

The Dualisms in Death: How the Dominant American Way of Practicing Death and Dying
Perpetuates Hierarchical, Hyperseparated Dualisms

The average American way of dealing with death and dying is strikingly efficient at the ways in which it systematically maintains a stark physical and psychological separation between the living and the dead. Think, for instance, of the way that most Americans die: while 80 percent of Americans “would prefer to take their last breath at home,” surrounded by loved ones, “only 20 percent” actually do. “Sixty percent die in hospitals, while 20 percent live their last days in nursing homes” (Mitford, Jessica). Rather than dying in the supportive presence of loved ones, most Americans instead die surrounded by the detached “medico-scientific” gaze “emanating from an assortment of physicians” (Laderman, Gary). This is what I will later refer to as the ‘medicalization’ of death, and it is the first of two main ways in which the general American public—and wider westernized culture—is separated from death. The second way is through the primacy and professionalization of modern embalming practices, which take the care of the dead away from the family and into a radically separated sphere which acts as a kind of “black box” between life and death (Mitford, Jessica). With the combined force of these twin pillars of [1] the medicalization of dying, and [2] the professionalization/commercialization of the funeral industry, it is no wonder that the average American has little connection—both physically and psychologically—to the concepts of death and dying. However, there remains an important question: What kind of epistemological model caused these practices to gain such primacy?

In order to trace the underlying epistemological model behind the physical and psychological separation from death in the United States, I will first use Val Plumwood’s conception of Western rationalism to suggest that the American separation of the living from the

dead can be explained through the rationalistic conception of hierarchical, hyperseparated dualisms. Then I will reference the work of Gary Laderman to illustrate *how* and *where* these dualisms play out in the dominant death and dying practices in the United States. Finally, I will give a brief look at various non-dominant/ non-dualistic ways of practicing death and dying rituals—such as green burials—in order to suggest a model for how the dominant death and dying culture in the United States can be combatted through practices which embrace the human connection with death and the earth.

Before I explore how the American way of dealing with death and dying physically and psychologically separates the living from the dead, I will first outline Plumwood's conception of hierarchical, hyperseparated dualisms in order to later illustrate how this way of dividing up the world impacts the physically and psychologically distant ways we practice our death and dying rituals. In her 1993 book, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, Plumwood writes, "The set of interrelated and mutually reinforcing dualisms which permeate Western culture form a fault-line which runs through its entire conceptual system... Each [set of dualisms] has crucial connections to other elements, and has a common structure with other members of the set. They should be seen as forming a system, an interlocking structure" (Plumwood, Val. *Feminism*. Pg. 42, 43.). Plumwood then provides a list of example dualisms, which include "reason/nature, male/female, mind/body [and] master/slave" (ibid). As Plumwood explains, these dualisms cannot be fully examined, nor meaningfully combatted, if they are seen as isolated and unique, operating separately. Instead, Plumwood urges us to see how they function as mirrors of one another, all partaking of the same logic. For instance, the same logic that functions in the master's subjugation of the 'inferior' slave, and in man's oppression of the 'passive' woman, functions in reason's calculating control of an 'inert,' 'non-agential' nature. Another way to see the

connections between these dualisms is to imagine switching around all the descriptions of the ‘lower’ dualisms. It is true, for example, that in ‘Western’ culture, nature is seen not only as ‘non-agential,’ but it is also seen as ‘inferior’ like the slave, and ‘passive’ like the archetypal Western woman. The reason these descriptions can be swapped around is because in this dualistic system, as Plumwood points out, they are all oppressed by the *same hierarchical, rationalistic system*.

