

# Rethinking Historical Time

*New Approaches to Presentism*

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## Death and Archaeology in the Present, Tense

Shannon Lee Dawdy

If we are at the 'end of history', then can the death of archaeology be far behind? This is a wrong-headed question. I will show why via a critique of anti-presentism. Then I will go somewhere more interesting. Namely, how cultural attitudes towards our individual deaths can be understood as a cosmological miniature of the dominant temporal paradigm (a cultural formation). How we think about and treat death is tangled up in our experience of the present, our projections of a collective future, and the way we write about the past. And death is changing rapidly: does this represent a 'crisis of time' (Hartog 2015: 16)? In this chapter, I will start with an anthropology of history and end up at an archaeology of the contemporary.

### Some problems with presentism and the end of history

*What happened leaves traces, some of which are quite concrete – buildings, dead bodies, censuses, monuments, diaries, political boundaries – that limit the range and significance of any historical narrative. This is one of many reasons why not any fiction can pass for history: the materiality of the sociohistorical process (historicity 1) sets the stage for future historical narratives (historicity 2).*

Trouillot 1995: 29

Many scholars have been making pronouncements about the 'end of history' and the 'tyranny of the present'. What is meant by this? Unfortunately, many things. For one thing (I'll call it Problem Number One), it is often not clear whether they mean Trouillot's Historicity 1 or Historicity 2, or some confused blending of the two (another way to gloss the difference is 'traces of the past' versus 'historiography'). Most seem to mean the end of historicity 2, History with a capital 'H'; or the grand narratives of domesticating events into a developmental trajectory. The writing of History abets Enlightenment ideas about progress, which are implicated as much in Marxian analysis as in racist evolutionary thought and aggrandizing nationalism. Historical writing of this era, a particular 'regime of historicity' in Hartog's (2015) language, was as much about inscribing the future as predicting the past. It was, in a word, teleological. Foucault's (1982) critique attempted to bring an end to this kind of History. Because it

is a fiction woven through gaps and silences. Because it is so often an iteration of state power. But thus far Foucault has failed to revolutionize the deeply conservative field of History.

Or the entrenched ideological attraction of teleological discourse. A case in point is another well-known author who tried to kill off history from a completely different perspective. With *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992), Francis Fukuyama attempted to write one of the grandest narratives of the late twentieth century. Following the Hegelian tradition, which presumes a universal world history unfolding, this political scientist pronounces that the end is coming in the form of a perfected stage of development – there's nowhere else (better) to go after most of the world is governed by liberal democracies and the free market. Fukuyama firmly believes that human history (that is, Historicity 1, the past) follows an evolutionary course and although he worries about the dangers of uncontrolled technology, his political stance doesn't so much end history as it ends the future. It is already known. No surprises are possible. This is Problem Number Two – even those who pronounce 'the end of history' really mean the end of the future, which is confusing. In *Specters of Marx*, Derrida (1994) analysed Fukuyama's rhetoric as an essentially Christian eschatology (the world will finally be united as a Holy Empire of non-nations) and an anxious attempt to kill Marx and end any possibility of communism by simply declaring it a thing of the past. Fukuyama's narrative is a kind of textual super-modernity (Augé 1992; González-Ruibal 2008) rather than postmodernity.

Somewhere in between lies François Hartog's (2015) *Regimes of Historicity*. While being a 'historian of history' who synthesizes the work of others (primarily that of Reinhart Koselleck and Paul Ricoeur), Hartog most of the time seems to mean Historicity 2 – or the way that we Western-style academics narrate events of the past. He starts with Homer and works his way up. But what remains entangled is how the experience of time – its duration, its speed, its repeatability, its depth – is reflected in how we write history. *Temporality* would have been a better translation into English than historicity for many of his examples. The gap between experience and narrative seems to be almost non-existent for Hartog. Thus, there seems to be no significant distinction between the perspective of the historian and the experience of other actors. History (Historicity 2) and its cultural milieu (its anthropology) are one and the same. Although I'm going to call this Problem Number Three (the occlusion of everyday temporality and narrativity), this perspective has its merits. It does not enshrine the historian with a privileged, omniscient experience of time denied to the rest of us.

