paddle out [on a surfboard] or at their church or, you know, at a hall that they rented and had some friends come over."[119] In the Midwest, the alkaline hydrolysis facilities are even more belief-ambiguous, typically emphasizing the cost and ease of the process rather than their attitude towards beliefs. But perhaps even this is an important shift. One example of overt religious, as opposed to spiritual, demonstrations in the viewing rooms is with Jewish families. Although Tiffany acknowledged that Jewish families will typically choose green burial over alkaline hydrolysis, she has had one Jewish family that "brought readings, and they were singing and doing readings at the beginning of the process." Timothy, another eco-disposition provider, has found that many Jewish people that he has spoken with are able to bring their traditions more readily into the alkaline hydrolysis space rather than a traditional crematorium, since there is a deep history of trauma associated with flame cremation.

Even more than alkaline hydrolysis, natural organic reduction facilities are natural blank slates on which people can build their own services and bring their own interpretations. There is no overt funerary history associated with these sites, so providers can easily present them as spaces that can be shaped by the bereaved. However, there is still values and beliefs that are infused in the space because of the people who own and operate it. As mentioned earlier, people are sometimes wary of some natural organic reduction facilities' liberal learnings. One of the facilities has an "about" page that includes words like "inclusive" and "ethical," which, while perhaps neutral, are likely laden with implications about minority communities and fair-trade practice. Another natural organic reduction site has been very conscientious about cultivating a progressive and inclusive viewpoint, making a point to include Land Acknowledgements on their page and in presentations. As I will discuss more

[119] Margaret Gibson and Mardi Frost, "Surfing and Ocean-Based Death Ritual: The Paddle-out Ceremony," *Mortality* 24, no. 3 (August 2019): 304–18, https://doi.org/10.1080/13576275.2018.1461816.

in Chapter 4, these spaces have become havens for some people who have historically been marginalized in death, like the LGBTQ+ community.

Breaking New Ground

Legislation to legalize natural organic reduction and alkaline hydrolysis continues to be brought forth in various states even as I race to finish this dissertation. Simultaneously, the interest in cultivating green burial grounds, either by way of conservation or hybridization, is also growing. The supply is growing in line with the demand. Frank remembers that “way back when, it was a very highly educated consumer that was looking for it, and you know it's done a complete about face, meaning that the highly educated consumers are there, but now it's everybody–every race, creed, color, religion, sexuality we've done it all.” As we will discuss in Chapter 4, this isn’t *exactly* accurate, as there are clear gaps in who has adopted these practices, but it certainly appears to be the providers’ intention. Now, with the growth of death providers on Tik-Tok and Instagram, more young people are learning about the various options around death.

Establishing these environmental options requires overcoming legislative, regional, and logistical barriers, but once permission is granted, new questions arise, such as how the facilities will operate to cater to the demand. In the next chapter, I will explore the eco-disposition sites and facilities that have been developed and updated to serve bereaved individuals and provide spaces in which they can express values and enact individual practices.

Chapter 2: If you build it, they will come

As I drove through the winding, two-land roads, I pulled over three times to check my maps (both physical and digital, as the cell reception was touch and go) before I finally arrived at the sprawling preserve in its own little corner of the Pacific Northwest. I crossed the small bridge to enter the preserve, where I was confronted by a deer in the center of the lane. He stared directly at me for a long moment before moving on, and I paused to look at the ponderosa pines to one side and open grassland on the other. It didn't feel like a typical cemetery, and it was wildly different from the natural organic reduction facilities that I visited the week before. By contrast, the urban natural organic reduction sites, several hundred miles north of the preserve, were in a maze of gray, metal buildings. This image changed as soon as I stepped inside, as the natural organic reduction facility entries are laden with plants and feature nature-inspired wall prints. The operators do an excellent job of making it feel very homey and provide things to touch–like a sample of the soil–on the entryway tables to keep people physically connected to the outcome. The message for both of these kinds of spaces is clear: when you die with us, you will return to nature.

Green burial grounds and facilities for alkaline hydrolysis and natural organic reduction have been mindfully cultivated by the owners or operators to distinguish themselves from the stereotypical associations with funeral homes of old by showcasing the "natural-ness" or connection to nature as well as encouraging personal involvement in the ritual processes. The facilities themselves encourage a focus on the body as both set apart and as part of something larger, integrating the specialness of the person with their importance in the cycle of life. The way in which these spaces are constructed reflects how the owners want them to be viewed by the surrounding community, always emphasizing the natural while, in

some places, avoiding the complication of left-wing environmentalism. This despite the driving ethos of climate concern driving the creation of these facilities. In the emerging natural organic reduction facilities, however, family needs were not clearly anticipated, and organizations were forced to adjust their architecture, modifying old and creating new facility designs based on the demands of the bereaved.

The eco-disposition facilities are, by design, religiously ambiguous[120], but like many religious spaces they require the material to evoke the immaterial. Supplanting a cross or mihrab is a facility's nature-inspired logo, plus the added touches of plants and death positive quotes. To make these distinct deposition processes easily understood as natural processes of death by most people, they must physically demonstrate markers of nature and continuity to suggest that nature, and therefore the deceased, continues after death as part of the natural cycle. We can use two key terms, which are used to analyze religious architecture, to think about eco-disposition facilities as housing particular beliefs and values: interactionalism and identification.[121] Interactionalism is the way in which the facilities are constructed as well as the relationship between the facility and subject. Identification is the idea that the individual self-engages in a socio-material field that includes other people and objects, including the body of the deceased. When applied to eco-disposition facilities, interactionalism encourages us to ask how the bereaved interact with the natural and built environment–the constructions themselves, or nature already present or cultivated. Identification, by way of contrast, focuses on the social relations and objects with which people interact in that environment–the

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[120] More on this in Chapters 3 and 4.
[121] Oskar Verkaaik, ed., *Religious Architecture: Anthropological Perspectives* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2013).

relationships between the bereaved, the facilities, the service directors or eco-disposition providers, and the physical parts of the space.

Engaging with Available Facilities

Green Burial

Most of the people on the conservation burial ground tour were dressed for a short hike. True to the fashion of the Pacific Northwest, the participants' outfits relied heavily on Columbia and Patagonia and visitors had opted for boots or rugged sneakers to start our journey to the burial areas of the preserve. I fell into step with Francesca, a young woman who was not much older than I, but who had come to pick out her burial site. Her story was not of tragedy, but pragmatism. Francesca had anxiety and wanted to be prepared for her death for the benefit of her family. Francesca was not outdoorsy, but the idea of embalming "freaked her out" so she had sought out alternatives. Despite her lack of enthusiasm for the outdoors, she made several comments about the beauty of the preserve. She felt at peace there and was excited to get a "feel" for her burial place. She was not the only one who felt connected to the space, and this is what the preserve wants to encourage.

Figure 1: An example of a personally selected green burial site, chosen for its proximity to the trees, and a small pond in the distance. The mound is made up of the natural materials removed from the dug grave and added tributes of local flowers and stones that were found around the grave site (personal photo, 2022).

Green burial providers cultivate an appreciation and even love for a specific environment. And this love for place begins with the providers themselves. In my phone conversation with Isobel and Luke, they continuously emphasized the native species, preserving the landscape and the original structures, and the natural beauty of their southern region. Business partners and long-time friends, Isobel and Luke would pause our conversation to say things like, “do you hear that blue jay, it is so close!” When I visited their burial ground nearly a year later with my brother in tow, they had the same enthusiasm for the natural species and space they had cultivated. Isobel, a cheerful woman in her late 50s, was attuned to the need to present and cultivate their land in a way that appealed both to the liberal conservationists from the closest city as well as to the neighboring farmers who take pride in working the land. This is why Isobel was eager to restore the old barns and shelters

that dotted her newly purchased burial land. The restored buildings, she hoped, would engage people's attention, and enhance their connection to the site. These elements of identification allow the burial grounds to mean different things to different people and enable people to interact with them in diverse ways. I think that Isobel was more aware of her own positionality in this because I was present with my brother, who certainly looks like the part of the neighboring farmers. Our juxtaposition—local, small-town guy and out-of-town coastal dweller—highlighted the kind of broad appeal she was hoping to achieve.

In conservation burial grounds, and to an extent in the less-stringent natural burial grounds, individuals can choose a burial plot environment. For Isobel and Luke's burial ground, this meant selecting a wooded burial or meadow burial. Isobel expressed some frustration that most pre-planners preferred wooded areas, but she was trying to entice them out to the meadows. To her point, she would crouch down and gesture to an emerging flower in the meadow. But waving, yellowed grass apparently had less aesthetic appeal than did the pine woods, where people were drawn to burial sites near particular trees. Isobel showed us a particular copse of trees in which all the burial plots had been reserved. The tree in the center was large, gnarled, and easily recognizable—many people felt an "affinity" for it, and, perhaps subconsciously, knew that it would be an intuitive, natural marker. In conservation burial practice, the owners and operators keep the landscape as wild as possible, providing the equivalent of hiking trails to get through the grounds and graves are typically only distinguished by a raised mound of dirt that will settle over time. The presentation works; after one visit, my brother had (at least mentally) chosen a meadow plot.

The near-seamless blend of cemetery and untouched nature is present at a smaller scale in both natural burial grounds and hybrid burial grounds. This was most evident when

my partner, who gamely accompanies me to such sites, said that one of the natural burial grounds we visited was “not nearly as creepy” as the conventional cemeteries. Prior to the 1900s, cemeteries in the U.S. served as every-day gathering places for shared meals and celebrations, but this practice waned throughout the 20th century despite the efforts of memorial park developments to create "beautiful parks...not creepy cemeteries.”[122] Ultimately, the memorial parks still had headstones and a cultivated appearance that gave away its primary purpose. The green burial grounds today are reclaiming the heritage of cemetery as a community center by obscuring, or at least not centering, the sites of burial. To promote this kind of engagement, the providers have hiking trails, work parties, and community events for people to gather and support the organization. This practice connects visitors to the land, perhaps as future customers, as well as providing an accessible outdoor space. They are creating a narrative that suggests that you benefit from the natural environment of the burial grounds and then you contribute to it after death. One of Leighton’s bereaved family members said, “We took our father home to die, and we took him to [your burial ground] to live.” This also provides a more accepting and open way for the bereaved to visit with the dead, without the pressure of an austere conventional cemetery.

[122] Lauren Carroll, “The Deathwives: Environmental Death” (The Round Glass Collective, November 7, 2021).

Figure 2: A walking trail in a green burial ground, grave sites only lightly visible (under the central tree and in the bottom right corner of the photo) (Personal photo, 2022).

Alkaline Hydrolysis

Dedicated alkaline hydrolysis facilities are still relatively uncommon throughout the United States, so it was a novelty to step into Timothy's warehouse. Our group gathered around a steel box, peeking around the back at the many tubes that led to giant, unlabeled cylinders of liquid. This area was clearly not for visitors, as no pains were taken to blunt the industrial appearance of the device. It is more typical for alkaline hydrolysis machines to be housed in crematoriums or funeral homes alongside cremation retorts. However, in the few dedicated facilities in operation, there is a clear emphasis on the natural benefits of the deceased's remains and the gentleness of the process.

Tiffany's alkaline hydrolysis facility had only been open for a few weeks when we spoke in 2022, but at that time she felt like most of the bereaved were choosing to be present when the process began. She thoughtfully chewed on her lip as she remembered each of her decedents so far. She finally concluded that she only remembers one family to leave quickly,

but, even then, they were still present when the machine was started. To facilitate this moment with the body, she created a comfortable room on one side of a glass window that looks into the alkaline hydrolysis chamber. The process begins by "bring[ing] people into the room. We have essential oils, we have some music playing, we turn the lights down a little bit. And the whole room is blues and greens and moss. It's not dark, you know?" As the family comes in, they only see a fogged glass, but when the process begins, the glass clears and they can see their loved one, temporarily covered with a sheet. The bereaved are welcome to spend as much time there as needed. When the attendees are ready, the deceased person is pushed into the cylinder for the alkaline hydrolysis process. Facilitators tactfully remove the sheet and start the machine. Family members can remain, but Tiffany finds that most simply linger for a few minutes to chat. Tiffany's alkaline hydrolysis facility currently does not offer any larger gathering spaces, so most people opt for a celebration of life or a scattering of the remains later at another location.[123]

Other alkaline hydrolysis providers that I spoke with had not developed a space for families to be in proximity to the body, but these developments are on top of the mind for operators. During my visit to Timothy's space for both alkaline hydrolysis and natural organic reduction, which are conveniently located across the street from each other in the suburbs of his western city, I noticed that the buildings were clearly industrial and not necessarily family oriented. Timothy has a deep understanding of the importance of his death work. A tall man with an easy smile, he showed me around his facility with a warm enthusiasm that also acknowledged the gravity of his role in the cycle of life. In his facility, he currently doesn't permit witnessed alkaline hydrolysis processing, but he plans to create a

[123] The rituals surrounding this process will be discussed further in Chapter 4.

much larger space where that might be possible. At present, he has a little sitting room to host visitors, and the most obvious feature is the considerable number of plants that are placed on tiny shelves across the wall and on every available flat surface. I learned that the donated alkaline hydrolysis "tea" that results from the process is used to fertilize the plants, which appeared remarkably healthy considering the winter climate. Each plant is a small reminder of the benefits of processed remains.

Figure 3: A room in the front-of-house for an alkaline hydrolysis facility, replete with plants, nature prints, and sculptures (personal photo, 2022).

If we compare alkaline hydrolysis to the process of cremation, witnessed cremations have not been conventionally popular. However, this is beginning to shift as more funeral directors recognize the importance of ritual engagement with the deceased.[124] To have a "witnessed" cremation, the family may be, like in Tiffany's facility, on the other side of a window to watch the person enter the machine. Some crematoriums provide the family the

[124] Sarah Kessler, "Can Family or Loved Ones Witness the Cremation Process?," *Cake* (blog), June 23, 2021, https://www.joincake.com/blog/witnessing-cremation/.

option to push their loved one into the cremation retort and even press the button to start the process. At this time, there isn't much emphasis placed on creating a particular natural atmosphere for participants. Despite the utilitarian approach, for some people, the involvement in these steps is important. However, this option is not for everyone, and the reality of cremation doesn't fill them with peace.

When my grandmother died at the end of 2022, our family chose to cremate her. I asked my mother if she planned to witness the cremation, and her short answer was "no," but her face showed some degree of disgust and disbelief. She didn't find the idea of being there for the cremation to be important or desirable. It seems that alkaline hydrolysis differs from cremation in this regard. This may be because alkaline hydrolysis has been developed at a time in which the importance of ritual is becoming more central in bereavement. There is also an intentionality in the choice of alkaline hydrolysis–it is rarely a default. Providers are creating spaces to entice people to use their services, and it may be that these tacit connections to nature in these viewing rooms then reinforces that environmental benefit of the choice. As alkaline hydrolysis facilities are being built, there is attention to these design aspects that have been neglected in the development of crematoriums.

Natural Organic Reduction

In visiting nearly every site for natural organic reduction, my first thought was how intentionally designed they were, despite being functionally warehouses. Although new facilities may be purpose-built for natural organic reduction, these initial facilities are all in existing warehouse structures. When you walk into the entry, each urban facility is covered with plants, nature prints, macramé, and earth tones. Many have sample soil from the natural organic reduction process readily available for people to see, touch, or smell. These choices

soften the otherwise industrial environment but are also conscious reminders of the result of the natural organic reduction process. Ultimately, your remains will return to the earth, but these additions also implicitly signal that you can become a plant or a tree. I will discuss this particular desire in the next chapter, but here will address how the physical space allows visitors to project this desire onto it.

Figure 4: An entryway into a natural organic reduction facility, with plants, nature prints, and warm touches of carpet (personal photo, 2022).

The intentionality in the design of natural organic reduction facilities includes overt connections between bodies and plants. This is perhaps most obvious in Timothy's warehouse, in which an individual plant is placed on top of each "cradle." The cradle resembles a giant spool, with two circular boards supporting a cylindrical middle. This design allows the operators to roll the cradle, mixing the human composted remains. Again, Timothy's facility is not open to the public, but he plans to create a larger facility where interaction and visitation with those "becoming plant food" will be possible. Currently, the plants remind the natural organic reduction operators of that connection to the person, and to the environment. The individuality of the person is represented by the plant.

Mick's outdoor natural organic reduction facility uses a similar cradle design, but is surrounded by wild, natural land, which directly suggested where people might distribute the processed remains. Mick's personality offered a sharp contrast to Timothy's steady gravity and to the attitudes of other urban natural organic reduction providers. Brusque, straightforward, and strong-willed, he was adamant that his approach, holistic and completely natural insofar as no external power sources were used, was best. As we approached the cradles, we could hear the birds calling and the early May flowers were starting to emerge. Even the rugged, farm-style cradle in which the body is placed evokes a raw and natural feel. Timothy and Mick's rustic natural organic reduction containers are notably distinct from the metal, industrial, and clean aesthetic of the urban natural organic reduction facilities. And this difference has caused some tension between environmental impact and acceptance of the practices, which I will address further in the next section.

Figure 5: Individual plants sitting on top of natural organic reduction vessels (personal photo, 2022).

Urban natural organic reduction facilities also differ in that they have developed a particular kind of space for both ongoing attention to the vessel and a ritual gathering space

for the “laying-in” ceremony. One of the facilities has spent much of their business development time cultivating the latter, taking time to create a chapel-like space for the laying in and funeral services or celebrations of life. Due to delays in construction and the COVID-19 pandemic, their facility has not been opened much to the public, but the intention was always present to provide this space. They were the first to recognize the need for ritual practice in this way, immediately consulting “ritual specialists” to help create the space for the laying in. In interviews, providers described a collaboration between the in-house team and the advisors that serve as these ritual specialists, which include a professor with expertise in cultural death narratives, a mortician, and a death doula, among others. In these facilities, there are people who perform back-end operations of the vessels or cradles, and funeral or service directors who tend to the deceased and the bereaved people. There is interactionalism between the ritual space and the family that allows for the ritual to be both prescriptive and descriptive, meaning that they can both follow a preset ritual and create new elements individually.[125] Both the physical space and a cycle-of-life ritual were created to fill this ritual intent, but the family is also welcome to take ownership of the process.

Another urban natural organic reduction facility, also in the Pacific Northwest, takes a more open approach, inviting people into the warehouse space itself to create the desired ambience for a laying-in rather than designating a separate ritual space. During the laying in for a young woman who died in an accident, the providers set up folding chairs facing a microphone and invited friends and family to speak. The directors set up a table for people to decorate photos or cards with messages to be placed on the deceased’s vessel. The warehouse itself becomes a site for the celebration of life. The facility operators also permit the families

[125] Catherine Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

to decorate the vessels and it's typical to see the vessels decorated with photos, mementos, and occasionally small food offerings (with a mutual knowledge that these will be taken away by staff after the family leaves). Providers in this facility also allow the bereaved to return to visit during the 30-day composting process and the operators provide chairs for those who come to sit with their composting person. While this facility has pioneered this in-between visitation in their space, other natural organic reduction facilities are changing their physical architecture and building codes to follow suit. Because some are concerned about the industrial setting, they are creating separate kinds of visitation spaces for people to visit with their deceased loved one during the composting process. They are creating separate rooms or partitioned areas that block the more industrial parts of the process. As these developments are unfolding as I write, we are just beginning to see the way in which these spaces will adapt, but they are slowly but surely shifting focus to accommodate families' ritual needs and to emphasize the specialness of the body.