The logic that undergirds these interconnected hierarchical dualisms, as Plumwood explains in *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason*, “imposes a rigid barrier between subject and object which excludes relationships of care, sympathy and engagement with the fate of what is known, constructing connection as a source of error and the object known as alien to the knower” (Plumwood, Val. *Environmental Culture*. Pg. 42.). That is, the cold, rationalistic logic of these dualisms effectively demonizes connection with the other side of the dualism by *hyperseparating* the dominant side of the dualism from the subordinate. In other words, because the two sides are construed as having nothing in common, and because only one side of the dualism has the power of definition—of determination—a *dialogical relationship* (one in which regard and respect runs in both directions) between the two is rendered impossible. This creates no room for communication with the other, nor for any questioning of the underlying dualistic logic, and thus effectively entrenches the reigning hegemonic order which imposes *hyperseparation* and *domination* rather than communication and partnership. What these concepts mean for the American way of practicing death and dying is profound. If we map these hierarchical, hyperseparated dualisms onto the dichotomy between life/death, then we know that death is seen as the lower sphere, as something passive and inert, and as *something to be dominated*. Furthermore, because death is *hyperseparated from life* in this hegemonic

model, there is no connection possible, no way to respect death as an equal other, as something to enter into a dialogical relationship with. As Plumwood writes in *Feminism*, this hierarchical, dualistic system “does not give death the significance of unity with and embeddedness in nature, for the human essence is still conceptualised as discontinuous from nature; or to the extent that death can express a unity with nature, it is a unity with an order of nature conceived as dualised other, as itself stripped of significance, as mere matter.” (Plumwood, Val. *Feminism*. Pg. 102). Here Plumwood points to the problematic death presents to the human/nature dualism: because death is a part of human existence, within the dualistic model of human/nature, death cannot be a part of nature and must be thoroughly separated to preserve the hyperseparation between humans and nature. At the same time, however, because this dualistic system separates the human mind (also conceptualized as soul) from the body—the thing that dies—and couples the body with the dominated sphere of nature, death is thereby separated from the so-called ‘true essence’ of humanity, which is the mind/soul. Death, then—specifically human death—is separated from both humanity *and* nature, partaking fully of neither in order to preserve a hierarchical, hyperseparated system of dualisms. Plumwood touches on this concept again in her most recent book, *The Eye of the Crocodile*. She writes, “The exceptionalist denial that we ourselves are food for others is reflected in many aspects of our conventional death and burial practices—the strong coffin, conventionally buried well below the level of soil fauna activity, and the slab over the grave to prevent anything digging us up, supposedly keeps the Western human body from becoming food for other species” (92). Because the reigning hegemonic model hyperseparates humans—and human death—from nature, the human corpse exists in a kind of limbo between organic life and the existential realm of the rationalist human mind, unable to partake in the

natural order of live-consume-die-nourish. It is precisely this denial of the human corpse from the rest of nature that I will engage with in the next part of this paper.

Now that I have outlined Val Plumwood's argument that Western rationalism leads to the problematic, hierarchical/hyperseparated dualism of human/nature, I will demonstrate how this logic could be mapped onto the relationship practiced in the United States between life and death. As Gary Laderman explains in his book, *Rest in Peace: A Cultural History of Death and the Funeral Home in Twentieth-Century America*, by the start of the twentieth century, "the relationship between the living and the dead in America had begun to change dramatically [due to] the rise of [1] hospitals as places of dying, and [2] the growth of modern embalming" (Laderman, Gary. Pg. 1). This move away from dying in the home to dying in the hospital, which I call the 'medicalization of death,' meant that death "ceased to be accepted as a natural, necessary phenomenon" (ibid). In other words, death began to be seen as a technological failure, as a 'business lost.' This distant, scientifically-driven perspective which privileges the "medico-scientific" gaze of educated 'experts' (i.e. physicians) fits within the hegemonic rationalist hierarchy through the way it physically and psychologically *hyperseparates* most people from the dying process (ibid). When we send our dying away to institutions which are meant to 'solve' death, we not only lose touch with the physicality of death—what it looks like, smells like, feels like—but we also lose touch with naturalness of death—i.e. that death is a natural, expected occurrence. We, along with our dying loved ones, become situated in a system which is predicated on seeing death as a failure of our rational, technological prowess. We come to see death, as Plumwood describes, as something disconnected from the realm of the human because of its lack of connection to disembodied, 'pure' rationality. The medicalization of death also turns the human-death relationship into something akin to the master-slave hierarchical

