UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA,
IRVINE

Material Remains: Photography, Death, and Transformation

DISSERTATION

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in Visual Studies

by

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2019

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to express my deepest appreciation to my committee chair, Professor Cécile Whiting, without whose unflagging support and guidance this dissertation would not have been possible. I am especially grateful for the example Professor Whiting sets as a mentor and a scholar of the highest caliber, and as a truly kind person.

Immense thanks are also due to my dissertation committee members, Professor James Nisbet and Professor Aglaya Glebova, whose intelligent input, flexibility, and continued support were indispensable to this dissertation. I would also like to thank Professor Bridget Cooks and Professor Miles Coolidge for their thought-provoking and enthusiastic contributions as members of my dissertation prospectus committee.

I would like to acknowledge the support of UCI's School of Humanities, which awarded me a Dean's Fellowship, allowing me to focus solely on the dissertation during the 2017–2018 academic year. I'd also like to thank the staff of the Visual Studies program for their logistical support and, more importantly, their encouragement and friendly spirit, especially Graduate Coordinator Clara Quijano. Enormous thanks go to the staff of Langson Library, and the staff for Interlibrary Loan in particular, without whose labor this dissertation would have been impossible.

I am sincerely indebted to the artists discussed in this dissertation, especially those who were so generous with their time in interviews and studio visits—Jacqueline Hayden, Jonathan Hollingsworth, Justin Kimball, Jason Lazarus, David Maisel, and Sarah Sudhoff.

Thank you to my cohort in the Visual Studies program, Anirban Gupta-Nigam and Jessica Ziegenfuss, whose camaraderie buoyed me over the last six years. I would also like to give a heartfelt thanks to Jess for her companionship, support, and advice as a dear, dear friend.

I would like to thank all my friends in Visual Studies and at UCI, especially my writing buddies, who kept me company and kept me accountable through the writing process: Ben Aaron, Caitlin Benedict, Matt Knutson, Mary Schmitt, Annie Yaniga, and Jess Ziegenfuss. I'd also like to give thanks to Ryan Gurney, Kayleigh Perkov, and Mary Schmitt for their peer mentorship and enduring friendship. I'd like to extend a special thank you to James Goebel and Heather Layton, who offered immense and invaluable support during the last six months of this dissertation. An enormous debt of gratitude is also due to Paroma Wagle, my roommate, writing buddy, and cherished friend, for her encouragement and care.

I would like to thank my colleagues from various museum positions over the years, especially the staff of the Mead Art Museum at Amherst College during my time working there, and in particular, my mentors Dr. Elizabeth Barker, Dr. Randall Griffey, and Dr. Pamela Murray. My time at the Mead was instrumental in my decision to pursue this PhD and to my success as a graduate student and museum professional. I'd also like to thank the team at the UCI Institute and Museum of California Art, especially Amy Lim, Kevin Appel,

and Carol Jun, whose confidence in me during my last year at UCI was greatly appreciated and indispensable to my continued success in this field.

Gratitude is also due to my Art History professors at Smith College for setting me on this path, especially my advisor Frazer Ward and my mentor Dana Leibsohn. Thank you also to Smith College friends Melissa Breor, Amanda Coen, and Emily Floyd, whose continued friendship means so much me.

I would like to sincerely thank my family for their unconditional support over the years. I have especially appreciated having my aunt and uncle, Amy Corton and Carl Eibl, close by during my time in Southern California.

Lastly, I'd like to thank my parents, Genie and Lloyd Dethloff, for all the love in the world. Thank you for everything.

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FIELD OF STUDY

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PUBLICATIONS

PHOTOdocument: Twentieth-Century American Photography and Found Text. Amherst, MA: Mead Art Museum, Amherst College, 2012.

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Material Remains: Photography, Death, and Transformation

By

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Doctor of Philosophy in Visual Studies

University of California, Irvine, 2019

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This dissertation discusses photographic series by nine contemporary American photographers who picture the materials of death: belongings left behind, physical traces, dead bodies, and cremation ashes. In the series by Andrea Tese, Justin Kimball, and Jonathan Hollingsworth featured in Chapter One, belongings left behind—furniture, clothes, keepsakes, and personal effects—retain physical and psychic traces of the lives of the deceased. The blood- and fluid-stained fabrics and the decaying dead bodies themselves pictured in series by Sarah Sudhoff, Sally Mann, and Robert Shults, discussed in Chapter Two, serve as evidence of the physical and sociopolitical circumstances of death. In Chapter Three, series by Jacqueline Hayden, Jason Lazarus, and David Maisel feature cremation ashes, which suggest, through their resemblance to stars and other sublime vistas, an enduring afterlife.

These photographs vacillate between emphasizing the "truth" and persistence of material remains and their literal and metaphorical transformation. Utilizing an array of photographic processes and artistic choices, the photographers lead the viewer through various levels of literal and metaphorical transformation, allowing the photographers to

explore new ways to visualize that which otherwise may not be accessible, apparent, or knowable: the story of a life lived and lost, the underlying sociopolitical causes of a death, or the existence of an afterlife. These varied approaches to reading death through transformation suggest possibilities but ultimately accept the limitations of attempting to picture the unknowable. Despite their acknowledgement of such limitations, however, each photographer suggests that efforts to memorialize, understand, and envision remain meaningful and worthwhile.

This dissertation primarily utilizes visual analysis and incorporates material from in-depth, firsthand interviews between the author and six of the discussed artists. The dissertation also draws on photography theory and interdisciplinary scholarship from the field of Death Studies. Contemplating the photographs discussed herein, singly and in series, and in conversation with each other and with trends in popular media and contemporary funerary options, allows viewers insight into individual experiences of dying and enables them to extrapolate broader patterns in attitudes, sociopolitical circumstances, and institutions that affect how people age, ail, and die, and mourn and remember today.

INTRODUCTION

This dissertation discusses photographic series focused on death and created since the beginning of the twenty-first century by nine photographers working in the United States of America. All nine photographers highlight materials related to death: belongings left behind, physical traces, dead bodies, and cremation ashes. In the series by Andrea Tese, Justin Kimball, and Jonathan Hollingsworth featured in Chapter One, belongings left behind encompass homes and their contents, including furniture, clothes, keepsakes, and personal effects found on or near bodies at the time of death. Physical traces are present in subtle ways on such belongings left behind, such as imprints of the body on a favorite chair, and in viscerally apparent ways in the blood- and fluid-stained fabrics in a series by Sarah Sudhoff in Chapter Two. The dead bodies themselves that are pictured in the other series discussed in Chapter Two, by Sally Mann and Robert Shults, are captured as they undergo the process of decay, while the bodies in series by Jacqueline Hayden, Jason Lazarus, and David Maisel featured in Chapter Three have been reduced to ashes through the process of cremation. Although photography of dead bodies has nearly as long of a history as photography itself, these series depart from the precedents of postmortem portraiture and photojournalism in the circumstances under which the bodies are photographed and in their focus on the material qualities and material "truth" of the remains they picture. These particularities of the photograph's subject matter allow the photographers to emphasize themes of literal and metaphorical transformation and explore new ways to visualize that which otherwise may not be seen.

The dual foci on the persistent material "truth" of the dead body and its literal and metaphorical transformation is what allows these artists to attempt to picture the ineffable.

Transformation occurs on various registers: it can be a change in composition or structure; a change in the outward appearance of; and/or a change in character or condition. In this dissertation, I make a distinction between literal transformation—namely structural transformation, such as that which the body undergoes during decomposition or cremation— and metaphorical transformation—that is, transformations in character or condition, in which we imagine a spiritual or social afterlife. The third kind of transformation, transformation in appearance, is found both on literal and metaphorical levels—the drastically changed appearance of the decaying body, for instance, or the depiction of ashes to *look like* stars. As a flexible and visible register, transformation in appearance can signal or echo structural changes that the body has undergone or is undergoing and suggest or represent changes in character, such as the imagined alteration of the individual from a living, embodied person to a soul, spirit, or memory.

Utilizing an array of artistic choices—from their choice of photography as their medium and selections of specific photographic materials and processes, to composition, editing, and presentation—each photographer leads the viewer through various levels of literal and metaphorical transformation, and as the subject matter slides between fact and metaphor, the known points to the unknown, and the visible points to the invisible. Traces of sweat, blood, and decay permanently, invisibly or visibly, mark the objects that the deceased leaves behind; but these marked objects stand not only for the body, but also represent the life lived and lost. These photographs by Tese, Kimball, and Hollingsworth arranged in photobooks emphasize the story-telling inherent in this representation of life. Decay is an unavoidable truth of death, but this literal process of transformation also points to social processes and spiritual possibilities. Mann's use of the wet plate collodion process

emphasizes decay, while Sudhoff's and Shults's aesthetic choices highlight that photography "freezes" processes like decay, allowing for observation and measurement. Likewise, cremation produces an enduring material variation of the body through a process that is both literal and highly suggestive of spiritual journeys. Hayden's use of the scanner and Lazarus's use of the photogram process, as well as Maisel's attention to composition enhances their photographs evocations of an afterlife journey. The theme of transformation, therefore, is crucial for facilitating the artists' attempts to picture that which cannot otherwise be seen or represented—a life lived and lost, the factual and sociopolitical circumstances of a death, or an afterlife; and the medium of photography is key to the artists' elucidations of transformation. These varied approaches to reading death through transformation suggest possibilities but ultimately accept the limitations of attempting to picture the transcendent. Despite their acknowledgement of such limitations, however, each photographer suggests that efforts to memorialize, understand, and envision remain meaningful and worthwhile.

Literature Review/Methodology

This dissertation draws on art history and visual studies methods of visual analysis and contextualization, and incorporates material from in-depth, firsthand interviews between the author and six of the discussed artists—Justin Kimball, Jonathan Hollingsworth, Sarah Sudhoff, Jacqueline Hayden, Jason Lazarus, and David Maisel.[1] This dissertation also draws on expanded scholarship on photography and scholarship from the various disciplines comprising the interdisciplinary field of Death Studies. The following

[1] In the instances when I was unable to interview an artist personally, I consulted pre-existing interviews and autobiographical texts in order to maintain a consistent representation of both the artist's intentions and interpretations and my own.

literature review summarizes salient arguments from the latter two bodies of scholarship, which inform both the content and methodology of this dissertation.

Photography of Death

A fundamental part of human life, death has been represented throughout time and across media, ranging from personifications of death in mythology and the arts, to the veneration of relics and material culture associated with burial and mourning. Relics, death masks, and Victorian hair jewelry, among other materials, suggest that artifacts with an indexical relationship to the deceased have historically been particularly potent in religious and mourning contexts. Photography, quickly following its advent in 1839, combined the iconic memorial functions of postmortem painted portraiture with the indexical trace present in death masks and hair jewelry. Emerging at around the same time as modern processes of embalming, photography likewise appeared to function to preserve the dead.

Like scholarship on photography more broadly, studies on the photography of death have been undertaken by scholars from multiple disciplines, ranging from social history, anthropology, and photography history to photography theory, philosophy, and communications. Three major strands of scholarship on the photography of death have approached the subject from the perspectives of cultural and social history, political economy and ethics, and photography theory.

Much of the substantive research that has been conducted on photographs of death have taken a social or cultural historical approach. *Secure the Shadow: Death and Photography in America*, a foundational study on postmortem portraiture by anthropology professor Jay Ruby, uses letters, newspaper articles, advertisements, and other archival

material to sketch the origins, chronology, and customs of postmortem photography. Ruby asserts that postmortem portrait photography was mobilized in the mourning process throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Whereas in the nineteenth century postmortem portraits were openly produced and consumed, considered a bulwark against forgetting and part of a normal mourning process, in the twentieth century postmortem photography was carried on privately due to a social taboo considering them to be morbid markers of an unhealthy fixation.[2] Photography historian and curator Audrey Linkman's *Photography and Death* takes a similar approach to its investigation of photographs of death. Linkman focuses on postmortem photographs taken or commissioned by those with an intimate relationship to the deceased and shows how these photographs provided comfort to the bereaved.

Particularly useful for the present investigation, in her final chapter, Linkman turns her attention to art photography of death created since the 1970s. Linkman argues that these artists transgressed social taboos against showing death and mourning by publicly processing their grief through photographic documentation of their loved one's dying and death and so contributed to changing social conceptions of acceptable bereavement.[3] Investigations such as Linkman's and Ruby's are useful models for social and historical approaches to the photography of death that make compelling use of visual analysis in their case studies. Ruby's use of primary source material such as period advertisements is an especially persuasive model for how to successfully establish a social and cultural context for photographs. Whereas these authors focus primarily on vernacular and intimate photography of death—a focus Linkman maintains even in her discussion of artistic

[2] Jay Ruby, *Secure the Shadow: Death and Photography in America* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1995).
[3] Audrey Linkman, *Photography and Death* (London: Reaktion Books, 2011).

projects representing death—I examine artists' photographs of death that are more wide-ranging in terms of the artists' relationships to their subjects and their motivations, and in terms of the style and conceptual underpinnings of their work. Thus, an expanded approach that draws on additional bodies of scholarship on the photography of death is necessary.

In addition to postmortem portraiture, photographs of war dead have also been analyzed from historical perspectives. Early war photographs, in particular those of the Civil War, have been discussed by scholars such as early twentieth-century historian Robert Taft, in the relevant chapter of his book *Photography and the American Scene: A Social History, 1839-1889*, as exemplary of a particular moment in the development of photographic technology (that of wet-plate collodion).[4] Scholars such as archivist Josephine Cobbs and photography historian and biographer Mary Panzer, in their respective texts on the renowned figure of Mathew Brady, have similarly described photographs of the Civil War dead in the context of period economies of the production and circulation of photographs.[5] Although understanding the photographs that comprise my case studies appears not to be contingent on period technologies and economies in the same way, such perspectives—in particular, considerations of these artists' technical processes—will enrich my readings of these photographs.

Photographs of Civil War dead and casualties of other wars have most compellingly been examined in light of the unprecedented view of war and death that they provided to

[4] Robert Taft, *Photography and the American Scene: A Social History, 1839-1889* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1942).
[5] Josephine Cobb, "Mathew B. Brady's Photographic Gallery in Washington," *The Columbia Historical Society Records* (1953-54): 28–69; Mary Panzer, *Mathew Brady and the Image of History* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press for the National Portrait Gallery, 1997).

the public and the role they consequently played in contemporary understandings of the war and the writing of its history. Like Ruby and Linkman, American studies professor Alan Trachtenberg, in his article "Albums of War: On Reading Civil War Photographs," describes how these particular photographs of war dead would have been encountered in their time, published for inclusion in custom albums and in books modeled after the album format. Trachtenberg emphasizes how their presentation and text accompaniments were mobilized to represent the war effort in ideologically positive or uncomplicated ways.[6] Trachtenberg's readings of how these photographs' presentation contributed to broader social conversations on issues of import serves as a useful model for my investigations of my case studies as participants in active conversations on contemporary attitudes towards death. As several of the photography series I examine have, furthermore, been published as photobooks, a consideration of the book format and its particular possibilities in terms of presentation, circulation, preservation, and narrative, akin to Trachtenberg's, will be useful. Scholarship from other fields, such as communications and ethics, on photographs of war dead and other photojournalistic images of victims of violent death have raised related and additional questions of what values are communicated by such photographs. Due to their public visibility, representations of death in the news have been widely, although not cohesively, considered.[7] Although the photographs I examine differ from photojournalistic images of death to varying but significant degrees (aesthetically and conceptually, as well as in how they are encountered by the public), the sweeping issues raised in relation to

[6] Alan Trachtenberg, "Albums of War: On Reading Civil War Photographs," *Representations*, no. 9 (1985): 1–32.

[7] Folker Hanusch, *Representing Death in the News: Journalism, Media and Mortality* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010). In *Representing Death in the News: Journalism, Media and Mortality*, lecturer in journalism Folker Hanusch attempts to synthesize the broad scholarship that has been produced on representations of death in the news and highlights necessary future research.

photojournalistic images of death are important and challenging to consider as they gesture to the potential political and ethical ramifications of photography of dead bodies.

The representation of death in the media is not equitable; not all deaths are as likely to be illustrated photographically and not all deaths are pictured with the same degree of "goriness." Professor of communications George Gerbner and professor of media history Jean Seaton, among others, have argued that portrayals of death serve significant symbolic functions of social categorizing and control, by representing the deaths of certain populations, such as women and children versus adult men, as more or less worthy of sympathy. These contests of interpretation affect the balance of power and, according to this type of political economy model, results in the media's reproduction of the dominant ideology.[8] Sociologists Tony Walter, Jane Littlewood, and Michael Pickering have examined the level and type of coverage of foreign deaths, finding that those whom the readership identified less with, i.e. people of other nationalities, were more likely to be represented in a de-personalized and more graphic manner. The consequence is the "othering" of non-Western peoples and non-dominant populations that problematically implies their lives do not hold the same value and, it has been argued, twists their death into "pornographic" spectacle.[9]

Considerations of power imbalances and the ethical treatment of subjects is not necessarily limited to journalistic photographs. Similar arguments have been made of ethnographic photographs, which anthropologist Elizabeth Edwards argues were

[8] George Gerbner, "Death in Prime Time: Notes on the Symbolic Functions of Dying in the Mass Media," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, no. 447 (1980): 64–70; Jean Seaton, *Carnage and the Media: The Making and Breaking of News About Violence* (London: Allen Lane, 2005).
[9] Tony Walter, Jane Littlewood, and Michael Pickering, "Death in the News: the Public Invigilation of Private Emotion," *Sociology* 29, no. 4 (November 1995): 579–596.

circulated and displayed to create anthropological knowledge in ways that reflected colonial power relations; [10] medical photographs, which George E. Stevens and other practicing medical scholars have explored alongside photography historians and collectors such as Stanley and Elizabeth Burns; [11] and criminal identification photographs, which photo theorist Allan Sekula argues functions complicit with state power and regulation.[12] Art historian Andrea Fitzpatrick argues in "Reconsidering the Dead in Andres Serrano's 'The Morgue': Identity, Agency, Subjectivity" that artistic photography of dead bodies falls victim to the same or similar ethical traps related to consent and unequal power relations. Fitzpatrick argues that Andres Serrano does representational violence to the subjects in his series *The Morgue* by projecting, through aesthetic choices, largely unfounded and unfavorable identities onto them.[13] As the identities of the owners of the bodies, bodily remains, and personal belongings in my case studies are variably unknown (such as in Sally Mann's *Body Farm*) and known (such as in Jacqueline Hayden's *Celestial Bodies)*, it would be negligent to not consider these ethical questions in relation to the work of the featured artists. Series like David Maisel's and Jonathan Hollingsworth's are further complicated by the marginal identities of the subjects in comparison to their white, cis-male photographers. While these photographers seek to represent their subjects in respectful ways, the very fact of the photographers' privileged social position and role as image maker creates a potentially problematic power imbalance. While the present project is

[10] Elizabeth Edwards, *Raw Histories: Photographs, Anthropology and Museums*, 1st ed. (Oxford: Bloomsbury Academic, 2001).
[11] George E. Stevens, "Medical Photography, the Right to Privacy and Privilege," *Medical Trial and Techniques Quarterly* 24, no. 4 (Spring 1978): 456–64; Stanley B. Burns and Elizabeth A. Burns, *Stiffs, Skulls & Skeletons: Medical Photography and Symbolism* (Atglen, PA: Schiffer Publishing Ltd., 2015).
[12] Allan Sekula, "The Body and the Archive," *October* 39 (1986): 3–64.
[13] Andrea D. Fitzpatrick, "Reconsidering the Dead in Andres Serrano's 'The Morgue': Identity, Agency, Subjectivity," *Canadian Art Review* 33, no. 1/2 (2008): 28–42.

necessarily limited in scope, future research would ideally encompass more identities for both subjects and photographers to address such issues and provide a broader understanding of photographs of death inclusive of the diversity of the United States.

In addition to photography's being used to document deceased bodies and memorialize the deceased, photography's very ontology has been connected to death. In fact, film theorist Christian Metz suggests that the use of photography to represent death springs in part from the intrinsic characteristics of photography itself. Photography's theorization in relation to death is inextricably linked to its theorization in terms of its relationships to 1) the "real" material world that it reproduces and 2) time and memory.[14] Writing in 1859 in "The Stereoscope and the Stereograph," Oliver Wendell Holmes, one of the earliest influential writers on photography, calls photography the "mirror with a memory" for its perceived ability to faithfully and automatically capture its subject.[15] This ability to preserve a "real" world that may otherwise disappear, is cited by film theorist André Bazin in his 1960 essay "The Ontology of the Photographic Image," as allowing photography to take up the "embalming" function of the plastic arts. Explaining that the "representation of life" was conceived of as the "preservation of life," Bazin asserts that the plastic arts allowed men to beat death. Photography's perceived ability to not only represent life but to "*re*-present" it, marks photography as the purest instantiation of this preservationist function.[16]

Siegfried Kracauer, a film theorist, however, disputes photography's ability to cheat death in his 1927 essay "Photography." Kracauer argues that although photography

[14] Christian Metz, "Photography and Fetish," *October* 34 (1985): 81–90.
[15] Oliver Wendell Holmes, "The Stereoscope and the Stereograph," *Atlantic Monthly*, June 1859.
[16] André Bazin, "The Ontology of the Photographic Image," trans. Hugh Gray, *Film Quarterly* 13, no. 4 (1960): 4–9.

preserves an extraordinary amount of detail of the "spatial" existence of its subject, photography does not encompass a lasting record of the meaning or significance of its subject throughout time in the way of memory. According to Kracauer, the older a photograph is, the more it can ultimately only embody loss.[17] Writer Susan Sontag elaborates on the idea that it is photography's relationship to time that connects it to death. In her 1977 essay "In Plato's Cave," Sontag specifies that it is photography's very ability to shave off and freeze a discrete moment in time that reminds us of time's unstoppable march and the mortality of all things. Likening the taking of all photographs to acts of violence, Sontag further describes how the language of hunting and death—capture, shoot, etc.—permeates the language used to describe the photographic act.[18] Published in 1981, literary theorist Roland Barthes's *Camera Lucida* is the most often cited, and arguably most articulate and poetic argument characterizing photography as fundamentally about death. Because photography always represents a moment that is now past—it is always a statement of "this has been"—it always evokes the death of its subject twofold. Through an analysis of a photograph of Lewis Powell, one of the co-conspirators of President Lincoln's assassination, taken a short while before his execution, Barthes describes how a photograph suggests that its subject is both going to die and is already dead. For Barthes, this pervasive evocation of death is present in all photographs and constitutes the universal, underlying punctum (the detail that "wounds" or speaks affectively to the viewer) of all photographs.[19]

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[17] Siegfried Kracauer, "Photography," in *The Past's Threshold: Essays on Photography* (Zurich; Berlin: Diaphanes, 2014), 27–46. Originally published in *Frankfurter Zeitung* 28 (October 1927).
[18] Susan Sontag, "In Plato's Cave," in *On Photography* (New York: Picador; Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977), 3–24.
[19] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981).

Thus, it is the combination of photography's ability to capture the "real" and to isolate it in a moment of time that cements photography's theoretical association with death. This facet of photography theory will not only be indispensable for an investigation of these photographs of death that focus on the material reality of the human remains that are their subject, but it also points to why photography is a particularly meaningful and effective medium in which to explore death and transformation in the contemporary moment. Photography's perceived ability to capture and preserve the "real" reinforces and extends the sense of the permanence of the bodily material pictured in the photographs discussed in this dissertation, but the artist's act of taking a photograph is also automatically an act of creative intervention and transformation. The act of photographing transforms the subject into a representation and the artist's eye informs the resulting image. The various photographic materials and processes chosen by the photographers in this dissertation, alongside their creative choices in composition, scale, and presentation, among others, allow the artists to magnify and multiply the transformations enacted in making and pictured within their photograph.

Death Studies

The interdisciplinary field of Death Studies produces scholarly research related to humankind's experience of and attitudes towards death and generates practical resources for those who work in fields related to the care of the dying and their families, such as hospice and grief counseling. Death Studies research emerging from sociology, anthropology, and archeology examine death in a social context, charting a given society's epidemiological trends (such as expected life span, spread of disease, etc.) and also its

methods of handling death (i.e., burial practices). Psychology and philosophy offer insights into human reactions to death, ranging from personal experiences of grief to broad theories of a universal human "death anxiety," while ethics and law consider such timely issues as physician assisted suicide and organ transplantation. The field of Death Studies is, as this brief sketch suggests, incredibly broad and lacking in any one disciplinary theory or methodology. This dissertation largely draws on sociological, anthropological, and historical death-related research. The approach of examining materials left behind that the artists, and subsequently, present and future viewers, undertake constitutes a kind of anthropological or archaeological endeavor to try to understand the early twenty-first century moment. This section of the literature review focuses on sociological and anthropological research about the twentieth and twenty-first century epidemiological and institutional context of death and refers to a number of models of shifting "death systems" in order to sketch the social landscape of death in which the photographers are working. While psychology is not discussed overtly, a brief discussion of foundational Death Studies texts theorizing humankind's deep emotional ambivalence to death addresses the fact that whereas understandings of and responses to death are historically and geographically situated, death as an inevitable part of human experience is universal and perpetual.

One of the earliest texts absorbed into Death Studies, anthropologist Bronisław Malinowski's 1925 "Magic, Science and Religion" suggests that ambivalence is a basic and near universal human reaction to death, as the bereaved experiences a continued, intense emotional attachment to the personality or identity of the deceased as they simultaneously experience repugnance or fear towards the bodily remains. Ritual, in its various forms, Malinowski argues, functions to deal with the remains as well as reassert the emotional

attachment to and continued existence (spiritual or in memory) of the deceased.[20] Two foundational texts from the era of Death Studies' formal organization into a field, anthropologist Ernest Becker's 1973 "The Terror of Death" and Robert Jay Lifton and Eric Olsen's 1974 "Symbolic Immortality" furthermore argue that the fear of death and a corresponding striving for immortality underlies the creation of all social organization.[21] In the face of one's own impending death, psychologists Lifton and Olsen explain, humankind expresses its search for immortality through five modes of expression: biological (i.e. immortality through their offspring or family name), creative (through their art, literature, or knowledge production), theological (in the form of resurrection, reincarnation, or spiritual afterlife), natural (as part of an eternal universe or cyclical nature), and experiential (induced by altered states of consciousness).[22] The majority, if not all, of these modes of symbolic immortality are evident in the photographs in my case studies. It will be useful, however, to update Lifton and Olsen's categories to more clearly include two other modes of symbolic immortality evident in the photographs: memory—individual and national memory that preserves the deceased's personality and identity—and sociopolitical impact. The latter is particularly supported by newer Death Studies texts; anthropologist Antonius C.G.M Robben's 2000 "State Terror in the Netherworld: Disappearance and Reburial in Argentina" and anthropologist Katharine Verdery's 1999 "Dead Bodies Animate the Study of Politics" make a strong case that the dead can live on through (or be used by the living to effect) political machinations and long-term

[20] Bronisław Malinowski, "Magic, Science and Religion," in *Science, Religion and Reality,* ed. Joseph Needham (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1925), 19–84.
[21] Ernest Becker, "The Terror of Death," in *The Denial of Death*, (New York: The Free Press, 1973), 11–24; Robert Jay Lifton and Eric Olson, "Symbolic Immortality," in *Living and Dying* (London: Wildwood House, 1974), 67–90.
[22] Lifton and Olson, "Symbolic Immortality."

sociopolitical change.[23] This newer literature also points to how reactions to death can be both universal and culturally inflected. The artists in this dissertation likewise ask "universal" questions—such as what happens after death?—while the issues, social institutions, attitudes, and trends in practices surrounding death in the contemporary United States of America that their work points to can be construed as the necessarily culturally specific and historically grounded attempts at answers.