Hartog's account narrates the by-now familiar depiction of modernity as characterized by speed and acceleration. Anthropologist Thomas Eriksen (2001) in his book, *Tyranny of the Moment*, documented the speed-up of time that has been growing exponentially since at least the Industrial Revolution, and its deleterious effects on human relations. He says, 'acceleration affects both the production of knowledge and the very mode of thought in contemporary culture' (2001: 148). Eriksen expresses an apocalyptic sense of temporality that is shared by the French architect and philosopher Paul Virilio, geographer David Harvey and theorist-at-large Frederic Jameson. That is: that we live in an era in which time is compressed and broken up, through our telecommunications, travel and modes of work into tiny, manic fragments such that we

have lost even modernity's sense of progressive linearity. Eriksen and Virilio go so far as to say that time itself stops and melts into an eternal present. According to Virilio, dromocracy, or a political economy where speed is power, is creating 'a society that has no future and no past, no extension and no duration' (1997: 28).

Frederic Jameson writes in an article titled the 'The End of Temporality' (presumably playing with Fukuyama) that 'the new rhythms are transmitted to cultural production in the form of the narratives we consume and the stories we tell ourselves' (Jameson 2003: 704). He then proceeds to analyse the Keanu Reeves and Sandra Bullock Hollywood blockbuster film *Speed* as a cultural production that captures what Eriksen would call the tyranny of the moment and what Virilio would call dromocracy. Virilio's (2004) work is coloured by a dystopian romanticism, a sense that not only experience, but materiality and space itself, are being emptied out by the virtual, and by speed. The means (vehicles) matter more than the ends (cargo) and we are losing sight of where we are going. We have lost the future.

What is helpful from this anxious literature is the serious attention to tempo (speed) over progression, especially as evidenced by an anthropology of experience that documents how media, digitized communication, transportation, warfare, artificial lighting, etc. affect our experience of time. What is not so helpful (Problem Number Four) is the simplistic division of time into past-present-future that really doesn't get us very far towards a cultural phenomenology of time. When these authors note the planned and ever-faster obsolescence of commodities, the way that even unprecedented events like 9/11 are immediately mediated and archived, or the ways that technology (especially cell phones) keeps us always reacting and rarely planning, they are not describing a society living in the present. What they are actually describing is a form of temporality chopped into little bits – pieces of data – that are moved around in space-time in different configurations. It would be more accurate to say we have become a compulsively archival society that does anything *but* experience the present because we are so busy recording and creating a past as a resource for the future. Sometimes the bits (digital images, emails, but also material items like plastic cups) are put quickly and permanently into the past – archiving as oblivion, discard. Sometimes the data bits are collected precisely because you plan on using them in the future – for utilitarian purposes, or planned nostalgia (the Facebook function that recycles posts on their anniversary captures this archival function perfectly – it is both retrospective and prospective). The past is, if anything, more accessible to more people than ever before. Further, a great deal of labour and life activity is oriented not so much towards the present but a near-future (the next thing on our to-do list, the weekend, etc.). This is, in fact, a common observation of contemporary consumer society about which many people have some critical self-awareness. Yoga teachers and purveyors of self-help manuals offer the counter-mantra, 'be mindful in the present'. I am suggesting that a more qualitative approach to temporality that looks closely at the thought and behavioural patterns that get lumped under presentism would be more productive than hand-wringing about the 'tyranny of the present'. The current dominant temporal paradigm of post-industrial, cosmopolitan society might better be described as 'Anticipatory Bit-Time'. This phrase captures two tendencies: (1) we are an archiving society that chops time into small, moveable bits, and (2) that we have a strong tendency



to live in a state framed by the near-future. But even this dominant paradigm may be changing (an assertion I will expand upon in the very near future!).

So, what about archaeology? Archaeology, as many have noted, is the antiquarian practice par excellence. Archaeologists produce antiquity. We have helped define modernity by showing what it is not. If the history of grand narratives is dying, as Foucault wanted and Hartog seems to fear, then surely old school archaeology must be dying too? Some branches may be but the subfield of historical archaeology has striven to respond to Foucault's critique of teleology. The field has also struggled to define itself in temporal terms. The prevailing definition is synonymous with the archaeology of modernity (circa 1450 forward). Until recently, it would be rare to read about components that dated later than about the First World War. Once we arrived in a period with living narrators who can provide a memory of events, archaeology seemed to stop. But now even that has changed. Starting in the 1990s, archaeologists began to pay more attention to the 'recent past', although where the divide between the 'present' and the 'recent past' lies is usually left unspecified (Buchli and Lucas 2001; Graves-Brown, Harrison and Piccini 2013; see also the *Journal of Contemporary Archaeology*). Archaeologists, perhaps better than historians, have long known that such periodization is more a matter of heuristics than reality. The cut-off between the past and the present is, if not arbitrary, culturally relative (Problem Number Five for the anti-presentists, who never define the boundary). As the subfield has gained momentum, more practitioners now call what they do an 'archaeology of the contemporary'.