relationship that Plumwood describes because of the way that it regards death “as an accident, a sign of helplessness or clumsiness that must be put out of mind” (ibid. Pg. 4). That is, because death is seen as such an inferior state of being in the Western model of hierarchical dualisms, it is effectively pushed away from the collective American consciousness in order to preserve the hyperseparated state of ‘life’ as the dominant state of being, left unchallenged and thereby utterly superior. In fact, it is this *lack of challenge* which characterizes a monological, hyperseparated system, because a dialogue cannot be had between the two sides of a hierarchical dualism if the ‘subordinate’ side is rendered invisible and voiceless.

The other way Laderman describes the hyperseparation and domination of death is through the modernized practice of ‘professional’ embalming. According to an article in *The Smithsonian*, “If you were to die in 2017... You would most likely be interred with the blood and organs of your body replaced with carcinogenic preservative liquids, heavily cosmetized to hide the signs of the the embalming surgery that rendered you this way. Your embalmed body would be placed in an airtight casket, itself placed inside a concrete vault in the ground” (“When You Die, You'll Probably Be Embalmed. Thank Abraham Lincoln For That”). In other words, if you die in the United States and you don’t have an after-death plan specified in your advanced directive, you will most likely be embalmed because it is the most common, so-called ‘traditional’ way that most corpses are treated in the United States today. However, this wasn’t always the case; it is largely a modern phenomenon, having gained popularity in the early twentieth century with the rise of professional embalmers. Gary Laderman writes, “As more and more undertakers became versed in the delicate process of arterial embalming, and produced *inoffensive, well-groomed, and appealing corpses*, the public embraced the practice as an integral component of a successful funeral” (Laderman, Gary. Pg. 6. italics mine). The key

words here are “inoffensive,” “well-groomed” and “appealing” because they demonstrate the way that the embalming process attempts to remove the natural, messy processes of decomposition from human corpses. In the words of Suzanne Kelly, a mortician and natural death activist, the embalming process effectively “hyperseparate[s] the dead body [from nature]—its value and purpose [having been] denied and thwarted” (Kelly, Suzanne). Furthermore, by dosing the dead body with toxic chemicals it “comes under the control and obedience of science and technology—the funerary industry—remade and cast out of the cycles of the environment” (ibid). Kelly effectively sums up here how the embalming process plays into Plumwood’s conception of *hyperseparated, hierarchical dualisms*. By replacing the body’s natural compounds with toxic carcinogens meant to keep the body sequestered from the process of decomposition—from returning to nature to nourish the soil biota—the dead human body is hyperseparated from the rest of nature, unable to participate with it, unable to give itself up in a dialogical, give-and-take relationship.

Finally, now that I have described how Plumwood’s model of Western hierarchical, hyperseparated dualisms are mapped onto the way that Americans practice their most popular death and dying rituals, I will conclude with examples of various non-dominant/non-dualistic ways of practicing death and dying rituals in order to suggest a model for how we can combat the dominant death and dying culture in the United States. In *Ecowomanism: African American Women and Earth Honoring Faiths*, Melanie Harris argues for a more holistic, interconnected cosmology which could combat the reigning dualistic model. Specifically, she argues for a renewed emphasis on African cosmologies. She writes, “African cosmology connects the realms of spirit, nature, and humanity into one flowing web of life. That is, instead of a hierarchical or dualistic structure, African cosmology functions in a circular manner emphasizing

interconnectedness and, in the words of Thich Nhat Hanh, ‘interbeing.’ ”(Harris, Melanie. Pg. 69). This circular way of viewing the world could have a significant impact on the way that Americans practice death and dying rituals. In this epistemological model, instead of viewing humans as “discontinuous from nature,” humans and nature would be intertwined in a dialogical model which emphasizes a mutualistic, give-and-take relationship (Pluwood, Val. *Feminism*. Pg. 102). I argue, however, that we already have several death and dying options available for use in the United States which, though they are not necessarily of direct African descent, similarly express the values of give-and-take and mutual respect that Harris emphasizes.