A number of Death Studies scholars have attempted to categorize Western society's historical "death systems," defined as "the sum total of the persons, places, ideas, traditions, acts, omissions, emotions, and statements that we make or think about death"[24] and as "the interpersonal, sociophysical, and symbolic network through which an individual's relationship to mortality is mediated by society."[25] The French historian Philippe Ariès defined five historical death *mentalités*: "tame death," "death of the self," "remote and imminent death," "death of the other," and "invisible death" in his 1977 *At the Hour of Our Death* (translated into English in 1981). The "tame death" is characterized by the dying person's awareness and acceptance that death is near, which allows for the dying to gather his or her community and put his or her spiritual affairs in order. Ariès tame death of the Middle Ages was underlaid by a strong Latin Christian belief in communal resurrection. Over the course of the Middle Ages, Ariès explains, the belief in resurrection metamorphosed into concern over judgment, the moment of which became coincident with the moment of death. Ariès's second attitude, the "death of the self," developed as a result,

[23] Antonius C.G.M. Robben, "State Terror in the Netherworld: Disappearance and Reburial in Argentina," in *Death Squad: The Anthropology of State Terror*, ed. Jeffrey A. Sluka (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), 91–113; Katharine Verdery, "Dead Bodies Animate the Study of Politics," in *The Political Lives of Dead Bodies: Reburial and Postsocialist Change* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 23–54.
[24] John Morgan, "Living Our Dying and Our Grieving: Historical and Cultural Attitudes," in *Thanatology*, ed. J.D. Morgan (Amityville, NY: Baywood, 1997), 12.
[25] Robert J. Kastenbaum, *Death, Society, and Human Experience* (Boston: Pearson, 2007), 104.

as the individual biography of the person and their conduct during dying became key to their fate. As the Middle Ages shifts into the Renaissance, death becomes "remote and imminent." Beginning in the eighteenth century, the family becomes a more important part of life and so, of death. Death produced a painful separation between intimates, but the afterlife promised reunion. Ariès suggests that a "cult of the dead" emerges at this time, with an effect that death becomes hidden behind "the mask of beauty."[26] Death remains hidden in the twentieth century, but the bonds of family and community are weakened in industrialized and urbanized nations, leading to what Ariès characterizes as isolated and "invisible death."[27]

In his 1994 *The Revival of Death*, British sociologist Tony Walter lays out three ideal (simplified) types of death cultures. Each type is associated with a particular "bodily" (epidemiological) context, social context, and source of authority, plus different conceptions of the journey of dying, different chosen funerals, different values, and different senses of self. Walter's "traditional" type is characterized by quick and frequent deaths that occur in the context of community, where the ultimate authority is religion—much like Ariès's tame death. The values, journey, funerals, and sense of self relate to religious ideas and belonging in a community. The "modern" type is characterized by hidden death—death occurring in public, i.e. in hospitals, but the internal experience of dying or grieving occurring privately and internally. Again, this is roughly analogous to one of Ariès's categories—"invisible death." The authority in this type is the medical expert, the journey is a physical one, values include privacy, and the sense of self is rooted in a singular identity. The "neo-modern" type, which typifies Walter's "revival" of death, is characterized

[26] Philippe Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death* (New York: Knopf, distributed by Random House, 1981), 473.
[27] Ibid.

by prolonged death, with private experience bleeding into the public as the journey is now a psychological one, with emphasis on processing and expressing emotion. While the self has ultimately become the authority, he or she is aided by the experts through codified stages of processing and/or in their decision making as consumers for whom it is not possible to be fully informed (because they haven't died before). The self is no longer conceived of as one singular identity, but a composite of identities, and funerals embrace not only the uniqueness and personal wishes of the deceased but also often the input or contributions of many friends, family, and peers. Walter's three types sketch a historical progression but also continue to exist side by side. Furthermore, Walter points out that the majority of people do not experience death according to only one of these three ideal types, but usually through a contradictory or complementary mixture of them.[28]

Sociologist Allan Kellehear, in his 2007 *A Social History of Dying*, charts how "dying" varies across different kinds of societies, deftly summarizing organizational, epidemiological, and ideological trends that affect how people die. Many of Kellehear's categories echo Ariès's and Walter's, but his focus is productively different. Whereas the story Ariès sketches closely tracks with changes in interpretation of Western and Northern European Christian ideas of life, death, and afterlife, Kellehear's sociological focus on modes of societal organization tries not to privilege any one type of cultural or religious background. Kellehear's scholarship complements and expands on Walter's, providing a greater degree of explanation of how social organization and epidemiology are interconnected with ideology. Kellehear calls the first type of death "death as dying," in reference to the tendency in Stone Age/hunter-gatherer societies for individuals to

[28] Tony Walter, *The Revival of Death* (London: Routledge, 1994).

experience swift and unexpected deaths in this world and a process of transition or a journey—dy*ing* active, present tense—in another world, aided by community ritual and intercession. More slowly approaching deaths associated with pastoral, rural, agricultural societies allowed for dying individuals to prepare themselves by settling their worldly and spiritual affairs to ensure a "good death." In urban societies, the rise in professional specialization and individualism transforms the "good death," characterized in part by family and community involvement, into a "well-managed" death overseen by doctors—in accordance with death increasingly resulting from epidemics and old-age-related diseases such as cancer—and other professionals. Kellehear suggests that death in our current "cosmopolitan" age is defined, for the present purposes, by biomedical advances that allow death to come later and later in life. This late death, Kellehear argues, however, occurs amidst a drastically dwindling quality of life thanks to degenerative diseases like Alzheimer's and thus constitutes "shameful death." Shameful deaths are deaths that are neither good nor well-managed, in part because they are not well-timed, leaving social death (the exit of a person from community and family life) and biological death unaligned. Alongside advances in medicine, increasing secularism greatly characterizes our contemporary age, so that whereas the "good death" was underpinned by religious beliefs in a specific and defined spiritual afterlife, death in today's cosmopolitan society happens amidst insecurity of what the afterlife might be, if one exists at all.[29]

Whereas Ariès, Walter, and Kellehear are attempting to identify world-wide, or at least Western-world-wide categories, Christina Staudt's Introduction to *Our Changing Journey to the End* summarizes how these categorizations can be applied to the North

[29] Allan Kellehear, *A Social History of Dying* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

American context specifically. Using Ariès's, and then Walter's, categories, Staudt suggests that Native North Americans had "tame death," characterized by "tacit acceptance," a belief in an afterlife, and prescribed ritualized roles for the dying and the community. Colonial and early Republican Americans followed the model of Ariès's "death of the self." Wishing to play an active role in their own dying, they prepared last will and testaments and attended to their spiritual well-being. In the nineteenth century, the United States, like Victorian England, with the nuclear family firmly at the center of life, experienced the romanticism of the "death of the other." The afterlife was envisioned as a place of reunion with loved ones, who were, in the meantime, memorialized fondly with hair jewelry, photographs, etc. In the twentieth century, Staudt continues, death became "invisible" and sequestered by increasing militarization and medicalization.[30] The argument that death was removed from view and from the purview and experience of others is an oft repeated one. Journalist Jessica Mitford's scathing exposé of the funeral industry in 1963 (the decade marking the "nadir" of the "concealment of death"[31] according to Staudt), is one example, which connects this trend not only to increasing medicalization but also to capitalism. What Mitford terms the twentieth century's "American Way of Death," is characterized by efforts of the funeral industry to professionalize and monetize the services of funeral directors, embalmers, cemetery personnel, and associated positions. This process of professionalization, as in the medical industry, removed the care of the dead from the family and in doing so largely removed death from view.[32]

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[30] Christina Staudt, introduction to *Our Changing Journey to the End: Reshaping Death, Dying, and Grief in America*, ed. Christina Staudt and J. Harold Ellens (Santa Barbara, California: Praeger, 2014), 3–28.
[31] Ibid., 6.
[32] Jessica Mitford, *The American Way of Death Revisited* (New York: Vintage, 2000), previous edition published as *The American way of Death* (Greenwich, CT: Fawcett Publications, 1963).

Since the 1960s, Staudt argues, death has been making an arduous journey back into the light, thanks to texts like Mitford's and psychiatrist Elisabeth Kubler-Ross's *On Death and Dying*,[33] changes in epidemiological causes of death, medicine, and other related institutions in America, and the aging of the large "Baby Boomer" generation of Americans.[34] Staudt and Andrea Fontana and Jennifer Reid Keene in *Death and Dying in America* both offer an overview of the epidemiological trends of import since the mid-twentieth century in the United States, which track quite closely with Kellehear's assessment of the epidemiology of much of Western, industrialized nations. As survival rates from heart attacks, stroke, and cancer increases, more and more people are living to increasingly advanced ages, experiencing physical and mental degenerative diseases and effects of old age, while the AIDs crisis in the 1980s and 90s saw many Americans experience similar degenerative effects earlier in life. The challenges posed by the long and often painful and/or difficult dying of those experiencing AIDs or Alzheimer's and Americans' growing dissatisfaction with death care in the mainstream medical institution sparked developments such as the rise of hospice.[35] Fontana and Keene, however, detail how hospice, which initially functioned outside the mainstream medical industry, was co-opted into it with legislation passed in the 1980s. This legislation, which ensured Medicaid coverage for hospice, made hospice more accessible but also diluted some of its efficacy as more and more hospice units were integrated into hospitals and consequently fell prey to some of the same issues of sequestration.[36]

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[33] Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying* (New York: Macmillan, 1969).
[34] Staudt, introduction to *Our Changing Journey to the End*.
[35] Staudt, introduction to *Our Changing Journey to the End*; Andrea Fontana and Jennifer Reid Keene, *Death and Dying in America* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2009).
[36] Fontana and Keene, *Death and Dying in America*.

Staudt, Fontana, and R.L. Tina Stevens in *Bioethics in America* further discuss biomedical advancements and corresponding institutional and legal changes that have altered the landscape of death. Resuscitative and sustaining technologies such as artificial respirators, paired with the success of organ transplants necessitated a "redefinition" of biological death from the ceasing of pulmonary function to the ceasing of brain function, formulated by the Ad Hoc Committee of the Harvard Medical School to Examine the Definition of Death in 1968. Legal and ethical debates about prolonging/relieving suffering, etc. followed high-profile cases of comatose patients Karen Ann Quinlan and Nancy Cruzan. Such cases inspired the creation of Living Wills, as well as spates of self-help books to help people navigate dying and death, their own or their loved ones', emotionally, practically, and legally.[37]

The shifts in America's death system(s) since the 1960s and 70s is particularly useful for contextualizing the photographs in this dissertation. The 1960s and 70s could be thought of as a watershed moment relative to the topic of death. Texts by Jessica Mitford, Phillipe Ariès, Ernest Becker, Kübler-Ross, and others emerged from numerous disciplines; Death Studies (formerly called death education) as a field arose; organ transplantation and continuing attention to resuscitative technologies and concerns over prolonging suffering in the 1960s lead to a redefinition of death in 1968 and the beginnings of the hospice movement. It is at this moment, too, that photographers like Jeffrey Silverthorne begin photographing dead bodies in morgues and views of death in military and international contexts, like the war in Vietnam, begin to proliferate in the media. Photographs of death

[37] Staudt, introduction to *Our Changing Journey to the End*; Fontana and Keene, *Death and Dying in America*; M.L. Tina Stevens, *Bioethics in America: Origins and Cultural Politics* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000).

and dying increased amidst the AIDs crisis of the 1980s and 90s (David Wojnarowicz's photographs of Peter Hujar are just one of many examples) and artists like Andres Serrano again turned to photographing in morgues. Literature professor Roger Luckhurst, in contextualizing the current state of death photography in his essay "Why have the dead come back?" much as I am attempting to here, cites continued and renewed reason to bring death back to view, such as the biomedical and legal changes of the last couple decades sketched above, as well as media depictions and the restrictions thereof of death in armed conflict. Following the flood of images of the Vietnam War, the U.S. military has exercised increasing levels of control over who may photograph in war zones, what kinds of images they may publish, etc. Some journalists, like Thomas Hirshhorn, Nina Berman, and Luc Delahaye, Luckhurst points out, have turned to fine art contexts and institutions to show the work deemed too graphic for media publication or censored by the military.[38]

The photographs in my case studies are categorically different from the photographs of dead bodies in postmortem portraiture, photojournalism, and even the examples from the fine arts context, like those by Silverthorne and Serrano, mentioned above. As Luckhurst notes, "the dead have come back," in fine art photography and, as Staudt notes, citing September 11, 2001 as the end of America's period of "invisible death," as bodies were photographed falling from the twin towers,[39] in media. These photographers are of this different moment: the era of Kellehear's "shameful death," but also the era of Walter's "neo-modern" death. Walter's paradigm of neo-modern death is characterized by "death awareness"—acknowledging death as a part of life—a concern for

[38] Roger Luckhurst, "Why Have the Dead Come Back? The Instance of Photography," *New Formations* 89/90: *Death and the Contemporary* (Autumn/Winter 2016): 101–115.
[39] Staudt, introduction to *Our Changing Journey to the End*, 12.

self-determination and personal control, personal expression and individual definitions of transcendence or spirituality, and a desire for communication and connection to stave off isolation and denial. In the conclusion to his more recent *What Death Means Now: Thinking Critically About Dying and Grieving*, Walter tentatively lays out a new paradigm he terms "pervasive death," suggesting that the "twentieth-century separation of death from everyday life in western societies is mutating into a pervasive presence, a mutation involving both ideas and institutions."[40] Like Luckhurst and Staudt, Walter cites death's spectacular visibility in mass media. Critically, he also discusses the playing out of everyday death and grief on social media, as well as current funerary practices that disperse the dead "into the physical environments which sustain the living,"[41] indicating that the dead now pervade everyday life in multiple ways. This trend toward pervasiveness is, Walter argues, in part institutionalized (through hospice movements and the like) and in part grassroots (as individuals come up with novel and DIY ways to memorialize their loved ones). J. Harold Ellens, a psychologist and theologian, further emphasizes that the baby boomer generation, whose lifetimes track the various developments outlined above and who are now dealing with death firsthand, is a driving force in changing America's approach to death, not only because of their numbers but also because of strongly held beliefs of self-determination.[42] These themes, of shameful death, pervasive death, and society's attempts to make death personally meaningful today, are clearly resonant with the photographs

[40] Tony Walter, *What Death Means Now: Thinking Critically About Dying and Grieving* (Bristol, UK: Policy Press, 2017), 107.
[41] Ibid., 110.
[42] J. Harold Ellens, "From Death Denial to Death Control: The New Baby-Boomer Approach," in *Our Changing Journey to the End,* ed. Christina Staudt and J. Harold Ellens (Santa Barbara, California: Praeger, 2014), 29–44.

discussed within, as well as much of the contemporary popular culture and funerary trends that I examine in concert with them.

Contemporary funerary practice in the United States is diverse, offering quickly multiplying options for burial and for the disposition of cremation ashes. Some of the myriad options appear to push back against the capitalistic "American Way of Death" while others can be comfortably located within it. Uniting the various options is their maintaining of an American tradition of deep ritual and their adherence to our late twentieth and early twenty-first century desire for personalized solutions and experiences. Many of them furthermore emphasize the same themes of persistence and transformation as the photographs discussed herein. New "green burial"[43] options allow the body to decay naturally, more quickly becoming one with the earth in which it is buried and allowing the family to imagine their loved one living on as a tree or otherwise part of the local ecosystem. Certain new options for the dispositions of ashes take the practice of scattering to new heights; having one's loved one's ashes turned into fireworks[44] or shot into space[45] allows the family to imagine their loved one living on as part of the ecosystem writ large, or even the cosmos. Other methods of handling cremation ashes preserve them and keep them close at hand (or at least in a designated spot), while transforming them into some other kind of material that allows the families to imagine their loved one's continued existence. Reef balls[46] for instance, transform the ashes into concrete to help support new

[43] Mark Harris, *Grave Matters: A Journey through the Modern Funeral Industry to a Natural Way of Burial* (New York: Scribner, 2007).
[44] "Fireworks Package," Greenlawn Funeral Home Website, accessed November 25, 2019, https://greenlawnfuneralhome.com/Fireworks_Package_1439179.html.
[45] Andrew Cutting, "Ashes in Orbit: Celestis Spaceflights and the Invention of Post-cremationist Afterlives," *Science as Culture* 18, no. 3 (2009): 355–369, DOI: 10.1080/09505430903122992.
[46] Eternal Reefs Website, accessed November 25, 2019, https://www.eternalreefs.com/the-eternal-reefs-story/about-reef-balls/.

coral reef growth. LifeGem[47] turns ashes into diamonds, and Artful Ashes[48] turns them into glass décor, allowing families to honor the eternal beauty of their loved one. This desire for personalization suggests that Americans today are searching for better ways to be involved in the disposition and memorialization of their deceased loved ones, to return some of the care of the dead to their purview, and to seek a healthier way of processing death. That these current options emphasize transformations of the body (natural decay, cremation, and the creation of something out of the ashes) furthermore suggest that contemporary Americans are considering not only ways of adequately memorializing their loved ones, but also imagining or exploring possibilities for an afterlife for them.

Chapters

The following dissertation is comprised of three chapters. Each chapter discusses three photographers who focus on similar subject matter, highlight similar types of transformation, and seek to illuminate similar "unseen" truths. The "that which is otherwise unseen" that each set of artists attempts to represent varies. In the first chapter, the artists attempt to grasp a life lost, remembering, reconstructing, or imagining the life of the deceased from the physical evidence they've left behind. In the second chapter, the artists attempt to confront death, bringing to view the circumstances of the deceased's death and its aftermath. The retrieved factual and physical circumstances and consequences point to sociopolitical circumstances and consequences. In the third chapter, the artists attempt to imagine some kind of afterlife for the deceased—a spiritual afterlife

[47] LifeGem: Ashes to Diamonds Website, accessed November 21, 2019, https://www.lifegem.com/?gclid=Cj0KCQiAiNnuBRD3ARIsAM8KmltQXqvIkh9PrrTWmi0I_VN8hl2aACM3AekfbBAI51Ba1MhTrNQ2WyAaArSQEALw_wcB.
[48] Artful Ashes Website, accessed November 21, 2019, https://artfulashes.com/.

and/or an enduring legacy or memory, pictured through their cremated remains. Thus, the three chapters of this dissertation represent the artists' attempts to picture ineffable aspects of life, death, and afterlife. While each chapter focuses on one of these three phases—life, death, or afterlife—the related themes of memorialization, circumstances of death, and possible afterlives weave in and out of all three chapters. As the photographs of all three chapters are, at their basis, postmortem photographs, the theme of potential afterlives comes to encompass the other themes: memorializing a life and confronting the circumstances of a death become ways that the deceased achieves Lifton and Olson's "symbolic immortality."[49]

Chapter One focuses on photographs by Andrea Tese, Justin Kimball, and Jonathan Hollingsworth, capturing the personal belongings of the deceased. Andrea Tese's series, titled *Inheritance*[50] was created as Tese sorted through and cleared out her grandparents' home after their deaths. The photographs feature items ranging from furniture to clothing to military awards, and photographs of and drawings by Tese herself as a child. Justin Kimball's series, *Pieces of String*[51] captures similar items, but in the homes of deceased persons who were largely unknown to the photographer in life. Jonathan Hollingsworth's series *Left Behind*[52] captures the personal effects of unidentified immigrants who died crossing the U.S.-Mexico border. The transformations these artists suggest are largely metaphorical, in which objects that had a close physical or emotional relationship with the deceased function as their proxies. While the objects stand in for the bodies of the

[49] Lifton and Olson, "Symbolic Immortality."
[50] Andrea Tese, *Inheritance*, with an essay by and Alison Devine Nordström (Göttingen: Steidl, 2015).
[51] Justin Kimball, *Pieces of String*, with an essay by Douglas M. Kimball (Santa Fe: Radius Books, 2012).
[52] Jonathan Hollingsworth, *Left Behind: Life and Death Along the U.S. Border*, with an introduction by Gregory L. Hess (Stockport, England: Dewi Lewis Publishing, 2012).

deceased, they also, and perhaps more importantly, represent the deceased's life—their taste, life experiences, and circumstances. In doing so, these proxy objects allow the photographers to make visible that which cannot otherwise be easily seen—a life lived and now ended—and meditate on how and to what extent one can know and memorialize another person's life. In Tese's and Kimball's series, especially, even as the photographers remember and imagine the lives of the deceased through their belongings, they simultaneously raise questions regarding our ability to know the dead through such items. Despite the doubts cast by Tese's and Kimball's series, Hollingsworth's series emphasizes how the work objects do in illuminating and memorializing the lives of the dead remains useful and important for honoring the deceased, aiding the living in processing loss, and instigating change to benefit those who will follow.

Chapter Two discusses the work of Sarah Sudhoff, Sally Mann, and Robert Shults, who reveal the messiness of the body at death through photographs of stains and decomposing bodies, respectively. While Sudhoff pictures the stains created by the dead body, Mann and Shults picture the mess-making dead bodies themselves as they ooze. The transformations these series capture are largely literal. Sudhoff's stains picture the unsettling persistence of real, material traces of the dead in her series *At the Hour of Our Death*,[53] which captures indelible blood and fluid stains created on fabrics at death and through the process of decay. Sally Mann's series *Body Farm*[54] and Robert Shults's series *The Washing Away of Wrongs*[55] were created at forensic anthropology research facilities

[53] Sarah Sudhoff, "At the Hour of Our Death," Artist's Website, accessed April 18, 2019, https://www.sarahsudhoff.com/at-the-hour-of-our-death.
[54] Sally Mann, *What Remains* (New York: Bulfinch Press, 2003).
[55] Robert Shults, "The Washing Away of Wrongs," Artist's Website, accessed April 18, 2019, https://robertshultsphoto.com/the-washing-away-of-wrongs.html.

and show the literal transformation of bodies via their natural processes of decay. The messes and the processes that produce them are literal and permanent but also observable and measurable, and so can act as records of the otherwise unseen circumstances of death. As records, these bodies and their messes point not only to factual circumstances, but sociopolitical circumstances that affect the wellbeing of the living and create life or death situations. Sudhoff's photographs reveal aspects of the funerary industry that affect society's relationship to death; Mann's photographs ask if cultural memories of violence and trauma can be preserved at the site of death; and Shults's photographs demonstrate the scientific research on dead bodies that can, in fact, reveal and retaliate against violence and institutional wrongs, bringing justice to the deceased.

Chapter Three examines photographs of cremation ashes by Jacqueline Hayden, Jason Lazarus, and Davis Maisel. Hayden and Lazarus picture cremation ashes themselves, while Maisel captures makeshift urns. The transformations at play in this chapter are both literal and metaphorical. The cremation ashes are the product of a very literal transformation the body has undergone (similar to but different to the decay in Chapter Two). The artists' interventions represent the ashes as transforming into other material, such as stars, and these visual transformations imply metaphorical transformations from living, embodied person, to a persisting, disembodied soul, spirit, or legacy. These transformations therefore attempt to visualize that which otherwise cannot be seen or known—the afterlife. Hayden's series *Celestial Bodies*[56] imagines possible spiritual afterlives by visually manipulating the appearance of the ashes of her family members to evoke the ashes' transformation into stars and galaxies and her loved ones' transition to a

[56] Jacqueline Hayden, "Celestial Bodies," Artist's Website, accessed April 18, 2019, http://jacquelinehayden.net/.

soul or cosmic energy. Lazarus's series *Heinecken Studies*[57] explores the afterlife of renowned artist Robert Heinecken as an ever-evolving pedagogical and artistic legacy by way of images that transform his ashes into stars, dust motes, etc. through a daisy chain-like darkroom working process. Maisel's series *Library of Dust*[58] features copper canisters that contain the ashes of former psychiatric patients. The canisters, the ashes, and environmental conditions have combined to produce brilliant mineral blooms that suggest landscapes, paintings, and other imagery. Like the originally non-descript cannisters, many of the patients whose ashes are contained within were overlooked in life and forgotten about in death. Their individual spirits are recuperated through the unique blooms on their copper urn, while the discovery of these beautiful urns allowed descendants to rediscover their ancestors. Like Hollingsworth's and Shults's photographs then, Maisel's photographs represent recuperation and reparation, and, furthermore, reunion and/or enduring remembrance.

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Joseph Campbell, a twentieth-century generalist and scholar of mythology, calls the ineffable aspects of existence—what, like the afterlife, I have referred to as that which cannot be seen or represented—the transcendent. The transcendent refers to truths of life and the universe that are ultimately unknowable, unable to be seen or adequately expressed, and exist outside of time, space, and language. Myths, the stories of religion, Campbell argues, are thus metaphors for that which we cannot otherwise know or

[57] Jason Lazarus, "Heinecken Studies," Artist's Website, accessed April 18, 2019, https://jasonlazarus.com/projects/heinecken-studies/.
[58] David Maisel, *Library of Dust*, with essays by Geoff Manaugh, Terry Toedtemeier, and Michael S. Roth (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2008).

communicate.[59] Using the metaphorical and symbolic potential of the visual language of art, these photographs accomplish the same thing—attempting to illuminate the unseen. Quite appropriately, Campbell identified artists as bearing the mantle of mythmaking today. In *The Power of Myth*, an interview between Joseph Campbell and Bill Moyers, the mythmaking role of artists, as well as the interpretative function of mythology is explicated:

> MOYERS: Who interprets the divinity inherent in nature for us today? Who are our shamans? Who interprets unseen things for us?
>
> CAMPBELL: It is the function of the artist to do this. The artist is the one who communicates myth for today.[60]

Contrary to common assumption, Campbell also explains, myths do not seek to answer the question "why" (why do we live?) so much as they seek to tell us "how" (how can we live well?).[61] The artists discussed in this dissertation, likewise, do not appear to be asking "why do we die"? but rather, they ask many possible "hows"—how do we remember, how do we process, how do we live on; how can we die well, how can we confront death, and how can we do right by the dead and the living?—and suggest and interrogate many possible answers.

Ultimately, these artists recognize that some of the questions they address are fundamentally unanswerable, like the question of life after death, or that there is no single answer, like for the question of how we confront death, and so any answers must be socially rooted and timely and/or metaphorical and approximate. The artists do not seem perturbed by this, however, but rather suggest that there is value in the attempt to think

[59] Joseph Campbell and Bill Moyers, *The Power of Myth*, (New York: Doubleday, 1988).
[60] Ibid., 99.
[61] Ibid.

through the questions. The process (processing emotions or thinking through questions) is the productive part.

As these artists embrace a questioning attitude, they also suggest that it is important to do what we can. Our grappling with the intangible has concrete consequences. The work of Jonathan Hollingsworth, Robert Shults, and David Maisel discussed within, which take as their subjects the remains of marginalized people, punctuate the chapters in which they are discussed to emphasize this point. While it isn't possible to truly know another's life, or fully understand them through their belongings left behind, the belongings can lead to identifying the unknown dead and bringing peace to their survivors. Likewise, the research conducted on the bodies at forensic anthropology research facilities help law enforcement identify unknown dead and use clues about the circumstances of their death to bring justice. The abandoned ashes of psychiatric patients produce lyrical mineral blooms that suggest the personalities and enduring spirit of the deceased. The stories told through these remains furthermore shed light on sociopolitical issues that create life and death situations, not to mention quality of life, moral, and ethical problems, for many people. Recognizing that we cannot reach the transcendent does not preclude us from doing our best to process difficult questions and situations and illuminate possible improvements in "how" to live and die.

The attitudes of these photographers appear to dovetail with that of the general populace, their photographs symptomatic of our times in which an aging population contemplates death and explores how to respond to its inevitability in new and renewed ways. The photographs in the nine series discussed in this dissertation have been variously displayed in museum and gallery exhibitions, published in photobooks, made available on

the artists' websites, and reproduced as illustrations in articles focused on the work and on relevant topics. In each case, the series has achieved significant circulation and garnered both critical and popular attention. Articles about or illustrated by these series and reviews about the series, their exhibition, or publication, in particular, are easily found online, joining a deluge of death-related pop culture currently circulating on the internet, ranging from sensational stories about new things to do with cremation ashes to spoilers for episodes of crime dramas; true crime podcasts to dryly humorous memes; reports of celebrity deaths to the entertaining and educational social media posts of death-positive collectives.[62] Contemplating the photographs discussed herein, singly and in series, in conversation with each other and with trends in popular media, allows viewers insight into individual experiences of dying and to extrapolate broader patterns in attitudes and underlying social and political circumstances and institutions that affect how people age, ail, and die, and mourn and remember today.

[62] The Order of the Good Death Website, accessed November 25, 2019, http://www.orderofthegooddeath.com/. The Order of the Good Death is one such collective, and perhaps the most extensive and best known. The collective, which advocates for death acceptance through events, activism, articles, videos, etc., was founded by Caitlin Doughty, a mortician who has published a number of successful books geared towards a popular audience such as *Smoke Gets in Your Eyes* and *Will My Cat Eat My Eyeballs*?