Old school scholars ask: how can this be archaeology at all? Isn't it by definition a study of past societies? Clearly, archaeologists of the contemporary are in the process of redefining what archaeology is (I now explain to students that it is simply the study of human-material relations). I have to wonder whether Eriksen et al. would take this archaeological movement as a symptom of 'the tyranny of the present'. I accept the implication of the alarmists (as unreflective as it may be) that the interpenetration of popular and scholarly temporalities has significant effects. But perhaps this seepage is productive, not dangerous. In the next section, I will show how I am letting everyday temporalities inform my own work as an archaeologist of the contemporary. Doing so allows me to see that popular conceptions of collective time are on the verge of a tectonic shift. This shift goes so deep it involves how we (those living in post-industrial, cosmopolitan and increasingly secular spaces) think about the most fundamental timeline of all: our own lives, and deaths.

### An archaeology of contemporary death

Frederic Jameson takes the anxious critique of presentism to a startlingly personal level when he diagnoses one possible cause for what he thinks of as our delusional entrapment in an eternal present. He says, 'perhaps our own attitudes on the subject [of destiny and fate] are conditioned by the modern American concealment and sanitization of death' (Jameson 2003: 709). Jameson does little more with this intriguing suggestion. However, Philippe Ariès (1974, 1981), in his opus on Western death, connected the way death was imagined and treated as a symptom of the gestalt of each

period. Although not explicitly one of Ariès's themes, I will trace here how ideas about the afterlife and the ways they reverberated upon individual trajectories necessarily involves a paradigm of temporality. Ariès's scheme identified four (later, five) basic phases of Christian European death. 'The Tame Death' of the early medieval period is one in which death was considered natural, reflecting 'the conviction that the life of a man is not an individual destiny but a link in an unbroken chain, the biological continuation of a family or a line that begins with Adam and includes the whole human race' (Ariès 1981: 603). The second phase, the 'Death of the Self', marks the beginnings of a more pronounced individualism in the late medieval period continuing through the Renaissance and the Enlightenment (ending with the 'Remote and Imminent Death' of atheism). Life became unpredictable and death was a violent rupture. From the Romantic period into the Victorian era, some amelioration of this crisis in death appeared in the form of a focus on enduring love and the development of a death cult: 'The next world becomes the scene of the reunion of those whom death has separated' (Ariès 1981: 573). Aspects of this death culture and its memorialization practices (monuments, mourning jewellery, obituaries, death photography, etc.) never entirely went away. These phases should not be seen as entirely replacing one another, but as overlapping and evolving cultural formations. As one reviewer says, Ariès's approach was, 'a mélange of the synchronic and the diachronic' (Porter 1999: 83; for other critiques, see Stone 1978; Whaley 1981). For my purposes, what is important is not whether Ariès's periodization is solid, but that in each case a more general temporal gestalt is embedded in attitudes towards death.

This brings us to the contemporary moment and Ariès's 'Invisible Death', which could also be titled the sanitized or medicalized death of the twentieth century. This cultural period marks the colonization of death by science and industry. Death represents a failure of the body; it becomes dirty and embarrassing. Outside the professional sanctuaries of funeral homes, communal rituals started to break down. To cover the shame, embalming and restoration aimed to create a lifelike 'memory picture', which suggested the deceased were only sleeping. These practices led, according to Ariès, to a society that behaved, 'as if death did not exist' (Ariès 1981: 613). This denial of death, developed in its most extreme form in the United States, was made easier by the sequestering of the corpse in morgues, funeral homes and suburban cemeteries. Or by eliminating it altogether through the even more sanitary practice of cremation. In a world in which one's own death is denied and that of others rarely spoken about, the present, indeed, expands exponentially because there is no clear endpoint, no imagined future.

