INTRODUCTION

Commemoration and Cultural Meaning, Historic and Present

Robert Spinelli and Robyn S. Lacy

This book is the result of colleagues coming together via social media to discuss and settle on a theme for the journal *Mortality*, and soon the editors, Robyn Lacy and Robert Spinelli, had collected more than enough abstracts to move forward with a full-length edited volume covering the topic of displays of commemoration within community groups. We wanted to ensure that the collection contained perspectives from a variety of contexts: historical, contemporary, and digital. Although our backgrounds vary greatly—Lacy from archaeology, Spinelli from information sciences—we share an interest in how people choose to commemorate their loved ones in their communities, whether through artifacts and historic sites that have survived through the archaeological record or via more contemporary forms of cultural expression. As a cultural artifact, memorials have been a part of funerary and memorializing traditions for centuries and have continued to evolve as human culture has changed over time, becoming catalysts for art movements, social justice, public displays, and publications. Both the materiality and the ethereal nature of mourning are at play in the way a community responds to loss, evident through the creation of specific objects—such as rings or gloves given out at eighteenth-century funerals (O'Brien 2021) or mourning jewelry made of deep black jet—rituals honoring a loved one's passing, or contemporary literature written to commemorate a community's loss.

The ways in which we mourn are as varied as the individual human experience. Although acts of commemoration are displayed differently around the world, from community to community and person to person, the act of grieving in remembrance and acknowledgment of loss is universal. It has been known since the early 1900s that Neanderthals buried their dead with compassion, and took care of their elderly, showing the same compassion for their community members as people do today (Zilhão 2016). We create a space for the dead, in our homes, in our communities, within the

landscape itself, and associate that space with mourning and remembrance. In many cultures, such space takes the place of a burial ground or cemetery, but you can also find ash-scattering sites that are personal to a family but unknown by others who pass through. Commemoration can also come in the form of art, exhibits, activism, and so much more. An action can be taken in memory of an individual, or words written with someone in mind. Throughout history, there have also been many acceptable ways to grieve, and many personal ways. Not everyone dressed in black for months after the death of a spouse, as was popular during the nineteenth century, due to the cost of fabric (U-M Library n.d.). Throughout the chapters in this volume, we see examples of grief and mourning presented in many forms, from singular to community, in person to online. This collection draws from a diverse, international group of academics to offer an overview of grieving and memorialization ranging from traditional modes of expression to contemporary modes, including digital representations of remembrance and memory preservation.

Commemoration in History

Robyn S. Lacy

My interest in commemoration and burial practices comes from my work in archaeology. Through excavating a variety of sites, there is one common theme that ties them all together, throughout all cultures. Archaeology is inherently a study of death, and how a group of people treats their dead tells us so much about how they lived and operated within their community and the wider landscape. My doctoral research examined the development of burial landscapes—that is, the space that organized burials occupy as well as spaces that contribute to the burials—in seventeenth-century colonial settlements in North America. I consider it part of landscape as well as mortuary archaeology, exploring how a burial space can reflect so much about the community it served. Although my research does not look at the dead body in terms of details such as nutritional markers from bones, the burial space as a part of a community or the wider landscape created by people living and dying there reveals how they interacted with mortality as a society, and how their dead were treated, reflecting the religious, sociopolitical, and personal beliefs and practices of the community. Within these practices are mourning and commemoration, the central themes we are exploring in this volume.

I was first introduced to mortuary archaeology through a surface survey in my undergraduate program, where I attended a field school through the University of Liverpool's Centre for Manx Studies, headed by Professor Harold Mytum, in 2011. A large portion of the field school consisted of recording gravestones in County Monaghan, Ireland, a process that included sitting in front of many headstones, clipboard in hand, carefully recording the inscriptions on the face of each one, the style, the iconography, and the material. Crouched there in the cold Irish rain, umbrella balanced over my head, dutifully feeling the surface of each stone to pick up on the shape of every letter

for my recording, I learned how important a resource for archaeology burial grounds are, and how much research needs to be done on them and with how much care, not only to preserve that information for the future but also to learn how people lived in that community years before. This was my introduction to the study of the dead, through the commemoration created by those left behind. It was a lightning moment, as I am sure many researchers experience within their fields, to understand just how much we can learn about a community through gravestones and mortuary traditions. Within my research, I have also examined contemporaneous documents, specifically journals from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and examined the way in which the writers wrote about death, funerals, and burials (Lacy 2024). Documents and gravestones, as well as the burials they commemorate, are all pieces of the puzzle of humanity.