CHAPTER ONE

Traces of Life

The following chapter examines photographs by Andrea Tese, Justin Kimball, and Jonathan Hollingsworth, conceived in series and published as photobooks, that depict belongings left behind by people who have died. Andrea Tese sorts, categorizes, and photographs her late grandfather's belongings in the series *Inheritance* as an attempted bulwark against the forgetting of his and her grandmother's memories, as well as ultimately the memory of the artist herself; Justin Kimball plumbs the estates that his auctioneer brother has been hired to disburse in *Pieces of String*, highlighting what little can be definitively known—and what can be imagined—of the lives of strangers through their belongings. Finally, in visiting the Pima County Forensic Center and photographing the contents from the pockets of people who have died crossing the border between Mexico and the United States in his series *Left Behind*, Jonathan Hollingsworth strives to uncover the identities and recuperate the memories of individuals from marginalized populations and precarious modes of survival. In these photographs, in the absence of the bodies of the deceased themselves, physical traces of the deceased, such as the imprint of the body on a favorite chair, and evidence of personal taste and life events transform the objects pictured into proxies for the person of the deceased. The used and valued objects stand in for the deceased's presence in their literal absence, represent their personalities and habits, and suggest the story of their lives. It is through the interaction with belongings left behind that the objects assume proxy power and suggest the lives of previous owners. The storytelling necessary in this process recommends itself to the photobook form—the

sequential nature of which inherently narrativizes the lives, and deaths, of the absent subjects of the photographs—and the artists' processes of encountering belongings left behind logically features significantly in the design and organization of each of these photobooks.

Whereas both Kimball and Hollingsworth take photographs of the belongings of people unknown to them, Tese takes photographs of those of her own family members. Both Tese and Kimball photograph domestic spaces and their contents while Hollingsworth photographs small caches of pocket-sized items. Despite these differences, the three photographers' series adhere in the way belongings left behind function as proxies for the deceased and serve to reconstruct, or attempt to reconstruct, the lives now past. The series furthermore similarly communicate the photographers' doubts over our ability to know a life through its material remains and their persisting belief that the attempt is worthwhile. In the end, the process of recuperating or remembering any part of the deceased's life provides opportunities for mourning, remembrance, and healing, and for reflecting on the experience of dying and mourning in America during the present moment.

These photographs are not the first images to highlight how material belongings can serve to represent aspects of a person or stand in for their person as a whole. Attributes—particular objects or symbols—identify particular saints and other figures in many traditions of religious art. In secular portraiture, certain objects mark the figure as having a particular status, trait, or talent. Some modern portraiture like Charles Demuth's "poster portraits" represent their "sitters" entirely through objects and symbols. Demuth's 1928 *I Saw the Figure 5 in Gold*—his best-known poster portrait—for instance, represents the poet William Carlos Williams through word play and pictorial references to Williams's

1921 poem "The Great Figure." Scrapbooks and modern and contemporary collage like Hannah Höch's and Martha Rosler's further demonstrates how various material objects and imagery can be juxtaposed to tell a personal or sociopolitical narrative.

In light of material's power to evoke a person or narrative, it is no wonder that material belongings have long played a significant role in navigating the aftermath of a death. Items that held significance to or were used by the deceased are not simply inert objects, but also potent devices for mourning and remembrance. Family heirlooms and photographs are common examples still today. The Victorian era is particularly noted for its heightened mourning practices, which often involved remembrance through material objects, most notably photographs and hair jewelry.[63] Various religious traditions similarly highlight the emotive power of materials associated with the dead, especially items that preserve the physical presence of the dead. Many relics in the Catholic tradition of veneration are actual body parts or bones, but objects that belonged to a saint or were touched by a saint are considered just as holy. The physical and purported spiritual traces left on the object by the saint's touch transforms the object into a proxy for the saint's body and holy personhood and allows the object-relics to perform miracles.[64] Icons (images of a saint) have also reportedly functioned the same way.[65] In both secular and religious contexts, images and belongings of the deceased function as critical links to the dead.

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[63] Victorian mourning has been taken up by a number of scholars. For a foundational text on the subject, see James S. Curl, *The Victorian Celebration of Death* (Detroit: Partridge Press, 1972). For an interesting discussion of lockets containing both hair and photographs, see Geoffrey Batchen, "Ere the Substance Fade: Photography and Hair Jewellry," in *Photographs Objects Histories: On the Materiality of Images*, ed. Elizabeth Edwards and Janice Hart (New York: Routledge, 2004), 32–46.

[64] Arnold Angenendt, "Relics and Their Veneration," in *Treasures of Heaven: Saints, Relics, and Devotion in Medieval Europe*, ed. Martina Bagnoli, Holger A. Klein, C. Griffith Mann, and James Robinson (Cleveland: Cleveland Museum of Art, 2010), 19–28.

[65] Robin Cormack, *Icons* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

The proxy, mourning, and memorializing functions of objects are potentially particularly inflected in contemporary America in relation to the twentieth-century phenomena of the sequestration of death from everyday life, which scholars suggest inhibits a healthy relationship to death and mourning, leaving loved ones without closure.[66] Personal effects left behind (ranging from knick-knacks and clothes to property) pose a parallel problem to that of the dead body itself—what does one do with it? It's not a simple task to undertake, considering these items had value and significance to a now-gone loved one, but the endeavor allows belongings to play an active role in the mourning process. Survivors can revisit memories, decide what belongings to keep and hold dear, what to give new life to through donation, and what can be discarded. The loving care with which this gargantuan task can be accomplished mirrors that which the family would have previously expended on preparing the body before the rise of the funeral industry and hospice removed these processes into the hands of professionals. As Tese's series *Inheritance* suggests, without the care of the body to facilitate the grieving process for surviving family, the process of sorting through personal belongings can be cathartic. Although the option to handle loved ones' estates remains available to survivors, and is often taken on by them, this process, too, can be outsourced. Kimball's photographs discussed below are testament to this.

For Kimball, and for present and future viewers of his, Tese's, and Hollingsworth's series, these photographs of objects previously belonging to persons unknown to us also function in anthropological or archaeological fashions, as evidence of lives and societies in particular moments of time. For Kimball, his photographs speak to the isolation and social

[66] Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death*; Mitford, *The American Way of Death*; Kellehear, *A Social History of Dying.*

death of the aging and dying that has come along with the sequestration of death. As Kellehear writes, medical advances of the mid- to late twentieth century have resulted in physical death occurring "too late," after social death has occurred. "Bad" death, Kellehear says, is death that happens at the wrong time.[67] The deaths represented in Hollingsworth's series are therefore also tragic, but for being "too soon." Unlike the deaths of Tese's grandparents and, we presume, most of the deceased homeowners of Kimball's series, the deaths referenced in Hollingsworth's series came about not from old age or natural causes but from extreme circumstances instigated by sociopolitical upheaval. Like the Civil War dead who not infrequently failed to be identified by the few personal belongings in their pockets and were buried as unknown soldiers, the dead of the American Southwest to which Hollingsworth attends were able to take very little with them on their journeys. When the remains of the bodies and these few personal items fail to identify the deceased, the dead's survivors are unable to mourn, but historians still may glean information from the items about the circumstances of the historical moment. In these ways, these three photography series join interdisciplinary and historical modes of making associations between belongings and their owners and reflect on dying and mourning in the current moment in America.

Andrea Tese, *Inheritance*

The first image—titled *Luggage*—in Andrea Tese's photobook *Inheritance* is of a neat stack of khaki and olive luggage—olive, khaki, olive, olive, khaki, stacked in descending sizes—waiting at the outside corner of a house. The house is shingled in its own mottled olive covering and is surrounded by concrete laid in neat sidewalk-style squares.

[67] Kellehear, *A Social History of Dying.*

The luggage is placed directly under the house number, marking the location of all of the photographs in the series that follows. A window with the blinds drawn is partly visible in the upper left part of the photograph, the panes of glass reflecting one of the few brief glimpses that the viewer will encounter of the world beyond this house. A white drainpipe extends down the house's corner edge to the right of the luggage, positioned to emit water directly onto the concrete, and an air conditioning unit adorns the wall as it recedes towards the backyard. The side door stands open, framed by a swath of backyard grass and foliage, enticing the viewer away from the outside world and into the intimate spaces of the home. While the viewer is drawn to the open door and the interior beyond, the luggage's patient sentry outside the house evokes both the presence and the absence of the inhabitants of the home, marking at once their being there at the house and their departure from it. Alison Nordström, in the short essay following the photographs, echoes this simultaneous presence and absence, characterizing the stack of luggage as "anthropomorphized in their rounded head-shape, blind hinge-eyes and smiling handle-mouths" but also as a tombstone.[68]

The inhabitants of the home are, in fact, departed. Tese's grandmother passed away in 1997 and her grandfather in 2010, shortly before this photograph was taken. That is why Tese is here at the house. With her grandparents absent, Tese must deal with what is present, the luggage, clothes, furniture, and keepsakes they left behind. Tese began cleaning out her grandparents' home without necessarily intending to photograph the process. Starting in the attic, Tese sorted through the objects there, opening boxes and rearranging things into categorized piles. As she moved to sort through closets and cabinets on the

[68] Alison Nordström, "Acts of Will," in *Inheritance* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2015), 121.

lower floors of the home, Tese moved objects up and down the stairs to deposit them in their correct pile. As the process progressed, Tese realized some piles should be consolidated and others should be split into two. This process of sorting and categorizing works inventoried her grandparents' lives through the belongings they left behind, allowing Tese to take stock of their lives through materials as seemingly impersonal as crumpled newspaper pages and as deeply personal as letters, military medals, and her own handmade gifts to her grandparents. Tese writes, "I decide to photograph everything. I will make an inventory. I will document. In this way nothing will be discounted. This is my grandparents' collection. It should be acknowledged."[69] Once Tese decided to photograph the objects, she spent two years between 2010 and 2012 rearranging them in order to photograph them in their various piles, some quite neat, such as mattresses, folded sheets, and pillows, stacked by size (*Bedding*), others quite evocative, like the ladders that appear to be clambering up the basement steps (*Ladders*).

The second image in the book, in all tones of deep brown and pale tan, titled *Shoes*, features a laminate faux wood flooring beginning to curl up at the edge where it meets a closet. The closet's slatted bi-fold doors are open (one folded in on itself, the other extended to isolate the composition from a source of light behind) to reveal the contents. Nestled under a shelf, a bar supports one zippered, quilted cloth wardrobe, perfectly centered. Below the sagging, duct taped bottom of the hanging wardrobe, a pair of brown and cream cowboy boots stand at attention, toes pointed to either side. The ensemble suggests the upright posture of the person who once wore the boots. Along the front edge of the closet, other pairs of shoes are arrayed in a row, beginning with leather dress shoes

[69] Tese, *Inheritance*, 8.

on the left and ending with dirt-stained, white sneakers at the right—shoes for every occasion and well-worn. Evoking the physical traces of their previous wearer—his sweat and the worn imprint of the soles of his feet—as well as his tastes, occupation, and hobbies, the shoes in this image not only inventory one type of her grandfather's belongings but also function as proxies for her grandfather himself and the full life he lived.

This sense of proxy permeates all of Tese's *Inheritance* photographs, with the objects' proxy status achieved in various, overlapping ways. Certain objects, we can imagine preserving the touch and physical traces of the deceased—their bodies' imprints on a mattress or traces of sweat inside these shoes, for instance. Some objects are evidence of personal taste, habits, and values and so function as a proxy for the deceased's personality. One incredible example that showcases Tese's grandmother's tastes and habits is *Grandma's Lists*, in which dozens of handwritten lists of every movie Tese's grandmother had ever seen and every book she had ever read papers the wall and the floor, forming the backdrop for even more lists stored in notebooks and card boxes. Finally, other objects are evidence of life events, such as military service, or of family connections, and so function as proxy for the deceased's life experience.

The sense of proxy is further heightened by the sense that Tese has arranged many of the objects, like the central wardrobe and pair of boots in *Shoes* or the luggage in the first image, as if for formal portraiture, using the objects as stand-ins for her grandparents' themselves. While many of the photographs are conservatively arranged like a proper portrait, others are more provocative in their arrangement, and evoke action shots of the deceased—photographs of them as they lived and worked. The photograph *Ladders*, for instance, suggests Tese's grandfather fixing ceiling beams or changing lightbulbs, moving

between the basement and the yard above. The precarity of the arrangement, with ladders and chairs balanced on one or two feet and each other up the length of the staircase from the basement, also suggests the fragility of the aging person of Tese's grandfather, being careful to lean on a railing to prevent falling.

Acknowledging that memories of people and the significance of objects they treasured fade with time, Tese's photographs are her self-aware, partly futile attempt at a bulwark against forgetting. In her introductory statement, Tese recognizes that her grandparents "will not last."[70] She writes:

> "They were extraordinary people who led unextraordinary lives…They were smart, with little education, and had good taste but no money. They were curious but didn't stray far from home and pretty much kept to themselves.
>
> They were never in the news or on the screen. They didn't create anything that would be read or viewed for generations to come. They were not famous and their legacy is humble."[71]

Tese's active remembering through her interactions with their belongings are documented in the resulting photographs, prolonging the memory of her grandparents a little longer, and testifying to Tese's own existence. For it is not only her grandparents Tese fears disappearing from memory, but, in time, herself. Tese's motivating desire to stave off forgetting has as much to do with fears over her own death and legacy as it does with her grandparents'. Tese continues, "This thought [that her grandparents will not last] has often troubled me—all that remains after a lifetime is a collection of transitory things. Our bodies will disintegrate. The people we love will disintegrate. The precious belongings that we safeguard against the understanding that we can really keep nothing will disintegrate,

[70] Ibid., 7.
[71] Ibid.

too…"[72] Tese says about her photographic project, "I need to do this," and elaborates, "My first memory is a recurring dream…There was nothing and I was nothing and yet I was terrified…it is my acquaintance with this nothingness that drives me. The images that follow can be seen as my unwillingness to give in to it, to cheat anonymity, to leave something lasting behind, to be immortal."[73]

This motivation drives both *Inheritance* and Tese's earlier series *What is Left Behind*, which considers the role people left behind have in sustaining the memory of a person who has passed away. *What is Left Behind*, a series from 2006–2007, consists of portraits of extended family members linked only by genetics and the New York Times obituary of October 31, 2006 of the family's former matriarch—Marjorie Elizabeth "Betty" Tese.[74] Tese recalls, "A lot of my relatives didn't even know about her, their great grandmother, because they were so far removed."[75] And so, like *Inheritance,* this series acknowledges that the memory of a loved one who died will eventually die itself, as those who knew the person also pass on. While the objects that a loved one owned, used, and loved help sustain the memory of the person for some time, Tese also acknowledges that the memory of what is significant about those objects will also fade in time. Their significance survives only as long as the memory does; it isn't necessarily inherent in the object itself. Tese's series *After*, taken between 2002 and 2009, examines this failure of objects to capture lasting information. *After* consists of portraits and photographs of environments through which

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[72] Ibid.
[73] Ibid., 9.
[74] Ed Barnas, "All That's Left: Andrea Tese Inheritance," *The New York Photo Review* 5, no. 6 (February 11–17, 2014), http://www.nyphotoreview.com/NYPR_REVS/NYPR_REV3598.html; Andrea Tese, "What Is Left Behind," Artist's Behance Webpage, November 20, 2013, https://www.behance.net/gallery/12321979/What-Is-Left-Behind.
[75] Sola Agustsson, "Andrea Tese's 'Inheritance' at De Buck Gallery," *Whitewall*, February 3, 2014, https://www.whitewall.art/art/andrea-teses-inheritance-at-de-buck-gallery.

Tese "shows the effects of the casual violence we constantly work to integrate into daily experience" with a "dreary realism… [and] anxious, uneasy compositions" by documenting the visible aftereffects of more or less recent traumas.[76] Referring to *After*, Tese explains, "I am interested in impermanence and mortality. The impression that an event or being has on this earth is often fleeting. The experience itself can have existed for just a second or less, and the ruins of it usually remain only a little longer."[77] This inescapable disappearance reads in the photographs, as noted by art critic Benjamin Sutton, who remarked, "There's little sense of hope in these scenes of intimate pain, unless it's in the act of looking and understanding itself."[78] This series presages *Inheritance* in its use of "dreary realism" in an investigation of physical evidence of people or events that eventually fade regardless, leaving only our attempts to see and understand.

Despite, or perhaps because of, the ultimately futile outcome of any attempt to cheat nothingness, *Inheritance* suggests that undertaking the task of sorting through belongings left behind can be a useful step in the grieving process. Because the home Tese sorted through and many of the objects therein were familiar from her childhood and laden with personal associations (some of the objects were even handmade gifts she and her sister had made for their grandparents), the project records a distinctly personal process. In her artist's essay at the beginning of the book, Tese writes, however, that the parameters and processes she set for her project allowed her to more easily and more clinically assess the objects to keep, give, or throw away: "The process of arranging the objects and creating

[76] Benjamin Sutton, "Whatever Remains," *Wicked Artsy* (blog), *The L Magazine*, February 26, 2009, http://www.thelmagazine.com/2009/02/wicked-artsy-whatever-remains/.
[77] "Andrea Tese 'Boats Against the Current' Heist Gallery," Events, *NY Art Beat*, accessed November 6, 2019, https://www.nyartbeat.com/event/2009/6613.
[78] Sutton, "Whatever Remains."

tableaus within the various spaces of my grandparents' house is soothing. I can approach the process of disassembling a lifetime systematically…I can create something from this destruction of attachment, this breakdown of meaning. I can give these objects new life, if only within the rectangular frame of an image."[79] Tese explains, "I'm not religious, so creating these works is my way of coping with death."[80] Tese's photographs are testament to this. The photographs evoke Tese's grandparents' lives and memories, as well as evidence of Tese's personal and loving relationship to her grandparents. Although a personal project, Tese's photobook is accessible and relevant to others, most of whom will, like Tese's grandparents, "not last." The book speaks to everyone's unavoidable risk of disappearing sometime after death and could potentially help viewers move their own grieving processes and come to terms with this inevitability.

Tese's ritualistic sorting and arranging of her grandparents' personal belongings not only reenacts the artist's loving relationship with her kin, it also allows the photographs to ultimately function as a portrait of Tese herself in the present. Tese's decision to manipulate the objects in her grandparents' home makes *Inheritance* categorically different from *What is Left Behind* and *After*, and further speaks to Tese's doubts over how lasting of a document her photographs of objects can be. By re-arranging the objects before photographing them, Tese makes the photographs a document not only of the objects but of her interaction with them, a record of her process of cleaning out her grandparents' home, and a record of her own life's intimacy with theirs. Thus, Tese's photographs attempt to preserve the memory of the significance of the objects a little longer, to preserve the memory of her grandparents a little longer, and to preserve her own memory a little

[79] Tese, *Inheritance*, 9.
[80] Agustsson, "Andrea Tese's 'Inheritance.'"

longer. In her artist's statement for *Things Fall Apart,* 2013, Tese describes how this aspect of her work has continued to develop. She writes:

> I began with an object that was devastated beyond recognition [a single propeller plane that had crashed in the Rocky Mountains] and through the cathartic process of reconstruction I created a sculpture in the plane's likeness. *Things Fall Apart* can be seen as a continuation of a recent shift in my practice, wherein I take a more active role in my surroundings and insert myself into my work. By manipulating the situation before photograph (sic) it, I am taking steps to ensure my own legacy as well as that of my subject.[81]

Tese's subsequent series *Upstate* features the defunct summer resorts of the Catskill Mountains, a formerly popular vacation spot, extending her investigation of loss and memory to a broader, cultural scale. In these photographs, Tese restores one element of the scene—the neat hotel beds, for example—and leaves the rest in their derelict state to highlight and juxtapose history and the continuation of time.

The sequencing of Tese's photobook is equally communicative, appearing to replicate her experience or journey through her grandparents' home. The sequence of photographs is arbitrary but logical, largely moving from things worn and used to things of taste and experience and identity. Each photograph features one kind of item, taking us through Tese's logic of organization: clothing, bedding, personal hygiene. Then books, glasses, binoculars, items related to hobbies, collections. Next are appliances, lighting fixtures, electronics, then furniture and tools. The groups get less concrete: consumables, bits and bobs, family things (such as "Things We Made," "Baby Things," "Pictures and Posters," "Pictures of Me"), magazines, postcards, occupational items, locks and keys, bells, weapons, "Things Found in the Wall," crumpled newspaper, newspaper clippings, documents ("Grandma's Lists"), jewelry, IDs, money, and finally "Everything Else." Such a

[81] Andrea Tese, "Things Fall Apart," Artist's Behance Webpage, November 20, 2013, https://www.behance.net/gallery/12308763/Things-Fall-Apart.

thoughtfully organized but still confusing sequence of categories, and its insistent conclusion of "Everything Else," emphasizes the inability to fully categorize and understand another person's life. There are always outliers and random objects kept for unknown reasons, that hint at but can't convey the deceased's lost individual spark. The photo on the cover returns us to Tese herself. A lock of hair and a couple lost teeth are displayed with a jewelry cabinet. These items last the longest separated from the body, and they carry DNA longest. These kinds of materials are saved by mothers from their children or vice versa and expresses the kind of biological immortality Lifton and Olsen describe.[82]

At the very end of the book is a photograph of Tese's grandfather in his casket. At this point in the viewer's journey through the photographs, the figure seems less a portrait of the individual who died than his belongings do. About photographing at the wake, Tese describes, "I had everyone leave the room at the end of the wake. It was strange to be alone with a dead body, or even in the presence of a dead body. The animal in you kind of just feels it; you just kind of know they're dead. It's a strange presence. Then I set up my shot, from afar, and it was nice. It was emotional, but I liked the formality of it."[83] While the moment was generative for Tese, the moments most generative for the viewer are her interactions with these things her grandfather left behind. Tese takes us through the process of keepsakes and memory, only to return us to her own presence. Once she is gone, so will these memories be, reaffirming her initial knowledge and fear of the ultimate disappearance of us all. In an interview for *Whitewall* magazine, Tese reveals that her initial

[82] Lifton and Olsen, "Symbolic Immortality."
[83] Agustsson, "Andrea Tese's 'Inheritance.'".

layout of her book would have led us to the same conclusions by a different route: "I start the book with [a traditional coffin portrait], and end with a self-portrait of myself in the house."[84]

Justin Kimball, *Pieces of String*

The form of Justin Kimball's photobook *Pieces of String* mimics the experience of coming upon belongings left behind, particularly boxes of unknown items. A thick industrial rubber band holds a tri-fold hard cover together. The cover, pale gray, appears dirty and stained with water damage and dust. After removing the band and opening the first of the panels, the reader encounters a photograph set into the second panel. In the photograph, a foggy plastic wardrobe cover drapes over the back of a wooden chair set at a three-quarter degree angle. The backdrop is a faded and peeling wall painted in peach, bubblegum pink, and mint green with tan trim. The rough wood tabletop on which the chair perches is littered with paint peelings, two dusty and warped hardcover books, and a buckled piece of paper. The effect is of an aged, worn, and unreadable bride waiting for a long-promised portrait to be taken.[85] Opening the second panel, the reader finds a paperback volume, the cover of which echoes the first hardcover panel. Open this cover and the frontispiece, the reader comes upon a quote by Willa Cather, "The sun was like a great visiting presence that stimulated and took its due, When it flung wide its cloak and stepped down over the edge of the fields at evening, it left behind it a spent and exhausted world." Tucked behind this page and on top of the title page is a booklet containing an essay by the photographers' brother, Douglas M. Kimball, an auctioneer. The booklet is

[84] Ibid.
[85] This image also appears inside the photobook and is titled *Willow Street*.

slightly narrower than the photobook, allowing the reader to see the image of a length of string printed on the right side of the title page. After turning the title page, the reader finally discovers the first photograph of the photobook proper, titled *Forest Road, garden record*.[86]

The photograph is of a ledger, set on a faded and peeling green bench. There is a thin band of a white wall, equally crackled and dirty, at top, and hints of blue or green paint, red painted wood, and a dirt ground below. Two large rocks flank the ledger on the right. The ledger is open to pages 104 and 105, titled in a large cursive script "1998 Garden Record." On June 6, the gardener "Put in Peas, Onion Sets, Rutabaga's (sic), Lettuce, Parsnips, Cabbage seeds, and Radish;" on June 22 he or she "Dusted Golden Glow, Tomatoes, vine crops and Rutabagas. Mulched the Peach Tree." The gardener recorded when the Hollyhocks bloomed ("July 20"), the first summer squash ("Aug 1"), the first light frost on the tomatoes ("Sept 17") and the first snow ("12-29 6 inches"). Tucked into the ledger are a number of loose pages, more handwritten notes, and at least one typeset resource for dealing with "destructive insects." Despite the level of detail that the gardener recorded here, the ledger is only an echo of a past, the garden itself remains unseen, and the gardener him or herself remains a mystery.

This and the other photographs of the book are titled with the location at which they were taken – "*Forest Road*," "*Holyoke Street*," "*Route 2*." These titles evoke the domestic settings of all of the series' photographs, the northeastern region of the country where they were taken, and Kimball's working process on this series. The photographs in *Pieces of*

[86] Justin Kimball, interview with the author (Artist's Studio, Florence, MA, May 26, 2017). In our interview, Kimball explained how important the design of the book was and how organically it developed as he worked with the publisher.

String were taken at various homes that Kimball's brother, an auctioneer, had been hired to sort through and clear out. As his brother assessed the contents of the home for auction or for discard, Kimball photographed the former inhabitants' belongings, often as he found them, but sometimes with a little rearranging to heighten the emotional impression Kimball experienced coming upon the scene. In an interview with the author, Kimball explains that his choice to title the photos with street names is intended to give them a sense of location—they suggest the local routes and neighborhood streets of a particular region—while not identifying a specific house or city.[87] The setting of the pictures can thus be read as any number of ubiquitous northeastern American neighborhoods and, taken together, the addresses function to give the feeling of home. As the homes used to be places occupied that are now empty, the place becomes a kind of proxy along with its contents, maintaining the person while also changing in their absence.

Kimball's perspective for this project was shaped in part by personal experiences and meditations on death. In his early life in New Jersey in the 1960s and 70s, Kimball encountered death often, observing his young friends die from overdoses, suicides, and other consequences of living rough lives. Around the time he was twelve years old, Kimball recalls, he pulled a dead body out of the water, and over the course of his life, inexplicably two more.[88] When he was younger, Kimball didn't know if he himself would live past 25 years old and thought about the possibility of his own death a lot. Despite the circumstances, these early thoughts of his own death remained rather abstract, but as he has grown older, as so often happens, death has become more and more a certain, urgent,

[87] Ibid.
[88] Ibid.

and terrifying future reality.[89] Kimball has no guiding ethos that shapes his beliefs about the end of life and beyond; he says he doesn't know what happens after death and can't stomach the idea that there's simply nothing. Kimball considers, "Maybe part of that's what I'm responding to, that I don't have a thing. I mean, looking for the thing." [90] Like Tese, the fear of nothingness after death is part of what gives these photographs poignancy for Kimball. He says, "The sadness in these pictures for me, now that I'm thinking about it, is that there is this hole,"[91] and, "There was a fullness and richness…it's sad that this is where it ends."[92]

A particular experience in Kimball's life that speaks to the deterioration of a full life, and informed this series most directly, was when Kimball was a young man and went with a friend to clear out the friend's late great-uncle's home in Arkansas. They found near a chair in the living room a journal of sorts, written daily on the cardboard from Wheaties cereal boxes. With few exceptions, each entry said "Nothing," which struck Kimball as heartbreaking but also oddly hopeful. If this man had persevered to log each day that nothing happened, that surely meant he thought that someday something might happen. This experience of imagining what this man's life had perhaps been like, judging by his personal effects and this detail-less diary stuck with Kimball until and through the time he was working on *Pieces of String.*[93] In *Pieces of String*, again, he encountered the personal belongings of people he hadn't known, whose life story he didn't know, but whose

[89] Ibid.
[90] Ibid.
[91] Ibid., (edited for clarity).
[92] Ibid.
[93] Ibid.

belongings evoked an emotional response and suggested something about the deceased's life and last days.