This brings us back to Jameson, who could just as well be citing Ariès on 'the modern American concealment and sanitization of death' (Jameson 2003: 709). What I want to emphasize is that this comment made in passing by Jameson indexes his intuition that our attitudes towards death are bound up with our dominant temporal paradigm in everyday life. I would argue that it is impossible to say that one merely reflects the other; rather, they are co-constitutive. As accounted in my re-interpretation of Ariès' phases of Western death, the phenomenological temporality of life tends to cohere with conceptions of death. A sequestered denial of death, with funeral practices broken into little bits of standardized professionalism and non-linear 'memory pictures'

reproduced at a funeral service fitted with the inadmissible long future and modular character of 'Anticipatory Bit-Time'.

However, Jameson and Ariès only bring us up to about the end of the twentieth century. It is starting to look like we will need to label a new period. The denial of death, Ariès' 'Invisible Death', is breaking down and being replaced by a new gestalt. I will illustrate what I mean with some snapshots from my own research on contemporary death practices in the United States. However, the movements that I will describe have parallels in the UK, Australia and Western Europe. Nonetheless, it is safe to say that an extreme form of sanitized death was practised in the United States in the twentieth century. I am also comfortable saying, as a result of research by myself and others, that American death is now going through a kind of post-industrial revolution. In the conclusion, I will return to what all this seems to portend: if death practices are changing, then the dominant temporal paradigm may be as well. While this transformation is still emergent and uncertain, I believe we are witnessing the beginning of the end of what has been called presentism.

To date, the most significant work on modern American death practices remains journalist Jessica Mitford's classic exposé, *The American Way of Death* (1963, revised 1998), which documented the ways that the American funeral industry standardized this important life ritual and professionalized what used to be a form of family care. Viewing of the embalmed body became a standard practice of a proper funeral among Christian and secular Americans. Despite Mitford's critique, for decades little changed in American funeral practices. But between 2000 and 2015, the cremation rate doubled and now one-half of all Americans choose this disposition of the body with rates projected to reach 70 per cent by 2030. Northern California, where cremation rates are already at 80 per cent, is also the epicentre of two newer movements – green burial and at-home (or DIY) funerals. In this chapter, I will focus on these last two because they are newer trends and adherents are particularly articulate about the values that drive their choices.

Since the fall of 2015, with my collaborator, filmmaker Daniel Zox, I have been travelling the United States, from the Midwest to New Orleans to California, conducting interviews. The simple question at the heart of the project is: What does the changing face of death tell us about American life? We follow key innovators who are transforming the treatment of human remains and forms of memorialization. We also speak to everyday Americans and ask them two key questions: *what do you want done with your body after you die?* and *what do you think happens to us after we die?* Although our focus is contemporary society, we are engaged in a classic archaeological operation: how do the ways in which a society treats its dead reflect its cosmology, its values, its organization? In what follows, I zero in on those moments when temporality was invoked.

In addition to innovators, we spoke to over twenty conventional funeral directors and staff members to get their perspective on how funeral practices are changing. While they have been criticized by Mitford and others for being the main agents of the depersonalization of death in the United States, these professionals often express a deeply compassionate orientation – and a pronounced worry that most Americans seeking their services are in too much of a hurry.

Jason is an independent funeral director located in rural Louisiana.<sup>1</sup> He says that funerals are becoming smaller – and shorter. He says that this is because 'as a culture,

we have less time'. He cites a fact referenced by many other conventional funeral directors I spoke to: that the traditional American funeral used to take several days (in the range of three to five): a three-day wake and vigil, followed by a funeral ritual and then a separate graveside ritual. Now, most funerals last half a day, at most. Some services take as little as twenty minutes. The wake has been replaced by an optional hour or two before the service for viewing (of the body) and visitation (with the family), or been eliminated altogether. If a burial is the chosen disposition, often only a few family members are present to witness the interment, if anyone is there at all. Cremation, unless the family members are Hindu or Buddhist, connotes no expected rituals at all and is often handled via email and postal delivery of the remains.

The reasons for this speed-up in the conventional funeral is both attitudinal and structural. Jason says that people just don't think they are important anymore, but also that families are so scattered, over hundreds or thousands of miles, that the travel involved takes significant time. Even if their employer offers bereavement leave (not a protected right or standard benefit in the United States, see Cann 2014: 3–10), it is rarely more than three days, two of which are eaten up by travel. Those living on precarious hourly wages often have no paid leave at all and can't afford to go many days without pay.