Recognizing the Specialness of the Body

Why are these eco-disposition operators and owners cultivating these spaces so carefully? The answer lies in the emerging distinction between cremation and eco-dispositions. Like religious spaces, eco-disposition sites are "espace autres" that resist desanctification due to the specialness that people ascribe to the dead body. [126] Cremation, as a utilitarian response to conventional burial, downplayed the specialness of the body—the role it played in the bereaved's values and their bereavement itself. Green burial, alkaline

[126] Dawdy, *American Afterlives*; Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Vintage Books, 1967).

hydrolysis, and natural organic reduction are a reaction to this utilitarian turn. These practices provide a middle-ground between the conventional, expensive ceremony that dominated much of the twentieth century and bare-bones disposition that prevailed in reaction at the close of the twentieth and early part of the twenty-first centuries.

As Colleen acknowledged from her perspective in the cremation industry, the popularization of cremation left people without a clear sense of what to do with the cremated remains. Even when taking this bare-bones approach, people still felt that the remains were special, so they rebelled at the idea of throwing them away. Some purchased expensive vessels with the intention of displaying the remains, but that often didn't sit right either. As a result, some remains were left unattended in Tupperware containers and in the back of closets, relegated to the shelves with sentimental, child-created crafts that feel too special to be thrown away, but also not ready for display.[127] Eco-disposition options not only provide an environmental alternative, but they also recognize the specialness of the body and have created spaces in which the physical body is treated as special for a final time. The environmentally beneficial form of the remains moreover suggests their return to the earth as a final resting place and the body's place in the ecological life cycle as it is transformed from body to plant.

Demonstrating the transformation from body to nature is not an issue with green burial. Back at the natural burial ground in the West, our tour group arrived at the end of the long gravel driveway to the area that was designated for burial. Next to the walkway I saw a wooden, two-wheeled cart, much like a long wheelbarrow. During the short talk that followed, the operators explained that this was available to families to take the deceased

[127] Personal interview, 2019.

person, in a coffin or wrapped in their burial shroud, into the burial area. Manually operated carts like this, some influenced by Amish designs, were present at several of the burial grounds. The family is encouraged to physically transport the deceased to their final resting place. This final act of service connects the family to the burial process itself, demonstrating that this type of ritual is not only symbolic, and actually involves the physical participation of the participants.

Figure 6: An example of a hand cart used to transport the deceased body to the grave on green burial grounds (personal photo, 2022).

The hands-on nature of this type of disposition reflects the rural death rituals of old. Historically, in rural areas, death was a moment of community solidarity and familial closeness, but this simple transition to internment became complicated as populations

increased and became more urban.[128] Limited space and time in which to spend time with the body meant that in urban settings, the body is whisked away quickly and managed by professionals to limit contamination. To counter this in urban spaces, and to draw people closer to nature and the body within the city, providers of alkaline hydrolysis and natural organic reduction also encourage this hands-on participation.

At their natural organic reduction facility, one of the operators permits the family to come into the preparation room, to bathe the deceased, and to help wrap them in a cotton garment. One provider described the story of a deceased young man who was one of their first laying-ins. The young man had died suddenly, and his mother made the decision to have him undergo natural organic reduction as a final tribute to his life. She drove him to the provider's facility from another state because, in life, he was afraid to fly. She insisted on being part of every stage of the process from transport to body preparation. The mother asserted that, "I gave him his first bath, and I will give him his last." The hands-on aspects combine with a connection to nature itself.

Another one of the natural organic reduction facilities shared a social media post that featured a quote from a family member of a person who had been disposed of in their facility and then his remains spread by his family at their home. The post quoted he deceased's sister as saying, "I still talk with [him] every time I am weeding underneath my own Japanese maples. I love thinking of him spread under the roots of so many trees." The caption read that the disposition method was "an ecological option that connects us to the land and ecosystems—much like natural burial for our rural counterparts. Soil created from our

[128] Laderman, *The Sacred Remains*, 38.

beloved dead goes to enrich the cities in which we live." Natural organic reduction is stylized as an urban green burial.

Making the Process Special

Providers of eco-dispositions center the body, and its reintegration into nature, as a key element of the process. In this way, it is not simply the body that is special, but the acts that lead up to its final disposition. However, even in conventional burials of the past century, the treatment of the body after death and prior to interment is also time set aside and the body is made the priority. The difference lies in the family's engagement with the physical body. As a funeral director, Dawn works with many families who choose home burials, which are often green, and ask about green options, which she is more than happy to discuss. She is equipped to handle every part of the disposal process, from picking up the deceased from their place of death (usually a hospital or hospice, but sometimes a home or morgue) to preparing the body for its final disposition. However, part of her mission is to educate families about both green and hands-on options, which often go together. When a family chooses a home burial, it is not only about the environmental benefit, but about adding meaning to the process by returning that person to a landscape that is familiar and doing so with the aid of their family and friends. In the absence of family or friends, Dawn nonetheless makes a point to mark the disposition process as special. One of the first people to choose natural organic reduction at Mick's burial ground did not have family or friends to witness and help in the process. Dawn and Mick did a small ceremony, a pause, and created a space for that ritual moment.

The memorialization of the person once they have gone through their disposition process has also developed away from the conventional. Occasionally, conservation burial ground operators find that people want to mark their loved one's grave and the operators must educate the client about the importance of maintaining the environment as close to natural as possible. The operators remind clients that the reason they wanted their person buried there, or the reason the deceased chose it for themselves, is because of the natural beauty and resonance with the environment. To me, this signals that by introducing markers or other non-native species or objects, environmental purity is compromised. This is purity in the ecological sense, distinct from the purity that has marked the conventional cemetery, which is more visual and includes pesticide-maintained plants and mown lawns.[129]

Figure 7: A green burial plot atop which a family has placed some deer antlers that they found nearby. This serves as an example of the kind of natural decoration and connection to the surrounding landscape and wildlife common in these burial grounds (personal photo, 2022).

[129] Lawns themselves are, in fact, a cultural construct of the 1950s in the United States, see [Why American Lawns All Look the Same] (https://youtu.be/XQaMr3UHOWE)]

To get a sense of the space, when I visited burial grounds in person I had close looks at the graves, and how they existed in the larger area of the burial grounds. I had to search to find Sarah Jane's western burial ground, but once there I breathed in the pine smell and felt the warm sun and the peace began to settle in. It was clear that this was a special place. Even though the conservation burial grounds tend to limit the number of non-native plants and highly visible markers, the layout of the trails, the natural landscape encouraging animal presences, and the operators' creativity highlight how each grave and person is special within the grounds.

Similarly, Taylor described the paths of her midwestern burial ground to be no more than 100 to 200 feet from any one grave site, so it's easy to access your person, but not intrusive.[130] Many green burial grounds aim to strike a balance between access and natural appearance. But at the same time, it is important to invite people into nature as much as possible, as it provides a backdrop for important phenomena. Taylor only had some experience in the death world, but her reverence for the process was evident even over Zoom. She described several of the interments she has seen at her natural burial ground. During one service, Taylor described eight bluebirds sitting in a tree. Taylor was specific in her explanation that, "bluebirds are not a gregarious bird. They're very skittish. They usually stay away from people." So, their appearance at this burial was notable, special. The natural phenomena that are cultivated in these preserved areas become a source of comfort or peace at the grave site.

Many of these green burial "plots" develop into works of art, specific to the person and perfected for each family. Leighton is renowned for his attention to detail in creating

[130] Anyone who has visited a conventional cemetery has had the experience of being unsure where to step when walking down the paths in front of headstones--where does the grave end and the path begin?

aesthetic grave experiences for each family. These natural decorations–flowers, branches, leaves, plants–create a unique experience for each deceased individual. In contrast to the tarp, astroturf, and manicured setting of a conventional burial, at Leighton's burial ground, "you don't see a tarp. You do not see a tent generally unless it's pouring rain, or there is excessive heat...I want to try to break everything down and just have us and raw nature right there. So that we can get the closest to the return or the burial as possible." The setting itself is an ode to values of honoring and preserving nature and to the body itself.

Without the aid of nature in its raw form, both alkaline hydrolysis and natural organic reduction facilities must bring those elements into the space to make that connection to the special part the body plays in the cycle of nature. There is no escaping the industrial setting of these processes, but facilitators work to transition the mind's eye from the mechanical surroundings to what will be the final product and emphasizing the gentleness of the process. The few alkaline hydrolysis facilities are distinguishing themselves from crematoriums by recognizing that families want to be present with the deceased body during the process and creating a space in which they can do so safely, given the restrictions of operating machinery.[131] The viewing room at Tiffany's facility has low-lighting, soft touches, and creates a mood of peace. The families are given however much time they need, honoring the time of bodily transition to remains as important. Meanwhile, witnessed cremations may also have a viewing room, but require that a family move through quickly and may even charge for the option to view. In a crematorium, other cremation retorts must be shut down if a family is viewing, and therefore it is important to move people through the facility quickly.

[131] During the COVID-19 pandemic, alkaline hydrolysis facilities did not have as many challenges as other funeral homes with respect to viewing the deceased because the facilities were designed with a physical separation between the deceased and the family.

Distinct from crematoriums, the alkaline hydrolysis facilities are designed with reminders of the result of the process. Timothy tells visitors that the plants in the waiting room are fertilized with donated "tea," an effluent that is the liquid result of the decomposition process. Because of the element of choice in deciding to do alkaline hydrolysis, most clients have a sense of what they want to do with the remains, either personally or with the intention to donate them to a farm or nature preserve. This reminder is validating their environmental choice. For those that do not prioritize the positive environmental impact on a collective, global scale, Timothy shifts the focus to how the person's remains will benefit their private land—contributing to their crops or garden. During the process itself, both Tiffany and Timothy cover the deceased person with a sheet, since they will be naked for the process, rather than fully clothed as in cremation. The white shroud or sheet evokes a sense of naturalness and almost liminality, as the body will be transformed in the process into a beautiful white "ash" and environmentally beneficial effluent.[132]

Natural organic reduction facilities are also industrial, but some of these facilities have gone out of their way to create an environment that is fresh, natural, and, like alkaline hydrolysis, a reminder of what the final product will be. When I visited one natural organic reduction facility, they were just beginning to create partitions to hang in front of the shocking purple and green metal industrial racks on which the natural organic reduction vessels are placed. These partitions, prints of the redwood forests just a short drive away, could be moved whenever families visit their vessels, but otherwise would appear like an indoor forest. Meanwhile, another organization has created a blend of industrial and natural, creating a honeycomb-like structure to backdrop their vessels, likening the body to a bee

[132] Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, 1969.

larva stored in a wax cell, to be harvested later. There is a degree of tension between the operators of the cultivated urban aesthetics of the metal vessels and the more rustic designs of the large, wooden cradles. The original designs for urban natural organic reduction aimed to distance the process from a family compost heap, creating the image that the process, and even the deceased person themselves, is clean, beautiful, simple, and, ultimately, not a smelly compost heap. The cradle designs, some of which are outside, and all are manually rolled, break down some of this illusion. Without technological monitoring, some providers feel like the manual cradles are more at risk of "failing" and compromising the specialness of the process for a human body. Not to mention the potential legal ramifications for improper operation.

Figure 8: The "honeycomb structure" observed in a natural organic reduction facility (photo by Recompose, available on website).

Mick argues the opposite: that the urban design is for the benefit of fundraising and aesthetics only and the natural design is a more genuine approach. For him, the fact that his cradles require no electricity means that they are ultimately a much more environmentally friendly choice. His architecture and the presentation of the natural organic reduction cradles is centered on his intentional living goals and the importance of the permaculture of the forest. While creating a natural burial ground was important from the perspective of "reconciliation and being a service to nature," ultimately Mick "just damn well [is] not going to move." The land is home, a forever home. Then, his intention behind the design of the natural organic reduction cradles can be interpreted as being about the greater environment, but also about the individual. Fewer people tend to visit these cradles, and only slightly more visit the gravesites scattered throughout his natural burial ground. Well into the Cascades, Mick's land is not easily accessible.

Many people who choose to be interred or have their loved ones choose this method are compelled by the solitude. With fewer visitors, it's not as critical to create a visual or architectural presentation, but, in the age of Instagram, we all know that aesthetics do indeed matter. Urban natural organic reduction, more so than alkaline hydrolysis, has tried to create a natural and beautiful aesthetic. The visual details, from the honeycomb vessels to the indoor forests, distance people from the industrial and unconventional methods, while reminding them that the output is going to be beneficial and closely tied to nature. The body, although temporarily housed in metal, will return to the earth in a way that is net positive.

Ritualization of the Process: Natural Organic Reduction's Concept Shift

While both green burial and alkaline hydrolysis had models on which to build–historical burial and cremation, respectively–natural organic reduction has had to cultivate a new vision of what it means to dispose of bodies in both urban and rural environments. Natural organic reduction practice evolved from disposition of farm animals, but this, again, is not the image that the original creators wanted to evoke. The initial design was intended to blend the ethos of large-scale composting with city living and create a truly urban and functional design that would allow bodies to be disposed of in a timely and efficient manner and to return to the collective.

Katrina Spade's original vision for human composting began with a giant silo.[133] The multi-story silo would be filled with compostable materials, and the combination of gravity and heat would interact with the body to aid in its decomposition as it moved down the silo. The opening at the bottom of the silo would supply a rich, usable compost to a community or community garden, centering the facility as part of the local culture and activities. Spade herself described the imagined facility as part funeral home, part memorial, and part public park.[134] This idea is reminiscent of the cemetery as a gathering place, but in a much more functional form. There was even emphasis on the de-individualization of the remains. Spade said, "What's magical is that we cease to be human during this process. Our molecules are rearranged into other molecules, and in fact what's created is not human remains. To give

[133] Brendan Kiley, "The Architect Who Wants to Redesign Being Dead," The Stranger, accessed March 8, 2023, https://www.thestranger.com/features/2015/03/03/21792773/the-architect-who-wants-to-redesign-being-dead.
[134] Robyn Ross, "Inside the Machine That Will Turn Your Corpse Into Compost," *Wired*, 2016, https://www.wired.com/2016/10/inside-machine-will-turn-corpse-compost/.

someone back the soil that is created from just their person would be purely symbolic. If what we're trying to do is reconnect with the fact that we're all part of this grand natural world, let's say, ok, we really are part of this system that's greater than ourselves."[135]

Figure 9: One of the original concept images for the "Urban Death Project," which would eventually evolve into contemporary natural organic reduction technology. The multi-story compost vessel would allow for deceased bodies to be laid-in on each level (image from Wired.com).

When applied to eco-disposition facilities, interactionalism encourages us to ask how the bereaved interact with the natural and built environment–the constructions themselves, or nature already present or cultivated. Identification, by way of contrast, focuses on the social relations and objects with which people interact in that environment–the relationships between the bereaved, the facilities, the service directors or eco-disposition providers, and the physical parts of the space. There were several reasons why Spade's initial vision was not

[135] Ross.

realized, and it returns to the concepts of interactionalism and identification. The bereaved felt uneasy about the "mass grave" model of disposition–the silo design and the idea of vertical burial felt too foreign for comfort. Then, the legal implications interact with the bereaved individual's unease, discouraging the further development of this style of site. It is unclear which hurdle came first, but, logistically, most state law prohibits the "co-mingling" of human remains, or the group interment or mixing of multiple individuals in the same container. English common law did not consider the deceased body as property, but the courts have since deemed it property-like. The deceased's next-of-kin has the right to the possession of the deceased's body, also called the right of sepulcher under common law.[136]

Crematoriums have come under fire in the past for blending cremated remains from different people into the same urn, or mistakenly giving a family the wrong person's remains. The legal status of the body as more than an object is a way of avoiding religion, but still marking the body as special.[137] The natural organic reduction silo model, which would have mixed the remains of different people, made the hurdles for legalization much higher as it would require more fundamental legal changes and cultural shifts. However, designers rapidly realized that these laws reflected people's aversion to the idea of mass graves. People were still attached to their person–even as remains–and this is demonstrated at natural organic reduction facilities today when people immediately go to hug a small bag of their loved one's composted remains. The body–the remains–are sacred, and people in the U.S. are

[136] Stimmel Law, "Rights and Obligations As To Human Remains and Burial," Stimmel, Stimmel & Roeser, accessed March 7, 2023, https://www.stimmel-law.com/en/articles/rights-and-obligations-human-remains-and-burial; Abou Farman, "Speculative Matter: Secular Bodies, Minds, and Persons," *Cultural Anthropology* 28, no. 4 (2013): 737-.
[137] Farman, "Speculative Matter."

unwilling to cede that individuality in death.[138] Moreover, religious bodies, such as the leadership of the Catholic Church, have specified that remains need to be kept together and buried (although only permitted in the case of cremation so far). So, the theoretical model of the silo did not realistically engage with ways in which people think about the deceased body. Conversely, the individual vessel model both represents and reproduces our social norms as well as results from an interaction between the designers, legal boundaries, and the people requiring these services.[139]

Figure 10: A mock-up from the Urban Death Project, demonstrating how people might gather at the top of the silo to lay their person into the compost (from the Urban Death Project).

From the outset, however, this original silo model included an emphasis on ritual. The imagined design included a walkway for a funeral procession and space for a "laying in"

[138] Philip Olson, "Death at a Planetary Scale: Comingling and the Environmental Politics of Human Remains" (Death & Culture IV, York, UK, September 2022); Ross, "Inside the Machine That Will Turn Your Corpse Into Compost."
[139] Verkaaik, *Religious Architecture*.

ritual. In the initial concept, family and friends gathered on one of the silo’s levels or floors, placed their person on top of the compost, and aided in covering the body. As the design evolved, this laying-in ritual was always considered as part of the process. Ritual, in fact, was one of the central features of this process beyond the return to the natural environment. When the design shifted, creating individual vessels, the ritual intention remained. Unfortunately, when the first facilities broke ground in Washington state, the COVID-19 pandemic hit, forcing a shift to virtual formats for the early laying-ins and the next facility to open didn't anticipate this need as clearly.

Some of the early founders of natural organic reduction organizations envisioned that they would operate as the soil version of a direct cremation facility–people would give the facility their deceased loved ones, and the facility would give back soil. This was a very material, and very perfunctory, view of the body and of bodily disposition. In our conversation, one of the natural organic reduction providers described this initial perspective, and then his surprise then when people wanted to be present at the laying in, a desire that the leaders of one natural organic reduction facility had already anticipated but was obscured due to COVID and the delayed facility construction. So, facilities adapted, allowing people to create whatever they needed around a laying in ceremony, guided by service directors only at the bereaved person’s request. The industrial space was actually ideal for this purpose, as it allowed people to decide how they wanted to be present with the body–choosing music, food, and drink as suited them.

And then, a new desire emerged in this space, which was the desire to be with the body during the 30-day composting process. Again, there wasn't a designated space for this, but it turns out that people didn't necessarily need one. They just wanted a chair and a place

to be with their person. Eventually, the facility operators brought in picnic tables and people came to eat lunch and socialize alongside their composting loved ones. Other facilities have taken note of this, and when I asked if they had seen similar responses, they said that they hadn’t anticipated this need, so they hadn't created a space, but they intended to do so, likely based on the popularity of the practice at these early facilities. Denise is still in the initial stages of her natural organic reduction company but said that they originally hadn’t planned for the laying-ins or visits to be open to families, “but that’s absolutely something we want to be able to do. We didn’t design this facility for that specifically, but we have figured out how we can make that happen.” Families were both requesting this kind of attention directly, but it was clear from the availability at other facilities–and their growing success–that this was a necessary step to be competitive in the natural organic reduction market. In this way, the spaces are being created to benefit the stated needs of the bereaved, to be close to the body and to honor it during the transformation process. In chapter four, I will go into greater detail about the creation of novel rituals in natural organic reduction. But before we turn there, I will explain why people are choosing these practices and how those values impact ritualization.