Although Kimball had varying access to details about the persons whose homes he photographed, through his brother and any remaining family members who had hired him, Kimball is less interested in matching the belongings to an existing life story.[94] Rather, Kimball is interested in investigating what the objects may tell him about these persons unknown to him. Kimball—whose previous work focused on people, such as the series *Where We Find Ourselves*, which featured figures during moments of casual leisure in outdoor environments ranging from a backyard to a local park—doubts we can ever really know someone from a picture, even photographs *of* people.[95] The further impossibility of knowing another person *at all* emerges in Kimball's brother's essay, titled "Stuff," that accompanies the *Pieces of String* photobook. Douglas Kimball describes finding items within estates that were antithetical to how the former owner seemed or to what the family remembered about the person. In these instances, like the time he discovered Ku Klux Klan robes in an attic in Springfield, Massachusetts,[96] the objects reveal *more* about the person than the persona they portrayed in life and the memories of their loved ones. This type of situation reveals how the story of a life in inherently constructed, as the person who lived it and their loved ones narrativize it even as it is being lived. Kimball finds that, as a stranger to these belongings, rather than *tell* him anything, the objects *suggest* life stories and it is in his imaginings of the lives attached to the objects, and our imaginings as viewers of the photographs, that imbue the photographs with meaning. After death, for loved ones and for

[94] Ibid.
[95] Ibid.
[96] Douglas M. Kimball, "Stuff," in *Pieces of String* (Santa Fe: Radius Books, 2012).

strangers coming across belongings left behind, the only way to understand the life that was lost is by creating and shoring up an, at least partial, fiction.

Many of the objects that Kimball focuses on in *Pieces of String* carry distinct physical traces of their owners, such as wigs or a low-slung mattress on a well-worn bed, as well as traces of their personalities or habits that are ripe for storytelling. In *Washburn Avenue*, we see a snapshot of someone's bathroom. A large bottle of Gold Bond powder sits on one shelf to the left, a coffee mug with a toothbrush and toothpaste sit on the top of another, metal shelf. Below them, a bottle of perfume or cologne. Hanging from the metal unit are two wigs, both wavy haired and light brown, one slightly blonder, the other slightly curlier. A mirror to the right, under a bare bulb, reflects a bed, a dresser with a lamp and a hat, and a bedside table and wall mounted lamp. Orange and yellow flowered wallpaper covers the wall from below the wigs and the mirror to the right edge of the photograph. These personal hygiene products—the powder, perfume, and toothbrush—evoke the scent and spit of a now gone user. The wigs not only contain traces of sweat, we imagine, but also function as uncanny remnants of the body itself.

This idea of presence and absence informs Kimball's attention to trace in these photographs. In our interview he showed me a book of pressed flowers that he saved from one of the homes he photographed, pointing to the discolored traces of the flowers on the facing pages.[97] He imagines traces of the deceased on their belongings as similar marks, yet at times invisible. In considering the traces of the body in the furniture they frequently sat in or the bed they slept in, for instance, we are led to imagine the body there. Kimball was interested in showing the spaces of these people's lives as if they had just gotten up and

[97] Kimball, interview.

left,[98] like how classic postmortem portrait photographs often look like the person is simply sleeping. The spaces maintain a sense of the person while also pointing to their absence. The objects, and especially the furniture, come to stand in for the person who is no longer there.

For this reason, mattresses and chairs, as the furniture most intimately connected to the body, appear often in *Pieces of String*. In *Forest Road, bed*, for instance, bright white light shines in a double beam from a window just above the left upper corner of the photograph. Passing over piles of newspaper and softcover publications, the light hits a dirty, pilled white blanket crumpled on the end of a bed. A faded and dirty blue blanket covers much of the bed until another heap of dirty white fabric and then a striped pillow sticking out of a stained white pillowcase. The piles of newspaper and paperbacks continues up the left side of the bed, set on top of wooden crates. Behind the bed a stack of yellow and white paperbacks, an old radio, and a red tool chest sit atop a table in front of a bookcase of hardcover books. A bare lightbulb hangs from the ceiling. On the right side of the bed is a stool, covered with a wooly grey seat cover and a colorful blue and red checked flounce. The bed, and its space, look well-worn, as if its occupant spent a lot of time in it. The pillowcase and blankets are rumpled and creased, and the pillowcase is most stained where the person's head presumably most often rested. In *Lyons Hill Road, bedroom*, another low-slung mattress is covered with a pink flowered bed spread, a rumpled pink pillow, and a scattering of newspaper, a paperback book, and a couple gift wrapping ribbons. A dirty electric light hangs from the wrought iron headboard, over which a piece of fallen, dirty and faded wallpaper drapes. On the adjacent wall, more wallpaper slumps over

[98] Ibid.

a hanging didactic for "Understanding our Weather." In both of these images, the bed holds traces of the former owner's body, the weight of his or her body having impressed the mattress and their sweat having marked the pillowcases. One photograph in particular speaks quite evocatively to the imagined connection between the deceased and their proxy objects—*Grove Street* features a bed that appears to be undergoing the process of decomposition and sprouting new life in parallel with the unseen and now buried body that once occupied it.

Evidence of the deceased's time spent, interests, and habits are here in these photographs, too. The map of air currents for understanding the weather, the remnants of a gift wrapped in newspaper, books, and hoarded piles of newspaper. But unlike the traces that Andrea Tese could read as evidence of someone she knew and loved, the traces in Kimball's photographs are traces of ghosts. The deceased are there, in these residues of their habits and their bodies, but without having known them, we can only access a fragmentary knowledge of their lives. The kinds of material and interiors pictured, appearing to be those of lower-middle class homes or homes that were not necessarily well maintained, while they don't reveal the specific individual who lived there, do reveal a picture of their social, economic, and/or personal circumstances.

Ultimately, the objects, and the photographs of the objects, tell us more about life, aging, and death in contemporary American society more broadly, and about our own beliefs and fears about death, than they do about the people who once owned them. Kimball emphasizes this fact by occasionally shifting objects to heighten a juxtaposition and suggest a narrative about the lives or deaths of the inhabitants. An example of an evocative re-positioning that Kimball describes in our interview, is the gun seen in *Federal*

Street. In *Federal Street*, a denim blue armchair with a neatly placed white and grey-blue woven pillow sits against a wood paneled wall. Next to the chair, a wooden side table with scalloped edges supports a lamp with a square marble base, a brass stand, a merlot colored glass body with a pattern of grapes, and a white lamp shade. A small digital clock, a rattan cup of pens and pencils, a pad of paper with a list of numbers to call, a remote control, coasters, a loose pencil, cosmetic scissors, nail clippers, nail files, a pocket watch, and a rusty gun are scattered over the tabletop. Amongst the rest of the items and turned with its gaping muzzle and open chambers pointing towards the viewer, the gun, which Kimball initially found in a shoebox at the foot of the chair, is easy to overlook.[99] Kimball explains that finding this gun communicated to him a clear sense of where the resident was, emotionally, towards the end—he imagined a man seated in his favorite chair day after day imagining ending his life—and Kimball placed it closer at hand to emphasize this feeling. Although this particular photograph and others like it—such as *Mount View Road, basement*, featuring a gun partially tucked into a paper bag on a dusty concrete floor—are steeped in a rather violent sense of hopelessness, a more mundane sense of bleakness pervades many of the other photographs in the series and the series as a whole, in part facilitated by Kimball's use of digital photography for the project. *Pieces of String* is the first series for which Kimball used a digital camera, which picked up details in shadowy areas that film, with its greater contrast, may have lost, and allowed for the muted lighting and colors that achieve a realistically subdued and even dingy aesthetic.[100]

Although Kimball sometimes shifted objects, only *Florence Road*, an image featuring a worn and ripped small cardboard box, was created from a wholly constructed scene.

[99] Ibid.
[100] Ibid.

Scattered around the box, on top of wood planks—formerly painted green blue but now almost entirely faded and splashed with the occasional splatter of white paint—are rusted nails and screws and various seeds. Written on the top of the box in a shaky hand is the phrase that gives the photography series its title, "Pieces of string to Small to save (sic)." An adaptation of the title of a book of poetry by Donald Hall—*String Too Short to Be Saved*—referencing the myth of the Yankee who saves everything, Kimball knew this would be the title of the book he wanted to create from these photographs. He created the scene, writing the words with his left hand to achieve the right look, and left the box to age in his partially restored barn for two years.[101] Hall's poetry and Wright Morris's photography and writing, which Kimball also cited as influences, assemble snippets of everyday life into poignant portraits of an America on the verge of being lost. Kimball's photographs function similarly, and this title and this constructed scene connects this series to the "spent and exhausted world" of Willa Cather's quote. The title and image further suggest that belongings left behind, often mundane, aged, neglected things, are "too small" and too unreadable to save the person's memory. Cather's quote also suggests that not only are the objects too unreadable to save the person's memory but that photographs themselves are but husks of a "spent world" created by the sun.

Taken together, as they are published in the book, Kimball's photographs begin to suggest a larger story about how many people experience the end of life in America, alone and isolated. In my interview, Kimball says… "hard for me to get around stuff that's also specifically American… you know not that I couldn't be making those pictures in another place, I think, but…it's the way we deal with death…it's how we deal with older people, it's

[101] Ibid.

not going to look that way" elsewhere. He continues, "People are left to their own devices, you know, if there's no family or if family's not connected…at the end things are pretty rough and things fall apart, and there's no money, and no… service nets, to help."[102] The preponderance of lone, empty chairs and worn, sagging beds gives Kimball's photographs an acute sense that where there once was presence, there is now absence. The viewer's experience of glimpsing only snippets of stories through such objects further emphasizes a sense of unfamiliarity and isolation. The disrepair of many of the rooms and objects Kimball photographs, along with prominent outdated décor in shades of green and orange from the 1970s, indeed also suggests that the former occupants of these homes received little monetary or practical assistance and were perhaps more than a little cut off from contemporary society. By referencing economic disparity, the unexpected pitfalls of the American dream of owning a home of one's own, and the struggle of social isolation, but also hope, *Pieces of String* is both poetic and subtly political.[103]

The second to last photograph in the book, *Forest Road, back door* poignantly points to the kind of socially isolated death some aging members of American society experience, but also the hopeful small efforts of some available social services. A close-up shot of part of a door, inset with glass reflecting the forested setting, and the chipping white painted side of the house, the photograph highlights a sticker on the door window reading "Security Check by Sheriff's Office" and a note tucked under the corner of a barometric pressure gauge on the wall. The note reads:

[102] Ibid.
[103] Ibid.

> "Forrest - We tried to deliver your hot meal + your frozen meal for yesterday (New Year's Day) on Wed but the driver told me that your door was locked + she couldn't get in. I don't know if you were home or not. If you do go out + will not be home to get your meal, call the senior center… + let me know. If it is after 10:30 or 10:45 in the morning, leave a note on your door. Otherwise I need to call your neighbors (very nice people!) to be sure you are O.K. I tried to call you on Wed. but I am told that your phone does not ring, but that you have a caller I.D. box. Is your phone broken so that it doesn't ring? Maybe I could get you another one. Anyway I thought it would be easier to write this note."

This message conjures up thoughts of an elderly Forrest dead in his bed, discovered by neighbors or the sheriff. On second thought, the fact that this note was left and included a postscript saying "I am giving you 2 frozen meals to make up for Wed. + Thurs." gives us hope that Forrest is still alive. But Kimball is here—whether dead or moved into a nursing home, the viewer senses Forrest's age and social isolation. This image is followed by *Adler Avenue, bed*, the final image in the book, which re-emphasizes absence, with an empty bed, but exudes a sense of peace with its view out the window behind the headboard to a quiet, snowy landscape beyond.

Although Kimball's and Tese's projects are immediately similar in the way that their photographs feature the same kinds of furniture, clothes, and personal items in domestic settings, the photographers' different relationships to the deceased and their different working methods inflect their photographs in significant ways. Rather than the artist's interventions into the objects standing in for personal interactions with loved ones, Kimball's movement of objects reflects his lack of knowledge of his subjects and communicates how objects on their own tell us very little, requiring the viewer's imagination to piece together a narrative. Kimball doesn't seek to capture the sum of a life, but snippets and intimate daily stories of life. As Kimball's photos emphasize poverty and

aloneness, highlighting the deaths of people who appear to have been abandoned by family and society and who seem to occupy the lower rungs of America's socioeconomic ladder, the project is, furthermore, a political one. Jonathan Hollingsworth's series, discussed next, shares and expands this political motivation, focusing on the deaths of people who are unidentified and die far from home.

Jonathan Hollingsworth, *Left Behind*

Jonathan Hollingsworth's series *Left Behind* takes the reader of his photobook *Left Behind: Life and Death Along the U.S. Border* through the Pima County Forensic Science Center as an unidentified body would be processed. The first section of the book contains images of the coroner's van, receiving room, autopsy room, and other spaces in the Forensic Science Center. The second section, to which Hollingsworth devotes the bulk of the book, consists of photographs of the plastic sleeves of personal effects of unidentified men and women who were discovered near the U.S.-Mexico border in Arizona and processed through the Pima County Medical Examiner's Office. The majority of these Jane and John Does who perished in the harsh conditions of the desert, although not all, appear to be or are later identified to definitively be border crossers. Their scant personal effects documented by Hollingsworth reflect the dire circumstances of the journey they embarked on, and the reader encounters many of the same kinds of items sleeve after sleeve—small bills of Mexican or American money, photographs of family members, and handwritten lists of phone numbers belonging to contacts on either side of the border. Hollingsworth follows this main section of the book with photographs of Green Valley, a common pickup spot for border crossers. Here, Hollingsworth shows us the landscape as well as personal items left

behind there, covered in dust from the journey undertaken. Hollingsworth's series seeks to give us an understanding of this journey, for those who made it and for those who didn't. For those who didn't, Hollingsworth seeks to recuperate the identity of those unknown men and women who died crossing the border. Unlike those of Tese's and Kimball's series, the dead of Hollingsworth's series didn't die from illness or old age in their homes, but rather in the process of travelling to a new beginning, a new life.

After immigration through the common urban border areas such as San Diego and El Paso were tightened during Clinton's presidency, more immigrants have crossed through the treacherous Sonoran Desert.[104] Temperatures rise into the triple digits in the summer, there is little fresh water, and coyotes (hired border crossing guides) who ill-prepare their groups—as well as the risk of violence from unscrupulous individuals, vigilantes, or U.S. Border Patrol—make crossings through the desert incredibly perilous. Thanks to the harsh conditions of the desert, the bodies of those border crossers who perish are found in varying states of decomposition or mummification, making identification by facial recognition impossible in most cases. The personal effects photographed by Hollingsworth not only give viewers the slimmest sense of the personalities and circumstances of the John and Jane Does, but they also help professionals identify the bodies with which they were found, so families can be informed. Medical examiners from the Forensic Science Center work with cultural anthropologists like Robin Reineke, co-founder of the Missing Migrants Project (now the Colibrí Center for Human Rights[105]), to coordinate information from missing persons reports and databases with the

[104] Jonathan Hollingsworth, interview with the author (Artist's Home, Brooklyn, NY, July 15, 2018); Hollingsworth, *Left Behind*, 106.
[105] Colibrí Center for Human Rights Website, accessed November 30, 2019, http://www.colibricenter.org/.

information known from the materials at the Center. As a cultural anthropologist, Reineke is able to assess personal effects for clues that could lead to an identification.[106] The task of discovering the identities of these unknown persons is important for providing closure to surviving family and friends; but the "illegal" immigrant status and tragic circumstances of the deaths of these men and women further points to the sociopolitical importance of Hollingsworth's efforts to photograph the belongings and make the images widely available.

Having had little personal experience with death, Hollingsworth found his visit to the Forensic Science Center shocking and the more visceral aspects, such as the smell, difficult to grapple with.[107] In an interview with the author, the artist explains that, as his goal was awareness, he avoided the gorier images (such as images of the bodies themselves) when making selections for inclusion in the book. The objects left behind, he felt, were more effective, with enough beauty and mystery to be able to draw the viewer's attention and contemplation.[108] Hollingsworth further explains that the majority of photographs related to the border seen in news media are photographs of Border Patrol in their green uniforms with their flash lights, images of crime and violence in border towns, or exposés of "guilty" illegal border crossers who have been "caught."[109] Hollingsworth, on the other hand, wanted to focus on the individuals that the items belonged to, emphasizing their individuality. This focus has served Hollingsworth's goal of producing work that allowed viewers to absorb the scope of the issue without being repulsed, and

[106] Robin Reineke, "Arizona: Naming the Dead from the Desert," *BBC News Magazine*, January 17, 2013, https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-21029783.
[107] Hollingsworth, interview.
[108] Ibid.
[109] Ibid.

Hollingsworth notes that responses have largely been positive: regardless of people's politics, they've been sympathetic to the element of tragic death.[110]

After spending a week at the Forensic Science Center, observing the work of the medical examiners and looking through and earmarking sleeves of belongings, Hollingsworth photographed his selection in a single day.[111] Hollingsworth photographed the sleeves of personal effects as he found them—as they are considered biohazards, he was unable to remove the contents from their sleeves or rearrange them[112]—and did very little editing of the images after capture. He did, importantly, remove glare from the cellophane sleeves to allow the clear plastic of the bags to all but disappear, leaving the floating contents the sole focus of the prints.[113] Some of the spreads in his book feature front and back images of the sleeves, others only the fronts. In many of the sleeves, there are few enough objects that they can be arranged in their bags evenly spaced, with reasonable breathing room between the items, allowing the viewer to examine each item on its own as well as in concert with its bedfellows. Other sleeves contain more objects, which are stored overlapping each other and speak in cacophony as often as in concert. Hollingsworth's selection of sleeves captures examples of items seen again and again throughout the archive, such as money, phone numbers, and photographs, as well as outliers, like an eyelash curler or a metal belt buckle engraved with the image of a motorcycle. The top item in each and every bag, however, is a blue identification tag, through which the hook that holds the bag within its locker also passes. The tags state that these are "PERSONAL EFFECTS" and have the unique ML (identification) number of the

[110] Ibid.
[111] Ibid.
[112] Ibid.
[113] Ibid.

body and the shared name "Doe," "Doe, John," or "Doe, Jane." Hollingsworth presents his photographs of personal effects in no discernible order, with no formal titles. Each photograph is, however, accompanied by the information associated with the deceased in NamUs, the National Missing and Unidentified Persons System, which includes date and location of discovery, estimated date of death, state and level of recognizability of the body, any clothing found on or near the body, etc.—that is, all of the details that will be used in efforts to identify the deceased. Hollingsworth's direct approach to photographing these objects—with straightforward composition and minimal editing—makes the photographs appear objective. The objects are presented as facts—incontrovertible evidence of a life, and a death—but incomplete facts. In the spaces between the objects, the gaps in the evidence—in both the images and their meager captions—lies the political content of Hollingsworth's series, as it asks us to recognize the difficulty of the task of identifying these bodies and question the circumstances that lead to these deaths.

To a certain degree, this project is a departure from Hollingsworth's oeuvre, as the only project focused on death,[114] and on issues of immigration. This project is consistent, however, with the sociopolitical bent of his larger body of work. The subjects of other well-known projects of the artist include such political topics as opinions on the Iraq War (*What We Think Now*) and the Supreme Court ruling on gay marriage (*Supreme Court Ruling on Gay Marriage*)—hot button issues of a similar caliber to immigration. Hollingsworth's work is similarly unified by his attention to groups of people who are commonly marginalized—

[114] At the time of our interview, Hollingsworth was working on a relatively new project thematically related to death, which he referred to as *The Blue Dress*. Now published on his website as *Mother*, the series reflects the transitory nature of the self through yearly photographs of his mother in a blue dress owned by his late grandmother (his mother's late mother). See Jonathan Hollingsworth, "Mother," Artist's Website, accessed December 1, 2019, http://www.jonathanhollingsworth.com/series/view/id/38.

such as LGBTQ individuals—or at the least, overlooked—such as Central Park Carriage Drivers, or under-thirties.[115] His focus on the marginalized and unseen are heightened in *Left Behind* as the populations crossing the border fall into both of these categories. Not only are immigrants and Hispanic Americans treated in biased ways in the United States, but their struggle to enter the country occurs out of sight. If done "successfully," an illegal border crossing should be conducted unnoticed. When "unsuccessful," those who perish are seen by few, likely only the hiker or police officer who discover the body and the staff at the coroner's office. Already unseen, the bodies are also difficult to identify, compounded by the lack of a centralized database of missing persons cases. The 2013 report of the North American Congress on Latin America, a non-profit that publishes on relations between the U.S. and Latin America, explains that NamUS, while incredibly important, is often incomplete and insufficient. Not only does NamUS rely on local jurisdictions to enter their records, but until recently, it could not intake reports for most missing migrants "because a police tracking number was required, and U.S. police agencies usually will not take reports for missing foreign nationals." Furthermore, "the full potential of NamUs is not reached unless information is entered for both unidentified remains and missing persons" and often, relatives may not report missing migrants for fear of deportation.[116] This lack of a robust centralized database makes these people often absent from even the resources meant to bring them to light. And so, although *Left Behind* was spurred by a year of record immigrant deaths in Arizona (230 in 2010), Hollingsworth says the series was never about

[115] In an interview on his series of photographs of a historic leather bar, Hollingsworth says, "Photography is my way of giving attention to populations who are otherwise overlooked." Jerry Portwood, "Remembering The Rawhide," *Out.com*, April 22, 2013, http://www.jonathanhollingsworth.com/press/view/id/21.
[116] Robin Reineke, "Lost in the System: Unidentified Bodies on the Border," *NACLA Report on the Americas* 46, no. 2 (2013): 50–53, DOI: 10.1080/10714839.2013.11721998.

death. Rather, it is about the individuals, "unheralded, forgotten, without care," deserving of dignity.[117]

The shade of tragic death that clings to these objects left behind is in contrast to the initial hope of the migrants' journeys. The scarce personal effects are what were considered critical to the journey, but they can also be viewed as a fundamental portrait of the individual who carried them, as well as indications of both past and future lives. Family pictures point to the past, while items like an eyelash curler or makeup may point to hopes for the future. Phone numbers work in both senses, Hollingsworth says, belonging to family left behind or a contact or family member ahead who can help them get started. The tone of the journey is always hopeful, Hollingsworth says, albeit challenging: "No one set out to die."[118] It is from our perspective that the objects take on a tone of tragedy. This is the crux of the project: the material objects are "evidence of a life lived and a greater social problem."[119]

Hollingsworth initially pitched this project to news outlets and magazines, but when these outlets expressed less interest than he had hoped for, Hollingsworth decided to produce a book, believing that, as a "democratic" medium, a book would allow him to reach a broad public.[120] After the book was published, the press expressed more interest and Hollingsworth's images have since been included in numerous articles explaining the work of the Pima County Forensic Science Center and the Colibrí Center for Human Rights. By publishing his photographs widely, Hollingsworth seeks to bring attention to the humanitarian issues surrounding immigration, help the public process the implications of

[117] Hollingsworth, interview.
[118] Ibid.
[119] Ibid.
[120] Ibid.

this specific kind of death, and mobilize change. In the introduction to Hollingsworth's *Left Behind*, Gregory L. Hess, Chief Medical Examiner of the Pima County Forensic Science Center, in fact, writes "It is my hope that these illustrations of places and 'left behind' belongings serve as a spur for further dialog on immigration reform." Paraphrasing the 18th century physician Giovanni Morgnani, Dr. Hess concludes, "In this way the dead may once more help the living."[121]

In lieu of a body "helpful" for medical examiners in identifying the deceased, the personal effects of the deceased must stand in for the body and the person. These personal effects at times lead to identifications that wouldn't otherwise be possible, by providing clues as to the person's place of origin, or other decisive details. Reineke recalls, for instance, a prayer card featuring an obscure saint, Señor Santiago Apostol, who is venerated in a particular remote rural area of southwestern Mexico. Matching a family's description of their relative when he was last seen and their hometown in this remote area to a set of clothes and this prayer card found together with an unidentifiable body, Reineke was able to give closure to the family.[122] When these efforts are successful, the items don't lose their proxy power but rather continue to stand as testament to the origins, values, personality, and journey of the person, their past and hoped-for future lives. The items, in concert with any surviving loved ones, provide a fuller picture of who the person was who passed away under such marginalized circumstances. The items are perhaps even more important when they do not successfully lead to an identification, for then they are the only

[121] Giovanni Morgagni's quote (translated from the Italian and reproduced as the epigraph for Hess's text) reads: "Let conversation cease. Let laughter flee. This is the place where death delights to help the living." Gregory L. Hess, introduction to *Left Behind: Life and Death Along the U.S. Border* (Stockport: Dewi Lewis Publishing, 2012), 7.

[122] Kathy Boccella, "Identity Sleuth: Robin Reineke '04 Uncovers the Names of Migrants Who Perished in the Sonoran Desert," *Bryn Mawr Alumnae Bulletin*, May 2013, http://bulletin.brynmawr.edu/features/hp-primary-feature/identity-sleuth/.

evidence we have of that person's life and the only bulwark against their continued disappearance. Thus, these proxy items recuperate the memory of those who would otherwise be overlooked, and act politically by doing so, pointing to the circumstances of their deaths and how the laws managing immigration are ineffectual and inhumane.

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In these three series, parallels established between the body and belongings left behind metaphorically transform the objects into proxies for the deceased. The objects not only represent the deceased but function or act on their behalf through survivor's mourning processes and attempts to recuperate the deceased's memory when it threatens to be lost. These proxy objects bear physical traces of the person who owned them and reflect their personality, habits, and experiences, thus recalling, as much as if not more than their deaths, their lives. Just as the pictured objects themselves stand as proxies, so do the photographs and photobooks these three artists have made. Not only can they be seen as lasting documents of the objects, and by extension, of the deceased, they may also claim to be "fuller" proxies. Each photograph captures several objects and thus becomes a "composite portrait" of the deceased. The photobooks do so to an even greater degree, as a collection of such composite portraits. The book form also has the advantage of reaching a wider audience than the photographic prints alone, whose audience is limited to patrons of galleries and museums where they have been displayed—and the greater its audience, the more the deceased's memory can persist.

Ultimately, however, the composite proxy cannot reconstitute the deceased—we still get only an incomplete picture of a life and its permanence is limited: photographs

eventually fade and even sturdy books do not last forever. The incompleteness of the composite proxy reinforces the photographers' conclusions that we are ultimately unable to fully know or memorialize a person through their objects. The texts in the photobooks ensure that the significance of the objects, the photographs, and the book itself remains understandable into the distant future, but that significance will be translated into a broader understanding of the moment in which they were made, rather than as a portrait of a particular life.

As a *representation* inflected by the artist's perspective, the photographic "proxy" further reinforces the idea that what we can come to surmise from objects left behind is inherently grounded in imagining—the photograph is always a story, not a fact. The photographic proxy is not only always already a fiction, by bringing together multiple proxy objects, it also captures the gaps between them, the gaps left in a life story that must be filled by the photographer's or viewer's interpretations. The photographs further also document and embody the photographer's process of storytelling or narrativizing as they encounter, select, arrange, and frame a collection of objects. While other photographic series in this dissertation have also been published as books, the present chapter is the only one in which all three case studies have been published as books. To even a greater degree than the photographic form, the photobook form amplifies the story-telling aspect of these projects. Its sequential organization inherently creates narratives—narratives of the deceased's lives but also narratives of the photographers' processes, leading us along on their journeys of encountering and interpreting belongings left behind.

While these projects ultimately fail at complete permanence and fullness in all of their various forms, just as the objects they depict do, they perform a useful function for

those seeking to remember the lives of those past. While acknowledging its limitations, Tese suggests the attempt to safeguard her grandparents' memory is still important, if ultimately only for her own process of mourning and ease of mind in the face of death. Kimball's projects functions less to process grief over a particular death, as to meditate on the possibility of reconstructing a life through belongings left behind and the broader experience of dying in contemporary America. The objects in Hollingsworth's project function similarly, as aids for grieving families and as a critical comment on the policies and circumstances that lead to the deaths at America's southern border of those simply seeking new lives.

