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BECKY ALEXIS-MARTIN

Manchester Metropolitan University

Sensing the deathscape: Digital media and death during COVID-19

ABSTRACT

Across cultures, death has traditionally encompassed diverse material and ritual assemblages. Funeral practices are a unifying element of death, presenting an opportunity for communal memorialization of the deceased. These practices are environmentally embedded, spanning traditional graveyards and floral memorials, to contemporary green burials and body farms. However, COVID-19 has disrupted socio-environmental practices, due to disease transmission concerns that have manifested new constraints to funerary space. Here, I contemplate the digital deathscape during COVID-19 through three vignettes: the first considers Hart Island mass-burial drone footage and the emergence of a necropticon. The second vignette considers the emergence of domestic deathscapes and their significance to digitally broadcast (DB) funerals. The third vignette, Billy's funeral, gives interview-based insights into the porous domestic deathscape of a DB funeral guest, Samantha. All three vignettes contemplate the experience of remotely sensing the deathscape and the scenarios that arise when traditionally hidden or 'in-place' death rituals arise 'out-of-place'.

KEYWORDS

digital media
digitally mediated
funerals
drones
surveillance
necropticon
deathscapes
necrogeography
funerals

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WELCOME TO THE NECROPTICON

During the second week of April 2020, the international digital news media presented us with a stark insight into American burial in an age of COVID-19. Aerial photographer George Steinmetz's drone footage of Hart Island, New York, laid bare the utilitarian realities of mass-burial environments to millions of people worldwide (BBC 2020). Steinmetz's drone was later confiscated by the police, and he was cited for violating NYC Administrative Code §10–126, forbidding the take-off or landing of a drone within New York City (NYCC 2015). However, his short film revealed a glimpse of a strange underworld of banal death. It invited us to surveil the parsimonious processes of mass-burial first-hand, while emotionally and spatially distanced from these practices. As the COVID-19 pandemic escalated, the Hart Island footage went viral. Done footage offers a specific form of digital mediation, as it brings fresh verticalities to our sense of how abject death is sensed and (un)seen (Birtchnell 2017). It crumbles socio-environmental boundaries that would otherwise prevent us from gaining insights into the Hart Island death space, creating new panopticonic possibilities.

When Foucault contemplated the panopticon, he explored how prison surveillance produces a conscious and permanent visibility among inmates through isolation and monitoring (Foucault 1975; Sheppard-Simms 2016). Thus, the prisoner is 'seen, but he does not see; he is an object of information, never a subject in communication' (Foucault 1975: 200). The notion of the necropticon literally means 'seeing death'. It draws on Foucauldian thought to consider the new conscious and permanent visibility of death to us – made present by state isolation in quarantine, health monitoring, and media depictions of death and dying. Thus, the necropticon is well-placed as a new conceptual lens by which to consider the implications of COVID-19.

As CCTV, webcam, smart phones and drone technologies have become abundant, our digital culture has become somewhat post-panopticonic and unaware of monitoring (Nemorin 2017). The Hart Island drone footage offers a fresh reminder of our surveilled lives and deaths, as we are isolated, monitored and disciplined by our respective states to control COVID-19 transmission. When we view the Hart Island footage, we enter the *necropticon*, a virtual landscape of collectively surveilled death. As we become party to (in)visible death, we reflect upon our own mortality and its future spatialities. We watch as people we do not know, and perhaps do not even care about, are abruptly deposited into dank graves.

The Hart Island footage reveals an abject *necrogeography* of derelict buildings, scruffy scrubland and umber earth (BBC 2020; Muzaini 2017). We watch anonymous contractors excavate deep graves for the forgotten and impoverished dead. These dark trenches are then loaded with a stratigraphy of pale pine coffins, shifted by forklift truck. A delicate pattern of traction marks traverses the mud. Despite being large enough to see by space satellite, this bleak end point was never meant to be seen by us (Motherboard 2020). For many New Yorkers, this was their first insight into the United States' largest cemetery. Hart Island is 'out of bounds to the public [...] the locus of some of the darkest dimensions of New York's psyche' (Bowring 2011: 256). For 150 years, it has been a hidden and unruly green space, detached from the lively parks and gardens of the city.

Recalling the anonymous Victorian cholera pits, Hart Island has a legacy of unobtrusively interring those who have died from communicable disease: from nineteenth century tuberculosis and yellow fever to the 1980s AIDS

epidemic (Engelmann 2018; Sheppard-Simms 2016). Each mass grave gradually melds into the surrounding landscape. This quiet deathscape reveals how some bodies count more than others do, and to be privy to Hart Island during COVID-19 reminds us of the velocity of death. As we view the BBC version of the Hart Island footage, its visual captioning asserts that '[i]t is probable that some of these coffins are for COVID-19 victims' (BBC 2020). Through this narration, the abject nature of COVID-19 becomes present.