Place and Space

The decision to have an eco-disposition is driven by several varied factors, but they align and interact with the spaces in which these options are available. The available facilities and areas of eco-disposition open up new spaces that allow people to develop rituals and express deeply held values that center on the enduring specialness of the deceased body. Through these examples, we see how the concepts of interactionalism and identification can

help us identify a relationship between facility, the person choosing this option for themselves or their loved one, and the socio-material field in which these eco-disposition sites are being developed.

Once these eco-disposition sites are legal, established, and operating in response to demand in the area in which they are located, the next question is who they are attracting, or who chooses this for themselves or their loved ones. The principle of interactionalism repeats here in that it is the coming together of place, space, providers, and individuals that creates the organizational construct that is the eco-disposition site. In the next chapters, we will pivot from the providers and facilities to the people who are engaging with these services.

Chapter 3: The Valued Natural Body

As each of my interviews wound down, I turned my interlocutors to the personal, asking what they want to happen to their physical body after death. Despite being death workers, some had made no official plans, but nearly all the eco-disposition providers that I spoke with intended to use their advertised manner of disposition for their own remains. Natalie, speaking from her natural organic reduction facility, had just finished her paperwork to become human compost. Natalie, a young woman with a very frank manner of speaking, knew as soon as she heard about natural organic reduction that this would be her path. All the natural organic reduction providers I spoke with had decided, and many had prepaid, for their disposition service at their facility, despite most being younger than 40 years old.

Providers at natural burial grounds have already selected their plot or have volunteered to be in the least desirable areas. At her burial ground and during our tour, Keira described selecting her plot where a dug grave was filled with heavy shale rock. When the operators dug out the grave, instead of the typical soil and some rock, most of the material was heavy rock slab. This would mean when the person was interred that they would cover the shroud or casket with the heavy rock–not the most moving way to re-inter a body in front of family. She decided that a space like that–unusable except to the uninitiated death worker–would suit her fine. At minimum, each of the people I spoke with thought it would be rather obvious that they would choose their own disposition method. This speaks to the passion and values that the providers are bringing. The providers believe in their process in a way that never seemed as important for conventional funeral directors. Like choosing to adopt eco-dispositions, choosing to provide them is value laden as well.

It is through this pursuit of personal values that providers observe others are coming to their services. Individuals who choose natural disposition options not only do so out of concern for the environment but do so more fundamentally because they view their bodies as part of the natural environment. The connection to nature manifests through different means: the material, spirituality and religion, and as embodied. For the secular and not spiritual types, it reflects their natural or materialist worldview that underlies and reinforces the importance of the dead body. The embrace of nature is true not only for non-religious people who integrate materiality, science, and/or spirituality into their choices but also for religious traditionalists who see nature as sacred and view themselves as imitating the practices of Jesus and see their natural burials as worship.

In this chapter, I will discuss the perceptions that providers have about the people who are choosing their services, supplemented with interviews and survey data that draw from people who are making these choices for themselves. Each provider has a slightly different perspective, but themes emerge. Brittany attributed the excitement people have for her conservation burial ground to its simplicity, small environmental footprint, consistency with religious traditions, and connection to the land and the natural cycle of life. Fundamentally, Timothy argues, “people don't want to disrupt the values that they held in living because they're at the moment of dying.” I argue that whether people view themselves as secular, religious, or spiritual, those who choose an eco-disposition do so not only for environmental reasons but as an expression of an embodied connection with the natural world that can be material or spiritual. I argue that the enduring importance of the body – rooted in the bereaved person’s continued attachment to the deceased–is gradually transformed into a connection to the natural world through the eco-disposition process.

Materiality and Secularism

In the interviews, as we turned to these more intimate questions around personal belief, some of my interlocutors offered expansive explanations of their beliefs, while others were more reticent. Of the 25 interviewees who were asked if they identified as religious, spiritual, secular, or something else, 12 identified as secular: some agnostic, some atheist, others as “not religious,” sometimes with qualifiers including spirituality, others associating their lack of religiosity with a lack of belief in an afterlife. As secular people, these respondents were not viewing the body from an afterlife perspective. Nor do they simply dismiss the body as dead matter. As the U.S. becomes more secular, people are increasingly linking the body with the life and values of the deceased, while they were living, rather than with a religiously-imagined afterlife. Secular people face a slightly different challenge than the religious, as they must first understand their own relationship to death in a way that may be distinct from the beliefs in which they were raised or are most common among the population.[140] Both the self-described secular and religious acknowledge the cognitive truth that the person is dead, and their body no longer has a distinct purpose, but the body continues to represent their personal connection to the person that they knew and loved. Eco-dispositions are a straightforward way in which people who subscribe to a materialist viewpoint can better express the significance of their own or a loved one's death by contributing their body materially–whether to protect land or to fertilize a garden or forest.

Scholars have only recently begun to inquire into the death and bereavement practices of secular individuals. Although much work has been done to delineate a materialist or

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[140] Caryle Murphy, “Most Americans Believe in Heaven...and Hell,” Survey (Pew Research Center, November 10, 2015), https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/11/10/most-americans-believe-in-heaven-and-hell/.

secular frame for understanding the world more broadly, this critical moment of death has largely been overlooked, especially in light of these emerging eco-disposition methods. Both ethnographic and sociological inquiry has indicated that disposition practices and death rituals can validate a secular worldview in terms of framing a material immanence in the case of humanist funerals, participating in meaningful disposal, and creating a formation of the body that is social.[141] Natalie, who had a large hand in developing the practices and meaning behind the service designed for her natural organic reduction facility, said that her own belief in physics and love of the natural world from a scientific perspective influenced the development of the practice. Her beliefs infused the ritual with her values of respecting nature and the natural world. The small insights from my secular interlocutors build on the literature that suggests that secular death rituals remain a major place for the expression of secular values–appreciation of science, contribution to humankind, and respect for the existing world.

Most of my interlocutors describe the people who are choosing eco-dispositions as nonreligious. Brittany spoke with me over Zoom after several false starts. She was buried under many meetings to organize the growth of the organization that supported her burial ground. They were making critical decisions about advertising, number of burials they could support, and hiring choices. Despite her busy schedule, she was very thorough in explaining the sentiments of the people who were coming to the burial ground. And she mentioned that she had just been looking at these demographics herself for the business side of things. Brittany granted that she did see services that were overtly Jewish, Quaker, and one that was explicitly Christian Wiccan. But she said, “the majority of the services are probably not

[141] Copeman and Quack, “Godless People and Dead Bodies”; Engelke, “The Coffin Question”; Farman, “Speculative Matter.”

religious. And just people speaking, telling stories, singing." In the natural organic reduction facilities, there is even less apparent religiosity. Nathan, a natural organic reduction provider, hasn't seen "a lot of classic religiosity, in its classic sense...but I would also say that it doesn't mean it wasn't there...Spirituality is enormous...but it's not a classic demonstration of spirituality." Nathan struggled with his description of what he was seeing.[142] The acts of preparing their loved one's body, of sitting with it, of being part of the process, seemed spiritual to Nathan, even though it did not have many of the features he associated with typical spirituality or religion. In this sense, it lacked the iconography, clergy, or liturgy that might otherwise mark it as spiritual or religious. Although these trends are even more evident in eco-disposition facilities, more people in general are seeking non-traditional funeral service. For example, one survey found that 42% of Americans have attended a funeral at which non-clergy presided over the service.[143] The generational divide has further blurred the line between the material, spiritual, and religious.[144] LeAnn, another natural organic reduction provider, added that, for natural organic reduction, "the majority, especially the younger people—I think our first five decedents were under 40—tend to be unchurched, but that doesn't mean that their parents aren't churched."

The 2021 General Social Survey reports that 28% of people in the United States identify as unaffiliated. Comparable results from the Pew Research Center suggest that 29% of U.S. adults identify as religious "nones" –atheists, agnostics, or "nothing in particular." These terms all reflect what people have rejected. Much of the existing scholarship on

[142] At one point, Nathan said, "I sound stupid" as he tried to explain the sense of sacredness without spirituality and religion. I hastened to assure him that he was on par with most scholars of religion in terms of general confusion.
[143] National Funeral Directors Association, "2021 NFDA Cremation & Burial Report."
[144] Nancy T. Ammerman, "Spiritual But Not Religious? Beyond Binary Choices in the Study of Religion," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 52, no. 2 (2013): 258–78; Bender and Taves, *What Matters?*

secular and nonreligious people focuses on the "negative" aspects of their belief as well: they do not believe in God, or they do not believe in an afterlife. As scholars have devoted more attention to this growing demographic, they have begun to advocate a fundamental shift in the scholarly approach to nonreligion from a focus on "negative" terms to a more nuanced determination of the diversity of beliefs held by those who adopt nonreligious ways of life.[145] Nonbelievers do tend to specify a lack of belief in God, gods, or the supernatural and instead rely on materialist ontology, rational empiricist epistemology, and a strong trust in science.[146]

However, we now know much more about who they are and what kind of beliefs and values secular people do hold. Nonreligious people typically are younger, disproportionately male, more highly educated, more progressive politically, and less likely to be married.[147] As numerous scholars have noted, contemporary secular people may self-describe as freethinkers, humanists, atheists, agnostics, or nonbelievers and present a much more diverse range of views than is usually depicted in the popular media.[148] Often, the worldviews of these various expressions of nonreligion align with and are built upon values like humanism, critical skepticism, natural laws, and a scientific cosmology void of gods or supernatural

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[145] Quack, "Outline of a Relational Approach to 'Nonreligion.'"

[146] Blankholm, "Secularism and Secular People"; Blankholm, *The Secular Paradox: On the Religiosity of the Not Religious*.

[147] Joseph O. Baker and Buster G. Smith, "The Nones: Social Characteristics of the Religiously Unaffiliated," *Social Forces* 87, no. 3 (2009): 1251–63; Hout and Fischer, "Why More Americans Have No Religious Preference"; Derek Lehman and Darren E. Sherkat, "Measuring Religious Identification in the United States," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 57, no. 4 (December 2018): 779–94, https://doi.org/10.1111/jssr.12543; Jesse M. Smith and Ryan T. Cragun, "Mapping Religion's Other: A Review of the Study of Nonreligion and Secularity," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 58, no. 2 (June 2019): 319–35, https://doi.org/10.1111/jssr.12597; David A. Williamson and George Yancey, *There Is No God: Atheists in America* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2013); Phil Zuckerman, "Atheism: Contemporary Numbers and Patterns," in *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism*, ed. Michael Martin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 47–65.

[148] Blankholm, "Secularism and Secular People"; Garcia and Blankholm, "The Social Context of Organized Nonbelief"; Blankholm, "The Political Advantages of a Polysemous Secular"; Hout and Fischer, "Why More Americans Have No Religious Preference"; Hout and Fischer, "Explaining Why More Americans Have No Religious Preference"; Lee, "Locating Nonreligion, in Mind, Body and Space."

agents.[149] In the context of death practices, this means that different values and beliefs have primacy with respect to the disposition of the deceased body.

Evidence for a Material Turn

The Secular Communities Survey is the largest survey of organized secular people in the U.S. to date. Our research group conducted a survey in April 2021 of these secular joiners to determine the values and beliefs held by secular people to better understand this increasing demographic.[150] Our survey, which covered many topics, asked two questions related to death, one having to do with bodily disposition and the other with the afterlife.

> "When you die, what do you intend for your physical body?" Available responses included: Cremation, casket burial, other, don't care, and unsure.

> "Which of the following statements best describes your views about what happens after death?" Available responses included: Death is the final end, individual consciousness ends and becomes part of universal consciousness, the soul survives and is reincarnated, the soul survives and goes to heaven, hell, or purgatory, and other.

We found that many respondents had disposition preferences and afterlife beliefs that diverged from the general population. With respect to disposition, a survey of Americans indicated that 56% of people would choose cremation, 38% would choose casket burial, and 6% would choose other.[151] Our survey respondents diverged from this pattern. Most people still chose cremation (49%), but a much larger percentage chose other (28%), while only 2% chose casket burial (see figure 1). The 28% seeking other options was much greater than

[149] Smith and Cragun, "Mapping Religion's Other"; Valerie van Mulukom et al., "What Do Nonreligious Nonbelievers Believe in? Secular Worldviews Around the World," *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, 2022, 15.
[150] The research group, funded by the Templeton Foundation, was led by Joe Blankholm and Merril Silverstein; UCSB researchers included Dusty Hoesly, Samantha Kang, and Shakir Stephen, along with research associates at Syracuse University.
[151] National Funeral Directors Association, "2021 NFDA Cremation & Burial Report."

those of the general population. This suggests that secular joiners represent a section of people who no longer identify with the historical choices: cremation and casket (or conventional) burial. Those who specified their preferences wrote in body donation, green or natural burial, tree pod,[152] human composting, or “environmentally friendly” (SCS, 2021).

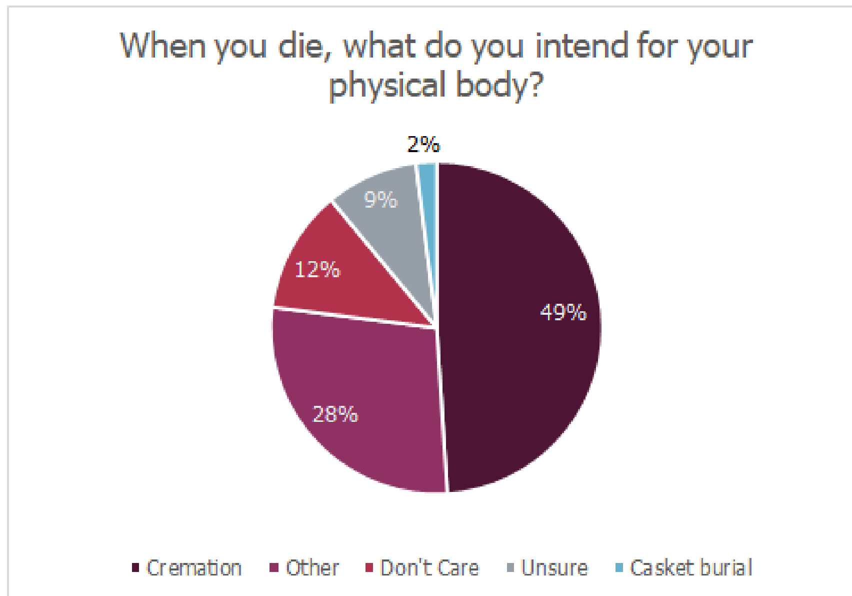

Figure 1: The Secular Communities Survey received n=12,370 responses from secular joiners. A majority of the respondents intended cremation for their physical body, but a large proportion (28%) intended “other.”

There was also a subset of respondents who said they didn't care what happened to their physical body (12%). Qualitative responses expanding on these selections disavowed the importance of their own body after death. One 40-year-old atheist said, “I'd like my skeleton to be preserved and trotted out on special occasions or left in an airport bathroom or something funny.” However, when my secular interlocutors were asked about the body of a loved one, this perspective shifted. The body of another person cannot as easily be treated with such a careless attitude, as the bereaved still maintains a connection with that person, in a way that they do not with their own body. As many believe that death is the final end, they know that they will not be there to be concerned about their own body. The body of a loved

[152] And unfortunately, not viable, see next section, which mentions the tree pod.

one is not necessarily significant for religious or spiritual reasons, but simply because it represents a person who they loved and respected. Therefore, the choice about what to do with their body has greater significance than their own, imagined dead body.

The stated preference, without prompting, for eco-disposition coincides with the data from our survey that showed that these secular individuals also had divergent beliefs about what happens after death. For our second death-related question about what happens after death, 83% of participants in the SCS chose "death is the final end," with another 8.4% choosing "individual consciousness ends and becomes part of universal consciousness." Less than 2% chose an option that included the continued existence of the soul. These data indicate that there may be a correlation between changing beliefs about the afterlife, or about belief in general, and a desire for different disposition practices. The survey respondents are among a group that is careful about avoiding or changing the language around rituals in order to keep religion firmly at bay.[153] The alternatives supplied, many of which are eco-dispositions, are distinct from the conventional practices around death that may well be associated with religion. In this way, the eco-dispositions are both an affirmation of values and an avoidance of religiously tainted death practices.

Relational-Deictic Approach

In addition to the practices, there is a distinct way in which nonreligious individuals think about the dead body itself. Using a relational-deictic interpretation of the physical world allows a move away from the notion that the world works according to divine plan. Appraisal from a relational-deictic perspective is an alternative to promiscuous teleology or

[153] Blankholm, *The Secular Paradox: On the Religiosity of the Not Religious*.

the bias toward purpose-based reasoning, or the spiritual or religious nature of the body or soul.[154] The relational-deictic works for any object that has relational value and takes into consideration relationships and point of view, pointing out that functions are context dependent and intrinsic to these relationships. It can also be connected to notions of intrinsic dignity, in which people have worth simply by being human.[155]

While ojalehto, Waxman, and Medin point out that Indigenous populations in the United States tend to display this kind of cognitive approach, I argue that this kind of reasoning is also apparent in adults who are choosing eco-disposition methods. Even those who don't believe in an afterlife, a soul, or the sacrality of the body from a religious or spiritual perspective, which many nonreligious people do not, still maintain a relationship to the person who has died through the psychological process of continuing bonds or attachment theory, and also undergirded by the Kantian notion of intrinsic dignity of the person. So, when they appraise the deceased body of another person, particularly a loved one, that body is seen as more than simply material. From a relational-deictic perspective, the body assumes a subjective purpose from which multiple purposes can arise and from an understanding that the body is inherently connected to the physical world. Hence, the body becomes a key part of a religious cycle or, in the context of these alternative forms of burial, a natural cycle. But even more important, the understanding of the purpose, function, and importance of the dead body becomes plural and context dependent. When appraising the body, people construe these teleological purposes as emergent from points of view and

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[154] bethany ojalehto, Sandra R. Waxman, and Douglas L. Medin, "Teleological Reasoning about Nature: Intentional Design or Relational Perspectives?," *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 17, no. 4 (April 2013): 166–71, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tics.2013.02.006.

[155] Daniel P. Sulmasy, "Death and Dignity in Catholic Christian Thought Scientific Contribution," *Medicine, Health Care and Philosophy* 20, no. 4 (2017): 537–44; Immanuel Kant, *Practical Philosophy: The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant*, trans. Mary Gregor (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

within a relational system, whether that includes intentional design or an intentional designer. A funeral director described the response of family members who choose green burial for their loved ones as deeply moving and impactful. She attended the funeral of a family matriarch that included "liturgy," which was poetry that intentionally avoided any biblical or spiritual underpinnings, and emphasized how important their mother was to them even as her body would now be nourishment for the earth. This framework implicitly informs the views of many who choose eco-disposal methods both religious and nonreligious.

The importance of materiality is reflected in the choice itself but is encouraged by the spaces and promoters of eco-disposition. As described in Chapter 2, the spaces for eco-disposition are religiously neutral and can be reconfigured for each service. The values of the environment are emphasized, particularly if that is the family's wish. By not having set clergy or prominent iconography to signal affiliation with religion, the spaces do not offend secular individuals, and provide a sense of comfort in being able to design services as they wish. The importance of these innovative rituals will be discussed further in Chapter 4.

Spirituality and Religion

Although the nonreligious are uniquely drawn to these eco-disposition options, the facilities and spaces do not exclude spirituality and religion. Providers are careful to allow space for families to bring their own beliefs to the practices. No assumptions are made about religiosity. Unlike in many forums in the U.S., people are invited to bring their religious or spiritual beliefs and practices into the space rather than it being the established norm.[156]

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[156] Jose Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994); Mark Chaves, "Secularization as Declining Religious Authority," *Social Forces* 72 (1994): 749–74; David Yamane, "Secularization on Trial: In Defense of a Neosecularization Paradigm," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 36, no. 1 (1997): 109–22, https://doi.org/10.2307/1387887.