CHAPTER TWO

Evidence of Death

This chapter focuses on photography series by Sarah Sudhoff, Sally Mann, and Robert Shults that focus on actual bodily material—stains created by bodily fluids and bodies themselves. In Sarah Sudhoff's close up shots of blood and other stains and Robert Shults's and Sally's Mann's photographs of decaying bodies, the viewer is forced to confront the grim reality of the body falling apart after death. Whereas in Chapter One the photographs depicted personal belongings that were metaphorically transformed into proxies for the deceased, in this chapter, the photographs picture the literal transformations that the body undergoes at death. The blood and seepage in Sudhoff's images come from a body rendered permeable and permanently stain the fabrics, both body and fabric altered in composition. In Shults's and Mann's photographs, the body undergoes its natural processes of decay and the structures of the body itself changes.

In taking a photograph, the artists freeze a moment of transformation, turning the messy changes that the body has undergone into evidence of the physical circumstances of death, from which can be extrapolated information related to sociopolitical circumstances. Whereas the objects—trinkets, clothing, furniture, etc.—featured in the work discussed in Chapter One were evidence of the deceased's taste or life experiences and so envisioned their life before death, the bodily materials discussed in this chapter bring into focus and serve as a lasting record of the death itself. The objects photographed by Sudhoff include swatches of fabric and the like that are stained with very visible, visceral traces of the blood and seepage emitted by the body at and after death, which are usually quickly collected for

disposal by biohazard cleanup companies. As Sudhoff trains her camera on these physical residues of the dead body, Mann and Shults focus their cameras on the actual dead bodies themselves. Mann and Shults visited forensic anthropology centers—the Forensic Anthropology Center at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville and the Forensic Anthropology Research Facility at Texas State University, respectively—where the decay of dead bodies in various natural environments are studied to advance forensic knowledge useful for law enforcement. Both Shults and Mann photograph the bodies themselves in their varying states of decay, although their artistic intentions, technical processes, and aesthetic choices differ greatly. Mann's treatment of the literal transformation of the body to organic matter integrated into the land suggests an indelible aura. Shults's approach to capturing the same process of decomposition focuses on the real-life implications of forensic science, in which "illegal" border crossers' identities and struggles can be recuperated, and their deaths understood and learned from. By turning their cameras on messy bodies, these photographers not only confront death in all its entropic force but freeze a moment of the body's messy changes, allowing it to become testifying and measurable evidence of a death and its circumstances.

The body's decay is a fact of death that has driven basic Western funerary traditions in various ways. Burial in the United States was traditionally, before the nineteenth century, performed with minimal trappings—a modest coffin, a plain pine box, or a shroud, if any container was used at all—which allowed decomposition to happen quite naturally. The advent of what Jessica Mitford calls "The American Way of Death" in the late nineteenth century, however, changed funerary practice dramatically. In the professionalized and commercialized way of dealing with the dead body that Mitford

describes, bodies are embalmed as a matter of course and entombed in ever fancier and more expensive sealed caskets at the recommendation of industry professionals—funeral directors, morticians, cemetery personnel, etc.—who emphasize ideas like "preservation" and "memorialization." The emphasis on preservation, as well as ideas of memorialization as they are construed in the modern funeral industry, are persuasive merchandising points, but antagonistic to the natural course of death and human's natural familiarity with it. Furthermore, despite promises, the eternal preservation of the body thanks to these technologies is a fallacy, and a repulsive one, as sealed caskets, for instance, foster anaerobic bacteria that continue or even accelerate the work of decay. Although the funeral industry represents the supply of expensive and elaborate sealed caskets, bronze memorial plaques, and the like as a response to public demand and claims that these products and the perceived value of preservation belong to an American tradition, and in turn to an even longer Western and Christian tradition, Mitford, and Philippe Ariès in *Western Attitudes Towards Death*, argue that most people would prefer the more understated, truly traditional, burial, with its more natural trajectory for the body's inherent transformation.[123] Likewise, rather than an anesthetized view of death where bodies are embalmed and preserved, the photographs examined in this chapter show the natural reality of death and dovetail with recently available burial alternatives, such as green burial and burial pods.

Unlike the accoutrements of burial that were largely standard in the twentieth century, sealed caskets, thick vaults, and embalming that attempt to prevent the transformation of the body, newer (or rather, revived) methods of burial embrace and

[123] Mitford, *The American Way of Death*; Ariès, *Western Attitudes Towards Death*.

provide for the decomposition of the body. Green burial, burial without embalming and with only a shroud, allows the body's natural decomposition and its reintegration into the earth to proceed uninhibited. This method appeals to those who prefer simplicity, but also to those who are environmentally minded—as it boasts a lower level of environmental impact—and most important for the subject at hand, to those who seek continuance not in the way of "preservation" or "memorialization" but through their body's integration into the earth.[124] Burial pods further both of these motivations. In this mode of burial, the body is buried in a pod with the seed of a tree.[125] The body nourishes the tree as it grows, not only contributing new plant life to the ecosystem (which will support further human life through the oxygen it produces) but also representing the person's rebirth in the form of the tree. These methods of burial share with the photographs of this chapter the desire to work against the sequestering the death and allow people to process death in more natural and healthy ways by emphasizing integration in a way that can be conceived of metaphorically and spiritually—the body and spirit becoming one with the new life of the tree—and also quite literally, scientifically, and perhaps dispassionately—the organic material of the body following its natural course.

Another alternative to burial in the style of the "American Way of Death" that has increased steadily in popularity since Mitford first wrote *The American Way of Death* (along with cremation, which will be discussed in Chapter Three) is donation of the body for medical or forensic research. Whereas students in medical school learn anatomy through dissecting donated and embalmed bodies, forensic researchers study how non-embalmed

[124] Harris, *Grave Matters.*
[125] Paula Erizanu, "The Biodegradable Burial Pod That Turns Your Body into a Tree," *CNN,* January 11, 2018, https://www.cnn.com/2017/05/03/world/eco-solutions-capsula-mundi/index.html.

donated bodies decompose in a variety of environmental conditions. Once bodies donated to forensic anthropology centers have decomposed, their bones are collected for their continued use in the study of osteology (the structure and pathology of the skeletal system). This research aids law enforcement and human rights groups to ascertain the identity of and the time and cause of death of someone whose body has been found. In both medical and forensic research contexts, the body is employed as a tool for the production of knowledge and provides benefits to the living on multiple levels, which donors to such programs find appealing. Rather than nourishing organic life, body donors envision their bodies contributing to critical research; rather than rebirth as a tree, body donors envision an enduring legacy through scientific and social advancements. In both contexts, the transformation of the body is key for revealing or producing this scientific knowledge. Although bodies donated to medical research may be heavily embalmed, the donors do not expect their bodies to remain unchanged. Rather, dissection is an indispensable process that opens up the intact body to reveal the internal structures and pathologies that are necessarily normally unseen. The ability to observe, measure, move, and record the body's structures is what allows the body to become a tool for scientific knowledge. In forensic contexts, the observation and measurement of the body "falling apart" is likewise required to generate scientific knowledge.

The first forensic anthropology center was founded in 1981 at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, but in recent years, "body farms" have been established as part of multiple university forensic anthropology programs.[126] The photographs in this chapter,

[126] Kristina Killgrove, "These 6 'Body Farms' Help Forensic Anthropologists Learn to Solve Crimes," *Forbes*, June 10, 2015, https://www.forbes.com/sites/kristinakillgrove/2015/06/10/these-six-body-farms-help-forensic-anthropologists-learn-to-solve-crimes/#332b0d9489fd.

like the research conducted at these body farms, focus on the ability of the changed or changing body to provide evidence of the physical circumstances of death, evidence that can then be extrapolated to provide insight into the sociopolitical circumstances of death. Whereas Shults focuses on the very research of the body farms, for Sudhoff, confronting evidence of death allows the viewer insight into the current, potentially problematic, state of the funeral industry while for Mann, it allows the viewer to consider the long-term effects of traumatic historical deaths.

Sarah Sudhoff, *At the Hour of Our Death*

Examples from Sarah Sudhoff's series *At the Hour of Our Death* appear at first glance to be abstract paintings along the lines of the stained color field canvases of Helen Frankenthaler or Sam Francis. One image features wavering, vertical, tomato-colored stripes of varying thicknesses and densities against a stippled, light grey background. Some of the streaks are opaque, others speckled like lightly brushed paint over a rough canvas. A second image has a large amorphous wash of brown, accompanied by smaller irregular passages of brick red, deep maroon, and yellow orange, around and through which can be seen the warp and weft of the background. Looking at other examples from the series, it becomes apparent that these aren't canvases but photographs of various kinds of fabrics—carpet, upholstery, bedding, etc. One image clearly pictures the composite foam of carpet padding, while another shows the woven texture of a brightly colored pattern of four circles, one each in red, purple, yellow, and green. A third has the distinctive damask ticking of a mattress and the tell-tale circular quilting. The titles of the works clue us in to the nature of the stains on these fabrics, and indeed, that is what they are. The vertical stripes

of *Suicide with Gun, Male, 40 years old (1)*, 2010, are the blood trails on a carpet or wall produced by a fatal gunshot wound. *Murder, Male, 40 years old (II),* 2010, features the splatter and small pools of blood from a murder that have soaked into a non-descript white fabric with a delicate weave. *Seizure, Male 25 years old*, 2010, shows the bright pool of hemorrhaged blood resulting from a seizure soaked through the carpet. *Murder, Male, 40 years old (I)*, 2010, has a splash of dark red-brown blood over what may be a decorative throw pillow or upholstery fabric. *Suicide with Gun, Male, 60 years old (1),* 2011, features a wave of blood soaked into the mattress. Yet another, *Suicide with Gun, Male, 45 years old*, 2011, focuses on a still-wet looking smear of blood (and perhaps a bit of hair) on what appears to be the surface of a suede couch. The circumstances of these deaths are preserved in visceral ways on the fabric swatches and in the titles, which include the sex, age, and cause of death of the deceased, which were provided by the records of the biohazard cleaning company in whose warehouse Sudhoff took these photographs.

Sudhoff's assertive presentation of these evidences of violence, or in other photographs, illness, contrasts very purposefully with the speedy removal of such evidence by professional cleaning crews in the usual aftermath of a death. In an interview with the author, Sudhoff recalls that her inspiration for this series stemmed from her own experience with a traumatic death and its hasty cleanup. When she was seventeen years old, Sudhoff lost a friend to suicide and vividly remembers a cleanup crew steam cleaning the carpet at her friend's home, erasing all traces of what had happened by the very next day. It struck Sudhoff that this expeditious removal of the evidence of her friend's death, especially when considering the kind of shocking death it was, affected the way she was

able to emotionally process her loss.[127] Sudhoff also emphasized the fact that her friend, and many of the people whose traces she photographed in *At the Hour of Our Death*, died alone. Sudhoff's photographing the traces of a variety of strangers in *At the Hour of Our Death* highlights the wide-reaching impact of the issues at hand. The traces that Sudhoff photographs are necessarily those created under traumatic circumstances. They are created from the kinds of death that leave a mess, violent deaths and lonely deaths, those left undiscovered for protracted periods of time. Although not all deaths are messy and seem to require the services of a professional biohazard cleaning crew, the focus on such thorough professional cleanup stands in for the role of professionals in cleaning and preparing the body, and more broadly, sweeping death out of sight. The professionalization of these processes creates a disconnect between people and death and, Sudhoff argues, impedes their emotional processing.[128] Sudhoff furthermore felt that her working process and personal handling of the photographed material (as opposed to the impersonal touch of the police or cleanup crew) was also important for recognizing and respecting the individuals who died.[129]

In order to make this series, Sudhoff needed to find a professional cleaning company who would give her permission to photograph in their facilities. After years of inquiring, Sudhoff was finally granted permission to photograph at one company's warehouse, where death-stained materials are gathered and stored prior to being destroyed. Although not necessarily visible in the final photograph, awareness of Sudhoff's process allows the viewer to imagine the journey the photograph's subject has made and catch a glimpse into

[127] Sarah Sudhoff, interview with the author (April 24, 2017).
[128] Ibid.
[129] Ibid.

one aspect of the death industry. As the materials she photographed for this series are considered biohazards, Sudhoff was required to wear protective coverings while working. When making the photographs, Sudhoff tacked the pieces of fabric to the wall and used the floodlights belonging to the cleanup crew to illuminate the material.[130] The photographs are closeup shots of the fabrics, which obscures the fact that they are fragments of the original item and allows them to initially appear to be pure abstractions. In fact, Sudhoff considers these photographs to be "abstracted mourning portraits."[131] Whereas traditional mourning portraits showed the body, and often the whole body, these "abstract mourning portraits" consist only of close-ups of traces.[132] The sheer frontality of these images both enhances their resemblance to abstract painting and, ultimately, undercuts that resemblance. There is very little depth to the photographs; rather, the fabric swatches are enlarged and brought near to the surface, producing an insistent frontality. Their very material presence and the frayed and worn character of much of the fabric prevent the images from being guilelessly beautiful, and the stains themselves, paired with the descriptive titles, refuse to allow the viewer to avoid or forget what these fragments actually index. In our interview, Sudhoff emphasized that the titles are intended to clarify and make more concrete what it is exactly the viewer is seeing on the fabric and to underscore that the stains came from a human being.[133]

In her artist's statement, Sudhoff further writes that her intention in producing these tightly-framed images is "to slow the moments before and after death into a single frame, to allow what is generally invisible to become visible, and to engage with a process

[130] Walley Films, *At the Hour of Our Death*, 2010, https://vimeo.com/15977077.
[131] Sudhoff, interview.
[132] Ibid.
[133] Ibid.

from which we have become disconnected."[134] Thus, Sudhoff's abstraction of her subject is not meant to obscure its nature, but rather to condense a great deal of information about it into an accessible synopsis. The informed viewer, who knows the journey the swatch of fabric has taken and can imagine the stain in situ on the original carpet, couch, or bed, is able to also imagine the deceased's last moments of life and the moments following their death. But even without knowing this particular journey, the splatters and pooling of blood read clearly as the arrested action of the rupture or decay of the body and again parallel abstract paintings, which consolidate lengthy sessions of "action painting" into a single composition. Seen either as abstraction or as stains, what was an ongoing process is abstracted—selected, removed, summarized—into a still image.

Sudhoff's work is generally inspired by personal experience in ways similar to *At the Hour of Our Death*, and usually speaks to similar themes. *Repository*, *Maternity*, and *Supply and Demand*, for instance, are based on her own firsthand experiences of cancer, pregnancy, and breastfeeding. While situated in personal experience, the ideas Sudhoff tackles throughout her oeuvre speak to broader themes and social issues, specifically the medicalization of the body and the health and death industry-imposed methods for managing its natural processes like birth and death. After her treatment for cervical cancer, and later during and after her high-risk pregnancy, Sudhoff photographed in hospitals, morgues, and like spaces in order to explore her own and others' experiences of the body, illness, and striving for health in the context of the medical industry's "sterilization of birth and death"[135] and other natural bodily processes. In the resulting body of work, mortality

[134] Sarah Sudhoff, "At the Hour of Our Death," Artist's Website, accessed November 21, 2019, https://www.sarahsudhoff.com/at-the-hour-of-our-death#0.
[135] Sudhoff, interview.

and birth, illness and health, and other supposed dualities are closely intertwined, and processes of caring for the body in its myriad states that are often kept private are revealed for our consideration and shared emotional processing. Sudhoff reports that viewers' responses to her work not infrequently include crying, "because someone is finally talking about something they themselves have experience with."[136] *Supply and Demand*, 2013, for instance, features video and stills of a performance piece in which Sudhoff cradled bars of frozen breastmilk in her arms, allowing it to melt down her body and pool around her toes. Sudhoff paired documentation of this performance with visualizations of statistical data regarding breastfeeding in order to highlight how intensely personal but also how highly medicalized breastfeeding is.[137]

In *Repository*, Sudhoff reflected on her experience following surgery for cervical cancer, producing photographs falling into four categories: spaces of the hospital and self-portraits in the hospital to explore a subject's relationship to a specific environment, as well as images of biomedical waste and preserved specimens of pathology to explore violence against and the fragmenting of the body in medical contexts. While her self-portraits and interior shots are evocative and effective, the images of waste and specimens prefigure *At the Hour of Our Death* in their close-up framing and the resulting abstraction. In *Fallopian Tube*, 2006, a wrinkled, flesh tone anemone on a stalk—the titular fallopian tube—reaches towards the camera. The uterus, out of focus and in the background, is equally wrinkly and a pale peach, suspended within a translucent liquid.[138] Likewise, in

[136] Ibid.
[137] Sarah Sudhoff, "Supply and Demand," Artist's Website, accessed November 21, 2019, https://www.sarahsudhoff.com/supplydemand.
[138] Sarah Sudhoff, "Repository," Artist's Website, accessed November 21, 2019, https://www.sarahsudhoff.com/projects_repository.

Single Use Only, autoclaved (sterilized) medical waste appears as bright, plasticky globs of material. In *Organic / Inorganic No.* 3, 2012, for instance, red plastic has bubbled and folded in on itself, evoking blood and organs.[139] As part of the installation of *Single Use Only* at Artpace San Antonio in 2012, Sudhoff included a bench with an inset block of concrete created from the ashes of a sampling of sterilized medical waste. Sitting on the bench is intended to "becom[e] an act of empathy; it is an intimate connection to the material that touched illness, crime, or death—and is an atypical experience in an American culture that tends to deny death and decay."[140]

Sudhoff cites her training in photojournalism as influential to the development of her working process, which generally involves learning about, in order to reveal, a subject, like the sterilization of medical waste, that the general public might not have knowledge of, experience with, or access to. For the series *Precious Metals*, for example, which captures orthopedic implants recovered after cremation, Sudhoff sought access to a crematorium and also interviewed orthopedic surgeons. The resulting images feature singular implants against seamless white backdrops. Although the implants carry the marks of use and cremation, they are offered with no additional context. In much of Sudhoff's work, then, the viewer is confronted by the mess of illness and death in abstracted but suggestive ways that cause the viewer to wrestle with how to look at that which is, because it is considered private, taboo, or rightfully the unique purview of professionals, usually unseen.

From the abstracted moments captured in *At the Hour of Our Death*, we are meant to extrapolate a chain of events occurring before, during, and after death that result in a

[139] Sarah Sudhoff, "Single Use Only," Artist's Website, accessed November 21, 2019, https://www.sarahsudhoff.com/single-use-only#0.
[140] "Single Use Only," Artpace San Antonio Website, accessed November 27, 2019, http://www.artpace.org/works/iair/iair_fall_2012/single_use_only.

twofold transformation. The first transformation apparent to the viewer is the literal change in the fabric as the bodily fluids are absorbed into the fabric's structure. The second transformation that the viewer notes, which unavoidably actually happens first, in order to produce the resulting stains on the fabric, is a literal change to the body itself. In some of Sudhoff's photographs, the transformation is sudden—the disruption of the body's integrity via a gunshot wound—but in others, the transformation is slow—a long illness breaking down the body's unity and the patient process of decay on bodies awaiting discovery. The fabric swatches' alteration, all that we are privy to see, point to the alteration the body itself underwent. The memory encapsulated in these fabric records, therefore, are not of the life of the deceased. Rather, these proxies stand for the damaged body itself and record what happened to it in the moment of death and in the moments after, providing us with a glimpse of the dead body's transformation that our contemporary death industry usually denies. The body's transformation itself is pictured directly in Mann's and Shults's series discussed in the remainder of this chapter.

Sally Mann, *Body Farm*

The edges of the image are unclear, appearing to fade into a vignette on the left side, appearing to curl and peel up on the right. The image appears slightly foggy, with an imperfect surface. The bottom edge has a crisp line, cutting a figure off near its waist. The figure is seen from the back, lying face down on a leaf- and twig-strewn ground. The figure has disheveled hair low on its head and on its neck and the skin is crisscrossed with wrinkles. But it's unclear, actually, what are imperfections in the photographic print, and what are wrinkles, hair, or injury to the body. The top of the figure's head is bare, but the

rough edges of the hairline and the mottled surface make the viewer question whether this is a bald scalp or a bald skull. Likely, it is a bald skull.[141]

Taken at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville's Forensic Anthropology Center's Forensic Research Facility, colloquially called the "Body Farm," this and the other photographs of Sally Mann's *Body Farm* series picture the effects of various environmental conditions on dead bodies that are the subject of study at the center. The photographs in *Body Farm* are made from wet plate collodion negatives. The artist has made no effort to prevent or erase the common mishaps that occur when making wet plate collodion negatives—fingerprints, smudges, areas of missing collodion, etc. The effect of these blemishes is to more closely link the photographic object with its subject, dead bodies ruined through decay. While the body's transformations are noted in detail by the forensic anthropologists at the "Farm" in order to aid law enforcement's investigations into cases of suspicious death, Mann's focus skews more towards a meditation on the body's natural processes of decomposition and its physical and metaphorical effects on the land. Mann's photographs do not investigate the work of the Forensic Center or memorialize specific people. Rather, Mann's photographs imagine that the body not only breaks down to become integrated into the earth but that this process leaves a palpable trace of death and trauma on the place. This series visualizes more clearly what Mann has explored in other series such as her *Antietam* and *Deep South* series.

Body Farm is included in Mann's published volume *What Remains*, along with three other thematically related series, including *Antietam*. *Body Farm* joins photographs of the remains of the family dog in the first section of the book entitled "Matter Lent." The title of

[141] Mann, *What Remains*, 39.

the section comes from a quote from Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet's "On Death, a Sermon" that is reproduced after the first photograph of the dog:

> All things summon us to death;
> Nature, almost envious of the good she has given us,
> Tells us often and gives us notice that she cannot
> For long allow us that scrap of matter she has lent…
> She has need of it for other forms,
> She claims it back for other works.[142]

Before the photographs that comprise *Body Farm* is a quote from Galway Kinnel's "The Quick and the Dead" that similarly describes the "crawling of new life out of the old" in contrast to the "centuries-long withering down to a gowpen of dead dust" that the author associates with airtight caskets.[143] Following the *Body Farm* photographs is the second section, entitled "December 8, 2000," which documents the site on Mann's property where a fugitive pursued by the Sheriff's office shot and killed himself. Like Sudhoff's interest in the quick disappearance of evidence of death through the efforts of cleaning crews, Mann was intrigued to explore what imperceptible evidence remained of this event (which she did not witness) on a place so intimately connected to her. Mann writes:

> There at the base of a hickory tree was a glistening pool of dark blood… as I stared, it shrank perceptibly, forming a brief meniscus before leveling off again, as if the earth had taken a delicate sip.
>
> Death has left for me its imperishable mark on an ordinary copse of trees in the front yard. But would a stranger, coming upon it a century hence, sense the sanctity of the death-inflected soil?[144]

Looking at the photographs, such as the one reproduced on page 76 of *What Remains* (all of the photographs in this book are presented without titles), the viewer may think "no, they wouldn't." What the viewer sees is the bottom parts of tree trunks, a couple stumps, some

[142] Ibid., 11.
[143] Ibid., 34.
[144] Ibid., 70.

fallen branches and tawny winter grass. The only intimation of something deathly is the washed-out tone of the photograph, as if the scene is viewed through a delicate, spectral veil. The next section, which contains photographs from the series *Antietam*, features photographs of Civil War Battlefields, accompanied by a passage from Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass.* The photographs from *Antietam* merge the aesthetic of *Body Farm* and "December 8, 2000." Scenes of fields and trees are seen through pale fogs, slashed with various blemishes from the wet collodion process. In the photograph on page 87, bright specks and comets of dust evoke bullets flying across the battlefield, while the emulsion appearing to curl and peel on the left side corners—the result of the wet collodion not reaching the edges of the plate negative—evokes the unveiling of a dark spirit realm behind the visible.

Many of the photographs in *Body Farm* feature similar spectral veils—foggy and undulating—produced by errors in collodion application or the plates' overexposure or overdevelopment, thanks to the unpredictable nature of the collodion mixture and manual processing. In the photograph on page 56, a corpse on the ground is barely visible through a thick white fog or veil. At the bottom corners, the fog starts to dissipate, or the veil starts to lift. In the upper corners, Mann's fingerprints smudge the surface and evoke ghostly hands reaching across a boundary. In the photograph on the next page (page 57), the emulsion appears wrinkled, with an indefinite and wavy edge at the top and whiskery creases on the left. The emulsion has stalled in places, too, leaving little oscillations like marbled paper. The cumulative effect is, again, of a veil rippling or lifting, this time about to expose a skull. The teeth of the skull are bright, apparent. The eye sockets are deep and dark. On page 63, another skull emerges from white smoke, its eye sockets and toothless

mouth cavernous, emitting a silent scream. The human forms appear both here and not here, fading away and insistently permanent at the same time.

Mann's use of the wet plate collodion process not only produces "deathly" effects, it also enhances her thematic focus on the body merging with the land in her *Body Farm* photographs. Developed in 1851, the wet plate collodion process involves coating a glass plate with a mixture of collodion and dipping the plate into silver nitrate just before it is put into the camera, still wet, for exposure. After exposure, the glass plate negative is developed immediately before the collodion mixture can dry. The necessarily continuously wet surface of the glass plate leaves the negative susceptible to a variety of blemishes, including fingerprints, smudges, stuck debris, etc., in addition to the potential for an uneven or incomplete coating of collodion. Mann embraces these chance spoils and, in this series especially, they serve to link the photographic object with its subject in provocative ways. The disfigurations of the negative surface translate to the printed photograph and make it appear as if the photograph is falling apart in parallel with the decaying body it features. The effect of the ostensible dissolution of the photographic object furthermore allows the decaying body and the decaying photographic surface to appear to merge, simulating the merging of the decaying body with the land beneath it. The parallel can be taken further yet. Just as the mishaps befalling the wet plate collodion negative are determined by environmental factors (wind, humidity, pollen count, etc.) and human intervention (clumsy handling, for instance), so too are the processes of decay the body undergoes determined by the environment in which they're placed (swampy, dry, acidic, etc.) and human intervention (pre- or postmortem injury, or clumsy handling, for instance).

The final section in *What Remains*, which lends its title to the volume overall, is comprised of close up portraits of Mann's children's faces. Their faces, like the battlegrounds and like the skulls of *Body Farm*, are shrouded in foggy veils of emulsion, peeling or torn along the edges. Mann's children were the subjects of her best known and most controversial earlier work, *Family Pictures*, and their reappearance here links the seemingly impersonal images of dead strangers and general philosophical musings over death to Mann's very longstanding personal ruminations on and fears of death that, in concert with themes of place and land, have informed much of her work. In her memoir *Hold Still*, published in 2015, Mann describes how even *Immediate Family*—the photobook of her *Family Pictures* photographs of her children published in 1992 that garnered her so much critical acclaim and generated such controversy—were acutely connected to the family property on which they were taken and inspired, in part, by a desire to ward off death. When he was just shy of 8 years old, Mann's son was hit by a car in front of his mother. Although he survived and was largely unharmed, the horrific scene Mann witnessed stayed with her and inspired the sometimes-dark mood of her *Family Pictures*. By visualizing her fears, Mann hoped her photographs would have an apotropaic effect, preventing actual tragedy from striking.