Beyond Hart Island, there are also virtual spaces where death and COVID-19 collide. Notably, Nintendo massive multiplayer online game *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* has provided a surprising landscape to memorialize loved ones. Among the virtual objects available within the game is a headstone, which players have used to create digital public memorials (DaRienzo 2020). This virtual grave within a virtual landscape offers solace for those who have experienced the real impacts of death during COVID-19. However, it is also a space of mass-surveillance. These headstones can be seen by many and contribute to a benign necrotopicon of a scale that would be impossible by a traditional graveyard.

DOMESTIC DEATHSCAPES

Across cultures, funeral practices are a unifying element of death that provide an opportunity for communal memorialization of the deceased (Perry 1993). Funerary practices are environmentally embedded, spanning graveyards and floral memorials, to green burials and body farms (Pitte 2004). Policies put in place to protect against the COVID-19 pandemic have disrupted these practices, manifesting new techno-cultural constraints to funerary space. A noteworthy phenomenon to emerge from COVID-19 is the proliferation of digitally broadcast (DB) funerals. However, digital deathscapes are not new. Previous work has explored digital commemoration, social media memorials, drone mapping and virtual reality (VR) cemetery tours (Sanders 2012; Gibbs et al. 2015; Nansen et al. 2017). Here, I consider the *domestic deathscape*: the cultural and material practices that emerge, as death arrives home through digital funeral broadcasting.

COVID-19 has reconfigured our relationships with death. For example, rapidly implemented UK guidance has restricted physical mourner numbers 'to be as low as possible' and recommended remote funeral participation by 'live-streaming' (UK Government 2020). This digital broadcasting of mourning arises as a formally prepared, presented and curated practice by the funeral industry but also informally, when guests share funerals by smartphone. This digital broadcasting of funerals is not new. For example, diaspora communities, including Ghanaians in South Florida, use DB funerals to support international inclusion (Arhin-Sam 2014; Sutherland 2017). DB funerals can also reduce disadvantages for mourners who cannot afford to travel and can improve access for those with participation-limiting disabilities (Bush 2017). Conversely, there are concerns that digital broadcasting may reduce live events to televisual representations of mourning (Nansen et al. 2017). Rabbi Rachel Timoner of Congregation Beth Elohim in Brooklyn, United States, described performing her first virtual burial service during the pandemic.

I was a filmmaker while I was burying him. I was holding my phone, trying to get the right angle, so his family at home could see what was happening. I kept asking them, 'Can you see? Is this what you want to be seeing?'

(Miller 2020: n.pag.)

This provides insights into the professional yet often media-unskilled process of mediating digital death, and Timoner's intent to provide the best experience for her 'audience', despite physical distance and adversity.

DB funeral guests have shared experiences through hashtags including #COVIDFuneral on social media. This hashtag has opened up space for collective memorialization and grieving. For example, @RayGoesTweet shared their mother's funeral via Twitter.

The live stream of my mother's funeral that will be held virtually will be held here <https://youtu.be/iZ4LTcMugdA> #riploridyne #COVID19Pandemic #covid #covidfuneral #rip #funeral #ripmom.

@RayGoesTweet (3 April 2020)

Others, including @Hexadecimal_85, describe the detachment of remote funerals through Twitter.

Watching my Pastor's funeral through FB Live is just soo strange. No one can hold and comfort each other. Everyone's wearing masks and gloves. I don't know how to feel. #covidfuneral #Covid_19 #familyloss.

@Hexadecimal_85 (25 April 2020)

This makes visible and shares the challenges that communities now face in dealing with bereavement at distance due to COVID-19.

BILLY'S FUNERAL

I undertook a conversation with a DB funeral guest, who has chosen to call herself Samantha. She attended the DB funeral of 'Billy', a relative with whom she had lived during childhood. Billy was in hospital before the lockdown, and Samantha had hoped to see him before he died. This was the first DB funeral that she had attended. Here, she considers her experiences before, during and after the funeral event.

We began by discussing death generally. Samantha shared that she is good at grieving and that funerals are important to her. When she learned of Billy's death, she felt uncertainty about whether she could attend his funeral due to British COVID-19 legislation. She expressed sensitivity about this possibility:

I was not wanting to ask about the funeral... because he's got children and grandchildren, and they should take priority. I didn't want to ask, as I didn't want them to feel uncomfortable explaining why I couldn't go. I was expecting no funeral.

Samantha decided to ask if she could send flowers, to pay her respects and to learn more. She had anticipated there would be a permitted ten-person funeral of children, grandchildren and partners. While she had wanted to send flowers, this was not possible due to restrictions. She joked about the impacts of the pandemic on grieving at home saying, 'That's why we stocked up on loo roll – it wasn't for the toilet, it was for crying'. This emotive quote wryly redraws the boundaries and materialities of death during COVID-19.