Many of these beliefs center on the environment: either nature-based spirituality or religion as nature. Others, however, adhere to more traditional religious traditions, such as Judaism, Catholicism, Islam, Protestant Christianity, and various forms of other, minority religious beliefs.

Like those whose values are more rooted in materiality or secularism, for the spiritual and/or religious, the body is important from a sense of continued attachment to the deceased, but in some cases, there is theological import placed on the body as well. And while many of the spiritual and/or religious people who are choosing eco-dispositions do so in line with their faith and values, they are also continuing a tradition of distinctions between doctrine and practice.

Nature Spirituality

The prevalence of nature-based spirituality has been observed in the Pacific Northwest for decades and has become mor evident throughout the U.S. in recent years.[157] Although associated with environmentalism, this type of nature spirituality situates a person's spirit within nature, either from a planetary or personal perspective. One of my interlocutors described his way of being "spiritual but not religious" in these terms, indicating that it was "informed by the living planet" (i.e., planetary) and that "most of my spiritual interpretation is done internally and not at the level of words" (i.e., personal).[158] The connection to something greater, the search for meaning in the world around us, and the influence of intuition all reflect a type of spirituality under a banner of environmental ethics that has been

[157] Shibley, "Sacred Nature."
[158] Personal interview, 2021.

emerging in the latter part of the 20th century and now well into the 21st.[159] The spiritual and religious dimensions of American environmentalism are well-documented.[160] In these views, although nature is material, it is also sacred, and it addresses fundamental questions about the world and reality.[161]

Many of the participants who do bring spirituality into the disposition include a natural element. Some of the facilities encourage this. At one natural organic reduction facility, the ritual specialists and service directors developed a laying-in service that honors the natural cycle of life. This is simply one option, but service directors said in our interviews that many people do choose this, as creating rituals can be overwhelming for the bereaved. Although designed to be applicable to all people, many of the people who choose this service resonate with it on a more spiritual level. This is also deeply evident in the services at green burial sites. Surrounded by nature, it is easy to extend an association between nature and the sacred to the deceased body.

Similarly, many explicitly religious services also incorporate nature. In her green burial ground in the last chapter, Taylor described eight bluebirds sitting in a tree alongside the deceased. The priest stopped and acknowledged it, and said, "what a beautiful thing it is to see God staring at you and to know that all is well." Religious services that are observable as such–have religious clergy presiding, incorporate readings from religious texts, and invite

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[159] Taylor, *Dark Green Religion*.

[160] Albanese, *Nature Religion in America: From Algonkian Indians to the New Age*; William Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness: Or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature," in *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, ed. William Cronon (New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 1995); Thomas R. Dunlap, *Faith in Nature: Environmentalism as Religious Quest* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2004); David Oates, *Paradise Wild: Reimagining American Nature* (Corvallis, OR: Oregon State University Press, 2003); Shibley, "Sacred Nature."

[161] Dunlap, *Faith in Nature: Environmentalism as Religious Quest*.

prayers–are not as common in eco-disposition spaces, and facilitators report that they are more often seen in the South and Midwest.

Judaism

When confronted with the deceased body, some observant Jewish people turn to the Hebrew phrase *Kavod HaBiriyot* (honor of God's creation) to dictate the treatment of the body. The phrase is not found in the Torah, but is a Talmudic phrase, and is most often translated to approximate "dignity."[162] Using this as a guiding principle, and the practice of *shomrim*, or guarding the body, as an important ritual, eco-dispositions are under discussion within the Jewish community, although most often it is the more liberal among them that are most keen. In 2010, Rabbi Thomas created the first designated green *and* Jewish burial ground in North America. He argues that green burial is really a re-embrace of traditional Jewish practices, so it made sense to formally combine the two. We chatted about the structure and organization of the cemetery over coffee, but several times he mentioned that the conversation would make much more sense if we went to the burial ground itself, as it has distinct sections for Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform/Renewal. Each of these sections were meant to represent the distinct streams of modern Judaism even within the same cemetery.

With a conscious shift back to more green practices within parts of the Jewish community, there has been additional conversation about other eco-dispositions and how they fit into Jewish law. This is the first example I provide of a disconnect between doctrine and practice, as there is some debate about whether burial is a Jewish legal requirement or

[162] Sulmasy, "Death and Dignity in Catholic Christian Thought Scientific Contribution."

simply fell into universal practice from custom.[163] This flexibility provides space for productive debate about the validity of natural organic reduction and alkaline hydrolysis within Jewish communities. While cremation has been frowned upon in Jewish communities, in our conversation, Eli, a member of the group that advocates for Jewish death practices, acknowledged that cost and environmental consideration have created a demand among Jews for a low-cost green option.

Creating a Jewish green burial ground is only the first step. Just as service attendance among majority religions has decreased in the U.S., synagogues are seeing fewer people attending. As such, some Jewish people are not turning to the synagogue for disposition at death, and instead are turning to other options. Frank has experienced this change from the perspectives of his many different cemeteries. One of his green cemeteries in the Northeast received a lot of interest from a Jewish congregation. His first encounter with their rabbi was not incredibly positive; the rabbi made it clear that he was in attendance because it was what the family wanted, but they would have preferred them to choose their own burial ground. But then, Frank said "the funny thing is that three or four burials later and he became friendlier and friendlier as he continued to come...he brought down yarmulkes for all my caretakers and said, 'here, can you guys wear these during the interment?'" To appeal to the secular, or at least unaffiliated, Jewish populations, Eli envisions green burial grounds that are inexpensive, accessible, but still respect aspects of Jewish burial custom. Reacting to current practice, Eli stressed the urgent need for Jewish green burial grounds that are affordable.

[163] Bryan Schwartzman and Rabbi Jacob Staub, "Human Composting: Good for the Environment, But Is It Kosher?," Evolve, accessed April 17, 2021, https://evolve.fireside.fm/17.

Conservation burial grounds, in particular, have faced challenges when responding to requests from Jewish community members who wish to be interred. Jewish burial law indicates that the grave should be partitioned off in some way to prevent people walking over it. In some cemeteries, doing so would require small fences or even stone borders. However, in the most aesthetically strict conservation burial grounds, such grave markers are not permitted, and the environmental ethos of "leave no trace" takes precedent. Providers of burial are also reluctant to create separate sections specifically for Jewish burial, as this violates their egalitarian approach to burial. Providers have had to compromise or deny Jewish people seeking burial on the land. This is one of the fundamental challenges facing bespoke secular spaces–the degree to which religion is allowed to be present. When these conservation burial grounds abstract their space to the degree that it transcends or leaves religion behind, the result is what Joseph Blankholm describes as the "empty secular."[164] So, while these spaces are styled as inclusive, to be so they also must be outside of the religion/non religion binary, providing a space for the inclusion or exclusion of religious practice.

At their alkaline hydrolysis facilities, both Timothy and Tiffany shared anecdotes of Jewish families that have used alkaline hydrolysis services. Tiffany recalled a Jewish family that brought readings and was one of the groups that spent the most time in the adjoining viewing room. The family was one of the few that behaved in an overtly religious way at the alkaline hydrolysis viewing. Timothy's impression is that there is less baggage associated with alkaline hydrolysis compared to cremation for Jewish communities. And, indeed, in the Jewish death conference proceedings that I attended, many of the Jewish members and rabbis

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[164] Blankholm, *The Secular Paradox: On the Religiosity of the Not Religious*.

were vocal in decrying cremation as a most disrespectful form of disposition, but there was less discussion, and less vehement dissent, about alkaline hydrolysis. At the conference, there was a persistent negative psychological association with cremation still present. Members of the Jewish community, like others, exist on a spectrum, with some advocating only for burial options, while those in the center disliked cremation, but were open to some of these other eco-disposition options.

This openness is reflected in a burgeoning conversation about natural organic reduction among Jewish rabbis and laypersons. Rabbi Naomi was part of a group that was discussing the possibilities for a liturgy and ritual for natural organic reduction. She self-described as a "heart-centered" rabbi, and a Reconstructionist, so her views are much more liberal than many. Most of the group is based in Washington state, where natural organic reduction is already available. Rabbi Naomi said of the imagined rituals, "we thought of shutting the door on the capsule is like when we do Taharah: we lift the body up and put it in the coffin and put the lid on. It'd be like that–putting the lid on. And then when you bury, or in this case, when you put the earth on, you say Kaddish for the first time. So, you could do Kaddish, and you could sing the blessing for the departed." She has met with other Reconstructionist rabbis and Jewish advocates of natural organic reduction and, together, they have had multiple meetings with natural organic reduction facilities there, many centered on the challenge of the bones. According to Jewish law, bones must be respected, and ideally preserved. The group proposed removing the bones for burial after the first phase of natural organic reduction, but once the body is in the custody of the natural organic reduction facility, they must completely process the body. Even though this is not a perfect alternative, natural organic reduction providers see a lot of validity in allowing for this option

for Jewish people. Rabbi Naomi agrees with Eli in that, if Jews are going to choose this option, they should make it Jewish.

Catholicism

The U.S. Catholic Bishops Conference has held tight reins on disposition practice among its constituents. With their long history of insisting on burial in a Catholic cemetery, i.e., in consecrated ground, Catholic leadership has steadily opposed alternatives. This opposition stems from both a belief in the physical resurrection of the body at the end of time, but also from a respect for the human body as a vessel of Christ and the Church. The *Order of Christian Funerals*' Appendix on Cremation states: "Although cremation is now permitted by the Church, it does not enjoy the same value as burial of the body. The Church clearly prefers and urges that the body of the deceased be present for the funeral rites, since the presence of the human body *better expresses the values which the Church affirms* in those rites."[165] However, this shifted slightly in 1962 when Pope John XXIII called the Second Vatican Council to update the church's policies and practice. During the proceedings, the prohibition against cremation was lifted. This permission was later incorporated into the revised Code of Canon Law in 1983 which states: "The Church earnestly recommends that the pious custom of burial be retained, but it does not forbid cremation, unless this is chosen for reasons which are contrary to Christian teaching."[166] This codified the tacit approval to pursue other kinds of disposition beyond conventional burial.

Even so, Catholics have tended to hold onto the conventional form of burial, and when they have chosen cremation have been encouraged to bury cremated remains in a

[165] No. 413, emphasis mine.
[166] Canon 1176, No. 3.

Catholic cemetery. A recent survey, however, suggests that green burial now appeals to Catholics as a friendlier alternative to cremation that is still in keeping with their tradition.[167] This may be in part due to the explicit support that Pope Francis has given for environmental concerns. In his Encyclical Letter *Laudato si'*, Pope Francis emphasized caring for the earth as "a universal principle that involves not only the Christians, but every person of good will who has the protection of the environment at heart." In areas like the Pacific Northwest, where there are a greater number of unaffiliated individuals, Catholic cemeteries have added on "St. Francis" sections that are explicitly for natural burial.[168] Providers of conservation burial have described Catholic priests consecrating their green burial graves, encouraging the religious and environmental values in those choosing this option.

In general, alkaline hydrolysis and natural organic reduction have not been as popular among Catholics. Catholic leadership has been one of the most vocal opponents of alkaline hydrolysis and natural organic reduction in many states in which legislation to legalize has been introduced. In Washington, at the outset of the legalization of natural organic reduction, Joseph Sprague, executive director of the Washington State Catholic Conference, wrote that "disposing human remains in such manner fails to show enough respect for the body of the deceased."[169] Recent reports have added that in a March 23, 2023 statement, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Committee on Doctrine said that both natural organic reduction and alkaline hydrolysis "fail to satisfy the Church's requirements for proper respect

[167] Zehl, "More Catholics Choose 'green Burials,' Hoping for a Lighter Footprint."
[168] Personal interview, 2022.
[169] Richard Read, "Washington State Braces for Eco-Friendly 'Human Composting,'" *Los Angeles Times*, May 13, 2019, sec. World & Nation, https://www.latimes.com/nation/la-na-human-composting-washington-green-burial-inslee-20190513-story.html.

for the bodies of the dead."[170] As documented above, the Catholic Church's rejection of cremation lies in the need for a ritual in which the body is present. Green options limit the ability to have a traditional funeral at which the body can be present to express the Church's values, as embalming is not possible.

Despite this institutional opposition, there are several examples of both alkaline hydrolysis and natural organic reduction facilities serving Catholics. LeAnn admits that the Catholics they have served were not necessarily practicing but did identify as Catholic. Like in Judaism, there is a disparity between doctrine and practice within these traditions, particularly around death. Just as doctrines around purgatory and hell have shifted, the strict following of burial customs are also changing for American Catholics.[171] The natural organic reduction facilities haven't yet had a priest preside over a laying-in, but they have invited Catholic priests to tour their facilities. There are some theological arguments in favor of these environmental practices grounded in the logic of placing remains in sacred places and relying on the intent behind Francis' *Laudato si'*.[172] Alkaline hydrolysis operators note that nonpracticing Catholics are also more common in their facilities compared to traditional Catholic services. The providers there had seen few priests within their facility, although they acknowledged that it was possible services took place later.

It is clear from their expressed beliefs and practices within my interlocutors' facilities, however, that for some individuals within these traditions, these eco-dispositions are in keeping with their faith beliefs and values. One key part of this is the role of the

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[170] Gina Christian, "Human Composting, Alkaline Hydrolysis Not Acceptable for Burial, Say U.S. Bishops," *EarthBeat*, March 24, 2023, https://www.ncronline.org/earthbeat/faith/human-composting-alkaline-hydrolysis-not-acceptable-burial-say-us-bishops.
[171] Kathryn Gin Lum, *Damned Nation: Hell in America from Revolution to Reconstruction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Murphy, "Most Americans Believe in Heaven...and Hell"; Pew, "How COVID-19 Has Strengthened Religious Faith."
[172] Ederer, "To Dust You Shall Return."

environment, which I will discuss further below. Among the major religious groups, Catholics are among the most likely (they are only surpassed by historically Black Protestants) to agree that global climate change is a very serious problem.[173] Nonetheless, Hispanic Catholics remain underrepresented in eco-disposition practices compared to white Catholics. Daniel operates a burial ground in the South, in an area in which there are several nearby cities with large Hispanic population. Daniel also identifies as Latino, and he told me that since he has taken over the burial ground in the last year, he is beginning to serve more Catholic people from a variety of Central and South American countries. He said that "we're starting to see a rise in the interest within that community too."

Other faiths

People are also bringing other faith traditions to eco-dispositions. One provider's interest in green burial arose when he discovered the limited options for a traditional Muslim burial for his father's death. Similar to Jewish practice, traditional Muslim burial happens within three days, without embalming, and typically involves wrapping the deceased in a simple shroud, an approach that is essentially green from a logistical perspective. And yet, many Muslim burial grounds have also incorporated the concrete liner and vault that has pervaded most American cemeteries. When describing green burial in one of my courses, I had a student come up to me afterwards to express his amazement. He and his family, who were practicing Muslims, knew of none of these options for what he thought of as a true Muslim burial, without vault and liner. The lived reality of Muslim burial practice in the U.S.

[173] Becka A. Alper, "How Religion Intersects With Americans' Views on the Environment," *Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project* (blog), November 17, 2022, https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2022/11/17/how-religion-intersects-with-americans-views-on-the-environment/.

is distinct from the doctrine, but even this is debated: “For instance, burial and grave regulations are deliberated in the Islamic legal literature along with the etiquette of visiting graves. Combining legal and ethical elements is an important characteristic of Islamic law that helps keeps it alive.”[174] It is perhaps not surprising that a different driving ethos–environmentalism–has been the means by which minority faith traditions can also express their own practices and values. Members of non-Christian religions are most likely to perform everyday activities, like reducing food waste and eating less meat, to address climate change.[175] This trend may soon extend into eco-disposition.

LeAnn was keen to describe the diversity of beliefs that she has seen come through their natural organic reduction facility in Washington. LeAnn is about my age, early 30s, and was really keen to talk about natural organic reduction. Hers was the first interview that I conducted in person, and she took me to what was like a conference room, but was the equivalent of the funeral parlor—the waiting area just outside the viewing area. It didn’t have any of the “weight” that I often perceive in a conventional funeral home. LeAnn had come from a funeral background, and she had gotten to the point that she was so burnt out and depressed that she wasn’t sure she could continue. When she found natural organic reduction, it was like it breathed new life into her. And her experience, she finds, is reflected in how people view the process for themselves or their loved ones. She explained that one of the recently deceased belonged to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. She “went [into the vessel] in her temple clothes, and then we had to remove them because they don't

[174] Ahmed Al-Dawoody, “Respect for the Dead under Islamic Law: Considerations for Humanitarian Forensics,” Humanitarian Law & Policy Blog, November 1, 2018, https://blogs.icrc.org/law-and-policy/2018/11/01/respect-for-the-dead-under-islamic-law-considerations-for-humanitarian-forensics/.
[175] Alper, “How Religion Intersects With Americans’ Views on the Environment.”

compost." As I viewed her vessel, I could see the paraphernalia that maintained her identity as part of the LDS Church.

Protestant Christianity is more heavily represented in the green burial grounds throughout the South. Leighton's burial ground in the South provides him with many opportunities to see the range of values that bring people to conservation burial, from environmental to deeply religious. He recalled one group that was deeply religious, and he was worried they might see the burial ground as too "woo-woo" or hippie to sit well with their beliefs. To his surprise, at the burial of one of the congregants, the pastor was interested in his congregation and the family getting involved with the process. Leighton remembered that he said, "Pick up a shovel, this is worship, and we do this out of love." This process was the "truest way that we could do it to be the most Christ-like." Leighton reflected that this seemed almost like "do this in remembrance of me with communion–the act of giving in the corporeal act of mercy of return for caring for the dead."

My interlocutors have also described a small percentage of those choosing eco-dispositions as Ba'hai, Christian Wiccan, and Buddhist, among others. Timothy described the relief felt by a Buddhist family who had been told that they could not keep their mother at home for three days when they were told they had complete control over the timeline of disposition. The three days were critical because they believed the spirit needs 72 hours to detach from the body. Timothy finds it "fun to be able to listen to a family's genuine request...and empower them." The embrace of alternative methods by these minority traditions has been observed in the United Kingdom in their practice of woodland burial.[176]

[176] Douglas Davies, *Death, Ritual, and Belief: The Rhetoric of Funerary Rites*, Third Edition (London: Bloomsbury, 2017).

As they become more available in the United States, these spaces may also allow for a freer expression of religious values for non-Christian religions.

Environmental

When I asked my interlocutors who was choosing their method of eco-disposition, there was a literal or implied, "of course" preceding their description of consumers that were environmentally minded or "hippies." In calling these "environmentally friendly" disposition practices, it becomes a foregone conclusion that when people choose this option, they are thinking of the environment. While environmentalism is a general term used to refer to concern about the environment, there are two distinct reasons for concern: protecting the environment for its own sake (ecocentrism) and due to its role in human development (anthropocentrism).[177] A range of values scientific, spiritual, and humanitarian infuse the overall movement to create a wide range of distinct "flavors" of environmentalism. And these different flavors of environmentalism dispose people towards distinct kinds of options. However, as with any push toward environmentalism, there is also the risk of greenwashing. Several products, practices, and organizations have been put forth as being environmentally friendly, only to be found to be insincere in their claims, or at least unsupported by independent research. Even these failures, however, do not seem to be deterring people from their aim to become part of the natural world.

[177] Anna R. Davies, "Environmentalism," in *International Encyclopedia of Human Geography*, ed. Audrey Kobayashi (Elsevier, 2020).