Mann's fascination with death also arises from her identification with the area in which she was born and raised, which she describes as steeped in death through the historical events of the Civil War, the murder of Emmet Till, and other tragedies that shaped the land and character of the Southern United States.[145] Although Mann's *Body Farm* series is much less often exhibited than her *Deep South* and *Antietam* series that very

[145] Sally Mann, *Hold Still: A Memoir with Photographs* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 2015).

directly explore this traumatic history of the South, I would argue that it is key to understanding these more visible series. The body's transformation that Mann captures in her *Body Farm* images is quite literal as the integrity of its structure actively decays. The romantic notion of the body being returned to the earth is plainly enacted here as the decomposed material of the body mixes with the earth below it and is consumed by various scavengers. At the same time that the decay of the body is very real, its literal transformation is imagined to effect a twinned transformation in character of the body and of the land. The deceased is imagined to "live on" as part of the land, while the land is imagined to be indelibly changed by the events that have occurred on it. A psychic trace of trauma is produced by the physical traces of death that become integrated with the soil. This psychic trace is the clear subject of Mann's *Antietam* and *Deep South* series, which revisits areas touched by death decades later. A most clear example is her photograph of the Tallahatchie river, into which the murdered body of Emmet Till was thrown in 1955. Emmet Till, an African American teenager, was accused by Carolyn Bryant, a white woman, of speaking to and/or touching her inappropriately. Bryant's husband, Roy Bryant, and J.W. Milam lynched Till in retaliation and disposed of his body in the river, with a cotton gin part attached to weigh the body down. Roy Bryant and Milam were acquitted by a jury but confessed to the murder in a 1956 *Look* magazine interview; they never served time for the murder. This case galvanized the Civil Rights movement and remains a source of pain today.[146] In this photograph, titled *Untitled (Mississippi Landscape),* 1998, the bank of the

[146] Monica Davey and Gretchen Ruethling, "After 50 Years, Emmett Till's Body is Exhumed," *New York Times*, June 2, 2005, https://www.nytimes.com/2005/06/02/us/after-50-years-emmett-tills-body-is-exhumed.html; Richard Pérez-Peña, "Woman Linked to 1955 Emmett Till Murder Tells Historian Her Claims Were False," *New York Times*, January 27, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/27/us/emmett-till-lynching-carolyn-bryant-donham.html. Till's body was exhumed in 2005 when the Justice Department

river sports a deep gash evocative of violence on the body. Here, the land itself appears to visualize the imperceptible trace of trauma and, Mann says, collapse time.[147] Like the abstraction of Sudhoff's work, then, Mann's landscape work tends to tarry in a frozen moment in which past, present, and future coalesce. In *Body Farm*, Mann pictures the intervening processes that transfer traces of trauma, whether seen or unseen, from bodies to the land, and reminds the viewer that the psychic traces that she alludes to in *Antietam* and *Deep South* are grounded in *real* violence. The psychic traces themselves may be more metaphorical than literal, but the historical event and historical bodies that produced them and the still-raw cultural memory that recollects is very real. By confronting the viewer with the reality of death and decomposition in *Body Farm*, Mann suggests the ways in which death has permanent, if unpredictable, aftereffects on the landscape and on our communal psyche.

Robert Shults, *The Washing Away of Wrongs*

Like the photographs in Mann's series *Body Farm*, those in Robert Shults's series *The Washing Away of Wrongs* were created at a forensic anthropology research facility. The Texas State University's Forensic Anthropology Center's Forensic Anthropology Research Facility (FARF), which opened in 2008, is the largest "body farm" in the world and specializes in studying decay in the environments unique to Texas and the Southwestern states. Shults's images differ from Mann's in several key ways, however, not least in the landscape of the facility he pictures. Shults's process and artistic choices favoring high

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reopened the case. In 2017, Timothy B. Tyson of Duke University published the book *The Blood of Emmett Till*, in which he published Carolyn Bryant's admission that she lied.

[147] Alison R. Hafera, "SALLY MANN: 'Emmett's Story' (2007)," an excerpt from "Taken in Water: The Photograph as Memorial Image in Sally Mann's Deep South," *American SuburbX*, November 23, 2011, https://americansuburbx.com/2011/11/sally-mann-emmetts-story-2007.html.

contrast give the photographs a decidedly different appearance and a double focus that Mann's do not have. Like the personal effects in Hollingsworth's photographs in Chapter One, the bodies pictured in Shults's series contribute to the efforts to identify "illegal" border crossers who have died in the inhospitable desert of the Southwestern United States. Shults highlights this aspect of research on the bodies in his photographs by depicting not only the dead bodies being studied, but also the live bodies conducting research on them. The crucial differences direct the viewer's attention away from romantic notions of the body's integration into the land or intangible, ghostly traces of death, towards the study of the body and its process of transformation as a concrete scientific metric.

Whereas all of Mann's photographs feature isolated dead bodies in the environment, the focus of most of Shults's images are the researchers, faculty, and graduate students at Texas State University, shown loading and unloading bodies, looking at and photographing bodies in the field, and taking notes and working with bodies in the lab. In one of Shults's untitled photographs, for instance, a man, framed by shrubs and trees, crouches over a wire cage containing a vaguely body-shaped form. In the foreground is another form, both more and less body-like. This body is mostly skeletal—and so is clearly identifiable as a human body—and mostly disarticulated. Of Shults's photographs that contain only dead bodies in the environment, most are more expansive landscapes that more clearly reveal the location to be the carefully contrived landscape of the research facility. In one image, ten or more wire cages are scattered over a grassy ground, under the shade of a number of slender but mature trees. Two closeup photographs of a deceased body center on the numbered identification tag on the body's wrist. In the first, the fingertips of the deceased's hand

press into the waxy-looking, malleable flesh of the abdomen, across which is a scattering of grasses and flowers. Attached to the thin wrist with a zip tie is a metal identification tag reading DOI-2016. In the second image, the tag identifies this body as the same DOI-2016. The hand has now become shrunken and skeletal and it sits lightly on the tight, leathery flesh of the torso. The flowers and grasses are turned to a scattering of debris and maggots. A third image, which the viewer comes across between the other two in the photographer's website gallery, shows the gloved hands of a researcher attaching the zip-tied identification tag to another body, reminding us that the ID tag is there for a purpose, to identify bodies throughout their changes. The subtle shifts in focus of these photographs, paired with the significant role researchers play in other photographs in the series make it clear that Shults's interest in these bodies is primarily in the scientific research conducted on them and its applications to helping the living and delivering justice. In Shults's own words in his artist's statement, the work undertaken at the FARF is in order to "give voice to the nameless and to bring home with dignity those who have been wronged by their fellow man."[148]

Shults' process for this project similarly reflects his specific focus. The artist refers to his usual working method as "participant observation," borrowing a term from anthropology to describe embedding oneself in the population that one is studying.[149] And indeed, for this series, once he received the necessary permissions, Shults joined the graduate students who use the facility on their various activities for about a year, "picking up donations, late night studying, taking classes alongside them, sitting in on lectures and

[148] Robert Shults, "The Washing Away of Wrongs," Artist's Website, accessed November 21, 2019, https://robertshultsphoto.com/the-washing-away-of-wrongs.html.
[149] "Ten Questions with Robert Shults," *PhotoVoice*, accessed December 1, 2019, https://photovoice.org/ten-questions-with-robert-shults/.

workshops."[150] Shults also had the opportunity to participate directly, saying in an interview with Jonathan Blaustein at the *New York Times*, "I did a short field excavation workshop where I actually dug up a body myself [and] I took an osteology workshop to learn in a week how to identify human bones and fragments."[151] Not only did Shults entrench himself in the activities of the research facility, he also sought to convey in his photographs "something approximating a first person view, a sense of what it feels like not to observe this work, but rather to actually undertake this difficult mission."[152] In order to do this, Shults "compose[d his shots] with [the body] at ground level, and [the scientist] at eye level" and at times even photographed from the very perspective of the scientists (shooting from just behind their heads). Referring to one such image, Shults described, "The camera is right along side (sic) her, seeing what she's seeing."[153]

Shults's oeuvre is dominated by series like this, which give viewers' a firsthand look into places and projects that very few people get to see. A self-proclaimed "nerd,"[154] it's also no surprise that Shults's work is often specifically focused on scientific work that is usually unseen and inaccessible to the general public. His previous series, *The Superlative Light*, documents the activity surrounding the Texas Petawatt Laser, the world's most powerful laser, which researchers use to generate nuclear fusion, and recreate and study phenomenon like supernovas, among other projects. Shults favored a high contrast aesthetic for this project, in part as a result of the technical challenges of photographing a

[150] Jonathan Blaustein, "Photographing the Science of Death and Decay," *Lens* (blog), *New York Times*, January 25, 2017, https://lens.blogs.nytimes.com/2017/01/25/photographing-the-science-of-death-and-decay/.
[151] Ibid.
[152] Allison Meier, "Photographs from the World's Largest Human Decomposition Center," *Hyperallergic*, March 27, 2017, https://hyperallergic.com/367038/robert-shults-the-washing-away-of-wrongs/.
[153] David Walker, "Creating a Photographic Study of Decaying Human Corpses, *Photo District News*, August 1, 2017, https://pdnonline.com/features/photographer-interviews/photographing-the-study-of-decaying-of-human-corpses/#.
[154] Blaustein, "Photographing the Science of Death and Decay."

light extremely brief and extremely bright, and in part to reference film noir and science fiction movies.[155] *The Washing Away of Wrongs* uses a similar stark black and white aesthetic that associates the later series with the earlier. For *The Washing Away of Wrongs*, Shults used a digital camera modified by an infrared image sensor and an on-camera flash fitted with an infrared gel. The near-infrared spectrum produces dramatic images and, Shults says, "enabled him to reference the esthetics (sic) of forensics photography, as well as the work of Weegee, who used infrared flash and film in order to photograph crime scenes without attracting the attention of police."[156] The resulting high contrast aesthetic also gives the images a sharp focus that aligns them with earlier scientific images like Berenice Abbott's and gives them the patented look of objective evidentiary photographs.

The scientific focus of Shults's series is not "science for science's" sake but also has significant real-world application. The research conducted at the FARF is used by law enforcement and related professionals to solve cases of suspicious deaths or identify unknown bodies. Studying the rate of decay in various environments helps determine the time elapsed since death; studying osteological features of the body and other factors helps identify the deceased. In one of Shults's images, we see a young woman, a researcher, in profile under the florescent tube lights of a laboratory, touching the hollow cheek of a facial-reconstruction model. In another image, a second researcher crouches over and measures the upper jaw of a skull with a large pair of calipers. Because of its location in

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[155] Jonathan Blaustein, "A Photographer vs. the Lasers," *Lens* (blog), *New York Times*, June 24, 2013, https://lens.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/06/24/robert-shults-vs-the-lasers/; Jordan G. Teicher, "This Powerful Laser Looks Cooler Than Science Fiction," *Slate*, October 3, 2014, https://slate.com/culture/2014/10/robert-shults-photographs-the-petawatt-laser-in-his-book-the-superlative-light.html; Robert Shults, *Superlative Light* (Hillsborough, NC: Daylight Books, 2014). Shults's book of his *Superlative Light* photographs contains an essay by Todd Ditmire, director of the Texas Petawatt Project and a short story by award-winning science fiction author Rudy Rucker.

[156] Walker, "Creating a Photographic Study of Decaying Human Corpses."

Texas, along the U.S.-Mexico border, much of the knowledge garnered through research conducted at the FARF is utilized to identify "illegal" border crossers from Mexico and other Latin American countries. Shults's experience at the FARF was deeply influenced by the university's forensic anthropology program's initiative known as Operation Identification (OpID), which started in 2013 with the exhumation of more than 50 unidentified human remains from a rural graveyard named Sacred Heart.[157] Dr. Kate Spradley, a professor at Texas State and founder of OpID, along with her students and peers, use a "biocultural approach" that fuses "osteological, dental, isotopic, genetic, and histological analyses" in order to create biological profiles of unidentified remains. The initiative focuses mostly on the "'long-term dead,' those buried years ago with little to no attempts at identification or record-keeping" in the hopes of reuniting the long-lost dead with their families.[158]

Shults views such unfortunate border crossers with empathy, referring to them in his artist's statement as "those who have been wronged by their fellow man." While the most direct interpretation of this statement applies to the often-unscrupulous coyotes who guide immigrants over the border, the statement could also refer to the harsh sociopolitical and unequal infrastructural circumstances in immigrants' home countries and in the United States that make a clandestine border crossing necessary. When Shults moved to Austin, TX, in 2001, he was homeless; having experienced first-hand the kind of structural inequalities that contribute to the struggles of marginal populations, it is not surprising

[157] Ryan Devereaux, "The Unclaimed Dead: In Texas, the Bodies of Migrants Who Perished in the Desert Provide Clues to the Living," *The Intercept*, July 1, 2017, https://theintercept.com/2017/07/01/in-texas-the-bodies-of-migrants-who-perished-in-the-desert-provide-clues-to-the-living/.
[158] Ibid.

that Shults photographs the work of the FARF with such sensitivity, highlighting the processes that contribute to giving "voice to the nameless."

It is through Shults's desire to support these efforts to give "voice to the nameless" that his first-person perspective photographs achieve their most poignant meaning. By giving viewers an intimate sense of what the work of forensic anthropology research facilities looks and feels like, Shults seeks to inspire compassion in the viewers. In an interview with *Photovoice*, Shults explains, "photography is uniquely suited to communicating the experience, rather than just the appearance, of an event. If, after encountering a photograph, a viewer can feel some small sensation that they, too, experienced a given event, that can be a powerful motivation to act differently, to cease "otherizing" the subject of a photo, in short—to empathize."[159] Shults further explains:

> I think that in a world where the means of both producing and publishing images has been so thoroughly democratized, raising awareness of social justice issues has, in many cases, taken on a diminished urgency… [T]here are often very few social ills of which we are unaware as a society. Increasingly, the mission, as I see it, is no longer ensuring that people KNOW about an issue, but rather making certain that they CARE.[160]

Shults's images put the viewer in the role of the forensic scientists and allows them to see an issue of social justice from a different perspective. The task of identifying the unknown dead buried along the border is a monumental task—OpID, for instance, has identified only 26 sets of remains and repatriated only 12 bodies to their countries of origin, out of 120 biological profiles that they've completed, which, in turn, represents only a fraction of the unknown dead.[161] Shults's emphasis on the scientific aspects of this work, however—as

[159] "Ten Questions with Robert Shults," *PhotoVoice*.
[160] Ibid.
[161] Devereaux, "The Unclaimed Dead."

well as his pledge to donate his own body to the FARF after death[162]—communicates the artist's belief that progress can be made and that any effort is worthwhile.

In Shults's series, the transformation pictured—the decomposition of the body—is literal, but more specifically it is observable and measurable. From the measurement of structural transformation, inferences can be made that help reconstruct the events that occurred prior, at, and after death and that help identify an unknown body. Whereas Mann imagined an invisible but permanent trace of such information attached to the land, Shults documents the processes that turn trace evidence into concrete knowledge. This evidence is used to extrapolate physical information about a particular death and also the sociopolitical circumstances of the deceased's life that contributed to their death. Not only do surviving family members benefit from the closure of knowing the fate of their loved ones, but knowing the circumstances surrounding the deaths of border crossers also sheds light on the sociopolitical problems that surround immigration and similar hot button issues. Whereas immigration is understandably a focus for forensic research along the U.S.-Mexico border, the work of forensic anthropologists is used in investigating all suspicious deaths and so can shed light on an extensive variety of issues that contribute to interpersonal and infrastructural violence—issues that put lives in danger and deserve urgent attention and care.

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Although the literal transformations of death and decay pictured in these photographs take center stage, the artistic choices the photographers have made lead us to interpret the structural changes as pointing to something beyond themselves. These

[162] Blaustein, "Photographing the Science of Death and Decay."

photographers' approaches to their medium are key to understanding how the resulting artworks function to preserve a view of death and interpret its physical and sociopolitical context. These photographs, first and foremost, attempt to preserve the records of death that will themselves disappear: the soiled fabric that will be destroyed and the bodies that will molder to bones. The circumstances of the deaths that left such records are thus preserved for some time longer in images. Although the inherent artistry in photographic practice—choices in selection, framing, exposure, etc.—precludes the photographic "document" from being wholly objective, the presumed evidentiary power of photography works in the photographers' favor in these series by imparting a sense of objective and scientific capture. The very act of photographing, however, is an act of transformation in itself. The photograph transforms the subject into a representation, a process which inherently overlays the subject with context and commentary. For these particular series that foreground literal transformation and industry, scientific, and sociopolitical processes, this interplay between artistic framing and document is particularly appropriate and effective, co-opting the so-called objective or scientific nature of its subject matter, broadly defined, but undercutting the "facts" to communicate the interpretative message that the photographer is invested in sharing.

The artists' particular choices, furthermore, are what allow the structural transformations pictured to speak to specific processes and themes. The extrapolation of evidence not only reveals physical circumstances of death but also allows us to examine relevant sociopolitical issues. In Sarah Sudhoff's photographs, blood-stained fabrics are framed as abstract compositions, allowing for the picture to compress the moments before, at, and after death. In this way, the fabric swatches testify to the kinds of messy deaths that

are usually quickly swept from view, and point beyond themselves to the workings of the funeral industry. For Sudhoff, confronting the circumstances of death directly, and spending time with the evidence, so to speak, is important for processing death. Sudhoff's photographs, therefore, attempt to reacquaint the viewer with death in a shocking, but not unhealthy, way. In Sally Mann's work, mishaps of the wet-collodion process underscores the dead body's merging with the earth below and evokes traces of trauma that are imagined to linger on the land long after the physical process of decay is complete. For Mann, confronting and remembering the circumstances of traumatic death is necessary for a society to process and learn from the past. In *Body Farm*, evidence—the body itself—is plain to see, but in related series the "evidence" is subtle, only an emanation from the earth. Created by real violence, however, these indelible traces point to the enduring cultural memory and psychic scars of violent death. Likewise, Robert Shults's photographs—which isolate moments of decay and suggest the observation and measurement of the changing body as a scientific tool—point to the work the dead bodies, and their researchers, do to uncover the circumstances of mysterious deaths. Shults's photographs are, furthermore, concerned with how the circumstances of death can be learned *from* in order to ultimately benefit the living. Not only does knowledge of the circumstances of the death of a loved one help surviving family and friends process and move on, but it also requests that society confront its policies and practices that endanger lives. In each of these series, the photographers' focus on and attempts to preserve some kind of record of a range of unpleasant deaths requires the viewer to confront the reality of mortality, both its inevitability and its particularities arising from specific sociopolitical issues that become clear through an examination of unseen funerary and forensic processes.

CHAPTER THREE

Evocations of Afterlife

This chapter discusses work by Jacqueline Hayden, Jason Lazarus, and David Maisel, who picture cremation ashes in their photography series. Jacqueline Hayden produces large-scale photographs that appear, at first glance, to be astronomical images, by scattering her parents' ashes over a flatbed scanner. Jason Lazarus creates vibrant photograms using the ashes of fellow artist and professor Robert Heinecken, in which the ashes look like stars, dust, and other kinds of particulate matter. David Maisel, rather than creating images with ashes themselves, photographs in vivid detail the copper canisters containing the ashes of former psychiatric patients from the Oregon State Hospital. The metals of the canister and the organic material within have reacted with the environment to create abundant mineral blooms that resemble paintings and awe-inspiring landscapes. In the majority of these photographs, the material depicted initially appears to be something else—stars, dust, landscapes, paintings, etc., before the viewer looks more closely. This vacillating focus on the materiality of the ashes—their material qualities and their very persistence as physical material—and their transformation is central to all three of these photography series, allowing the photographs in this chapter to showcase multiple levels of both literal and metaphorical transformation.

In many religious and secular funerary traditions, the body functions as a link to the individual after their death. The most familiar example may be the customary viewing of the body prior to interment or cremation in Western funerary traditions and others. Cremation ashes, although they are the body disassembled, continue to play a similar role,

that of being a sustaining link to the deceased. In interviews with the author, Hayden, Lazarus, and Maisel each expressed their desire to honor the deceased in a way that was meaningful and appropriate to the person and made clear that they considered working with the actual ashes important for accessing the memory or legacy of their respective subjects. For Hayden, this meant channeling her loved ones' likes and personalities;[163] for Lazarus, this meant channeling Heinecken's artistic philosophy and process;[164] and for Maisel, this meant attending to the circumstances of the hospital patients' lives and the treatment of their remains.[165] While the literal remains of a person may do no better job than their belongings at revealing them to us (although there are differences to each person's cremains, it's a stretch to attribute those to the person's "personality"—their chemistry and the temperature and duration of cremation, rather, are the determinants), they do create a sense of endurance through their persisting physical existence and are often utilized in commemorating the deceased.

In addition to maintaining a physical link to the deceased, cremated remains suggest a spiritual evocation of the deceased. While considerations of materiality and transformation are not unique to the contemplation of cremated remains, there is a longstanding association between cremation and the passage to an afterlife that depends on linking the body's physical transformation to spiritual transformations. Various ancient sources described cremation as freeing the soul or spirit or even purifying it before what was to come thereafter. As Stephen Prothero writes in *Purified By Fire: A History of Cremation in America*, however, cremation was an unpopular and taboo choice for

[163] Jacqueline Hayden, interview with the author (Artist's Studio, Florence, MA, December 28, 2016).
[164] Jason Lazarus, interview with the author (March 8, 2017).
[165] David Maisel, interview with the author (March 9, 2017).

Americans as recently as a century ago. Nineteenth century proponents of cremation, such as Persifor Frazer, Jr. (a public health advocate) and Reverend Octavius B. Frothingham, (a "free religion" adherent), renewed the ancients' arguments for cremation's benefits. In tandem with the sanitation argument—that illness was caused by miasma, a noxious emission from decaying matter, which burial did not prevent—proponents contrasted the purifying action of the fire to the "disgusting" processes of decay that occurred in the grave. Frazer, for example, characterized cremation as returning "to nature most expeditiously the little store of her materials held in trust for a few years."[166] Frothingham furthermore reassured those who believe in the resurrection of the body that it was no less possible for God to raise our earthly bodies from dust and asserted that cremation provided "'a sweeter field of contemplation' for the mourner, since 'the thoughts instead of going downward into the damp, cold ground, go upwards towards the clear blue of the skies.'"[167] Although initially disparaged for a lack of traditional ritual, Prothero writes that, because cremation allows for the customization of funerary services to a greater degree, it, "provoke[s] deeper spiritual experiences in participants than traditional wakes, funerals, and graveside committals."[168] Increasing numbers of the options for the disposition of ashes available today continue to articulate just such an individually defined and spiritually heightened interaction with the body, soul, and afterlife.

The "classic" options for the disposition of cremation ashes often speak to one of these associations, either that of ashes as a present and continuing link to the deceased or that of ashes as part of a spiritual transformation. The urn on the mantel signals the

[166] Stephen Prothero, *Purified By Fire: A History of Cremation in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 18.
[167] Ibid., 19.
[168] Ibid., 12.

importance of the enduring remains of the person for maintaining their connection to the family. The scattering of ashes in a loved one's favorite location, on the other hand, represents, and enacts, a return to the earth, reconnecting a person to places that were significant to him or her and furthermore, giving new life to the plants that may flourish from the nourishment of their body.

Like the photographs discussed in this chapter, however, newer options for cremation ashes emphasize both material persistence and transformation, allowing the ashes to remain a present and steadfast token of the deceased while at the same time being transformed into something else. Companies that provide such options include LifeGem, an Illinois-based company that turns the carbon in your loved one's ashes into everlasting diamond jewelry, offering numerous choices in cut and color.[169] Artful Ashes, based in Washington State, embeds your loved one's ashes within an orb or heart made of glass.[170] Eternal Reefs, located in Florida, incorporates ashes into "reef balls," large honeycombed domes of concrete which foster and support new coral reef growth in the ocean. These examples, and many others like them, emphasize the creation of a one-of-a-kind beautiful object that can be pressed into service as lasting vestiges of a unique person, expressions of their virtues, and enactments of their reincarnation or transition to another state of being. In the case of the photographs discussed herein, the photographs themselves are the objects that preserve and reincarnate the deceased. The photographers turn the ashes into images and further visually transform the ashes into other material, like stars, grains of sand, or dabs of paint, through their particular techniques and choices in framing and presentation.

[169] LifeGem Website.
[170] Artful Ashes Website.

This pictorial translation of the ashes into other materials is key to the photographs' evocation of afterlife. The ashes' change in appearance reinforces the literal transformation the body has already undergone, from corpse to ashes, and represents the imagined transformation of the individual from a living, embodied human being to particles reintegrated into the cosmos or a soul, legacy, or memory. Although the imagery evoked—galaxies, waves, mountains, and paintings—reference earthly life, the transformations ultimately represent our attempts to think through death to the other side—to the afterlife, that is. The majority of the earthly imagery specifically references sublime nature. The sublime is a concept of aesthetic philosophy, referring to greatness beyond measurement, calculation, or imagination, and of literary theory, in which it means the use of description that provokes thoughts and emotions beyond ordinary experience. Nineteenth-century American landscape painting, for instance, represented the American West as sublime, fashioning it into an earthly paradise imbued with the favor of God or all the mysteries of the unfathomable forces of nature. By referencing awe-inspiring natural features like mountains, oceans, and stars, these photographers thus suggest expansive and ineffable forces beyond what we see and know. The visible ashes and their pictorial transformation can then be read as conjuring invisible spiritual transformations and afterlives.

Jacqueline Hayden, *Celestial Bodies*

Each printed at quite a large scale of sixty inches by forty-four inches, the photographs in Jackie Hayden's *Celestial Bodies* series appear to live up to their name. A swath of starry sky stretches across the aptly named *Stardust*, a concentrated scattering of stars picked out clearly from the deep blackness of space. Dense clusters of similarly bright

stars spin out along the arms of a spiral galaxy in *Amazing Grace.* Gazing at Hayden's *Celestial Bodies* photographs, what we are seeing, however, is not literally celestial, but it is literally bodies. On closer inspection, what appeared to be stars are revealed to be ashes. To make the photographs that comprise *Celestial Bodies*, Hayden scattered the cremation ashes of her parents and mother-in-law across a scanner bed while invoking their memory by reciting a meaningful mantra or playing a significant song. When creating *Sentimental Journey*, which is comprised of both her mother's and her father's ashes, for instance, Hayden channeled her parents' memory by playing the song of the same name, their favorite. The analogy between cremated bodies and stars is, of course, purposeful. Hayden, raised Catholic, is now a Buddhist. Both systems' beliefs in a type of life that transcends death have informed what Hayden holds true regarding the afterlife. In an interview with the author, Hayden explains that somewhere out there, she believes, her loved ones still exist.[171] The motif of stars additionally highlights the equal influence of theoretical physics on Hayden's beliefs. In *Celestial Bodies*, Buddhist beliefs, such as the belief in reincarnation, dovetail with certain theories of modern physics, such as String Theory, discussed by Brian Greene and Lawrence Krauss. Whereas cosmologist Lawrence Krauss is referencing the creation of matter in the early development of the universe in his famed quote, "Every atom in your body came from a star that exploded…You are all stardust,"[172] Hayden reimagines this interchange of matter as a rebirth, returning her parent's atoms and spirit to the cosmos through the fire of the crematorium and the rays of the scanner.

[171] Hayden, interview.
[172] Lawrence Krauss, "A Universe from Nothing," lecture at Atheist Alliance International Conference, Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason & Science, October 21, 2009, https://youtu.be/7ImvlS8PLIo.

Working with the ashes of her own loved ones—her father, mother, and mother-in-law—was key for Hayden in creating these photographs. When asked if she would create work from others' ashes, Hayden replies unequivocally that she wouldn't—it wouldn't inspire her in the same way nor produce a successful artwork—because her working process for *Celestial Bodies* is deeply informed by her personal connection to her subjects.[173] In a private ritual in her studio, Hayden scatters the ashes over the scanner bed as she speaks words or prayers or plays music, believing this type of ritual helps her engage with her loved one's memory and their very "spirit." When I pointed to the irreversibility of mixing her parents' ashes, for instance, Hayden maintained that their spirits were there guiding her, and she felt that they would like the idea of being reunited.[174] While the ceremony that Hayden engages in to create these photographs happens in complete solitude in her studio, Hayden believes that the process honestly and truly captures the essence of her loved ones and ensures that the resulting images will be emotionally resonant and clear to viewers and collectors who did not witness the ritual, nor necessarily know that one was performed.

Celestial Bodies is but the latest series in an accomplished oeuvre that has consistently considered bodies, life, and death, and follows other attempts Hayden has made to process and understand death through photographing family members' bodies. Hayden's earlier work wrestled with standard ideas of beauty and value. When she was in her forties, Hayden created her *Figure Model* series and *Ancient Statuary* series, both of which employed elderly men and women as models and questioned definitions of ideal beauty as expressed in art and popular culture. In *Figure Model Series AC-92-01*, 1992, for

[173] Hayden, interview.
[174] Ibid.

instance, an elderly woman with short, curly hair poses in contrapposto, one arm bent with her hand resting on the crown of her head, the other one extended down her side, a piece of drapery hanging loosely from her fingertips. We see her in a dynamic three-quarter view, her face turned in profile and partially tucked behind her shoulder, while the muscles in her arm, back, buttocks, and legs are prominently displayed as if for a figure drawing class. The contrapposto stance and drapery evoke classical statuary, a connection Hayden makes explicit in *Ancient Statuary.* In *I. Statue of Hermes*, 1996, a regal portrait of an elderly man is superimposed onto the picture of an ancient statue, preserving its broken form and texture—the elderly figure is missing his legs, one arm above the elbow and the other entirely, along with the shoulder, and the stumps end in rough edged stone. Hayden recalls that, when asked why she was doing such a project while she herself was still so young, she explained "I wanted to imagine a future for myself that was beyond what we were told it should be."[175] *Celestial Bodies* functions similarly—by expressing her vision for her loved ones' afterlife, Hayden imagines her own. When it came to investigating death, specifically, Hayden turned to her own loved ones' bodies multiple times.