The largest and most well-known diary I analyzed as part of my doctoral research was that of Judge Samuel Sewall, known for his role in the Salem witch trials, for which he later apologized. In his role as a public figure, he attended and documented numerous funerals, giving us unique insight into how Puritans were adapting their views and practices regarding death and burial in the late seventeenth century. This was a time when Puritanism was in decline and the Anglican Church was moving into Massachusetts, much to the dismay of some of Boston's residents. For most people, Sewall simply recorded that they "were buried," but for others, likely people he knew, he recorded additional details about the funeral procession and burial itself. On 24 December 1685, he wrote of the death of his son:

> We follow little Henry [Sewall] to his Grave: Governour and Magistrates of the County here, 8 in all, beside myself, Eight Ministers, and several persons of note. Midwide Weeden and Nurse Hill carried the corps by turns, and so by Men in its Chestnut coffin 'twas set into a grave (The Tomb was full of water) between 4 and 5. At Lecture the 21. Psalm was sung from the 8th to the end. (Sewall 1973: 89–90)

While Puritan documentation of funerals does not seem to include much detail about the burials themselves, and indeed Sewall typically only wrote that a person "was buried," the additional information he added about the burials of his family members speaks to his personal mourning (Lacy 2024). He described his son as "little," and that his midwife and nurse were involved in the funeral procession. He also took time to comment on the state of his son's grave having been flooded. He mentioned the issue with water again on 6 April 1694:

> Major Richards Is buried in his tomb in the North Burying Place [Copp's Hill]; Companyes in Arms attending the Funeral . . . Coffin was covered with Cloth. In the Tomb were fain in nail a Board across the Coffins and then a board standing right up from that, bearing against the top of the Tomb, to Prevent their floating up and down; sawing and fitting this board made from inconvenient Tarriance. (Sewall 1973: 318)

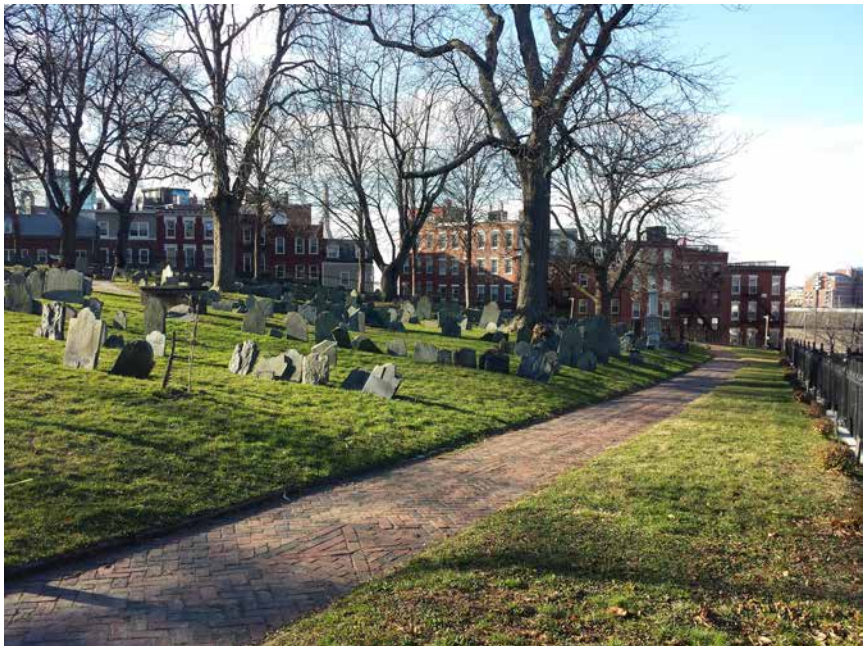

Figure 0.1. Copp's Hill Burying Ground. © Robyn Lacy 2016.

Both of these burials took place on Copp's Hill, located in the north end of the downtown core atop a large hill that once held a farm and windmill. Joe Bagley, City of Boston Archaeology, described this issue, stating that the hill is a glacial drumlin of clay and till and so provides poor drainage (personal communication, Joe Bagley via Twitter 2021). He described an excavation at the Old North Church crypt where clay had caused standing water to gather under the crypt floor, suggesting issues with water retention in grave shafts in the area as well (personal communication, Joe Bagley via Twitter 2021). However, we only observe these details in the burials that have a personal connection, such as that of Judge Sewall's son, or a significant figure being buried, in the case of Major Richards. These records give us insight into how a singular person thought about and interacted with mortality around him, from the view of a white man in a position of power.

On 20 October 1712 in Boston, Massachusetts, Sewall recorded in his diary that he "met a [Black] funeral" on the streets. It is the only mention in his extensive journals of a Black funeral, recording the burials of Black individuals or Indigenous individuals only a handful of times throughout. Funerals were a social occasion, a time to come together, to mourn and celebrate a life as a community, and in the case of Black communities in typically white settler cities in North America, to reclaim and practice their traditions and identities. Feeling threatened by the free movement of the Black residents in the city, the 'Selectmen' of Boston passed a law controlling the funeral

practices of Black and Indigenous residents of Boston, grouping them together (Boston Town Papers 1723). These actions were meant to control the minority population, even in their death practices, and says so much about how funeral and burial traditions are tied to a sense of self, illustrating how they have been utilized by groups in power to control others in a time of grief.