Climate Change and Land Protection

From a strictly environmental perspective, it is not completely clear which eco-disposition method is least intrusive or most beneficial for the environment, since there are several factors to consider: how death takes place, the access to options, decisions about transport and containment, and disposition method. Few studies have been done that take all of these factors into consideration. In-house assessments claim that for every person who chooses natural organic reduction "over conventional burial or cremation, one metric ton of carbon dioxide is prevented from entering the atmosphere … [and that] human composting requires 1/8 the energy of conventional burial or cremation." However, when people are being flown or driven from across the country, it is unclear how the math works out. Similarly, conservation burial practices require little in terms of energy for burial, but still must receive transported bodies. From an environmental perspective, it might be better to be buried locally, even if it means not doing it green. Dawn offers a very pragmatic approach to environmentalism, again sitting outside of her refurbished mill turned funeral parlor. As Dawn described in the last chapter, the most environmentally friendly disposition is to die at home, wrapped in a bedsheet from your bed, carried by friends and family from the bed to the yard, and buried in a grave in your yard that is hand dug and filled. As this option is available to few people, due to circumstances of their death, the willingness of their family and friends, or local laws, other considerations must be made.[178] Ultimately, however, the overall environmental impact of the various practices needs to be investigated more

[178] Courtney Applewhite, "How To Create a Family Cemetery: A Step By Step Guide," *TalkDeath* (blog), February 9, 2022, https://www.talkdeath.com/how-to-create-a-family-cemetery-a-step-by-step-guide/.

rigorously and is beyond the scope of this work. Instead, I turn to the perceived environmental effects.

Despite the reluctance of eco-disposition providers to over-green when advertising their services, a large part of their customer base so far is extremely concerned about choosing the most environmentally sound option. As we walked through the natural organic reduction warehouse, LeAnn explained that most of the people choosing natural organic reduction are converts from cremation. This is likely in part due to the high percentage of cremations in the Pacific Northwest, but also a result of realizing that cremation is not so environmentally friendly.[179] When the outdoor-loving, environmentalists of the Pacific Northwest are educated about the now-understood negative impacts of cremation, they are quick to turn to natural organic reduction, which is a new, greener process with the similar outcome of taking up no land space and the added bonus of having more practical, usable remains. Not to mention, there is a sense of pride in not contributing to the carbon footprint. Even death can be "carbon neutral," if you have the means to pay for it.[180]

This environmentalism, as I alluded to in previous chapters, can look different in different areas of the country. In the more liberal areas of the country, environmentalism centers on climate change and protecting the Earth from large-scale ecological disaster. In more conservative areas, this may look like protecting local and private lands from change and development. One interlocutor from the South described his lands as sacred and worth protecting for hunting, fishing, and farming, but in the same breath defended coal mining and drilling for oil. This latter group, more common in the rural, conservative-leaning parts of the country, do not have to subscribe to a belief in climate change to want to protect their

[179] National Funeral Directors Association, "2021 NFDA Cremation & Burial Report."
[180] Personal interview, 2022.

personal environments or to see nature as sacred. Indeed, survey findings indicate that there is a disparity in those with high religious commitment between the belief that the earth is sacred (68%) and the belief that climate change is an extremely/very serious problem (42%).[181] This is a demonstration of anthropocentrism in environmentalism, but one of limited scope. The pro-personal land, pro-oil drilling environmentalist sees only his family and immediate environment as within his purview of environmentalism, despite the devastating effects of climate change that have slowly and will continue to wreak havoc on individual landholdings.[182]

Although this divide still exists between liberal and conservative approaches to environmentalism, environmental concerns are top-of-mind for many of the younger generations that will be subject to the most acute challenges of climate change. And the gap between environmental perspectives seems to be shrinking. Younger generations are more likely than older Americans to advocate for and spend money on efforts to address climate change and shift U.S. energy reliance away from fossil fuels. Further, Gen Z Republicans are about three times as likely as Baby Boomer Republicans to favor phasing out fossil fuel use (20% versus 6%).[183] The Baby Boomer generation is generally responsible for many of the environmentally conscious norms that we see today, like recycling, but the younger generation will be responsible for taking up the mantle of trying to halt climate change as it reaches a precipice. In keeping with their influence on spirituality, which highlighted personal choice and seeking, Baby Boomers have set the stage for Millennials and Gen Zs to

[181] Alper, "How Religion Intersects With Americans' Views on the Environment."
[182] Davies, "Environmentalism."
[183] Cary Funk, "Key Findings: How Americans' Attitudes about Climate Change Differ by Generation, Party and Other Factors," *Pew Research Center* (blog), accessed April 14, 2023, https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/05/26/key-findings-how-americans-attitudes-about-climate-change-differ-by-generation-party-and-other-factors/.

embrace new disposition options and traditions.[184] As a result, when discussing options for disposition, many influencers and popular content producers of Millennial or Gen Z generations emphasize eco-disposition options. As one Tik-Tok creator, who wants to be buried directly in the ground and have a tree planted on top of them, explains, it appeals "because I think it's eco-friendly and I think it's romantic." This impulse to become a tree transcends the larger conversation about climate change to reflect the individual need for recognition, remembrance, and the idea of continuing.

Personal connections

The environmental values associated with eco-disposition are also about the individual and their role in its continuance and the general cycle of nature. Beyond that spiritual or religious connection with nature, there is also a more straightforward association with the idea that you are a part of a large natural cycle and therefore have a role to play in being responsible with your deceased body. When people imagine their "after" life at conservation burial grounds, they like the idea that they become part of the landscape. Research has found that being in nature and having that connection to nature has positive benefits for our mental health.[185] In extending this finding to these green burial spaces, green burial providers have also found that the connection that the living have to their loved one's burial place, particularly in these wild and natural settings, is healing. Brittany described a professor whose wife was buried at their burial ground who went to visit her grave: "He went one day to visit and there was a fawn curled up at his wife's grave. And he just sees those as signs." In the natural organic reduction facilities, it is a comfort that they can both contribute

[184] Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace*; Wuthnow, *The Reconstructing of American Religion*.
[185] Kirsten Weir, "Nurtured by Nature," *Monitor on Psychology* 51, no. 3 (2020): 50.

positively environmentally, and their family will still have a part of them to take home, or to do something with. In fact, most of the natural organic reduction operators agree that the primary reason that most people choose their option is because of the environmental impact combined with a close affinity for nature itself. People like the idea of transforming into something that is clearly of the earth and feels living, as opposed to the inert–or potentially harmful–remains of cremation.

Contributing positively to nature is an enticing prospect for many seeking eco-disposition. The ultimate return to nature is also a priority for those choosing alkaline hydrolysis and natural organic reduction. Just as the facilities aim to invoke that sense of naturalness, people describe their choice as giving back to the environment with their body. There is a sense of "uselessness" about the body after death. Choosing eco-disposition for a loved one provides a way in which the body can be useful, or join with nature in a contributory way, but also be honored as special. Although we may be able to treat our own physical body as simply something natural that can be discarded in the woods, or "trotted out on special occasions or left in an airport bathroom or something funny," it is much more difficult to treat a loved one's body in this way.[186]

However, if the impulses that brought people to eco-disposition were entirely environmental, this would impact their choice of a type of eco-disposition more than it seems to be doing. For example, most people are physically much closer to an alkaline hydrolysis facility than a natural organic reduction facility since, at this point, nearly all natural organic reduction facilities are clustered in a relatively tight corner of the West. It would be much more environmentally friendly to transport their body to the alkaline hydrolysis facility.

[186] Secular Communities Survey data, 2021.

Although alkaline hydrolysis does have the benefit of having a "tea" that results from the process that can be used as a fertilizer, it doesn't have the best optics compared to a friendly bag of compost. So, despite the drive to do what's most environmentally sound, many people also tend to rely on their connection with a particular kind of nature that best suits their taste. This results in some people are choosing "green" options because they like the idea of it and want to signal the virtue of being environmentally responsible, but they are not necessarily choosing the greenest option. Eco-disposition providers acknowledge that people have this personal connection with nature and hope to capitalize on it, so they sometimes push the definition of environmentalism, and wrap it in a more palatable offering.

Greenwashing to Become a Tree

Eco-dispositions have been subject to a similar kind of green washing seen throughout environmental movements. When people choose environmental options, they often want particular things that they envision as being good for the environment but are not beneficial or sometimes even feasible. The most popular instance of this is in the desire to become a tree.[187] Human bodies are generally not good for trees.[188] Conservation burial providers have to explain to people choosing burial spots for themselves or their loved ones that they cannot be buried directly beneath a tree, as the tree's roots may be compromised and the human body–typically laden with heavy metals–may not be beneficial for the tree itself.

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[187] Christina Becher, "Becoming a Tree: Exploring the Entanglement of Bodies, Soil, and Trees in Natural Burials," *Green Letters* 25, no. 4 (October 2, 2021): 403–14, https://doi.org/10.1080/14688417.2022.2029717; Craig, "MEMORIAL EARTH PARK © AN ENVIRONMENTALLY SUSTAINABLE PUBLIC SPACE"; Claire Elise Thompson, "From Fiction to Reality: Could Forests Replace Cemeteries?," *Fix*, September 14, 2021, https://grist.org/fix/green-burial-forest-cemeteries/.

[188] Carroll, "The Deathwives: Environmental Death"; Vanessa [BCCDC Cleven, "April 2023 - Alternative Disposition Services: Green Burial, Alkaline Hydrolysis And," April 19, 2023, https://policycommons.net/artifacts/3676921/april-2023-alternative-disposition-services/4482763/.

The same is true of cremated remains, even when combined in “eco-urns” for tree growth. Cremated remains are very alkaline, and do not promote growth. When I commented to one funeral director that everyone wants to become a tree, she confided, “they do, and how do you poo-poo, pee-pee on someone's parade? And I know that's not going to grow because it's probably not going to grow from the ashes.” Despite this insider knowledge, the desire to become a tree is so great that providers are reluctant to course-correct the bereaved. Of course, this comes from a place of empathy, but it is challenging to reconcile with an environmental mission.

The desire to become a tree is not new. At the end of the 18th century, people began carving willows and urns onto headstones, supplanting the cherubs and angels that had been popular during the previous century.[189] Literature throughout the Middle Ages to the present has dwelt on the continuity between life and death as represented by a tree.[190] In her article, Christine Becher examines Ovid and Tristan and Iseult as examples of literature in which becoming a tree plays a role. The theme of becoming a tree has been repeated throughout many of our cultural examples, but it seems to be taking strong root at this particular moment and in the context of eco-dispositions. I think that part of this is driven by the requirements for there to be minimal memorialization around eco-disposition. A tree provides a natural marker, and in the bereaved person’s mind it is in keeping with the aesthetic desired by burial grounds, despite the reality that the tree is not being served by the deceased body from a biological perspective.

However, with alkaline hydrolysis and natural organic reduction, becoming a tree is a bit more possible. The “tea” produced from alkaline hydrolysis remains can be used to

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[189] Stannard, *The Puritan Way of Death*.
[190] Becher, “Becoming a Tree.”

fertilize a tree or plants, although the solid remains are similar to cremated remains in their nutritional and chemical composition. Most often, family members are not interested in taking vats of the “tea” home, so Timothy typically receives the donated remains, and it is sent to a local farm to aid in growth of crops. Similarly, the result of natural organic reduction is compost, and it can be used to add to trees or other growth. The risk is that the tree may die, therefore resulting in a “second death” as many providers are careful to explain to people who are hoping for a living memorial.

Other eco-disposition methods have also been proposed–including the Capsula Mundi and mushroom suits. Although wildly popular on social media, and even resulting in a TEDTalk with over 250,000 views, the mushroom burial suit is not necessarily effective and likely because of this, not readily available. Luke Perry was famously buried in the mushroom suit in 2019, despite a 2016 experiment that demonstrated that it didn't work.[191] Any of the eco-disposition providers will tell you that a mushroom's mycological network cannot work 3 feet below the ground–the depth of a typical green burial. Therefore, the mushrooms won't develop. The Capsula Mundi (see Figure 2) has even more challenges, and therefore has never even been used. The image most often used to describe the method is an artist rendering, but it has captured the imagination of people craving green options and ultimately taps into that desire to become a tree. A giant pod with a person inside, the idea is that the pod contains a seed for a tree, so your body is directly feeding the tree's growth. However, not only is it impractical to place a person into the fetal position and into a giant pod, lowering it into the earth also proves challenging. Needless to say, we will likely not see this option pick up steam.

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[191] Casey Lyons, “The Mushrooms That Ate Luke Perry,” *Orion Magazine*, September 2, 2022, https://orionmagazine.org/article/luke-perry-mushroom-shroud-90210-riverdale/.

Figure 2: The “Capsula Mundi” tree pod. An artistic rendering of a disposition method, in which the deceased is meant to be enclosed int the large, oval pod at the base of the tree.

Embodiment

Valuing the environment does motivate people to choose eco-dispositions, but it is not the end of the story. Just as individuals can value the idea of the environment and not choose the most environmentally conscious choice, there are multiple factors at work in how people consider eco-disposition. There is a viscerality in the choice of what to do with your body or the body of a loved one that extends beyond the environment. Deirdre is a provider at a green burial ground where she has a strong, tangible connection with the land. We spoke on Zoom but had an instant connection since she had lived in some of the same places I had. Another woman in her early 30s, Deirdre spoke both seriously and lightheartedly about operating a green burial ground. She loves the land and protecting it, but also recognizes that

it's a lot of work. In thinking about people choosing her burial ground, Deirdre eloquently expressed, "I do think that when we make decisions, there's usually a deeper motivation. And it's usually emotional. And then we layer on top of all these rational reasons. My sense is that there's a deeper emotional pull. And then layered on top of that is that it's good for the environment." Despite the movement away from centering the enduring preservation of the deceased body in these eco-disposition movements, there continues to be attachment to our deceased bodies, and even more so the deceased bodies of our loved ones.

From a cognitive perspective, it is difficult to separate ourselves from our bodies. Back in the Pacific Northwest, Sarah Jane brought me to the spot where she had witnessed a couple lie down, holding hands, to get a feel for their burial place. This embodied experience was explored in a 2010 performance piece in which married artist collaborators Miller and Shellabarger dug two graves side by side, with a tunnel to hold hands, to explore physicality, duality, time, and romantic ideals.[192] She said this type of behavior was not uncommon. One couple decided on different plots–the wife wanted a place in the sun, whereas the husband insisted he wanted to be in the shade of a tree. None of these people thought they would be there to experience it in a literal sense, yet the way they felt in their bodies as they lay in those will-be graves was important. I saw this practice repeated at several of the green burial sites. During our tour of the burial ground, Francesca broke off from the group to find the best situation for her grave. She wanted to stand in the physical spot where her body would be. As we walked back to the cars after our tour, she told me that her future grave overlooked a large valley and was slightly windy, and she felt good up there. Sarah Jane reflected that perhaps some people are thinking of those that come to visit them, but, on the whole, she

[192] Miller and Shellabarger, *Untitled (Grave)*, 2010, Performance, 2010.

thought not. These visitors talked about liking to be warm, to feel the sun on their face or the wind in their hair–this was a personal kind of embodied experience.

To me, it makes a lot of sense for people to want to try to anticipate their future bodily experience. Because we have such limited ways in which to understand the world around us, much less a future world in which we expect to have different, limited, or no knowledge of our physical body, the only information we can gather is from our current situation. The idea of death eventually transcends the physical body, but at present the physical body is one of the limited means by which we can understand the world.

Adjacent to the embodiment inherent in the process of finding a way to dispose of your own body, there is also an element of embodied knowledge for the bereaved in the process of engaging with eco-disposition. Although not necessarily a reason for choosing eco-dispositions initially, there is a powerful sense of embodiment in the bereaved person's engagement with the deceased's body. Frank reflected that the way in which the experience benefits the bereaved is a bodily kind of sensation. "When they show up," he explains, "they're grief stricken, and they're crying, and they can be part of that process. It's a way to release all that pent up emotion...they leave with genuine smiles on their faces and transformed." This description is that of a physical, bodily change in the way the person experiences a death. Frank went on to say that the very act of engaging with eco-disposition empowers the bereaved. In this way, "you've changed them forever," but the important part of this is that it is part of how we should have been all along because "caring for our loved ones in death is in our DNA. We just lost touch with that."

While the dead don't actually experience the process of undergoing alkaline hydrolysis or natural organic reduction, there are some TikTok's of living people laying in

the cradles filled with organic matter to imagine how it might feel and the living find comfort in the "gentleness" of the process, something that cremation has a harder time advertising. Cremation is efficient and cheap, but it is not gentle. In fact, early opponents of cremation were quick to point out that "burning grandma" was not a respectable way to treat her.[193] One of my interlocutors explained that she loved being hot, so cremation felt like a desirable choice. But, like my mother's aversion to witnessing my grandmother's cremation, it doesn't necessarily sit well if we think about the bodies of those we love. Alkaline hydrolysis and natural organic reduction, however, are more passive processes. alkaline hydrolysis providers quickly disabused people of the notion that they were "boiling" bodies or "dissolving" them in acid. Tiffany acknowledged that a combination of bad advertising, negative press, and lack of education about alkaline hydrolysis has hindered its progress. Now, she simply explains that the process is gentle and will give the family as much detail as they require. Alkaline hydrolysis machines do not boil water. The solution is an alkaline and water solution, and some models gently rock the body into dissolution.

Similarly, natural organic reduction operators speak of the gentleness of the process, often glossing over some of the harsher realities, like what happens to the bones. In many interviews of people who are intimately familiar with natural organic reduction, there was some critique of companies that used misdirection or outright misinformation to describe what was done with the bones in their process. In interviews and online descriptions, I saw very imprecise and avoidant language to indicate how the bones were processed. There was an instance in which one of the natural organic reduction operators said that most of the bones are reduced in the first 30 days, and whatever remains is processed and then

[193] These examples always call upon grandma; it's interesting that this the figure we tend to turn to pull heartstrings--more than parents or even a grandpa.

reintegrated for the 30-day curing process. But in my conversations with others in the field, it seems like the technology is not capable of breaking down bones that effectively. From a pragmatic point of view, the bones must be broken down, i.e., “crushed.” Any death worker familiar with the processes of disposition or any funeral director who has performed a cremation knows that this is the case. However, in the carefully cultivated optics of natural organic reduction, there was a studied avoidance of this detail as it made people physically less comfortable with the process.[194]

Setting aside the problem of the bones, many people choosing natural organic reduction are doing so because the idea of a gradual transformation into soil is a tangible way to understand what would be natural decomposition in a grave. According to Nathan, the service directors at his natural organic reduction facility explain how their current situation is different from their previous experiences at conventional funeral homes: "How do I say this? [You can’t imagine] A phone call coming into a crematory and someone's saying, ‘I'm dying, it's devastating. But I want you to know that I'm just so excited about my cremation.’ Said nobody the fuck ever. But we get phone calls [like this all the time].” People appreciate natural organic reduction as part of their story—the life narrative that ends with, or extends their life, in death. Down the road at her natural organic reduction facility, Denise reported the same reaction: “What I’m hearing from people is that they’re inspired by it, and it brings them a sense of peace that planning a cremation wouldn’t do.” The excitement that people feel for the idea of natural organic reduction is comforting for both the deceased, while they are alive, and the bereaved. The body itself is not cold, wet, or on fire–it is encased in a beautiful mix of organic materials and will transition into that material that is still teeming

[194] As of this writing, there has been a push on social media for several of the natural organic reduction facilities to bring greater transparency and education about the bones.

with life. Timothy calls the product of his natural organic reduction process "living soil." The soil is animated by bacteria and microbes that were once the deceased person.