The most promising models for more sustainable, eco-friendly death practices come from the Green Burial Movement. Green burials, as opposed to ‘traditional,’ hyper-mechanized embalmed burials, are done “sans embalming and vaults. Bodies are often buried in shrouds or simple pine coffins that allow nature access to the body and the body access to nature... Bodies buried in this way not only avoid polluting the area but actually enrich the soil with their decay” (Constantino, Christopher. “Knowing Death Differently: Green Burial.”). Green burials emphasize a return to nature, a kind of ‘giving back’ which emphasizes *mutual regard* and care between humanity and nature rather than separation and domination.

Another benefit of green burials is the way they bring the care of the dying and the deceased back into the family and out of hospitals and care facilities. In a green burial, “the preparation of the body and the burial involves a high level of *family involvement*. This involvement includes transporting and carrying for the body as well as digging the grave and burying the body. Funeral attendees are *participants, not just spectators*. [They also create] a *deeper connection amongst those still living* and the bereaved. [All of this creates] a more meaningful transition from life to death. Death becomes not a destination (the vault and casket)

but rather a journey of returning to nature or God.” (ibid. Italics mine.). Instead of the traditional way of caring for the dead and dying, in which the dying are surrounded by medical personnel and the dead are whisked away and embalmed by professionals, green burials emphasize community, connection, support, and giving back to the environment; in short, they emphasize *respect* and *care*, which are the keystones of creating a dialogical relationship of ‘interbeing’ between death and the living.

Finally, one of the largest benefits to green burials is that they can “take land permanently off the market for future development. Land designated for green burial can become healthy natural habitats with indefinite legal protection” (ibid.). This is perhaps the best example of the giving back attitude behind green burials: while giving the corpse back to the land helps to replenish and nourish the soil and forest biota, it can also permanently protect land from future development, thus protecting the soil for future generations. The reigning rationalist way of treating our dead upholds an ideology, as Plumwood writes, “where the essential self is disembodied spirit... [which] poses a false choice of continuity, even eternity, in the realm of the spirit, versus the reductive materialist concept of death as the complete ending of the story of the material, embodied self.” (Plumwood, Val. *The Eye of the Crocodile*. Pg. 91-92.). That is, through the practice of embalming, we deny that our human bodies are part of a relationship with nature, that our human bodies have the ability to continue *mattering* (both literally and figuratively) after our death. Industrial embalming is the practice we get when we apply hierarchical dualisms to human/nature and life/death. With the practice of green burials, however, which embrace the cyclical relationship humanity has with nature, we have the chance to combat that rationalistic, hierarchical dualistic way of thinking: over our dead bodies.

Annotated Bibliography:

Harris, Melanie L. *Ecowomanism: Earth-Honoring Faiths and African American Women*. Orbis, 2017

I use this source as a reference to the concept of 'interbeing,' which I will use as a model to demonstrate the usefulness of green burials, which similarly emphasize the concept of interbeing, but more specifically between life and death. Though Melanie Harris argues for an epistemological model based on African cosmologies, I will argue that more sustainable death and dying practices, which partake of the concept of 'interbeing,' need not be specifically descended from African cosmologies to accomplish the same goal.

Kelly, Suzanne. "Dead Bodies That Matter: Toward a New Ecology of Human Death in American Culture." *Journal of American Culture (Malden, Mass. : 2003)* 35.1 (2012): 37-51. Web.