The day Hayden's father passed away from pancreatic cancer, she photographed his body in his hospital bed. It was several months until she could bring herself to look at the photographs, and even then, she could only bear to look at them once before throwing them away.[176] When her mother turned 90 years old, Hayden asked for permission to photograph her, which her mother had never allowed before. In the resulting series, *Passing Away*, Hayden zooms in on her mother's skin to document the way it changed as her health declined from old age and congestive heart failure. Although it once again took

[175] Ibid.
[176] Ibid.

Hayden some time to be able to look at the photographs, when she did, she felt that they were not only bearable but moving.

The differences between Hayden's photographs of her father and her mother that made, in her own eyes, one series unbearable and the other moving are perhaps apparent in the circumstances of the deaths and Hayden's processes (the former were taken after an extreme illness and all at once on the day of passing; the latter were taken over time, documenting a slow decline). But a key difference, and one that tellingly presages *Celestial Bodies* is *Passing Away*'s tight focus on her mother's skin, its material qualities, and transformative potential. Edited in Photoshop and printed on silk, Hayden's mother's skin appears realistically translucent, alternating between looking like what it is, aged skin, and appearing to be something else. In many of the photographs, the ridges and textures of the skin and the veins running underneath transform into landscapes. *Passing Away #153*, for instance appears to feature a low mountainous region shot through with cerulean rivers, while images like *Passing Away #211* appear to show the windswept dunes of a barren desert. *Passing Away #203* looks like the layers of brilliant shale, iron-rich sediment, and limestone in the rock face of a canyon wall. These photographs thus "map" the journey Hayden felt she had witnessed—her mother's gradual leaving of her deteriorating body for an alternate place.[177]

The "end" of this journey is taken up in *Celestial Bodies*, which visually articulates what Hayden believes about death—that it isn't an end at all. Like in *Passing Away*, in *Celestial Bodies*, an expressive transformation of the pictured bodily material—from ashes to stars—echoes a literal transformation the body has undergone—from corpse to ashes—

[177] Ibid.

and represents an additional, metaphorical transformation, that of the individual from a living, embodied person to a soul, spirit, or energy reintegrated into the cosmos. Hayden's expressive transformation of her loved ones' ashes therefore allows the viewer to envision a change from a physical body to a soul or spirit only, a transformation that otherwise could not be visualized.

Examining the particular schools of thought that influence Hayden's beliefs and aesthetics sheds further light on how Hayden plays with the visible and invisible. In between *Passing Away* and *Celestial Bodies*, Hayden consulted Buddhist texts such as the *Bardo Thodol*, reflected on the body and mysticism in Catholicism, perused studies of world religion by Joseph Campbell, and immersed herself in theoretical physics texts by Brian Greene and Lawrence Krauss.[178] These materials helped Hayden understand her experience of her mother's death—her observations of her mother's physical and spiritual fading from this world into the next—and articulate her beliefs and shape her vision for *Celestial Bodies.* In particular, Hayden embraced Buddhist dharma and was fascinated by the theories of the universe that suggest or even claim to mathematically prove alternate planes of existence. The motif of stars and other cosmic objects in *Celestial Bodies* clearly invoke such cosmological concepts. But with every theory of modern physics that speaks through Hayden's series, there is a Buddhist tenet in dialogue. As Lawrence Krauss's statement, "You are all stardust,"[179] quoted above, communicates, science's understanding of the origin of matter explains that we are all of the same stuff as stars. This idea supports Buddhism's core concept of emptiness, which posits that nothing exists independently

[178] Ibid.
[179] Krauss, "A Universe from Nothing."

from the rest of the world and that, ultimately, differentiation is an illusion.[180] The first law of thermodynamics, conservation of energy and matter, furthermore, allows Hayden's photographs to enlarge the Buddhist belief in reincarnation to astronomical scales. Because energy cannot disappear, our matter and our energy are bound to be somehow reintegrated into the universe.

While some are satisfied to imagine their corporeal being disintegrated and reintegrated into the cosmos, as Hayden's images initially suggest, many religions imagine afterlives that preserve the integrity of a non-physical element, an eternal soul, spirit, or consciousness. These afterlives are predicated on the idea of other realms, such as the heavenly realm of Catholicism, the religion of Hayden's upbringing, or the realms of Samsara (the cycle of life, death, and rebirth) envisioned by Buddhism, Hayden's adopted religion. The *Bardo Thodol*, called in English the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, prepares its readers for the soul's journey after death, urging it to enlightenment past the realms into which the soul could be reborn: the human and animal realms we are familiar with, and also the realm of beings in hell, the realm of hungry ghosts, the realm of asura (demigods of anger and jealousy), and the realm of deva (heavenly beings).[181] The idea of other realms is also pervasive in physics. Brian Greene's *The Hidden Reality* discusses nine theories that encompass the existence of other universes.[182] In some of these theories, the universes are separated by vast distances in space and time. Others, however, may be accessible and, in fact, closely map onto the kinds of alternate realms described in our various mythologies of

[180] Vic Mansfield, *Tibetan Buddhism and Modern Physics: Toward a Union of Love and Knowledge* (West Conshohocken, PA: Templeton Foundation Press, 2008).
[181] Attrib. Padma-Sambhava, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead Or the After-Death Experiences on the Bardo Plane*, ed. W.Y. Evans-Wentz, trans. Lama Kazi Dawa-Samdup, (Salt Lake City: Summum, 2012), eBook, https://www.holybooks.com/the-tibetan-book-of-the-dead-2/).
[182] Brian Greene, *The Hidden Reality: Parallel Universes and the Deep Laws of the Cosmos* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2011).

the afterlife. The most salient for our discussion are three ideas from String Theory: the existence of extra spatial dimensions, and two proposed forms for a "multiverse"—the braneworld and the landscape multiverse. These theories are highly speculative, as String Theory is as of yet unable to be experimentally confirmed, but they are rich for contemplation. Mathematically, String Theory requires eleven dimensions—ten spatial dimensions instead of the familiar three, plus time. These extra spatial dimensions could be so small that they exist, unseen, right in front our noses, like the pile of a vast carpet, curled into complex shapes called Calabi-Yau shapes.[183] Could our souls exist after death within these dimensions, unseen but ever present, like in the realm of hungry ghosts or the realm of deva? In the landscape multiverse theory, bubble universes continually form within other bubble universes,[184] offering the closest parallel to the Christian imagination of a heaven in the firmament or the sequential encountering of the realms of Samsara. In the braneworld theory, our observable universe is contained within a three-dimensional membrane and may be one of an infinite number of such regions that exist, unseen, right next door,[185] again, like the various realms of Samsara. In String Theory, ordinary matter is made of string snippets, whose ends, in braneworld theory, are confined to the brane. Could our souls, though, be string loops, like gravitons (the quanta particle of gravity),[186] able to move out of not only our bodies but also the brane that forms our familiar world and into others? Hayden conceived of *Celestial Bodies* as astronomical photographs in order to suggest just such possibilities, to suggest that, whether as a soul that retreats to an alternate plane or as energy that returns to the cosmos, we continue as part of the universe.

[183] Ibid., 104.
[184] Ibid., 200–201.
[185] Ibid., 129–130.
[186] Ibid., 132–134.

Just as these cosmological theories of a multiverse are highly speculative, so are ideas about the afterlife, because there is no experimental apparatus with which to confirm theories of such, at least not to scientific standards. Hayden's work unites religion and physics in the fact that the truths they seek to probe are invisible and perhaps ultimately unknowable. The stories of religion, Joseph Campbell writes, are metaphors for such truths.[187] In each case, art, religion, and physics, we need a specialized or metaphorical language to express the ideas. Hayden's photographs use the pictorial language of art; in physics, we need mathematics. And just as myths arise from people's observations of the world around them and mathematical proofs are supported by indirect evidence physicists identify in the observable universe, so too the average stars and galaxies that Hayden invokes suggest a whole stable of cosmological possibilities for the afterlife.

In *Grammy's Center of Gravity* shimmering purple and blue appear to collapse into, or perhaps radiate out from, a center of inky blackness—a black hole. A black hole itself cannot be seen, as no light within the hole's event horizon can escape to illuminate it for us. Hayden's apparent depiction of energy rushing into a black hole, then, is a visual metaphor of something that can't be seen. Or, we can read the blue and purple streaks of energy as outside the event horizon, radiating outward, representing Hawking radiation, an observable phenomenon that serves as indirect evidence of a black hole.[188] The blackness of the black hole itself, furthermore, is a cipher for emptiness. In physics and in Buddhism, emptiness is a deceiving term. It does not mean empty in the colloquial sense. Modern physicists now knows that empty space is actually permeated with a mysterious energy,

[187] Campbell and Moyers, *The Power of Myth*.
[188] Greene, *The Hidden Reality*, 283–286.

called "dark energy," that has a profound effect on the workings of the universe.[189] Likewise, the interrelated consciousness implied in Buddhism's emptiness is unseen but always, crucially, working to foster its twin tenet, compassion.[190] And so, although the persistent materiality of the ashes plays a critical role in constructing a picture of the possibilities for an afterlife that Hayden imagines in *Celestial Bodies*—it is again a metaphor, and we must read between the lines to come to a full understanding. It is in the negative space, the blackness, the emptiness, where we are to imagine the transcendent soul. And so, as there is something in nothing, Hayden asserts that there is life in death, saying "It's not horrific, it's not the end, it's not fear, it's what it is. It's time, it's space, it's immortality, it's continuation, it's life. Even though it's death … I think death represents a form of life."[191]

Buddhism and science have thus converged to enable Hayden to imagine an afterlife, and the ashes she pictures as "celestial bodies" represent, furthermore, multiple possibilities for afterlives. For the viewer, the process of close looking that reveals the material's vacillation between stars and ashes make such an interpretation apparent, even for someone not familiar with Hayden's process or influences. In evoking the mysterious and awe-inspiring astronomical realm with the mundane dust of the dead body, the photographs clearly suggest the kind of transcendence Campbell references—the ashes' appearance as sublime cosmological landscapes gives the viewer a sense of possibility just beyond our understanding.

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[189] Ibid., 27.
[190] Mansfield, *Tibetan Buddhism and Modern Physics*.
[191] Hayden, interview.

Jason Lazarus, *Heinecken Studies*

At first glance, Jason Lazarus's *Heinecken Studies* photographs appear to be smaller iterations (only twenty inches by twenty-four inches) of Hayden's *Celestial Bodies* photographs. *Study #4 (154y, 100m, at F8 for 3 sec)*, for instance, has a deep charcoal background and a bright cluster of white star-like particles in the lower half, a single galaxy-like wing extending into the upper half. *Study #21 (171y, 171m, at F8 for 30 sec, slight dodge)* has a similar dark background and a soft-edged band of green across the center that appears to cast an electric blue glare on the sparse starry points scattered across the expanse. Maybe it is an image of stars through the faintly visible aurora borealis or a far-away galaxy of large, incredibly hot (and therefore blue) stars.

Although these examples feature a scattering of ashes that appear to be stars, like Hayden's photographs, the differences in the series, when they emerge through close looking, are striking. Rather than uniform deep blackness in all the backgrounds, Lazarus's *Heinecken Studies* photographs feature washes of color from across the spectrum, from pale blues to vibrant oranges and reds to deep plums. Against these various backdrops, in addition to stars, the ashes, which also vary in tint, become dust motes in the air, debris sinking through water, little piles of pollen, growths of mold, and other particulate matter. *Study #9 (64y, 64m, at F8 for 1 sec without ashes, ashes laid down, burned with flashlight)*, for instance, has an ombre background that transitions from light orange at the top to a deep red at the bottom. The larger pieces of ash appear to be casting slight shadows or reflections onto the photographic paper. In combination with the ombre effect, these reflections take on the appearance of trails, making the ashes look like sand sinking through a somewhat viscous liquid—maybe Jell-O not yet set. *Study #23 (enlarger turned*

off, one flashlight burned twice) features an imperfect oval of bright green at the center of a larger imperfect oval of sky blue. The rest of the background is a sterile white, making the amorphous rings look like some kind of fluid in a petri dish. The ashes sprinkled on top have a fluffy appearance, making them look like mold cultivated in the petri dish. In *Study #25 (0y, 100m, at F8 for 15 sec)*, the ashes have a yellow-orange tinge, making them look like the effusive pollen of lilies staining someone's black clothing, or perhaps the fresh, bright burning sparks rising from a bonfire into the night sky. In addition to these visual differences, *Heinecken Studies* differs from *Celestial Bodies* in two significant and intertwined ways: the ashes Lazarus uses are not family members' or friends', but those of renowned artist Robert Heinecken, and Lazarus's chosen process for this series recalls Heinecken's own non-traditional photographic work.

Robert Heinecken was dubbed a "paraphotographer" or "photographist," rather than a photographer, due to how his work expands beyond the traditional definitions of the medium. Trained as a printmaker as well as a photographer, Heinecken worked in, and not infrequently combined, a number of mediums, including collage and sculpture, alongside lithography and photography. Even Heinecken's clearly photographic work straddles the boundaries of the medium, as much of it is created without the use of a camera. Rather than taking pictures with a camera and making prints from the film negatives with an enlarger, Heinecken often made contact prints using magazine pages or the television screen as his negatives.[192] In one of his seminal series of artworks, *Are You Rea* from 1968, for instance, he created photograms by contact printing magazine pages. By shining light through the pages in the course of making the exposure, the imagery and text on the front and back of

[192] Matthew Biro, "Reality Effects: The Art of Robert Heinecken," *Artforum* 50, no. 2 (October 2011), https://www.artforum.com/print/201108/reality-effects-the-art-of-robert-heinecken-29044.

the page were reproduced together, intertwined in evocative ways, on the photographic paper. In 1981, Heinecken pushed his own innovation further when he created "videograms," which used the television broadcast image as both negative and source of light. Heinecken's art thus interrogated the supposedly fundamental nature of medium as a defining parameter and the nature of an image-saturated, capitalist popular culture, fulfilling the role of the modern artist as defined by art critic Arthur C. Danto (who conferred on Heinecken the moniker "photographist") as "creating art that functions in part as a philosophical reflection of its own nature."[193]

Lazarus's *Heinecken Studies* series was occasioned by Heinecken's most unusual and final artwork. Heinecken's last artistic gesture, called *Residual Realities*, was to direct his estate to distribute saltshakers filled with portions of his cremated remains to family, friends, and colleagues upon his death. The remainder of his ashes was then given to the Heinecken Foundation to distribute. Lazarus obtained his portion after becoming friends with Luke Batten, Heinecken's long-time studio assistant and the manager of Heinecken's estate.[194] As a professor at Columbia College, Chicago and the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, both places where Heinecken had taught in the past, Lazarus was inspired to create a project around Heinecken's ashes.[195] Lazarus recalls, in an interview with *Art 21*, "I got the idea to make a series of images using the ashes as a medium...I decided to make photograms in the darkroom with the ashes, as Heinecken considered himself a paraphotographer… never really shooting film in a camera but doing material mash-ups in

[193] "About the Photographer: Heinecken, Robert," Museum of Contemporary Photography, Columbia College, Chicago, Website, accessed November 21, 2019, http://www.mocp.org/detail.php?type=related&kv=7228&t=people.
[194] Caroline Picard, "Memorial Photographs: An Interview with Jason Lazarus." *ART 21*, January 5, 2011, http://magazine.art21.org/2011/01/05/memorial-photographs-an-interview-with-jason-lazarus/#.XdcNrUVKi1s.
[195] Lazarus, interview.

the darkroom with the media-at-large as his 'negative' or fodder for art making."[196] Not only did Lazarus wish to play with what constituted a "negative," like Heinecken, he also wanted to engage with Heinecken's process as a source of creativity. Lazarus says:

> [T]he task was to do something artistic that would force me to use the darkroom as a point of creation, to force a trekking back and forth in and out of the darkroom as Heinecken had, which in a sense is a homage-performance which the photograms become documents of (further layering the documentation of Heinecken beyond the cremated ash indices the exposures created).[197]

With this goal in mind, Lazarus created his *Heinecken Studies* photograms by scattering Heinecken's ashes directly onto color photographic paper, which was then exposed to light from the enlarger, sometimes through various filters, and additional light sources (like a flashlight). The photograms are titled with the specific equipment settings and actions taken to produce the work, reinforcing Lazarus's emphasis on the performative and exploratory nature of his process.[198] The twenty-five photograms comprising the series were made in a daisy chain fashion over the course of one darkroom session lasting approximately five hours. As soon as he finished one image, Lazarus emerged from the absolute darkness of his work room, examined the photogram, and reentered to start another in response to the first.[199]

At the same time that Lazarus's working method for this series was inspired by Heinecken's, it also dovetails seamlessly with his own customary artistic concerns.

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[196] Picard, "Memorial Photographs."
[197] Legacy Russell, "Artist, Occupied: Jason Lazarus," *BOMB Magazine*, March 20, 2012, https://bombmagazine.org/articles/artist-occupied-jason-lazarus/.
[198] Lazarus, interview.
[199] Ibid. Lazarus revealed that his first attempt to create work using Heinecken's ashes involved blacking out a room, dropping the ashes, and using strobe lights to freeze them in the air, but the results were not satisfying. While Lazarus describes his decision to make photograms instead as being more inspired by Heinecken's working method than by aesthetic concerns, it is interesting to note that the photograms achieve a similar effect to what Lazarus initially imagined.

Chicago's *Newcity* magazine's "Art 50" directory of influential Chicago artists in 2014 directly compares Lazarus's work to Heinecken's. While the comparison may have been top of mind thanks to this very series, the similarities in the artists' philosophies and expanded approach to artmaking make the comparison apt. The article bestows upon Lazarus the title "paraphotographer," defining it as "one who asks questions associated with the cultural and material conditions of photography."[200] Lazarus, like Heinecken, is interested in interrogating the definitions of art and photography[201] and the intersections of pop culture, visual culture, and politics in a world flooded with images. In this series, Lazarus channels Heinecken's legacy as an experimental photographer through his intuitive working process undertaken in the darkroom at Columbia College, Chicago, where Heinecken's artistic and pedagogical influence (and now traces of his ashes) persists.[202] Heineken's legacy is expressed both through Lazarus's adoption of the performative photogram process and his daisy chain working method. The way Lazarus allows the first photograph to inform the second, the second to inform the third, and so on, mimics the way one artist's work can influence that of their followers. By the end of the series, the twenty-five photograms are notably different, but still identifiable as part of the same series, just as Lazarus's work is different from, but draws on Heinecken's. Like Hayden's private rituals with the ashes of her family, Lazarus's performative process of working with Heinecken's ashes is intended to tap into the essence of the deceased. Rather than considering

[200] "Art 50 2014: Chicago's Artists' Artists," *Newcity Art*, September 18, 2014, https://art.newcity.com/2014/09/18/art-50-2014-chicagos-artists-artists/.
[201] Lazarus's text "33 Meditations" consists of the artist's musings on the definition and future of photography, such as "I wonder all the time about photography departments in an age of image ubiquity and social media, and i (sic) wonder how they might flourish; i (sic) daydream about other names for them and the vague mist of possibilities these names hold…" Jason Lazarus, "33 Meditations," *Blackflash* 33, no. 3 (2016): 52–57.
[202] Lazarus, interview.

Heinecken's afterlife in a strictly spiritual or cosmological way like Hayden, however, Lazarus explores the idea of Heinecken's artistic and pedagogical legacy.

This project is not the first time that legacy has appeared in Lazarus's work. In his *Michael Jackson Memorial Procession*, Lazarus sought to recreate the spontaneous memorialization of pop icon Michael Jackson that erupted throughout Chicago after the musical artist's death in the form of widespread playing of Jackson's music. Putting together a group of participants to drive a caravan from Jackson's childhood home through Chicago, Lazarus created a pirate radio station to broadcast a curated list of Jackson's music to the procession.[203] In his curatorial work, too, Lazarus has explored the idea of artistic influence and legacy. His show *Hang In There* at Bridgeport's Co-Prosperity Sphere, showcased work by artists who had been asked to "address what makes them keep on keepin' on." Lazarus explains, "instead of the show being, 'Let's pat each other on the back,' it's more about artists finding ways to keep their gestures going not only in the show, but have them radiate outward."[204]

These explorations of legacy and memory, especially in the context of artists and celebrities, also touch on themes of private vs. public. In his ongoing project *Too Hard To Keep (THTK)*, Lazarus further explores this, soliciting submissions of photographs that participants deem too upsetting to keep but too meaningful to destroy. Lazarus gives them the option of allowing him to make their private memories public by displaying the photographs face up, or only displaying them facedown. In both cases, the viewer lacks the backstory and must "read between the lines," as it were, to try to understand the object's

[203] Picard, "Memorial Photographs."
[204] Lauren Viera, "Photographer's Mission Coming into Focus," *Chicago Tribune*, June 16, 2011, https://www.chicagotribune.com/entertainment/ct-ent-0616-jason-lazarus-story.html.

importance. This project, and his *Ink Pours* series—which deconstructs well-known photographs into the component inks it would take to print them—further interrogates the role of images in personal and collective memory.[205] In this way, legacy and memory is also about what is seen and what is unseen. In the 2012 list of Newcity's "Art 50," Lazarus is quoted as defining photography as the medium that "asks a basic question: 'What goes in the frame, and what escapes the frame?'"[206] So, like with Hayden's *Celestial Bodies*, the viewer looking at the chameleon imagery in Lazarus's *Heinecken Studies* is asked to consider what they see in these photographs, what they think they see, and what they don't see. When Heinecken captured both the front and back of magazine pages at the same time in his series *Are You Rea*, he effectively broke down the boundary of the page to merge what was on and what was beyond the surface. While Heinecken's revelation of what is behind the boundary is concrete and visible, Lazarus, like Hayden, asks us to think more philosophically about that which can't be seen beyond the surface and outside the frame.

Lazarus asks and proposes disparate answers to the question of Heinecken's afterlife by transforming the ashes into such a broad range of other materials, sand sinking through clean water, dust motes, stars, etc. Just as these varied materials seem to directly reference the fate of Heinecken's matter (his body)—scattered in small caches in numerous destinations, gracing many mantles or fertilizing many plots of land—the meditations on material and visuality they produce can also suggest the fate of his mind (his pedagogical and artistic influence), as a wide-ranging legacy that extends immeasurably and takes many forms.

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[205] Jason Lazarus, "The Rickshaw," Artist's Website, accessed December 2, 2019, https://jasonlazarus.com/projects/the-rickshaw/.
[206] "Art 50 2012: Chicago's Artists' Artists" *Newcity Art*, September 19, 2012, https://art.newcity.com/2012/09/19/art-50-chicagos-artists-artists/.

David Maisel, *Library of Dust*

David Maisel's *Library of Dust* features not ashes scattered over a surface, but contained, unseen, inside copper canisters. What is seen in each photograph is a single one of these makeshift urns, set against a black background. There are brilliant mineral blooms encrusting the surface of each urn, created through the interaction of the atmosphere with the copper containers, their lead seams, and the organic matter of the ashes within. For viewers familiar with minerals, like Terry Toedtemeier, the curator of photography at the Portland Art Museum (Portland, Oregon), who was trained as a geologist and who contributed an essay to Maisel's *Library of Dust* photobook, the growths are recognizable as "classic secondary copper mineralizations."[207] But, like that in Hayden's and Lazarus's photographs, the material we're seeing—the mineral growths—also tend to resemble something else. In *Library of Dust*, this something else variously takes the form of expressionistic paint, bodily forms, and most predominantly, sublime vistas of ocean waves or mountain ranges. In one photograph, named for the number assigned to the canister, *1165*, the red color of the copper is visible on the lid and on the left upper portion of the can's body, while the rest of the canister is overtaken by rich shades of algae green and aquamarine, cerulean, and navy blue. The deep blues and greens appear to wash over each other, sweeping in an arc from the lower rim of the canister up and to the right across its surface, capped in places by particles and concentrated passages of foamy white, making the surface resemble an aerial view of a dramatic ocean wave. In two photographs of canister *1207*, similar colors wash up the sides of the canister from the bottom rim,

[207] Terry Toedtemeier, "The Soul Remains: A Mineralogical Account of the Remarkable Transformation of the Cremation Canisters at the Oregon State Hospital," in *Library of Dust* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2008), unpaginated.

covering the lower half in roiling, crashing waves. On one side, the tide is coming in, the wave arcing up towards the top rim, and on the other side, as if displaced by the pull of the first, the tide is receding. As it curves back towards the bottom, the wave seems to leave slight pools of teal water in reddish sand. The growth on *1210*—engulfing the bottom quarter of the can—is another watery scene, but with small spots of blue that look like sea spray and a patch curling out over the passage from the left side, it begins to look less like an aerial photograph of waves and more like Katsushika Hokusai's popular woodblock print *Under the Wave off Kanagawa*, ca. 1830–32. The addition of other colors on other cans—yellows, black, and reds on *1211*, pink on *1834* and *1840*—makes them look like perhaps an abstract painter took his brush or palette knife to the copper surface.

That the ashes are unseen within their containers makes them an apt parallel to the living people these ashes once were. These canisters contain the unclaimed remains of patients from the psychiatric wing of the Oregon State Hospital (founded as the Oregon State Insane Asylum) who died between its opening in 1883 and 1971. The patients whose ashes are contained in these canisters, and others like them, were hospitalized for a variety of reasons, some of which would never be considered cause for hospitalization today. Michael S. Roth contributes an essay to the *Library of Dust* photobook that traces the history of psychiatric asylums from their original curative intentions in the mid-nineteenth century to the eventual development of their function as repositories of people who, for being mentally ill, odd, or inconvenient, were wanted out of sight and out of mind.[208] In an interview with the author, Maisel explains that mental illness has often been seen, historically and even today, as shameful. He recounts his discovery of an example of such

[208] Michael S. Roth, "Graves of the Insane, Decorated," in *Library of Dust* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2008), unpaginated.

"shame" in his own family's history: in the years before the artist was born, his grandfather experienced immobilizing bouts of depression and was repeatedly treated with electroshock therapy. This information, however, was kept from Maisel until he was in his forties, suggesting the way his family had compartmentalized this experience of mental illness, essentially writing the episode out of the family's story.[209] The conditions of the patients whose remains are in the canisters Maisel photographs were likewise left undiscussed and the patients themselves were hidden away in the hospital, as they are hidden away in death in their makeshift urns.

This separation of the "ill" from the "well" mirrored the separation of the dead from the living as Enlightenment thinking about hygiene pushed the site of burial from the churchyard to the cemetery outside of town. These cities of the dead spurred a cult of remembrance and encouraged concepts of individual eternal resting places. But, the cult of remembrance seems not to have extended to the cemetery of the asylum and many of its denizens were forgotten. Although the canisters containing patients' ashes were originally numbered and labeled, in case family did eventually inquire, over time even these numbers and labels have disappeared or become unreadable, and the numbering system became confused, making these canisters another extension of the patients' abandonment.