Conclusion

Death is a critical moment in our way of understanding the world around us–what is real, where reality comes from, and how we know.[195] Historically, the choice of body disposition could mean the difference between ever-lasting life and eternal damnation. These tensions continue to exist, albeit in slightly different guise. It is worthwhile to note that many of the people who are predisposed to choose eco-dispositions may still not meet this end. Beyond the complications of availability, as described in previous chapters, there are often many sets of values to be taken into consideration during the decision-making process at end of life. Many of my interlocutors described tension between family members when making these disposition choices. Frank pointed out that even in moments where the deceased's wishes were known, if it's not in writing, there can often be points of contention. In the example he provided, there were "10 individuals in a room. And nine of them know mom wanted [a natural burial]. And one of them says, 'Mom was a practicing Catholic, so I don't think this is right' because they themselves are very devout. Despite the other nine knowing the mom's wishes, the one individual always wins." This dynamic seems to exist because of the need for accord around death. The person who expresses dissent, or discomfort, sways the rest of the group toward the conventional practices, because the nine others in the group

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[195] Ann Taves, Egil Asprem, and Elliot Ihm, "Psychology, Meaning-Making, and the Study of Worldviews: Beyond Religion and Non-Religion," 2017.

don’t want to sow discord around the death. These tensions are sites of belief and value conflict, which can be both religious and nonreligious.

Today, we see the import of the body shift as our values, beliefs, and expectations have changed its role, but the choice of disposition has long been a way in which we have respectfully completed the body's residence on earth. The body has remained special even in the age of disenchantment, largely due to our continued attachment to our bereaved loved ones. For some, choosing an eco-disposition is more pragmatic. It is tied directly to environmental benefit or material usefulness. However, even when choosing it for pragmatic reasons, people are making decisions that reflect certain values. At minimum, this may mean a value of pragmatism, but it might also reflect values of secularism, scientific inquiry, contributing positively to the earth, responsible stewardship, and others. For others, the choice reflects their values both religious and/or spiritual. What one does with the body ties directly into beliefs and values around the importance of the soul, its eternal implications, and the relationship between body and earth.

In general, however, religion is not as present in eco-dispositions as in more conventional death practices throughout the United States. This may be a development that naturally coincides with a growing number of people who are not affiliated with a traditional religious institution. However, beyond this, eco-dispositions do not have the history and baggage associated with religion, so people with beliefs outside of traditional structures feel more comfortable engaging with these practices.[196] Although we will see that this benefit is also a challenge in that there are few prescribed rituals and clear guidelines in the absence of a tradition or religious leader. In this moment of grief, families have the option of relying on

[196] Blankholm, *The Secular Paradox: On the Religiosity of the Not Religious*.

generic services created by the eco-disposition providers, but most choose to innovate and create their own kind of ritual. The "blank space" of the eco-disposition sites allows for ritual innovation and genuine expression.

Chapter 4: The Ritualization of Eco-Disposition

For their first laying-in, LeAnn described a paradoxical sense of certainty and uncertainty on the part of the bereaved. No one present had ever seen a natural organic reduction laying-in. Even now, there have been only 500-600 people who have undergone natural organic reduction as a form of legal disposition.[197] LeAnn observed that the families knew the elements they wanted to include: family and friends gathering, short speeches, drinks. But then elements began to arise spontaneously. One family member came to get LeAnn asking, "can we play this song; it was her favorite," and "I think we want leis to place with her in the vessel." LeAnn's role is less to lead and more to offer support, as families create new traditions–new rituals–in these novel spaces and amid these new ways of disposing of the dead.

The way people are enacting rituals, like many of the elements of eco-disposition we have seen so far, is centered on the specific type of disposition, the regions in which they are practiced, and the identities of the deceased and the bereaved. In the tradition-conscious South, people are re-creating traditional practices in the spirit of the basic materials involved in green burials. Both the participants and the providers blend elements of "traditional" practices into more contemporary individualized formats that may or may not include religious beliefs. In alkaline hydrolysis facilities, managers are adapting ways in which they might more closely mimic something like a witnessed cremation. The results of the process, both the solid and liquid remains, provide families with an additional ritual step akin to the scattering of cremated remains. In natural organic reduction facilities, people are ritualizing

[197] Data drawn from personal interviews, 2021-2022.

the decomposition process–analogous to graveside rituals–to mediate the transformation of the body through decomposition, turning the remains into representations of their lived values. But even more intimate practices–somewhat like visitation of the embalmed corpse or graveside vigil–are emerging as well.

In the space of eco-dispositions, people are free to ritualize disposition practices in ways that can draw from religion or spirituality, but the participants also feel unencumbered by historical religious or cultural norms. Research has demonstrated that funerary rituals have increasingly turned toward the personal in the latter half of the twentieth century.[198] The increasing popularity of the eco–disposition has presented a unique forum in which the disposition itself becomes value-laden and can therefore incorporate an even wider range of beliefs–both religious and not. Following a similar pattern observed in the individualizing of spiritual practice, the novelty of each disposition option is allowing for an even greater movement away from historical or conventional death practices.[199] The spaces and novelty of eco-disposition lend themselves to ritualization, but have a complicated role in the way in which people who have been historically marginalized in their death practices, namely people of color and members of the LGTBQ+ community, use eco-disposition sites.

The Ritualization of Lived Experience

Research on rituals has examined them as set-apart, as transitions, as times made special or sacred, and often as religious. In the anthropological literature, the study of ritual

[198] Davies, *Death, Ritual, and Belief*; Tony Walter, “Bodies and Ceremonies: Is the UK Funeral Industry Still Fit for Purpose?,” *Mortality* 22, no. 3 (August 2017): 194–208, https://doi.org/10.1080/13576275.2016.1205574.
[199] Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit*; Bender, *The New Metaphysicals*; Heelas et al., *The Spiritual Revolution*; Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace*.

emerged from the study of religion.[200] It has been studied as distinct from other ways of acting and often defined in terms of ritual behavior as it is connected with religion including formal religious rites and associated life-cycle events. In more recent studies, ritual has been coded as spiritual rather than religious, which shifts the focus of study from adhering to specific liturgies or rites of institutionalized religion to practices that connect people with a less formal sense of the divine.[201] Within these conversations, debates have raged over the nature of ritual as inherently biological or socially constructed, but both sides agree that it ritual practice is consistent across the human experience.[202] Social scientists have now taken up the mantle of ritual research, grounding their definition in ritual's invariance and subsequent linkage to psychological elements.[203]

However, deviating from the scholarly thinking about ritual, the participants and providers of eco-disposition claim to be innovating and creating new kinds of death rituals for these occasions rather than repeating old rituals. When they do turn to tradition, it is with an eye toward personalization. This is in part due to the increase in non-traditional religious adherence; traditional religious scripts are no longer meaningful for some.[204] Their actions challenge conventional definitions of ritual, while appearing nonetheless ritual-like. In doing so, they generally distance themselves from formal or organized religion in favor of a more

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[200] Catherine Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Margit Warburg, "Secular Rituals," in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Anthropology*, ed. Pamela J. Stewart and Andrew J. Strathern (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2015), 127–43, https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9781315612744-14/secularrituals-margit-warburg.
[201] Dawdy, *American Afterlives*.
[202] Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).
[203] Nicholas M Hobson et al., "The Psychology of Rituals: An Integrative Review and Process-Based Framework," *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 22, no. 3 (2018): 260–84; Dimitris Xygalatas, "Extreme Rituals," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Cognitive Science of Religion*, ed. Justin L. Barrett (Oxford University Press, 2022), 0, https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190693350.013.12.
[204] Isabelle Kostecki, "Emerging End of Life Rituals in Western Healthcare" (Centre for Studies in Religion and Society, University of Victoria, May 12, 2022).

do-it-yourself-approach. They sometimes draw selectively to generate ritual-like actions that they may or may not view as religious or spiritual.

We can avoid the question of whether these behaviors are "rituals" by turning to "ritualization" as a strategic way of acting and explore how this way of acting differentiates itself from other kinds of practices.[205] This is an even more useful frame if we focus on the disposition itself, and not the subsequent funeral or celebration of life. Describing the actions around eco-dispositions as ritualized encapsulates the uncertainty, creativity, and generative nature of these emergent practices. This turn also centers the experience of the participants in that their behavior sometimes lacks aspects of the scholarly definitions of ritual—that they are repeated actions. My interlocutors, like Catherine Bell, reject ritual as manifesting a thought-action dichotomy, such that ritual actions are divorced from thought and intention. Instead, their ritualization of disposition is a dynamic and creative process that involves thought, action, and the body.[206] This shift from ritual to ritualization allows us to approach the practices around eco-disposition as ritual-like behavior and then analyze the beliefs that inform the practices and the contexts in which they take place, some religious and others not.

The body is central in these ritualizations, which link the values and beliefs held by the bereaved and the deceased in a series of meaningful actions. The actions of the bereaved highlight the interplay between the depersonalization of the body and the re-infusion of the remains with the deceased's individuality–a virtual embalming. The first stage of the process, the initial disposition, deprives the deceased of personhood, but in ritualizing the process of decomposition–filling the grave manually and adorning the top of the grave with natural grave goods, being present at the alkaline hydrolysis chamber, or the laying-in ceremony of

[205] Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, 7.
[206] Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*.

natural organic reduction and the 30-day visitation–people are organically experiencing or creating a period of time in which they engage with the deceased not simply as impersonal matter, but as individuals. The providers and participants in eco-disposition are ritualizing these decomposition moments rather than repeating old ones. They are engaging in a strategic way of acting in relation to the disposition of the body of the deceased and, in so far as their actions are set apart from everyday actions, a process of ritualization.

Viewing ritual-like behavior as a process of ritualization rather than focusing on "rituals" as actions that take a fixed form that has been and should be repeated allows us to appreciate the way providers have opened eco-disposition spaces to people of varying kinds of religious, spiritual, or secular beliefs. Ritualization does not inherently involve religion or spirituality, but ritual remains important. Nonreligious people still value a kind of ritualization at death, because although a literalist interpretation of materialist beliefs may indicate that the body is no longer significant at death, it does not decrease the body's significance as a representation of the individual.[207] The deceased body may be matter but it is *their* body and thus *personal* matter. Even as the body decomposes and becomes more natural-like, the remains are still imbued with the animation of life. The ritualization of eco-dispositions, while often not religious, is parallel to the popularization of celebrations of life that, instead of a focus on the afterlife, connect the dead body to the life it lived.[208]

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[207] Christine Behrend, "Case Study: A Funeral Ceremony for a Violinist," in *Emerging Ritual in Secular Societies: A Transdisciplinary Conversation*, ed. Jeltje Gordon-Lennox (London, UK: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2017); Engelke, "The Coffin Question."

[208] Courtney Applewhite, "Institutionalized Individuality: Death Practices and Afterlife Beliefs in Unity Church, Unitarian Universalism, and Spiritualism in Santa Barbara" (Master's Thesis, Santa Barbara, CA, University of California, Santa Barbara, 2019); Davies, *Death, Ritual, and Belief*; Garces-Foley, "Funerals of the Unaffiliated"; Dusty Hoesly, "Your Wedding, Your Way: Personalized, Nonreligious Weddings through the Universal Life Church," in *Organized Secularism*, ed. Ryan T. Cragun, Christel Manning, and Lori Fazzino (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017), 253–78; Margaret Holloway et al., "'Funerals Aren't Nice but It Couldn't Have Been Nicer'. The Makings of a Good Funeral," *Mortality* 18, no. 1 (February 2013): 30–53, https://doi.org/10.1080/13576275.2012.755505; Gibson and Frost, "Surfing and Ocean-Based Death Ritual"; Walter, "Bodies and Ceremonies."

The ritualization of eco-dispositions is a reflection of what scholars have called lived religion.[209] Lived religion, or co-construction of disparate elements of people, places, doctrine, and practice into belief and behavior, is another frame through which we can understand eco-dispositions.[210] In this work, I extend this approach to include the spheres of nonreligion and/or spirituality–a lived materiality or lived spirituality.[211] Despite distinct personal beliefs and backgrounds, the ritualization of eco-dispositions aims to cultivate personal connection with the deceased body. These eco-disposition providers are responding to a growing cohort of people, sometimes described as “unaffiliated,” “spiritual but not religious,” or simply “nonreligious” who are seeking alternatives to traditional disposition practices. In contrast to Dawdy, I reject the idea that these practices are, by nature, spiritual or a novel blend of science and spirituality.[212] Instead, eco-disposition sites not only offer people choices for the dead bodies besides conventional burial and cremation, but they also allow people to express values that complicate the religious/spiritual/secular trinary, a complication that scholars have long debated and has continued to be navigated among people in the world.

In the last chapter, I described Nathan’s confusion about how he defined spirituality and religion. In that example, he was thinking through some of the practices of ritualization that he observed. And it was unclear how he could properly group different kinds of actions

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[209] Nancy T. Ammerman, ed., *Everyday Religion: Observing Modern Religious Lives*, 1st edition (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); David D. Hall, *Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgment: Popular Religious Belief in Early New England* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990); Robert A. Orsi, *Thank You, St. Jude: Women’s Devotion to the Patron Saint of Hopeless Causes* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996).
[210] Bender and Taves, *What Matters?*
[211] Copeman and Quack, “Godless People and Dead Bodies”; Lee, “Locating Nonreligion, in Mind, Body and Space”; Gordon Lynch, *The Sacred in the Modern World: A Cultural Sociological Approach* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Village Atheists: How America’s Unbelievers Made Their Way in a Godly Nation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016).
[212] Dawdy, *American Afterlives*.

within his natural organic reduction warehouse. The board of one natural organic reduction facility includes a mortician advisor for alternative funeral practices and a professor who researches ritual and cultural practices. These two team members illustrate the way that providers are working to reclaim the two primary aspects of death that have been constrained by the funeral industry: choice about disposition and ritual.

As a form of lived religion, lived spirituality, or lived materiality, the ritualization of eco-dispositions serves the bereaved psychologically by creating a site at which competing tensions can be negotiated including different views of nature, spirituality, religion, and the afterlife. Instead, we might think of the move away from death denial and an embrace of these traditions more fundamentally: the ritualization of eco-dispositions creates a site where people can acknowledge their ongoing connection with the person. This connection may exist in ways they may consider spiritual or supernatural, but it is also grounded in an increasingly therapeutic culture and a general encouragement to deal with our own emotions. One of the ways in which this is achieved is in a turn to the past. Tradition may be a way in which, in the absence of formalized rituals, people are able to best soothe themselves: by connecting to an imagined past. But these traditions are also ritualized, with pieces selected that best serve the individuals.

Tradition in the Ritualization Process

My interlocutors in the South and Midwest are more likely to use language of returning to tradition to describe their practices, which have so far been primarily connected with green burial as opposed to alkaline hydrolysis or natural organic reduction. In this way, they are reflecting that which scholars have also concluded–that tradition has flexible

meaning. For more progressively minded people, green burial is a turn away from the modern burial practices, both a return to an imagined past in which people were more communally engaged and a progression to a more environmentally conscious future. For people who are more conservative, the emphasis is much more on a reclamation of lost traditions that were inherently better than what we have today by virtue of their antiquity.[213] This is part of the reason why many of my interlocutors anticipate slower acceptance of alkaline hydrolysis and natural organic reduction in the Midwest and South. Brittany, in the Midwest, believes that the resistance to a perceived change in the way things are done is too great with natural organic reduction, as opposed to green burial, which "you could say it has changed, but it's really a return to an old fashioned, very old-fashioned approach, pre-Civil War."

The emergent eco-disposition practices, like the reciprocal relationship between lived religion and a religious imagination, are selecting elements of past ritual practice to accommodate the change in religious affiliation or belief.[214] Although providers and practitioners may both understand and speak about their embrace of green burial as a return to tradition, the way they are ritualizing the process is typically less overtly religious and participants gravitate to those elements that can be understood in secular as well as religious terms (e.g., the Amish cart, the simple shroud, the hands-on approach of the family) and leaves the rest (e.g., the involvement of religious clergy, the theological import of burial, the critical role of the body in afterlife).

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[213] Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* (New York, NY: BasicBooks, 1992).
[214] Seeman, *Speaking with the Dead in Early America*.

Despite the variety of ways in which the people are ritualizing eco-dispositions, providers and participants still recognize them as ritual acts. Noam Chomsky found that, in language, there is a "poverty of the stimulus" in which people can understand an infinitely greater number of sentences than they have previously heard. And indeed, our recognition of ritual goes beyond that which we have previously observed.[215] My interlocutors took pride in extending our understanding of what it means to ritualize the disposal of the body. Deirdre described her experience at her southern natural burial ground serving Karen, a middle-aged woman who let herself die after a cancer diagnosis. In Deirdre's description, Karen's disposition service was truly individual, an accolade which made it even more special. During the service, "there were around 60 people, and they were very hands on. [Karen] was in a shroud and there were children present. When we got to the grave site, the service was really authentic. It wasn't formulaic, it wasn't led by a funeral director. It was led by a family friend who was very close to [Karen]. And her family literally helped to lower her into the grave." In the eyes of Deirdre, and many attending, the participatory element, the attention to the individual, and the intentionality behind Karen's choices all made the interment seem more authentic and genuine, and perhaps even more sacred, than a traditional formal burial ceremony. As their understanding of the decision-making in states of grief has expanded, eco-disposition providers are becoming more flexible and either providing options or working with the family in a free-form way.

In the moment Karen's body is covered in the grave, or the body being processed in the alkaline hydrolysis chamber, or as the body is transformed into compost, the person undergoes a unique change of status. The person is literally undergoing a process of

[215] Thomas E. Lawson and Robert N. McCauley, *Rethinking Religion: Connecting Cognition and Culture* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

decomposition in which they are depersonalized, sexless, and anonymous. Despite this change to what would be an unidentifiable state, Douglas Davies describes that, through ritualization, the deceased is rescued from an inevitable social death.[216] To some extent, the ritualization of the decomposition process corresponds to well-documented ritualized behaviors in conventional burial or funeral practices more generally.[217] Embalming and cremation objects have previously served to prolong this liminal period.[218] But with those practices comes the expectation and coding of particular kinds of disposition space as religious. The eco-disposition spaces generally provide a more neutral space for the ongoing ritualization. In conventional disposition, if the person is embalmed, there is a period of ritualized action: the visitation or wake in which the deceased can be viewed in the casket, the procession to the graveside, and then the graveside service. In eco-disposition, where embalming is not possible, there was a demand for similar kinds of ritual behavior that extended the in-between period between the body's disposition and the disposition of the remains.

Novel Ritualization in Eco-Disposition

Although modeled on perceived past practices, many of the elements involved with eco-dispositions are new to the people experiencing them and therefore perceived as moments that can be personalized. Paradoxically, this means that the return to traditional ritual practice is also an act of novel ritualization. In the U.S., there is a cultural memory of

[216] Davies, *Death, Ritual, and Belief*.
[217] Sébastien Penmellen Boret, Susan Orpett Long, and Sergei Kan, eds., *Death in the Early Twenty-First Century* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2017), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-52365-1; Davies, *Death, Ritual, and Belief*; William W. McCorkle Jr., *Ritualizing the Disposal of the Deceased* (Peter Lang US, 2010), https://doi.org/10.3726/978-1-4539-0067-3.
[218] Dawdy, *American Afterlives*.

pre-conventional burial practices, but not much practical knowledge, which begs the question of how much of that pre-conventional practice is grounded in historical reality.[219] In the opening episode of the television series *Six Feet Under*, a family of undertakers experiences the death of their patriarch. We see the estranged son, Nate, return home to question some of the rigid, modern death practices that the family has encouraged their clients to use. Nate ridicules the practice of sprinkling earth on top of the grave from a parmesan cheese shaker and herding the loud grievers to a quiet space to not disturb the ambience. Instead, he advocates for grief responses he views as more instinctive, like picking up handfuls of earth and wailing at the graveside. For some people, allowing that grief to manifest can result in behaviors that feel more authentic, but for others grief can be paralyzing. In response to these differences, the conventional funeral industry has created a menu of sorts that contains the limited options for the bereaved, based on precedent and traditional ritual, rather than working with the bereaved to create truly individualized experiences. The eco-disposition providers are shifting that perspective to building experiences from the family up, sometimes using outlines of conventional rituals, but more often building on the structure of the eco-disposition itself.