This compression of time has meant a transformation of funeral space. Jason selected the ranch-style house converted into a funeral home because the chapel area was small. This means that with the dwindling attendance at conventional funerals, the room might still feel full and not so sad. These businesses were once *homes*, as another one of my interviewees said. Sometimes the funeral director's family lived upstairs, but these capacious buildings also provided sleeping rooms, kitchens and eating areas for family members who were coming from out of town. Funeral homes were in part hospitality businesses for an extended ritual that intentionally suspended the rhythm of labour and life.

The majority of the professional funeral directors I spoke with expressed a variation of the concern that most of their clients are moving too fast. They worry that grieving itself is being short-circuited by the speed of life. The end-stage of Ariès's 'Invisible Death' stage needs an additional qualification: the death ritual has sped up and barely interrupts the flow of life. Here one does get the sense that the temporal paradigm is one of speed, in which we barrel towards a near-future (while denying the long-future of death) and rarely pause to appreciate the present. But, as most all of my interlocutors also asserted, these conditions and the overall depersonalization of death may be coming to an end. There are two growing movements in American death practice that reflect this with particular clarity: one revolves around the preparation of the corpse and rituals in the immediate period after death, and the other embraces the long *durée* of human matter and energy.

## DIY death

One of the fallouts of the industrialization of death in twentieth-century America is a confusion between standard practice and legality. As a result, many Americans operate under the misconception that only a licensed funeral director can prepare the body for



burial or cremation, or that the corpse must, as soon as possible after the heart stops, be transferred to a morgue (if an autopsy is required) or a funeral home. Juridically, freedom of religion has always allowed family care of the body (washing, dressing, visitation) in a home, and religious minorities such as the Amish and Orthodox Jews were never forced to adopt professionalized death care. Another popular misconception is that the corpse is a source of dangerous contamination, but there are very few diseases that survive the host's death (even the perception that cholera originates from dead bodies is incorrect (World Health Organization 2018)).

A similar misunderstanding ruled throughout much of the twentieth century that the only place to legitimately *begin* life was in a hospital. But the home birth movement of the 1970s attempted to change that perception and led to the rise of a generation of lay midwives and doulas who worked to demedicalize the natural process of birth. Some of these same women, or those influenced by them, have begun to switch their attention to the demedicalization of the other end of the life-cycle.<sup>2</sup> Throughout the United States, but especially along the West Coast (Washington, Oregon and California), a grassroots movement advocating for at-home body preparation and funerals is growing. In this movement, not only is the professional funeral home bypassed as a locale for services, but embalming is rejected. The values emphasize family-centred care and chemical-free processes. The primary rationale for a home funeral is that direct contact with the loved one's body aids in the grieving process by overcoming the denial of death.

Grace runs a small consultancy based in Northern California, but she travels all over the country training individuals to become 'death doulas', or to prepare for a death in their own family for which an at-home funeral is planned. In the course of her 20-year career, she has worked with over 400 families. Her description of the process is suffused with temporality. For one thing, the clock is slowed way down – back, in fact, to the timeline of the pre-industrial era. Although theoretically an at-home funeral could take place very quickly – within twenty-four hours as practised by Orthodox Jews and traditional Muslims – absent these religious traditions, Grace's training programme presumes a three to four day timeline during which the body is washed by family members, dressed and perfumed with essential oils, and placed on dry ice. Family and friends are then welcomed to visit with the deceased over a period of days. Or, those outside the immediate family are invited for a particular ritual or phase of the wake and funeral. There is a strong focus on *re-personalizing* the experience – decorative objects, dress, food served, music played, scents, etc. – should reflect the likes and personality of the deceased. Rituals are often ad hoc and improvised according to the lifestyle and values of close family and friends.

Grace says that people around the world keep the corpse at home for three days, and there is a reason for this beyond the need to allow adequate time for visiting and rituals, or even to verify (prior to modern medicine) that the individual was not just in a deep coma. That is, in those three days, the non-embalmed body undergoes a series of transformations. Death, she says, 'is not an event, it's a process'. It takes a while for the body's systems to shut down. Immediately after death, the body takes a while to cool. Rigor mortis peaks around thirteen hours after death but it usually lasts no more than two days, after which the tissues relax again, often resulting in a peaceful expression coming over the deceased's face. This transformation is something Grace believes to be

a vital passage for loved ones to witness. By the third or fourth day, the skin starts to fade and shrink and the body 'looks like a shell'. The death process is coming to an end. Importantly for Grace, at that point death cannot be denied – there is no one home in that shell. The body becomes unfamiliar and uncanny. Loved ones can then accept that the spirit has moved on. The body no longer is the loved one, but a collection of mere bones and tissues, cells and molecules.