Suzanne Kelly's essay is a particularly useful source for this essay because she writes directly about how Plumwood's model of hierarchical, hyperseparated dualisms can be mapped onto the way that most Americans practice death and dying. I reference Suzanne Kelly several times throughout the paper to further highlight how Plumwood's model maps onto ecologically unsustainable, psychologically harmful death and dying practices.

Laderman, Gary. *Rest in Peace: A Cultural History of Death and the Funeral Home in Twentieth-Century America*. Oxford University Press, 2003.

This book by Gary Laderman, who is a professor of American Religious History and Cultures at Emory College, traces the origins of American funeral rituals—from the evolution of embalming techniques and the shift from home funerals to funeral homes at the turn of the century, to the increasing subordination of priests, ministers, and other

religious figures to the funeral director throughout the twentieth century. I will use this source to demonstrate how the medicalization of death and dying, coupled with the rise of the professionalized funeral industry, serves to both physically and epistemologically separate the living from the dead, resulting in unsustainable death and dying practices.

Mitford, Jessica. *The American Way of Death Revisited*. Alfred A. Knopf, 1998.

This book was originally published in 1963 as a lengthy piece of investigative journalism exposing the predatory and unsustainable practices of the American funeral industry. Before her death in 1996, Jessica Mitford thoroughly revised her 1963 book in order to highlight both how funeral practices have remained largely unchanged, and how they have become simultaneously more predatory with the advent of inflated cremation costs, the telemarketing of pay-in-advance graves, and the effects of monopolies in a death-care industry now dominated by multinational corporations. I will use this source in my paper to highlight the way that American funeral practices deny and background the natural processes of death through embalming, airbrushing, concrete-and-steel burial vaults, and even through the way that the dead are clothed.

Plumwood, Val. *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason*. Routledge, 2007.

The quotes I picked from this particular work by Val Plumwood are meant to demonstrate the way that hegemonic westernized “rationalism” supports a hyper-accentuated, hierarchical separation from nature. They are meant to demonstrate how rationalism separates us—humanity—from that which is natural, which for the purpose of this paper, is *death*. I will then suggest that this psychological separation from the natural processes of death and dying leads to a physical separation from death, which then leads to our westernized fear of death. This fear, then, which stems from Plumwood’s notion of

hegemonic rationalism, results in unsustainable and psychically malnourished death and dying practices.

Plumwood, Val. *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*. Routledge, 2015.

This book by Val Plumwood interrogates the way that western rationalistic, hierarchical dualisms are intertwined and inseparable. This inseparability means, then, that we cannot hope to foster an environmental ethic without first addressing and changing the foundation of western rationalistic, hierarchical dualisms, such as the sharp divide between humans and nature—and as I will argue in my paper, between life and death. In addition to Plumwood's later work, *Environmental Culture*, I will use this book (specifically chapters 2 and 3) to explain Plumwood's conception of western dualisms in order to later show how they undergird our unsustainable American funeral practices.

Plumwood, Val. *The Eye of the Crocodile*. Australian National University, 2012.

This book by Plumwood may be somewhat less theoretically dense than her earlier works, but it is particularly useful for my purposes because she touches directly on the ways that hierarchical, hyperseparated dualisms separate humanity from both death and nature. I reference this work in the first section of the essay in order to highlight the particular way that hierarchical, hyperseparated dualisms deny the connection that human corpses have with the food chain and the rest of nature.

“When You Die, You'll Probably Be Embalmed. Thank Abraham Lincoln For

That.” *Smithsonian.com*, Smithsonian Institution, 1 Nov. 2017,

<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/how-lincolns-embrace-embalming-birthed-american-funeral-industry-180967038/>.

I only briefly use this source as a reference to the continuing dominance and popularity of embalming in the United States. While it is true that cremation is rapidly approaching parity with embalming, I chose to focus solely on the practice of embalming in this essay because it is still more popular than cremation and also presents a better model for the way that hierarchical, hyperseparated dualisms play out in after-death practices. If this essay were longer, however, then I would certainly have touched on commercial cremation as well.