The providers of green burial, thus, are supporting families by suggesting elements they may want to incorporate into their individualized rituals and maintaining a connection with them as they go through the process. The values of each person are honored in this expression of individualism and provide the family with a sense of control.[220] In her Midwest

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[219] Jonathan Z. Smith, "Map Is Not Territory," in *Map Is Not Territory: Studies in the History of Religions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978).
[220] Michael I. Norton and Francesca Gino, "Rituals Alleviate Grieving for Loved Ones, Lovers, and Lotteries," *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* 143, no. 1 (February 2014): 266–72, https://doi.org/10.1037/a0031772.

burial ground, Brittany observed the ritualized actions as ranging from "one family who did come from the church and gathered; they wanted the casket already at the grave. They came, said some prayers, and had an officiant and then they left before the casket was lowered" to one in which "pallbearers take the casket to the grave, put flowers on the grave, put handwritten notes in the grave, and they want to lower the casket into the grave themselves. Some want to help close the grave." This diversity between hands-on behaviors and aversion to the process is also where socio-cultural factors collide because there is a blend of participatory impulse grounded in instinct as argued in *Six Feet Under* and some reticence that is part of the cultural norms that reinforce a fear of death. The experience from the preparation of the body to the procession to the burial site and the closing of the grave each receive attention from the providers, but they also encourage innovation and personalization from the families. Leighton's Instagram fame has emerged from his careful attention to the graves of his burial ground. He decorates each with elaborate flower art, a service he provides at no extra charge. He does so primarily to curate a personal experience for each individual family, but also to serve his own spiritual practice, creating "a meditation, a mandala, a flower bed, an intention, [as if] feathering a nest like a mother bird."

Alkaline hydrolysis providers have expressed to me that there is less in the way of ritualization at their sites of disposition. As described in previous chapters, the spaces are still developing into places in which families can gather and create an ongoing relationship with the decomposing person. But, at present, the body is shut away into the chamber, and the next part of the process is deciding what to do with the remains. As the providers I spoke with had less insight into this part of the process, I will not detail the myriad of ways in which people can memorialize the deceased through their alkaline hydrolysis remains, as

other scholars have done a thorough job of detailing these practices.[221] But, in short, people who are receiving cremated or alkaline hydrolysis remains will store them in decorated urns, some of which support plant growth, press the remains into diamonds or stones to be shared among family and friends, or perform scatterings in significant places. But it may be that the people drawn to these practices are more interested in a green, utilitarian approach with the knowledge that they will honor the deceased with objects or actions after they are transformed. Natural organic reduction is distinct from alkaline hydrolysis in that the process itself provides a window for ritualization that the creators of the technology and the providers who offer it did not anticipate.

As described in Chapter 2, the first step in the natural organic reduction disposition process is a very practical act of putting the body in the vessel–the laying-in. That this act would be ritualized was anticipated by some of the facilities; they created spaces in which the family could be present to place the person into the vessel. Brooke is another young woman providing natural organic reduction. In her late 20s, Brooke has a background in finance and left the cutthroat industry for something more meaningful. The mission of natural organic reduction was deeply important to her. Brooke explained that on one level, "it's a practical act where you place the plant material on the body for the transformation into soil, but [our service director] has done a beautiful job of also making it really spiritual if the family wants." Brooke sees spirituality in the acts of lighting a candle and thinking about sunlight or thinking about breathing and simply being present in the experience. During COVID, when

[221] Candi Cann, *Virtual Afterlives: Grieving The Dead in the Twenty-First Century* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2014); Dawdy, *American Afterlives*; Duncan Light, Julie Rugg, and Craig Young, "The Disposal of Cremation Ashes in Tourism Settings: Practices, Impacts and Management," *Current Issues in Tourism* 0, no. 0 (April 14, 2022): 1–13, https://doi.org/10.1080/13683500.2022.2054403; Mathijssen, *Making Sense of Death*.

people were not permitted to gather, many of these more conventional presentations of rituals were done on Zoom, another neutral ritual space to which people can bring their own practices. Brooke was surprised with how many different ways in which families ritualized these laying-ins. One deceased person was a gardener, “and her husband gave us some plants from her garden to include in her vessel.” The bereaved are embracing the ethos of “participatory death care” that urban natural organic reduction facilities hope to embody.[222]

Natural Organic Reduction Ritualizes the Transformation

Just as COVID restrictions began to lift, some natural organic reduction facilities began to open their doors to laying-ins. As one of the first industrial settings in which natural organic reduction was taking place regularly, Nathan was surprised by the need for people to be with their loved ones after the laying in. Only a year into providing natural organic reduction, Nathan has a limited background in death care; he originally envisioned that natural organic reduction facilities would operate like a direct cremation facility, returning the remains to the families after the composting was complete. In contrast to the other natural organic reduction facilities, his organization did not even make plans for a space for a laying-in ritual (see Chapter 2). He immediately found that people not only wanted to be present for the laying-in of the person into the vessel, the analog to a graveside service, but also wanted to be present with their loved ones through periodic visitation throughout the thirty-day natural organic reduction process, ritualizing the decomposition itself.

LeAnn, at the same natural organic reduction facility, found that from the first, people wanted to be with their person during their 30-day transformation, and this impulse arose

[222] From Instagram social media post, 2022.

organically and filled a logistical time slot that the process itself provided. A person asked her if they might come by and sit with their person's vessel. She and the team had no objections; the industrial setting might be off-putting, but the family member knew where the vessel was and the kind of space it was in. As more people began to express interest in such visitation, LeAnn began to provide picnic tables and chairs for people to use while they were visiting. These visitors ran the gamut. She explained, “there was a group of young kids who would come and eat their lunch here a couple of times a week with their person” and a gentleman who came to sit by his wife’s vessel daily, bringing her a cup of coffee and chatting with her as they had done every morning while she was alive. LeAnn refers to it as a “temporary mausoleum,” that’s unlike a cemetery because “it’s in a building that you walk into, and you've been here before.” Family members can be buzzed in at any time—no restrictions for access. In this way, people have nearly free reign to engage with their transforming person.

The materials for engaging with the deceased are completely up to the family. LeAnn will supply things for laying-ins, such as chairs and tables, music, decorations, items to place in the vessel, but supplies nothing not for subsequent visitations apart from tables and chairs. The environmental values alone are showcased in the facility itself. And the importance of continued remembrance and presence is also exemplified by the photos and notes left on the vessels. One family taped paper cranes and printed messages to the front of the vessel. Another vessel was topped with a small altar complete with a tennis ball, a felted white rabbit, a piece of driftwood, and a Cadbury egg. The LDS woman from the previous chapter had decorations of butterflies and photographs as well as two newsletters from the Church: The Testimony of the Apostles and A Bicentennial Proclamation to the World. The families

know that these will eventually have to be removed–the vessels will hold another person in the future–but this act of short-term memorialization is a key moment in their bereavement process and marks the vessel as an individual in an otherwise gray, industrial setting. The experience at this facility has caught the imagination of surrounding natural organic reduction providers. Whether influenced by the activities at this facility, or driven by the same initial impulse, other facilities' operators have reported that people are interested in being present with the person in that liminal period, ritualizing the in-between time. The facilities have indicated that they plan to make these ongoing visitations possible.

While this memorialization may be likened to the procession to a loved ones' grave, the space, longer than a procession and yet still temporally bound, is unique to natural organic reduction. And unlike in other temporary memorials, like the tributes in Green Park following the death of Queen Elizabeth II in the United Kingdom, or the roadside memorials following traffic accidents, this is the place where the person is physically–it is intimately connected to them as their place of disposition.[223] In processes like cremation or alkaline hydrolysis, the process happens quickly–taking only a few hours–and is rarely attended by family members after the initial button-press. The longer, but not eternal, transformation period of natural organic reduction is opening up a new, pointedly secular space in which people can grieve and ritualize for a set period of time with the person's body-cum-compost.

Through this thirty- to sixty-day period, the remains are changed from a dead body into a usable, nurturing material, and as such are imbued with the values that were important to the dead: values that are ecological, material, and sometimes spiritual (see Chapter 3). The structure of the survivor's relationship with the deceased person has shifted, as their body has

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[223] Cann, *Virtual Afterlives*.

changed, but it is also a moment of hyper-clarity for the bereaved in which they often report that it feels like "exactly what they would have wanted."[224] The process of becoming compost and the ritualization of that process is laden with the values of the dead, or the living's interpretation of those values, rather than a default decision made in accordance with custom. In this way, the ritualization is not only a time to reflect on a person's life, but also an intentional action that is in keeping with the values of the people involved. These ritualizations, thus, are not simply empty connections with belief or reflection on the person that was, but an embodiment of values and a means of connecting with the person who has died. They are a novel way of acting in the world.[225]

Decisions on the Margin

Although the personalization of ritual practice has been well-documented in the literature, less attention has been given to the negative associations with death spaces for certain groups. Marginalized in many parts of life, minority belief, race, and identity groups have been even more set apart in death. Sometimes this separation has happened in such a way that has denied them not only their values, but their sense of self. The eco-disposition methods, thus, have had mixed reception for these communities. They have allowed a kind of ritualization in which they can be themselves without the negative history of previous death practices in the case of the LGBTQ+ community, but they are perceived by many African Americans as denying critical aspects of their cultural practices and embodied remembrance.

[224] Personal interview, 2021.
[225] Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*.

LGBTQ+ Communities

My interlocutors among eco-disposition providers observe a greater proportion relative to the general population of LGBTQ+ individuals choosing their services and shaping their ritual experience, but little research has delved into the complexities of death in these communities.[226] In the emergent field of queer death studies, 'queer' refers to both "a noun/an adjective employed in researching and narrating death, dying, and mourning in the context of queer bonds and communities, where the subjects…are 'queer'; and a verb/an adverb that describes the process of going beyond and unsettling binaries and given norms and normativities."[227] In both these ways, the ritualization of an eco-disposition is queering the historical precedents of death rituals in the U.S. During the height of the AIDS epidemic in the 1970s and 1980s, many of those who died of AIDS within the LGBTQ+ community were denied burial rituals for worry about contamination–social and medical.[228] More recently, as violence against trans/gender non-conforming individuals has risen, there is the added disrespect of deadnaming–or improperly attributing pronouns and names–after death.[229] Many eco-disposition facilities have allied themselves with these communities, providing safe spaces for their final self-expression. From a ritualization perspective, this means continuing the pattern of creating and adapting rituals in the interstitial spaces allotted to queer communities.[230] Finding these spaces is made more complicated in that research has

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[226] Marietta Radomska, Tara Mehrabi, and Nina Lykke, "Queer Death Studies: Coming to Terms with Death, Dying and Mourning Differently. An Introduction," *Kvinder, Køn & Forskning*, no. 3–4 (September 30, 2019): 3–11, https://doi.org/10.7146/kkf.v28i2-3.116304.
[227] Radomska, Mehrabi, and Lykke, 6.
[228] Marty Fink, *Forget Burial: HIV Kinship, Disability, and Queer/Trans Narratives of Care* (Rutgers University Press, 2021).
[229] Yannick-Robin Eike Mirko, "Misrepresentation of Trans Dead, and Resources to Prevent It from Happening To You," *Talk Death* (blog), February 2, 2023, https://www.talkdeath.com/misrepresentation-of-trans-dead-and-resources-to-prevent-it-from-happening-to-you/.
[230] Dustin Bradley Goltz and Jason Zingsheim, eds., *Queer Praxis: Questions for LGBTQ Worldmaking* (New York, NY: Peter Lang, 2015).

found that among queer communities, there has been a grappling with the tenets of organized religion and a subsequent turn to a personal sense of spirituality, sometimes alongside but often distanced from religious traditions.[231] Eco-disposition sites offer these spaces in which the disposition of the body can be ritualized without religion.

LeAnn explained that, because their natural organic reduction facility had not been open long, most of their laying-ins had been at-need rather than pre-need, meaning that the method of disposition was chosen by the survivors rather than by the deceased. According to LeAnn, many LGBTQ+ survivors have chosen eco-disposition to honor the deceased. One woman chose natural organic reduction for her partner because the partner loved the outdoors, and because the bereaved partner did not want her disposition to involve religion or anything resembling it, including a traditional funeral home.

These motivations, both spurred by named values and by avoidance, shape the ritualization process. The ambiguity of the natural organic reduction facility–a warehouse, more than anything–allowed the deceased partner to exist in her identity as a lesbian, along with her commitment to the environment, both central identity values. These spaces, unlike those reminiscent of religious spaces or those with religious iconography, are creating space for these expressions of self in ritual practice. Sarah Ahmed argues that "to build feminist dwellings, we need to dismantle what has already been assembled."[232] The creation of eco-disposition facilities is a step towards an environmental ethic, but also a space in which some

[231] Michael Thomas, "Spirituality and Sexuality: Not Necessarily a Binary Choice for LGBTQ+ People," *Innovation in Aging* 4, no. Supplement_1 (December 1, 2020): 678, https://doi.org/10.1093/geroni/igaa057.2359; Kath Browne, Sally Munt, and Andrew K. T. Yip, eds., *Queer Spiritual Spaces: Sexuality and Sacred Places* (Farnham, Surrey, England ; Burlington, VT: Ashgate Pub, 2010); Todd Nicholas Fuist, "'It Just Always Seemed Like It Wasn't a Big Deal, Yet I Know for Some People They Really Struggle with It': LGBT Religious Identities in Context," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 55, no. 4 (2016): 770–86, https://doi.org/10.1111/jssr.12291; Melissa M. Wilcox, *Queer Women and Religious Individualism* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2009).
[232] Sarah Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 2.

of the marginalized can dwell more comfortably in relation to death. If rituals are a culturally strategic way of acting in the world rather than a rote action stripped of context, the ritualization of natural organic reduction is not a result of thoughtless action or ritual for the sake of ritual, but a thoughtful response to a particular cultural context.[233] New rituals are created because there are new ways of being and acting in the world.

The relationship to the queer communities has been consciously cultivated, not only because several eco-disposition providers are part of the community but also because they are aware of this historical marginalization. One natural organic reduction facility makes a particular point to be "inclusive, queer-friendly, and validating" of all kinds of beliefs and backgrounds.[234] Providers both encourage and learn from the types of personalized services that they are facilitating. Rather than being prescriptive, or providing set ritual guidelines that people must follow, at his green burial ground, Leighton explained that they have "actually been able to give people an opportunity to create their own experience, make it what they want it to be." Leighton explained that the rate-limiting-factor for the number of services was the amount of time they spend with each family. Compared to the 30-minute affairs of conventional burials, their burials take much longer. Leighton describes a green burial at his burial ground as "more like a start to finish with the family present; from the time they arrive to the time they leave is generally about three hours that they're on site with us." As a result, they do not have more than one a day. This creates a personal, safe space for the marginalized to enact a full process of ritualization. And, as one of my interlocutors

[233] Bell, *Ritual*, 1997.
[234] Personal interview, 2021.

described his own experience in the queer community, "there's a lot of wounded gay people that find conservation and natural burial, a place of safety and healing."[235]

Black Americans and Ritual Significance

Despite the apparently ready embrace of eco-disposition practices by the LGBTQ+ community, there are many groups for which the eco-disposition methods are not attractive from a cultural and ritual perspective. When asked, nearly all of my interlocutors admitted that eco-disposition practices have had limited appeal to people of color, and specifically Black Americans. There are several factors that scholars and my interlocutors point to as driving this pattern. Part of this may be attributed to location–many of the eco-disposition facilities, particularly those for natural organic reduction, are in areas that are predominantly white. But even where facilities are readily available, many people in the Black community prefer to maintain the consistent, community-celebrated, and cohesive burial tradition–the homegoing–that is distinctive to the Black community.[236]

The tradition of homegoing has been developed to honor and celebrate members in their community in a safe environment. It is also in part a response to the historically minimalist and often obscured burials enslaved Africans were required to give their dead in the early eras of the U.S. while simultaneously marking the key role that funerals played in the lives of enslaved people–as moments of community, planning, and revolution.[237] Even today, burial grounds of enslaved people have been found in areas that are neglected, and

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[235] Personal interview, 2022.

[236] Brian Palmer, "American Homegoing: On the Richness of the Black Funeral Tradition," *Virginia Quarterly Review* 98, no. 3 (2022): 135–59; David R. Roediger, "And Die in Dixie: Funerals, Death, & Heaven in the Slave Community 1700-1865," *The Massachusetts Review* 22, no. 1 (1981): 163–83; *Homegoings* (Peralta Pictures Inc., 2013), http://www.homegoings.com.

[237] Brian Palmer, "For the Forgotten African-American Dead," *The New York Times*, January 7, 2017, sec. Opinion, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/07/opinion/sunday/for-the-forgotten-african-american-dead.html.

they are often only discovered because the land was purchased for commercial use.[238] This has led to activism for the protection of these cemeteries when they are uncovered. Although conservation burial grounds and green cemeteries are meant to be maintained in perpetuity, there is likely a lingering fear of similar fates when considering a final disposition.

Although some elements of the homegoing could ostensibly take place in eco-disposition spaces, the final bodily memorialization after burial does not naturally follow from this type of disposition. There is privilege in being able to completely return to the earth after death.[239] The ability or willingness to be obscured, depersonalized, or not memorialized after death is possible because one already has that recognition and privilege during life. There is also the matter of the *manner* of death, because white Americans are much less likely to die violent deaths compared to people of color and are therefore less likely to have their lives ended prematurely.[240] Many Black Americans have been denied that privilege and the simple ability to live their life to completion due to violence. Hence the calls for remembrance after death often heard during the Black Lives Matter protests: "Say his name, George Floyd," "Say her name, Breonna Taylor," and "I can't breathe."[241] And, to return to the subject of embodiment in Chapter 3, racism and white supremacy are embodied experiences. Ta-Nehisi Coates writes,

> "But all our phrasing—race relations, racial chasm, racial justice, racial profiling, white privilege, even white supremacy—serves to obscure that *racism is a visceral*

[238] Kami Fletcher, "Are Enslaved African Americans Buried at Mount Harmon Plantation? Space and Reflection for National Mourning and Memorialising," *Mortality* 0, no. 0 (June 1, 2022): 1–16, https://doi.org/10.1080/13576275.2022.2080541; Palmer, "For the Forgotten African-American Dead"; Preservation Maryland, "African American Burial Ground Network Act Introduced in Congress," Preservation Maryland, February 28, 2019, https://www.preservationmaryland.org/african-american-burial-ground-network-act-introduced-in-congress/.
[239] Kami Fletcher, "Death Is Not the Great Equalizer: African Americans and Their Fight Against Racism From Beyond the Grave" (Keynote Address, Death & Culture IV, York, UK, September 9, 2022).
[240] Patrick Williams et al., "Omission, Erasure and Obfuscation in the Police Institutional Killing of Black Men," *Mortality* 28, no. 2 (April 3, 2023): 250–68, https://doi.org/10.1080/13576275.2023.2190451.
[241] The final words uttered by Eric Garner before his death at the hands of police.

> *experience, that it dislodges brains, blocks airways, rips muscle, extracts organs, cracks bones, breaks teeth.* You must never look away from this. You must always remember that the sociology, the history, the economics, the graphs, the charts, the regressions all land, with great violence, *upon the body*."[242]

These expressions of insufficient ritualization after death extend even to green burial, which has greater space for remembrance. Balonnier et al. observe that the body's erasure and the lack of memorialization during green burial "dispossesses the already dispossessed." Although sampling Germans in Germany, they found that there is a hesitancy to embrace the green burials that minimize or eradicate those material memorialization symbols associated with conventional cemeteries. There is a paradox in the invisibility of green burial as this used to be a punishment or a result of poverty and even today can cause struggle with grief.[243] W.E.B. Du Bois pointed out that "whiteness is the ownership of the earth forever and ever."[244] And indeed, becoming one with the earth in ritualization of eco-disposition is the privilege of the few. And therefore, it is equally important to reclaim the perpetual ownership of the land as a Black person. In this way, burial rights can also be a form of restorative justice.[245] This raises the question of whether, in the context of green burial, it is possible for that justice to be restored if there isn't proper memorialization or monetary value placed on the interment itself.