In addition to training other death doulas, Grace oversees at-home funerals for clients in her community. But education remains her main task – to educate family members about options, about what to expect, and what steps to take. She often gets a call in the middle of the night from panicked family members once someone has passed away at home, wondering what they should do. The first thing she tells them is: 'There's no rush. Go get some rest.' As Alexa Hargerty notes in her own study of the home funeral movement: 'One of the expressions frequently heard in the movement is "death is not an emergency"' (Hargerty 2014: 436). This message is both a surprise and a relief to Americans accustomed to speeding through life. It also contradicts their conditioning to think of death as a sudden failure of the body followed by a dangerous liminal state. Naturalizing death for Grace means slowing it down.

This deceleration extends to the period after the funeral. Opportunities for memorialization and ritual observance do not have to be restricted to those three to four days. In the case of a close friend whose death and directions for an at-home funeral served as Grace's calling to this work, it was not until over a year later, when she was on a white water rafting trip, that she scattered her share of the ashes. At that moment, she felt not closure but 'completion with the deepest of the grief'. Another way in which at-home funerals work against the denial of death is by keeping the relationship between the dead and the living open. For those like Grace working to naturalize the death process, the dead are never entirely gone. Their spirit gets broken up and redistributed into memory snapshots and momentary flashbacks. But it also, along with the body's constituent molecules, gets absorbed into the environment and eventually transformed into animals, plants and minerals. Grace expresses a belief in a general form of reincarnation. Although the long future of death is vague, it is definitely not final. Death marks not the end of life, but its transformation into another form. It is a form of recycling. Grace says that for her own arrangements, she is intrigued by a proposed project to compost human bodies. Her death beliefs are consistent with an emerging temporality of life itself that is not fast and linear, but slow, distributed and cyclical. It is reflected in everything from the 'slow food' movement to recycling habits, to the self-help command to 'be present'.

## Green burial

Readers may be more familiar with the green burial movement (also called natural burial in the UK or forest burial in Germany (Hockey et al. 2012)). As with DIY funerals, one of the main tenets involves moving away from embalming and the sanitation of death that in the cemetery is extended through the use of concrete vaults and metal caskets. These material practices express important aspects of Ariès's

'Invisible Death': the desire to delay or deny decomposition, and the belief that the corpse poses a contaminating danger to the living. But what the decaying corpse may have presented most dangerously is a confrontation with the end of one's own story. In the linear, heavily narrativized temporality of late modernity, every story and every movie have an ending. But a different time gestalt is reflected in the growing popularity of green burial. As reflected in the culture of DIY funerals, death is not an ending but a transformation.

Lucas is an entrepreneur in California who several years ago purchased a small town cemetery north of San Francisco and began developing sections of it for traditional Jewish and green burials. He saw a market for this choice in death among the generally wealthy, educated and environmentally conscious local population. Although a businessman, he can reflect on what he has learned about life by falling into this business through a sideline as a website developer for funeral directors. He notes that the American denial of death is still very much alive: 'I laugh when someone says, "if I die" because it's "*when* I die". Although Lucas himself is trying to bring change to a conservative industry, he notes that things are changing anyway because the Baby Boomer generation demands personalization in all of their consumer choices. But there are larger values and trends coming into play as well. He believes that climate change is starting to instil a greater sense of responsibility and a realization that denying our own deaths is causing harm to the planet – both in terms of the disposition of the body (the chemicals used in embalming and the fact that cremation pumps most of our personal carbon into the atmosphere) and in terms of the speed with which we consume in our disposable lifestyle. He links the way Americans have lived to how they die and notes that the mid-twentieth century was all about conspicuous consumption – from the cars we drove when living to the fancy casket we rode into oblivion. And now people are starting to question both the greed and speed of life – which translates into a lower profile death. He says that because people's memories can be sustained in a digital afterlife via platforms like Facebook, stalling decomposition is no longer as important. He thinks we are coming back to a 'dust to dust' approach to the body.