Samantha was grateful to learn that Billy's funeral was available online. She said, 'I heard it was possible, but I was worried to ask, as they [Billy's

family] were grief-stricken. When I heard that I could see it online, I was so happy that something existed!’

She successfully accessed the funeral portal, despite concerns. She said, ‘I’m a techno-anxious person and I was worried that I couldn’t access it. It’s done by a professional company, so you try it in advance. If you can access it, you can get into the service’. However, she also mentioned some challenges, noting ‘Older people said that they couldn’t hear... I’m wondering about the camera – privacy, and not having a lot of people looking at them. You could just see them coming out of the room’. Samantha tried to bridge the service for members of her family without technology, by sharing it by phone. She said ‘I had the order-of-service sent to me, so I knew what was going to happen – and I passed it all on to my family – [I placed] a phone receiver next to the service online – twice removed’.

She described how her day changed from quotidian to unusual in a few clicks of a mouse, saying ‘I came out of a work meeting and went onto this website’. The permeability of boundaries between the digital and material funeral landscape were made clear when she discussed her funeral outfit. She said, ‘I put black clothes on, even though no one could see me. I did it for me, and him... I had my picture of him with me’. She changed outfit as a mark of respect for Billy but also as an environmental ritual within her home to demarcate the beginning and end of funeral time. This, and the image of Billy, helped her to immerse herself within the funeral atmosphere and to compartmentalize the experience within her home.

Samantha described the curated and controlled process of observing Billy’s funeral and the remote depiction of a familiar place. She said, ‘That room! I could see it – and it’s familiar to me ... Initially, I could just see people putting out the leaflets... It wasn’t like Zoom, as you could only see the room. The ten people weren’t sitting in front of the camera. The camera was positioned for their privacy’. The digital funeral environment was curated without mourners, in consideration of those attending in-person – but creating an unusually empty space for online guests. Samantha mentioned that the family ‘[...] felt really comforted to know that people were watching’. She talked about the importance of sensing remote kinship with funeral guests and took solace that ‘other people I knew would be there remotely...’, despite their collective invisibility as a non-participatory audience online. She said, ‘It didn’t look bleak, the coffin didn’t disappear behind the curtains’.

Samantha appreciated being able to express her grief at home, without worrying about other mourners or travelling. She said ‘It was good for me, as I’m not an uninhibited person... because I was alone, I felt like I could be very upset without thinking about how others would feel’. Home also provided a hidden mourning space before and after the funeral, ‘... when you are upset, you do a train journey to a funeral – and then you have to get home again afterward. There was none of that’. However, the tactility of a traditional funeral was absent. She said, ‘Whenever I’ve been to a funeral, I’ve held onto someone’s arm or hand to comfort us through the service... The worst thing about it was after. You want to talk to people. I just missed the socialising after’.

Samantha made her home quotidian again afterwards, through little normalizing activities. ‘I just went and got a cup of tea, sent an email to my cousin... I had this work meeting after... I changed my clothes, took the black clothes off so I had a marker that it was over’. She remarked how life had changed during lockdown, saying ‘it’s no longer just a home – it’s a workplace, a social life, everything. I’m mentally compartmentalised during my

day'. Compartmentalizing time within the same space is an adaptive approach to cope with the limited physical spatialities of lockdown. While the funeral was cathartic to Samantha, she still missed the tacility and atmosphere of a 'normal' funeral. Her closing words were 'I hope that we go back to face-to-face funerals'.

CONCLUSIONS

I have explored some of the ways that funeral environments have been digitally sensed, mediated and articulated during COVID-19. These new expressions of the deathscape have changed our understanding of death in both banal and dramatic ways. Through three vignettes that individually explore the remote sensing of the necropticon; domestic deathscapes and the human experience of DB funeral participation, I have demonstrated the recently altered nature of the digital deathscape. Each scenario also highlights the broad network of people who digitally witness and care about death; from those who watched international media reports of the abject mass-burials at Hart Island to those mourning their family members from afar due to COVID-19 restrictions. I have observed how the domestic and deathscape have merged during DB funerals and how material rituals and practices are still important to digital mourning – even if no one else is present to witness these small acts of respect. Some positive aspects of the digital deathscape have emerged, as grief becomes uninhibited by self-consciousness or perceived responsibilities to other funeral guests. However, for many, this loss of touch, of the tactile and sensory funeral environment, offers some sort of compromise but cannot replace traditional physical funeral practices in the future.

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CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Dr Becky Alexis-Martin is a lecturer in Human Geography, with expertise in existential threats, digital geographies and cultural studies. Her first book

Disarming Doomsday has been awarded the L.H.M. Ling Outstanding First Book Award.

Contact: Geography and Environment, Manchester Metropolitan University, Manchester M15 6LL, UK.

E-mail: B.Alexis-Martin@mmu.ac.uk

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8130-7543>

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