The Oregon State Hospital began cremating all patients who died in their care and were unclaimed in 1913 and built a crematorium on the grounds. Around this time, a building expansion also necessitated the exhumation and cremation of the bodies that had been buried in the asylum's cemetery over the preceding thirty years. The resulting unclaimed ashes were stored in the basement of the hospital's crematorium until 1976, five

[209] Maisel, interview.

years after the crematorium ceased to be used, when they were transferred to an underground vault. They remained in this vault until 2000, when they were removed and put in an aboveground storeroom. The existence of this large stash of canisters remained unknown to those outside the hospital until 2004, when a series of Pulitzer Prize-winning articles on the financial woes of the state hospital mentioned them. Maisel learned of the existence of these canisters through an article posted to a blog and wrote to the hospital to request access to them, which was, to the artist's surprise, granted.[210]

The incredible and diverse appearance of the copper canisters bestows on each an individuality denied to them by their faded labels and hidden storage. But the conditions of their storage were, in fact, a large contributor to the growth of these evocative mineral blooms. The canisters, sealed with solder composed of approximately 90% lead and 10% tin, were exposed to constant flooding over a period of fifteen to eighteen years while stored in the underground vault, thanks to rising groundwater levels. Copper is known to be reliably resistant to corrosion, but these environmental circumstances of the canisters' storage, plus the presence of other minerals in both the seams and the contents, allowed these copper canisters to very quickly bloom with secondary minerals in complex and varied ways. Copper's signature red color is actually the result of its first instance of corrosion. When copper meets oxygen and moisture, it forms cuprite directly on its surface, which both gives copper its color and protects it from further corrosion. In the presence of other metals, however, like the lead in the canister seams, copper is electrolyzed into copper ions, which diffuse throughout the cuprite. Copper ions are then what react with

[210] Ibid.

water and other elements to form the "secondary copper mineralizations."[211] Toedtemeier's essay accedes that without x-ray diffraction or some other kind of formal scientific analysis, we can't know exactly what the composition of the canister blooms are, but the myriad possibilities arising from the complex chemistry of human ash—the trace minerals that may have leaked through the seams—could easily explain their beautiful and incredibly diverse manifestations. The ash of cremated remains contains phosphates, calcium, and sulfates along with smaller amounts of potassium, sodium, chloride, aluminum, and silica. Toedtemeier lists off the products of various reactions: when copper reacts with phosphate, it produces a variety of multicolored minerals like pseudomalachite, libethenite, sampleite, cornetite; when it reacts with carbonates it creates azurite, malachite, rosasite; and when it reacts with sulfites, it can make brochantite, connellite, cyanotrichite, and spanolite.[212]

Maisel photographed the canisters using a medium format camera and the larger-sized negatives produced by it offer incredible levels of detail in their depiction of the mineral blooms. Using only filtered natural light, Maisel furthermore photographed the canisters against a backdrop of black felt using shallow depth of field, resulting in a focused view of the texture of the canisters' corroded surfaces. This focus on the surface highlights the chemical reactions that have occurred and their mineral results while also turning the surfaces of the canisters into visually pleasing abstractions. This focus on surface, and the resulting beautiful and abstract scenes, is typical of much of Maisel's work. The bulk of his oeuvre and the majority of his best-known work are aerial photographs of sites compromised by human intervention. In *Black Maps*, *The Mining Project*, and *American*

[211] Toedtemeier, "The Soul Remains."
[212] Ibid.

Mine, for instance, the sites Maisel photographs are locations in the United States that have been marked by open pit mining. Maisel not only shows the cuts into the earth of the pits themselves, but also the poisonous byproducts of processes like heap leaching, which are produced by chemical reactions of the same kind that produced the mineral blooms on the canisters of *Library of Dust.*[213] Both beautiful and alarming, *American Mine (Carlin, Nevada 18, 2007)* features copper-rich red dirt in the upper right quadrant, which fades into bright green contaminated water, translucent and yellowish along the edge where the two meet, opaque and forest green at an apparent deep point in the upper left corner. The green and red both bleed at the image's horizontal center line into chalky white earth crisscrossed with dry water beds and what appear to be tire tracks. In his aerial photography and in *Library of Dust*, Maisel thus captures the brilliant colors and interesting patterns created by materials interacting with each other, catalyzed by human action or inaction, and seeks to unveil their underlying causes and contexts, which may not be visible from usual perspectives.[214] In the case of *The Mining Project* and related series, it's the effect mining is having on the surrounding environment—the surfaces appear beautiful not in spite of, but because of the toxicity of the materials at play. In *Library of Dust*, the stunning mineral blooms formed not in spite of, but because of the canisters' neglect.

However, at the same time that Maisel's images painstakingly capture the details of each canister, they also question what we can know from surfaces alone.[215] Is the toxic nature of the enterprise, whether mining or a flawed system of mental health care, something the viewer can understand from a striking spectacle alone? Maisel muses, in his

[213] Ibid.
[214] Maisel, interview.
[215] Ibid.

essay in *Library of Dust*: "Beauty, I came to see through making photographs of these canisters, wedges into artistic space a structure for continuously imagining what we do not yet know or understand…*Library of Dust* shares concerns with a kind of beauty tinged with terror—an awful beauty."[216] This evocation of the sublime, what Maisel calls an updated or "apocalyptic sublime,"[217] in the mineral blooms allow the photographs to ask and answer the question "who was this" in a way that both eloquently speaks to the persistence of individuality in the face of neglect and sustains the deceased's unknown identity.

In addition to creating an impressive, coffee table book-sized photobook, Maisel has printed his *Library of Dust* photographs in editions sized at forty inches by thirty inches and forty-eight inches by sixty-four inches, both far larger than actual size. In lieu of labels or records, the mineral blooms, unique to each urn and in the case of the largest prints, presented at almost human size, come to stand for the individuals inside. Maisel refers to these photographs, in fact, as "mineralogical portraits," and explains that his selective focus on the mineral growths is intended to emphasize the individuality of each can, and by extension, each person inside. Whether or not the exact identity of the individuals are known, the fact of their individuality—that these were, indeed, unique individuals—is made plain by each canister's singular appearance. It is poignant that these people, who were shunned from society and forgotten, and who still remain mysterious to the viewer, have finally gained some visibility in this way.

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[216] David Maisel, "The Library and Its Self-Contained Double," in *Library of Dust* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2008), unpaginated.
[217] Leah Ollman, "A Haunting Memorial in 'Library of Dust,'" *Los Angeles Times*, January 4, 2009.

The recuperation of individuality is both metaphorical and, in lucky cases, literal. Since 2005, approximately sixty families have reclaimed their relatives' remains.[218] Maisel's *Library of Dust* series has helped several of these families become aware of the canisters, providing the impetus for them to contact the hospital to inquire after family members who may have resided there. Maisel considers this to be an incredibly fulfilling aspect of the project[219] and he describes receiving an email from a woman whose family had located their long lost dead relative Ada among the canisters. Ada—who had been committed to the hospital because she was an "inconvenience" to her parents, and had received little, if any, actual treatment during her forty-year residence in the hospital—was finally given a heartwarming homecoming.[220] Ada's descendent is quoted in an article in *Time* saying, "We thought we would bury her on our 10 acres of wooded land. But we have found we like having her in the house."[221] Maisel augments this account in our interview, revealing that Ada's family sent him a picture of her (in her canister) in the kitchen where the family could "hang out" with her.[222]

While these individual tales of recuperation are rare, in the postscript to his own essay in the *Library of Dust* photobook, Maisel reports how his work has contributed to the recuperation of the memory of the dead more broadly. He writes, "I am seeking to give those who lived with mental illness a presence that encourages their existence to be acknowledged in ways that were impossible during their lifetimes."[223] Maisel hopes that his

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[218] Rebecca Robertson, "Kept in the Dark," *Artnews* 8, no. 8 (October 2008), 42.
[219] Maisel, interview.
[220] Andrew Hulktrans, "Dust Collector," *Artforum*, April 16, 2009, https://www.artforum.com/diary/andrew-hultkrans-at-a-reading-for-library-of-dust-22545.
[221] Vivienne Walt, "Ashes to Art in *Library of Dust,*" *Time*, January 8, 2009, http://content.time.com/time/arts/article/0,8599,1869177,00.html.
[222] Maisel, interview.
[223] David Maisel, postscript to *Library of Dust* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2008), unpaginated.

series will encourage continued visibility by removing the taboo surrounding mental illness.[224] Maisel further mentions that images from *Library of Dust* have been used by NAMI, the National Alliance on Mental Illness, and by Oregon's political leaders to garner support for efforts to foster change within the mental health care system and to replace crumbling psychiatric hospitals with new facilities.[225]

For Maisel, the canisters, and their mineral blooms, are testament to a traumatic history of necessary and unnecessary psychiatric hospitalization, marginalization, and forgetting. While working on this series, Maisel read widely on trauma and visualization, such as Lisa Saltzman and Eric Rosenberg's edited volume *Trauma and Visuality in Modernity*, and on modes of memorialization, such as Michael S. Roth and Charles Salas's edited volume *Disturbing Remains: Memory, History, and Crisis in the Twentieth Century*.[226] The traditional model of Trauma Studies, outlined by Cathy Caruth suggests that trauma is inherently unrepresentable in language.[227] A line in the opening paragraph of *Trauma and Visuality in Modernity* sums up what is at stake for Maisel in this project and resonates with Caruth's claim of trauma's inexpressibility: "What does it mean for a visual object to mediate the relation between a traumatic history to which the object in some sense bears witness but for which it can only account imperfectly?"[228] These canisters bear witness to the neglect of the patients of the Oregon State Hospital during life and after death, but yet can't on their own recover their specific identities. Maisel's focus on the surface of the

[224] Maisel, interview.
[225] Maisel, postscript to *Library of Dust*.
[226] Michael S. Roth and Charles G. Salas, *Disturbing Remains: Memory, History, and Crisis in the Twentieth Century* (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2001).
[227] Michelle Balaev, "Trauma Studies," in *A Companion to Literary Theory*, ed. David H. Richter (West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., 2018), 360–371.
[228] Lisa Saltzman and Eric Rosenberg, *Trauma and Visuality in Modernity* (Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College Press, 2006), ix.

canisters, the part that has become the most expressive, echoes the latter half of Saltzman and Rosenberg's statement, questioning what we can learn from the object alone. The mineral blooms further speak to Saltzman and Rosenberg's suggestion that trauma is defined as a disconnect between what we are able to see and what we are able to articulate,[229] a definition reminiscent of the meaning of the sublime. The photographs' suggestion is that the blooms do express something of the individual contained within, but perhaps in a way that simply isn't translatable into language, a way that's universal rather than personal.

Roth ends his essay contribution to *Library of Dust*, with an excerpt from the 1886 issue of the *Daily Oregon Statesman* describing how the children from a nearby orphanage gathered wildflowers for the graves of the "unfriended dead" at the asylum cemetery on Decoration Day (now Memorial Day). Roth clarifies that in this context, decoration doesn't mean to prettify, but to "confer a distinction, to recognize or acknowledge." The unclaimed children claimed the unclaimed "insane dead." Yet it is poignant that their decoration—wildflowers—are transitory, too. The mineral blooms are a more enduring decoration, as are Maisel's photographs. Roth writes:

> David Maisel's project also makes a claim, reminding us of forgetting, of corrosion and oblivion, while also recollecting the unfriended. His photographs recognize the dead, even though the images cannot resurrect their individuality. His visual inscription of the passing of time is an act of decoration and acknowledgement; his deed is a worthy one.[230]

Like Hollingsworth's and Shults' series discussed in previous chapters, then, Maisel's *Library of Dust* similarly makes an argument for why, despite the difficulty or impossibility of definitively recuperating the lost, it is important to try.

[229] Ibid., xi–xii.
[230] Roth, "Graves of the Insane, Decorated."

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By representing the literal conversion of the body through cremation and several levels of metaphorical transformation—ranging from the picturing of cremation ashes to look like other materials to the imagined translation of embodied person to disembodied spirit or evolving legacy—these photographs propose a number of ways that the deceased may live on after death. Jacqueline Hayden, drawing on Buddhism and modern astrophysics, suggests a spiritual afterlife in her photographs of ashes-cum-stars. Jason Lazarus enacts the propagation of Robert Heinecken's legacy by utilizing the photogram technique and creating twenty-five prints in a single daisy chain progression. David Maisel's photographs of makeshift urns document splendid mineral blooms resulting from chemical reactions between ashes and their container. The mineral blooms evoke sublime landscapes of mountains and oceans and symbolize the individuality of the former psychiatric patients from whose ashes they are created, rescuing them from an afterlife of obscurity and encouraging their reunification with long-lost family.

The particular artistic choices the photographers have made—size and choice of photographic process, especially—are instrumental to the success of these series. The large size of Hayden's and Maisel's photographs lend the images a cosmological or mythical quality. For Hayden, this is the exact purpose—to mimic astronomical photographs. For Maisel, the size also makes the canisters virtually life size, emphasizing the human individual inside. The comparatively small size of Lazarus's photographs, on the other hand, recalls the widespread distribution of Heinecken's ashes to various friends and family, and the instantiation of his influence in myriad successive artists' work.

Of even greater consequence is the way the photographers make strategic choices in their photographic techniques to investigate what is and isn't, and what can and can't, be seen. Although Maisel employs a standard photographic process, his enlargements of the canisters and their tight focus on the minute details of the mineral blooms confront the viewer very forcefully with the thickly encrusted and unyielding shell *and* with their inability to see its contents. Hayden's and Lazarus's particular processes, on the other hand, reveal to the viewer an unpredictable or usually inaccessible view of the cremation ashes. Because Lazarus's *Heinecken Studies* are color photograms, they necessarily had to be created in a pitch-black darkroom (in contrast to black and white photographs, which can safely be developed in a room lit dimly with red light), meaning that their sequential creation led him through repeated cycles of darkness and light. Each photogram was, more or less, a surprise even to the artist, but what Lazarus was able to perceive in the photograms when he took them briefly into the light allowed him to refine and experiment further when creating the next. Hayden's use of the scanner, rather than a camera, for her *Celestial Bodies* photographs reflects the ways her series, and all the series examined in this chapter, represent attempts to think through, or *see through*, death to the afterlife. Whereas in the photogram process, material is placed on top of the photographic paper and exposed from above, when using the scanner, material is placed on top of a transparent surface and exposed from below. Thus, what the photographer sees from their perspective (looking down) is not the same as what the image will show. The image shows a view—a view looking up—that is, in reality, unobservable. This use of the scanner to capture *the other side* of the ashes thus evokes the idea of penetrating the boundary between life and death to reveal possibilities for an enduring afterlife.

CONCLUSION

This dissertation has examined photography series picturing materials related to death by nine contemporary American artists. In each of three chapters, I examined photographs of different kinds of materials—belongings left behind, residues and physical presences of messy, dead bodies, and cremation ashes. In examining the physical "truth" of the materials and their transformations in the chapters, I demonstrate how each kind of material acts in a different way to represent some transition from embodied life to disembodied death. In Chapter One, belongings left behind served as proxies for the deceased and sources of memory of their lives and personalities. In Chapter Two, decaying dead bodies and their stains served as evidence of the physical, and by extrapolation, sociopolitical, circumstances of death. In Chapter Three, cremation ashes were visually transformed into galaxies and other celestial and terrestrial bodies, suggesting a spiritual or other afterlife for the deceased. While the three chapters focused, respectively, on "life," "death," and "afterlife," the chapters ultimately share a concern with afterlife or "symbolic immortality" in the varied and overlapping guises of memory, sociopolitical change, spiritual afterlife, reintegration into natural cycles, and creative legacies.

Such themes are shared in popular culture materials like self-help guides to the funeral industry, current options for the disposition of cremains, and television and movies featuring death. These artifacts and media dovetail with the photographs in terms of what they suggest about contemporary attitudes towards death, supported by research in Death Studies that suggest that today's American society—as its enormous "Baby Boomer" generation ages and experiences the deaths of family and friends—is confronting its dissatisfaction with norms of dying with "death engagement." The death-related themes of

a range of documentaries, television series, and feature length films highlight contemporary society's engagement with, as well as anxieties and desires related to, death. Themes of the preceding chapters, belongings left behind, forensic science, and the afterlife, are taken up, supported, and elaborated on in a handful of examples examined below.

In Judith Helfand's short *NYTimes* Op-Doc 'Love and Stuff,' the filmmaker takes the viewer through the process of cleaning out her mother's home. Between her two brothers and herself, they make groupings of boxes to donate, give away, and for each sibling to keep, proportionate to their desires. Helfand expresses how difficult it is to give away things that her mother wore or used at special times and the last things she touched, despite the fact that Helfand would never use them and would, in any other circumstances, consider them gross (like her toothbrush). Particularly touching is Helfand's confession that her mother had been asking her for years to come go through her things with her, telling her there were so many things she wanted to show her. If she had come earlier, Helfand says, "this would be so much sweeter," because, we infer the importance and meanings of the things would have been communicated to her and because it would have been revisiting a life with the person who lived it. But Helfand couldn't face the task earlier, she says, hoping or believing irrationally that her mother would live longer if the task remained undone. The short documentary ends on a surprising and heart-wrenching note. Helfand says, "I guess I should go check on my mother" before leading the camera into the other room where she asks her living, dying mother, "how do you live without your mother?" Her mother can only reply, "you just do." The final shot is a box, with the label "give away" crossed out and the new label "Judy" added. In lieu of having her mother, her

mother's belongings, the evidence of her life, will have to do, as moving forward Helfand learns to live without.[231]

Yuval Hameiri's 'I Think This is the Closest to How the Footage Looked' similarly demonstrates how belongings function as stand-ins for loved ones as the filmmaker recreates his mother's last day alive using meaningful objects as stand ins for himself, his mother, and other family members. 'I Think This is the Closest to How the Footage Looked' also speaks to how photographic and film footage functions as powerful tools of memorialization. The short film is the story of his mother's last day, but it is also the story of the footage of that day. Hameiri's father filmed the children's last day with their mother; as Hameiri recreates the footage for the present film, he says "I think this is the closest to how the footage looked. I didn't see it." After recreating the day, Hameiri recreates the night, after his mother is gone, when he rewinds the tape to watch it to "preserve a memory" but can't bear and stops. The next morning, his father tapes the empty spaces where his wife used to be, her bed, her paintings, her figurine of the goddess of hope, etc., unknowingly filming over the footage of her presence. The short documentary ends with the tape rewinding and then playing. We see the abrupt transition from the few remaining seconds of footage from Hameiri's mother's last day to the footage of empty spaces, and then the footage rewinds and plays again, and again, and again, fixating on this duplicate moment of loss, the loss of the mother and of her image. And we notice how the objects Hameiri used represent the characters based on his father's later footage of absence: his sister is the figurine, his father is a camera, and his mother, a tube of paint. In the absence

[231] Judith Helfand, *Love and Stuff*, "Four Short Films for Mom," *New York Times*, May 11, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/11/opinion/short-films-mothers-day.html.

of his mother and with the loss of her image, Hameiri is left to recreate her/her image with the objects left behind.[232]

Whereas Helfand's and Hameiri's short documentaries explore loss, mourning, and remembrance from personal, non-fictional perspectives, non-fictional and fictional television shows featuring forensic science follow recurring characters who solve crimes and mysteries of the dead to highlight how personal stories of loss are enmeshed in larger social narratives. Just as belongings left behind play a role in processing death and appropriately memorializing the deceased in Helfand and Hameiri's documentaries, physical remains play a role in determining cause of death and seeking justice for the deceased in such fictional television shows as *CSI*, *Bones*, *Cold Case*, and *Law and Order*, and based-on-true-stories shows like *Dr. G: Medical Examiner*, *Forensic Files*, and others. During jury selection, today's judges and lawyers find themselves needing to ask potential jurors if they recognize that not all cases will have an abundance of forensic evidence like those they see on TV. These shows are exaggerations of current technology and science, but even so (and perhaps because they are exaggerations), they highlight our desire to know how and why people die and our desire to secure justice for those who died in "bad" ways, as well as to comfort the survivors. The greatest function these shows may have may be their ability to comment on contemporary and historical sociopolitical situations and circumstances. *Law and Order*, for example, is well-known for crafting episodes similar to recent real-life events and representing characters' responses and opinions in complex ways that reveal the complexities of the real-life situation. *Bones* and *Cold Case*, on the other hand, often tackle years- or decades-old cases and address themes of community memory. Through

[232] Yuval Hameiri, *I Think This is the Closest to How the Footage Looked*, "Four Short Films for Mom," *New York Times*, May 11, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/11/opinion/short-films-mothers-day.html.

their depictions of forensic science, these shows emphasize the ability to deduce knowledge from the body and its processes of decay and achieve justice or closure by this evidence. Although in reality there is much progress to be made in the research conducted at forensic anthropology centers like those at University of Tennessee, Knoxville, and Texas State University, these shows foster consideration of a wide range of issues, from the scientific to the sociopolitical to the spiritual that may help viewers cultivate a healthier relationship to death. "The Twist in the Plot," episode 13 of season 8 of *Bones*, for example, unites the scientific and spiritual concerns discussed in Chapters Two and Three and serves as an example of how these shows can encourage viewers to confront death in healthy ways.

In this episode, the team investigates two bodies buried in the same green burial plot—one, a cancer patient and the intended resident of the plot, the other, the terminal patient's death doula. Like a birthing doula, death doulas work to help prepare people, practically and spiritually, for life transitions, such as, in this case, death. Through their investigations, the forensic anthropologist Temperance Brennan ("Bones"), her husband and partner FBI agent Seeley Booth, and the rest of the team learn about the spiritual and practical impetuses behind green burial for the patient, the victim, and other characters, at the same time as they use science to discover the causes of death—suicide, not cancer, for the one, and blunt force trauma for the other—and bring the perpetrator of the murder to light. The answers provided by both science and the alternative funerary arrangements help bring the case to a close and process the deaths that occurred. Meanwhile, in the Brennan-Booth household, this investigation spurs a discussion of the couple's funeral instructions between the practical and seemingly dispassionate "Bones" and the intuitive

and more squeamish Booth. Bones's original plans for a Tibetan Celestial Funeral, in which the body is dismembered and pulverized and left for vultures to scavenge, giving the body to the air (a ceremony Bones describes as beautiful), strikes Booth as violent and distasteful. Bones changes her Last Will and Testament to request her ashes be scattered over an active volcano, instead, giving her husband and their daughter an opportunity to have an adventure together. Bones thus comes to recognize that the disposition of the body after death is more for the living than the dead, whether that be for solving a murder or memorializing the departed.[233]

In forensic television shows, characters utilize science and technology in their efforts to understand how and why a person has died; in fictional feature-length films like *The Discovery* and *Flatliners*, the characters turn to science and technology in order to try to uncover what happens to a person after death. In *The Discovery*, a feature-length fiction film produced by Netflix, scientist Thomas Harbor has managed to prove the existence of an afterlife by detecting that "some part of our consciousness leaves us and travels to a new plane of existence."[234] This discovery leads to a spate of suicides by those wanting to escape pain in this life and "get there." The action of the movie takes place a couple years later and begins with a man and a woman, strangers, on an island ferry. The man, Will, is there to visit the research compound of the scientist responsible for the discovery, where research is continuing in an attempt to discover exactly what or where the afterlife is. We learn that Will, our protagonist, is the disapproving son of the discoverer. Will meets the woman from the ferry—Isla—again when he observes and thwarts her attempt to commit suicide wearing a weighted backpack into the ocean. Will takes Isla to the research compound,

[233] Milan Cheylov, director, "The Twist in the Plot," *Bones*, season 8, episode 13, aired January 28, 2013.
[234] Charlie McDowell, director, *The Discovery*, 2017.

where there are many survivors of attempted suicide, put to work on the continuing research project in myriad ways in order to give them purpose in this life. During an intake questionnaire, Dr. Harbor asks Isla if knowing what the afterlife is might change her mind about suicide and she answers that it might, comparing it to looking at a brochure before deciding on a vacation. After Dr. Harbor introduces a new technology that will allow them to record the continued consciousness of the afterlife, Will manages to view and record the visuals produced by a corpse stolen from the local morgue, keeping this information from everyone except Isla. While it initially appears that the device has only recorded the dead man's memories, Will and Isla noticed discrepancies in the man's tattoos and discover, by talking to the deceased's surviving family member, that the recorded incident never occurred. Rather than a memory, it appears that the device has recorded the afterlife, in which the deceased was reliving moments of regret.

Not knowing of Will's investigations, Dr. Harbor, hooks himself up to the device and stops his heart to demonstrate that the device works. Will, Isla, and the team witness Dr. Harbor successfully changing his greatest regret in life. In real life, his wife, Will's mother, committed suicide after her husband neglected their anniversary dinner to continue working. In the afterlife version, Dr. Harbor emerges from his study for dinner. Believing this discovery—that one doesn't have to live with regret but can rather redo life in this newly confirmed "alternate plane of *this* existence"[235]—would only lead to more suicides, the team decides to dismantle the device. When Isla, however, is shot by a disgruntled former team-member, Will becomes distraught enough to attach himself to the device alive. We are transported with him back to the ferry on which we, and Isla, met him. There, Isla

[235] Ibid.

explains to him that he is already dead, and has been reliving his own greatest regret over and over. His first ferry ride, Isla reveals, Will didn't even disembark, hearing on the news the next day that a woman named Isla had killed herself. When he died at some later point in time, he came back to the ferry, trying to save his Isla from her own death over and over again. This time, she says, is the first time he managed to save her. When Will protests that he didn't save her, she died anyway, she replies that "there's more than one way to save someone" and we revisit the moment when she dies from the gunshot wound saying, "I don't want to die anymore."[236] Because of this, as Will dies again, hooked up to this intense device, he learns he won't come back to the ferry again. In the final scene, we are transported with Will, again, to the beach, where he saves Isla's son from drowning and in turn, saves Isla from becoming suicidal.[237]

While *The Discovery* experienced a lukewarm reception and is plagued by a number of plot holes, it is nevertheless revealing of the kind of hopes and anxieties contemporary society has about the possibility of an afterlife. As Kellehear writes, in our largely secular cosmopolitan society, the "otherworld" journey of dying consumes a miniscule amount of our concern compared to the "this world" journey of dying, in part because we have no strong religious conviction that an afterlife exists and no strong conception of what it is, even if we believe it does exist. This movie speaks to the desire to discover an afterlife but also to the anxiety of what it might be. While Dr. Harbor appeared to easily change the course of events in his biggest regret, the cadaver's confrontation with his sister regarding his dying father and the truth about Will reveals that efforts to change the past were emotionally fraught and difficult to achieve, leaving the deceased reliving their greatest

[236] Ibid.
[237] Ibid.

regrets time and again. That the regrets addressed by the three afterlives we witness all involved someone else's death is telling. The characters must face their own weaknesses—selfishness and cowardice among them—to save others from a "bad death."

Netflix's more recent original television series, *Russian Doll*, employs a similar plot device; two strangers relive the day of their death, helping each other to confront problems that plagued them in life and ultimately saving each other from dying, one from being hit by a car after carelessly rushing into the street and the other from suicide.[238] That suicide features prominently in both of these examples (as well as others) is noteworthy. Kellehear, among other Death Studies scholars, have discussed the "death with dignity" movement and the ethical and legal debates surrounding physician assisted suicide as taking on new complexity and new urgency as more and more people are experiencing drawn-out and painful dying.[239] Kellehear suggests that suicide is one way to take control over dying to prevent the shameful death of untimely dying. That pop culture largely represents suicide as something to be categorically prevented gestures to some of the emotional complexity of the debate. That these filmic portrayals represent suicide as something to be prevented by rectifying wrongs in life, however, perhaps also comments on the need for widespread sociopolitical reform.

Popular film and television shows raise questions about our relationships to each other in life and in dying—questions about how we can "do right" by others—that the photographs in this dissertation take up, as well. Tese tries to preserve the memory of her

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[238] Leslye Headland, Natasha Lyonne, and Amy Poehler, creators, *Russian Doll*, season 1, aired 2019.
[239] See Daniel Hillyard and John Dombrink, *Dying Right: The Death with Dignity Movement* (New York: Routledge, 2001); Derek Humphry and Mary Clement, *Freedom to Die: People, Politics, And the Right to Die Movement* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998); Sue Woodman, *Last Rights: The Struggle Over the Right to Die* (New York: Plenum Trade, 1998).

ordinary but deserving grandparents. Kimball reveals the lamentable social death experienced by many of our aging neighbors. Hollingsworth points out the tragic deaths resulting from immigration policies and attempts to bring closure to the families of the dead. Sudhoff confronts us with violent death and its emotionally counterproductive erasure. Mann and Shults ask if psychic traces and physical evidence (respectively) can affect cultural memory and institutions and bring justice to the wronged. Hayden calls into being a spiritual, celestial afterlife for her parents. Lazarus imagines an enduring creative legacy for Robert Heinecken. And Maisel recuperates the memory of those hidden away in asylums and nondescript urns and creates the possibility of their reunion with descendants. Through the literal and metaphorical transformation evoked in the artists' treatment of the materials the photographs picture, the material points beyond itself, acting as trace or evidence of the lives and deaths that produced it, to the immaterial, to memory, justice, spirit, and to possibilities for social transformation.

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