It should therefore not surprise us that Black Americans are not quickly turning to eco-dispositions. Many of my interlocutors are very engaged with and supportive of these differences. Although some emphasized the idea of making the space accommodating to everyone, many acknowledged that these practices would not be for everyone. Dawn

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[242] Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me* (New York, N.Y.: Random House, 2017).
[243] Becher, "Becoming a Tree."
[244] W.E.B. Du Bois, *Darkwater*, ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014 (1920), 18.
[245] Fletcher, "Death Is Not the Great Equalizer."

explained that she was a popular choice of funeral directors in the African American community in the Pacific Northwest because there is only one local “Black technical funeral home,” one in which they perform all aspects of post-death care, and her prices are much more competitive. For this group she finds that fewer are interested in her green services and are instead more interested in cultivating that experience of homegoing. In the 20 years that she has been doing death work, she does not recall aiding a Black family with a green burial or other eco-disposition.

Despite finishing my official research period, I still receive newsletter and social media updates from my research sites. A recent newsletter from one of the natural organic reduction facilities in the Pacific Northwest described their first laying-in for a member of the Black community. In the facility’s description, the bereaved family was pleased with the experience and assured the providers that, “more would be coming.”[246] At the institutional level, providers are recognizing that times may be changing. COVID-19 was a challenging moment for the National Funeral Directors and Morticians Association (NFDMA) in that the safety measures and restrictions around traditional practices meant a turn to cremation.[247] This, in addition to the growing acknowledgment of these eco-disposition options. It will be a point of future study to see how these practices develop within these communities, or continue to be set aside, as they become more accessible and widespread.

[246] Email newsletter updated, 2022.
[247] Palmer, “American Homegoing.” Black funeral directors created what is now called the NFDMA in 1924 when white funeral directors barred them from joining their professional organization (NFDA).

Conclusion

As several factors converge—the climate crisis, the rise of unaffiliated and nonreligious individuals in the U.S., and growing awareness of death and death care due to the COVID-19 pandemic—eco-dispositions have become more popular and with that comes a space–both physical and mental–for novel ritualization. The ritualization of an eco-disposition is largely driven by values that extend beyond religion, grounded in the experiences of the individual. Instead of a heavenly afterlife, the body's afterlife is ritualized in a natural or material sense–the body will go back to the earth, but rather than being limited to a space in a cemetery, the body can be transformed into earth and carried with their loved ones. It is through this ritualization that the person retains their individuality.

The ritualization innovations support the idea that traditions are not static but are continually being created and recreated over time. By studying the ways in which religious traditions, and by extension, death ways, evolve and change, scholars can gain a better understanding of the complex and dynamic relationship between religion, culture, and society. The participants in ritualization are themselves conducting experiments to better understand how ritual practice can serve them.[248]

When they are initially placed in the vessel among the organic materials in natural organic reduction, the deceased is a body that resembles the person they once were. It is through these repeated visitations of the body as it transforms that the bereaved maintain their relationship with the deceased, reinvigorating them as individuals through the remembrances they leave. It is true that not everyone's vessel is decorated, but this lack of intervention disturbs others. LeAnn described families asking about the neighboring vessel,

[248] Frost, "Ritualizing Nonreligion."

and if they could add something to it for the person inside. People crave assigning individuality to the vessels–ritualizing this process of decomposition. By the end of the process, LeAnn said that the first thing that people do with the bag of composted remains is hug it tightly: the compost made sacred.

Conclusion: The Compost Made Sacred

Six Feet Under

Ever prescient, *Six Feet Under's* final season concluded in 2005 with an ode to green burial. Nate, the contrarian eldest brother, dies unexpectedly at the age of 40. The climax of the season, and really of the series, centers on what to do with his body. Having learned of green burial a few episodes earlier, Nate changes his will to indicate that he wants a green burial for himself in the event of his death. Even as he has stayed to help in the funeral home, he has continued to question the norms. His family is divided–conventional burials and cremations are what their family has always done, what does it mean to do something different now?

This struggle, documented on the small screen over 15 years ago, persists as we gain different, new, and updated ways of disposing of our dead. Although slow to start, the conversation around eco-disposition is growing, and the attraction that this holds for young people, for people outside of traditional belief systems and identities, and for those that hold the environment as most critical cannot be understated.

The Entangled Corpse

Like many researchers in the humanities, I developed my research questions over time as I learned more about the people and processes involved in eco-disposition. But, in the end, my original questions proved most interesting. I aimed to understand the cultural, religious, and legal motivations that were influencing the popularity of eco-dispositions. I found that the deceased body is a site of importance to the bereaved and remains so through

the process of decomposition. However, the deceased body is also a site of contention, where legal decisions, attributed and held values, and moral differences determine its treatment. I aimed to determine the values that are associated with eco-dispositions. I hypothesized, and found, that these disposition methods would be places in which the nonreligious could express their own sets of values beyond the religious. And indeed, I found that when eco-dispositions are approved and made available in states and municipalities, they are opening spaces for people to express deeply held values and ritualize the process of disposition itself.

Emerging from the proliferation of data emerging about the changing landscape of American religion, I also asked how eco-disposition practices were related to these changing demographics.[249] The answer to this question is still largely speculative, as performed eco-dispositions are relatively few to make strong claims, but my data suggest that eco-disposition methods are serving a set of overlapping demographics that are all increasing–the nonreligious, people of only some marginalized identity groups, and people who deeply value the environment from both a worldview and personal perspective.

Chapter 1 examined the development of green burial, alkaline hydrolysis, and natural organic reduction as they are legislated, and the businesses created in various parts of the country. This chapter tended to the entanglements I observed in the legislative process and the marketing of these practices between regional culture and religious history, an embrace of the eco-disposition method as both product and produced, and the perception of tradition. While the South remains a popular place for burial, due to its large number of existing cemeteries, higher proportion of religious people, and connection to tradition, it has gotten

[249] Cary Funk, Greg Smith, and Luis Lugo, "'Nones' on the Rise: One-in-Five Adults Have No Religious Affiliation" (Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion & Public Life, October 9, 2012), http://www.pewforum.org/uploadedFiles/Topics/Religious_Affiliation/Unaffiliated/NonesOnTheRise-full.pdf; Kosmin et al., "American Nones"; Smith and Cragun, "Mapping Religion's Other."

less attention from alkaline hydrolysis or natural organic reduction. This is also true of the Midwest. Although these areas have recently approved more alkaline hydrolysis facilities, they remain a place primarily for burial or cremation. The Northeast and the West, areas that have long practiced cremation at much higher rates than the U.S. average, have been the first to accept the legalization of natural organic reduction. Although still only available in the West, the promise of a lower environmental impact in an urban setting appeals to the Northeast sensibility about available space, even as legislation proves more difficult.

Building on this difference of place, chapter 2 turned to the distinctions in space. By demonstrating how the sites of eco-disposition are carefully cultivated with a particular ethos in mind, I also showed how the body itself has remained central in the eco-disposition approach. The funeral parlor of old is not as attractive to some people as it once was, and today's eco-disposition spaces invite people in by evoking nature and creating an environment that feels almost anti-death. Plants, bright lights, and nature prints are about life—the life that you or your loved one will have after death. These spaces turn to more generic symbols of eternality than those typically associated with spirituality and religion.

Chapter 3 marked the transition from the outward perceptions of the eco-disposition movement to the internal feelings held by providers and participants. Emerging from my conversations with providers, time spent with advocates, and the explosion of social media around these practices, I showed that the key values associated with eco-disposition were, without much disconnect despite their difference, those centered on materiality, spirituality/religion, environment, and embodiment. Although some of these values proved to be more obvious, in this explanation I draw out the nuance of how these values are expressed in the particular time and place in these eco-dispositions. Materiality connects directly to the

rise of the nonreligious and people who identify as secular. Drawing from our Secular Communities Survey, I show how a disproportionate number of people who are secular joiners want a disposition that is not cremation or burial. And while I argue that these eco-disposition facilities are secular places, I meant that in terms of their projected neutrality, but note that even in their abstraction, they cannot be truly neutral spaces.

Spirituality and religion, particularly in more religious places in the country, remain important in these eco-disposition choices as well. Although these ideas must be brought in rather than the default in the space, as was typical in the past. In explaining the importance of environmental values, I point out the nuance that may be missed if not carefully considered. Of course, many people choose eco-disposition for the environment, but for some it is anthropocentric–they want to support the environment because it's what they live in and love, whether climate change is real–and others it is earth-centric—to protect the environment and future generations. These distinctions are evident throughout each eco-disposition method. The last value that I discuss in those choosing eco-disposition practices is the importance of embodiment. People want to feel, or want their deceased loved ones to feel, comfortable in death. This is why the people who provide these services double down on their descriptions of each practice as gentle and nurturing. No needles, no fire, just earth.

In the closing chapter, I turn to the deep literature on ritual to grapple with the ritualization I see happening at these sites of eco-disposition. The ritualization of eco-disposition has the distinction of being intentionally innovative and personal, set in these spaces that allow for distance from traditional funeral rituals and, if required, religious or cultural norms. I choose to use the phrase ritualization because my focus was not on the funerary services themselves, but rather the ritualization of the process of disposition.

Although other works have explored death rituals more fully, this centers the experience of laying the person into the grave, chamber, or vessel, and accompanying them on their process of decomposition. Rituals like funerals, celebrations of life, and the eventual scattering of remains have been discussed, and will warrant future discussion for these eco-disposition methods. The chapter closes by exploring the place of people with marginalized identities within the landscape of eco-disposition. While seen as an inclusive and safe space for the LGBTQ+ community, fewer people from minority racial groups, especially Black Americans, are gravitating toward these practices.

To Take to the Grave

The general aim of this dissertation has been to describe the people, groups, and organizations that comprise the eco-disposition movement. In this, I add to the work colleagues have done that have likewise sought to examine these practices in light of the history of disposition in the U.S., the growth of these methods in other countries, and their ritual significance. Indeed, as I began the writing stages of this dissertation, Shannon Dawdy published her book that approached the topic much as I have, from an anthropological lens that sought to understand the why behind people choosing these methods.[250] We even matched down to two of the questions we asked: what happens after we die? and what do you want done with your physical body at death? For Dawdy, the answers were oriented more to the spiritual, but for my providers, the answer was overwhelmingly material, agnostic, or practical. And for disposition? Universally eco-disposition. This dissertation considers the

[250] Dawdy, *American Afterlives*.

method of disposition as a critical act in itself, and the associated spaces, providers, and practices key to understanding how it will fit into a changing U.S. social landscape.

What is Left Behind

Before I began this project, I spoke with a mentor in the field of death studies, who warned me that disposition was not a sexy topic. They could not articulate exactly why, but they knew that scholars tended to stay away from it, instead focusing on death rituals, bereavement, or death in popular culture and literature. If they remember that conversation, I apologize for going against their advice, but I stand behind my decision to research eco-disposition methods. The way in which we dispose of our dead, beyond the ceremony, beyond the psychology, and beyond the popular image, reveals much about our values and beliefs. It is, as another mentor likes to say, “where the rubber meets the road.”

In this spirit, I hope that this research invites others to examine what we do with the deceased body. Studies of disposition are increasing, but it is still an underserved area of research, and I hope that this dissertation is a step in that direction. The U.S. has long taken for granted its two-party system of disposition, and with this increase of now three viable alternatives, the field is widely expanded. As with any expansion of choice, there are social, cultural, and personal implications for why people may choose one option over another—sometimes with conscious deliberation and others driven by external forces. With the deceased body of a loved one, or yourself, those stakes are higher. In this sense, I see my dissertation as contributing to three key areas: death studies in the United States, studies of secular people, and ritual studies.

The field of death studies is wide-ranging and encompasses wide areas of study and methodological frames, and it is growing.[251] The studies therein seem to have the challenge of whether to engage with death studies literature, or to engage with the literature of the subfield in which they are situated by topic (e.g., secularism, gender, race) or the methodological approach (e.g., psychology, sociology, anthropology). To death studies, I have aimed to provide a thorough explanation of these emerging eco-disposition methods, beginning to outline how it fits into the larger death histories in the U.S. and abroad. Eco-dispositions are indeed another iteration in a shifting death narrative in the U.S. Although our methods of disposition have remained limited, the feelings, approaches, and perceptions of death have been ever-changing.

Here, I have also endeavored to bridge the gap between death studies and one such subfield, secular studies. Following in the example of scholars like Abou Farman, Matthew Engelke, Jacob Copeman, and Johannes Quack, this examination of death as a site of secular or nonreligious expression extends their arguments that nonreligious people are continuing to create meaning outside of and alongside existing religious structures. In the U.S., death is still strongly influenced by religion and the religious connotation expressed in many conventional funeral homes. I have found that these eco-disposition practices are ambiguous sites that have been adapted for use, where religion can be included, but most importantly, does not need to be actively purified.[252]

In a similar vein, this site of secular ritual construction overlaps into my contributions to ritual studies. Death rituals are an important frame of scholarly inquiry, but the changing

[251] Erica Borgstrom and Julie Ellis, "Introduction: Researching Death, Dying and Bereavement," *Mortality* 22, no. 2 (May 2017): 93–104, https://doi.org/10.1080/13576275.2017.1291600.
[252] Blankholm, *The Secular Paradox: On the Religiosity of the Not Religious*.

nature of these rituals raises questions about the category itself. What does it mean to have ritual in an increasingly individualized society? What purpose do rituals serve beyond those social and societal? The concept of ritual is now reimagined in popular thought, perhaps demonstrated by how supplement and skincare brands use the word to evoke ideas of daily routine.[253] Beyond this hyper-generalized usage, secular people are actively reshaping ideas of ritual as they actively seek to eliminate religious associations rites.[254] Thus, some secular people are creating their own rituals, removing religious elements, while some avoid the concept of ritual altogether unless speaking of the general uses mentioned above.[255] Ritualizing eco-dispositions themselves removes some of the ceremony, replicability, and authority of ritual as it has been widely understood. My findings point to the development of a kind of ritualization that centers on the actions, intentions, and values that are specific to the individual, and both expressed and implied in the method of disposition.

There are many questions that remain to be explored, as the eco-disposition movement is in its infancy. Future anthropological work should explore the people who are choosing eco-disposition for themselves and their loved ones more precisely. The accounts I received from providers were instructive but are limited by the number of individuals they have served and their memories of such events. Their responses are also naturally informed by their own positionality to their activism, enthusiasm, and personal beliefs. However, approaching the topic of death from an anthropological perspective is complicated by the nature of death research more broadly.[256] Bereaved people, from an ethics perspective, are very vulnerable. Most of the research in anthropology and psychology is from people who

[253] See ritual.com and rituals.com for evidence of this.
[254] Blankholm, *The Secular Paradox: On the Religiosity of the Not Religious*; Frost, "Ritualizing Nonreligion."
[255] See also, the Secular Communities Survey, 2021.
[256] Borgstrom and Ellis, "Introduction."

are 1+ years away from their loss, a time when motivations, values, and decisions may not be as well-remembered.

The more precise question of who, and why, people are using these practices from a greater sample of people is the future work of a sociological survey. Some surveys have included questions about disposition, particularly those within the funeral industry, but a wider range of options might provide more insight. In our Secular Communities Survey, the "other" category of disposition options comprised 28% of respondents. With my research in mind, we provided a space for written-in responses, which provided the basis for my argument about secular joiners liking things "green." Without this option for providing a more detailed response in their own words, it is unclear what respondents mean when they select "other." I think it will also be increasingly critical to ask how these spaces are manifesting as death spaces for the nonreligious and other marginalized identities. Insofar as I attempt to engage in the early moments of this conversation, much more work is to be done. And if I can go beyond sociological surveys, there is much to uncover about the people choosing eco-dispositions in the wider sociological, and anthropological, theoretical perspectives.

The future directions of my own inquiries tend to the importance of the body, although in a slightly unusual way. There has been limited research into the way in which we engage with, perceive, and interact with the deceased body.[257] But, beyond this, we may consider the deceased body as part of a continuum of presence, from the hyper-material body itself to the presence of the deceased after death. Drawing from literature on meaning-

[257] Claire White, Daniel M. T. Fessler, and Pablo S. Gomez, "The Effects of Corpse Viewing and Corpse Condition on Vigilance for Deceased Loved Ones," *Evolution and Human Behavior* 37, no. 6 (November 1, 2016): 517–22, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.evolhumbehav.2016.05.006.

making, I aim to understand the ways in which our continued attachment to the deceased body affects our perception or understanding of their continued presence after death, also called sense of presence.[258] Sensing the presence is an experiential and embodied phenomenon, but it is also grounded in a cultural context and historical frame. I am interested in bringing together historical, anthropological, and scientific methods to engage with this question. Beyond the why, I will explore the how and by what means people experience a sense of presence. By speaking with people who have these experiences, and by using innovative methods that may induce these experiences, our future studies aim to understand the critical importance of the body, and the mind, on presence hallucinations.[259]

Any Last Words?

Endings are hard. I am unsure how to adequately conclude an open-ended question. And indeed, how do I conclude a work about such an ultimate ending? I will use this moment to situate myself in my own field of study, and to put in perspective the importance of this, and other, works on death. People often ask me, why death? The clearest answer is that I think of is that death tells us a lot about life. I think it reveals our motivations and values, and I believe it offers a perspective we might not otherwise take. *Memento mori*, Stoic philosophers wrote over two thousand years ago: *remember that you are mortal*. It is through

[258] Catherine Keen, Craig D. Murray, and Sheila Payne, "A Qualitative Exploration of Sensing the Presence of the Deceased Following Bereavement," *Mortality* 18, no. 4 (November 2013): 339–57, https://doi.org/10.1080/13576275.2013.819320; Matthew Ratcliffe, "Sensed Presence without Sensory Qualities: A Phenomenological Study of Bereavement Hallucinations," *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 20, no. 4 (September 1, 2021): 601–16, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11097-020-09666-2; Edith Steffen and Adrian Coyle, "Sense of Presence Experiences and Meaning-Making in Bereavement: A Qualitative Analysis," *Death Studies* 35, no. 7 (August 2011): 579–609, https://doi.org/10.1080/07481187.2011.584758.

[259] Olaf Blanke et al., "Stimulating Illusory Own-Body Perceptions," *Nature* 419, no. 6904 (September 2002): 269–70, https://doi.org/10.1038/419269a; Neza Vehar, Jevita Potheegadoo, and Olaf Blanke, "Linking Agent Detection of Invisible Presences to the Self: Relevance for Religious and Spiritual Experiences," *Frontiers in Behavioral Neuroscience* 16 (June 28, 2022): 952736, https://doi.org/10.3389/fnbeh.2022.952736.

this impulse that I study death, and it was through the medium of the deceased body that I was first introduced to death's reality.

In my work at the Medical Examiner's Office, the dead body was critical to our study. We were trained to use the "D" words: dead, death, died, deceased. No euphemisms for the weary. I spoke to family members with all the bluntness of the deceased body itself. "Your father died today." "Your daughter was found dead this morning." And the first thing they wanted was to see the body: the evidence of death. When I entered graduate school, I realized that the body was often overlooked. But the dead body is the one of the few *real* things in death–the only tangible thing. And certainly, from a materialist perspective, the last vestige of the person as they exist on earth. Eco-dispositions are having an important moment because people are realizing the centrality of the body again–the emperor in new clothes–the body wrapped in a green cloak.

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