In addition to body treatment being chemical-free, the green section of Lucas's cemetery has guidelines for the other material components of death. The body must be in a natural fibre shroud (and ideally any clothes should also be natural fibre) or a coffin made of unpainted wood and fastened with dowels rather than metal. Markers can be natural stone (uncut), preferably locally sourced. They can have a name and date cut into them, but otherwise should not be ostentatious. Some families opt for no markers at all. Further, landscaping is restricted to native plants – the aim is to 're-wild' cemetery space. In fact, the cemetery has a designation as a National Wildlife Federation Certified Habitat. After the burial and on anniversaries, family members may leave votive artefacts of remembrance, but these too should be of natural materials. Plastic is especially discouraged. On our visits to the cemetery, we saw peacock feathers, sea shells, paper notes and pebbles left on the graves. In one case, a loved one had gone the extra distance to carve a replica of a cell phone out of organic wood to leave on the grave. Perhaps no other artefact expresses the conflicting temporal values struggling for dominance in American life today: a tension between the addictive speed of

technological life and the soothingly slow process of organic decay. When I asked Lucas about what he thinks happens to us after we die, he says 'we return to a vastness'. The theme of return, like Grace's version of reincarnation, suggests a deep break with the linear times of Christian eschatology and Enlightenment progress.

The popularity of green burial may also index a growing temporal consciousness of a deep future – a mirror image of the deep history that climate change awakens (Chakrabarty 2009). Those who embrace green burial not only refuse to deny death, they welcome gradual decomposition and are no longer attracted to the clock-stopping magic of embalming. For them, death is imagined as a definitive but slow process of disintegration and return. And it is not just a choice for the elite green consumer. Two women we met – one a nurse and another a manicurist – said they were 'excited' about green burial and the fact that a new cemetery had just been permitted for their rural county. In response to a question about what she wanted for her own burial, the nurse said: 'I know it sounds a little morbid, but just kind of let the natural decomposition process happen the way it is naturally supposed to happen.' And she wants her body to feed a tree, to give back to the planet in some small way.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I have made two central arguments. The first is that the anxieties about presentism expressed by historians are muddled by a number of analytical confusions, the most critical being a simplistic reliance on an unqualified division of the past-present-future and a tendency to confuse lived temporality with historical narrativity. My second argument, made with the assistance of Philippe Ariès, is that death practices are a powerful index of broader temporal gestalts that more pervasively define the tempo and phrasing of life itself.

My sense is that we are witnessing not only a new kind of death, but a new temporal paradigm for a post-industrial, post-petroleum world. Given the ways in which practitioners and adherents articulate how these new (or returned) death practices relate to other cultural currents, such as movements to simplify and live with fewer commodities, and an ethic centred on caring for the long-term health of the planet, I predict that the tension between industrial and green death will continue to build until there is a shift in the temporal paradigm. The problems these emerging values respond to are unlikely to disappear.

It is important to point out that these efforts to slow down the process of death and allow decay to do its work go hand-in-hand with a different type of affective language permeating funeral practice in the United States. We are moving from mourning rituals to 'celebrations of life'. This important change is sweeping across the landscape of death care, affecting funerals with more conventional material practices as well as the alternative practices I've described here. Celebrations represent a broad-based shift away from narrating a linear plotline (a life) that came to an (always tragic) end, to a form of memorialization that makes use of the bit-time of the present. At celebrations of life, it has become standard practice to project a montage of images from the individual's life that focus on the happy times and funny moments in the deceased's life,



even if it was an untimely death. The focus has shifted away from the end of the story to its constituent and recombinant parts. Obituaries are a form of fiction that force a linear narrative upon the chaos of lived life. And while they are still used, particularly for the older generation, photo collages and 'memory pages', where snapshots of the past can be endlessly re-arranged, experienced and re-posted in virtual space, have taken a much more central place in American memorialization. More and more, it appears we may live and die as small recycling bits of matter and spirit that defy linearity. Historians' histrionics aside, the death-denying 'tyranny of the present' is on its way out and the future is expanding into a long, natural cycle of regeneration. As for the future of narrativity, if the close relationship between temporal experience and the historiographic imagination holds, then archaeology – as the discipline that excels in recombining small fragments into new patterns – may not be dying at all, but coming into its own as a postmodern practice.

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### Notes

- 1 The identities of interviewees have been anonymized to protect confidentiality. Direct quotes are verbatim from filmed interviews archived by the author. Research was conducted under University of Chicago IRB protocol IRB15-1236 (exempt).
- 2 There are a small number of men who seek training for at-home funerals (though more than there are male midwives). The gender contrast between professional and at-home funeral personnel is stark and worthy of study.

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