Though not commemoration in the traditional sense—these records are not the gravestones standing in the burial grounds of Boston—they provide a different means of remembering and recording the deceased for the one keeping the records and those who read the records in the future. Throughout this volume, we will explore numerous ways that individuals and community groups express their grief through commemoration for loved ones, and how commemoration can take on many forms. In the case of my own research, it is historical primary sources that provide intimate details of how an individual dealt with mortality. Records like these, studied in conjunction with archaeological data, not only provide a fuller picture of how funerals and burials were being carried out in their respective time period(s) but also show how people utilized a space from a social and religious perspective.

Physical Memory and Grief

Robert Spinelli

March of 2025 marked the second anniversary of the Covenant School shooting in Nashville, Tennessee. Although police monitoring made it impossible to get close to the school, driving past the site revealed a large number of personal items and messages left at the gates to the campus. Mourners stood by the side of the road, some clinging to the gates; others sat quietly by the entrance to the school, either alone or in small groups. Driving past, I was reminded of the year 1994; I was in eighth grade, and a friend of mine died in a gun-based accident. Several months later, a kindergartner died from an illness, and the small school community that we all lived in was faced with the task of trying to find ways to commemorate these lives. Today, a small children's garden exists on the grounds of St. Peter of Alcantara Catholic Church as a testament to the events of that year. Although the school itself has now shut down, the garden is maintained with flowers and plaques. Despite the fact that the school was not the actual site of either of these deaths, the location serves as a potent "sacred site" (Klaassens et al. 2007) due to its prominence as a place where both descendants had spent a portion of their lives.

Since the 1990s it has become commonplace to find bundles of flowers, crosses, and memorabilia along the sides of streets or placed at publicly accessible locations where tragic events have occurred. Standing in stark contrast with more formalized, institutionally approved memorials, these "spontaneous shrines" appear at the confluence of personal tragedy and public memory (Jorgensen-Earp and Lanzilotti 1998). Jack Santino coined the phrase "spontaneous memorial" in a 1992 essay on murder sites in Ireland that had become informal shrines. Given the often secular nature of these

Figure 0.2. St. Peter of Alcantara Memorial Garden. © Robert Spinelli 2024.

shrines, some contemporary researchers opt to use the term "temporary memorial" (Doss 2010). Although one often finds religious imagery at these memorials, the fact that they are allowed to exist outside of the confines of traditional church cemeteries and ritual exemplifies their status as public community features. While family members and close relatives will still mourn privately, these memorials permit others to share in and express their own grief without intruding upon familial ceremonies.

Individual commemorations of grief speak to the larger cultural forces that inspire people to take great strides to ensure that the memory of those they care for is preserved into the future. In moments of extreme and explosive grief, such as the aftermath of school shootings, the intense feelings of passion that need expression often find themselves communicated through performative modes of mourning and a focus on tangible representations of care and comfort for those who have survived (Doss 2008). While it is not a new practice to utilize physical objects to remember the dead, material culture has become an important aspect of properly managing and storing the remnants of temporary memorials. Memorials constructed during times of great public mourning, such as in the wake of Princess Diana's death, 9/11, and the Oklahoma City bombing, yield thousands of objects with no discernible solution for their keeping after the immediate time of mourning is over. It is at this point that there is the need for a shift from a public memorial attempting to embody an absence to a private, processed collection; in short, an archive.

In my journey toward the field of librarianship and archives, I have found this status of the archive as a memory space to be the most potent way to help memorialize the past and bring attention to the stories that these collections contain. To echo Doss, the creation and maintenance of an archive serves as a bridge between the living and the dead (Doss 2008). Constructing an archive is not simply the process of collating and labeling boxes and folders; rather, it is the act of selecting and presenting past events in such a way as to bring emphasis to the event as a whole. In the wake of tragic events and the eventual removal of temporary memorials, it often falls to librarians and archivists to make sense of the mass of papers, paraphernalia, and stories that appear (Maynor 2015). In her case study–based article seeking to lay a foundation for best practices in dealing with "archives of grief," Maynor emphasizes important questions that need to be considered when dealing with the aftermath of traumatic events, questions that archivists focus on at all times: What audience will be served by keeping objects of grief? What purpose will they serve into the future? As she notes in her work, the role of librarians and archivists in forming these archives is not a topic that enjoys much study in the information sciences literature.

With libraries being repositories of knowledge, history, and stories, it seems remiss for this oversight to exist within the field's body of research; however, this is one of the motivating factors for my involvement with this book project. Every time that a temporary memorial is developed, we are presented with visceral reminders of the physicality of grief. As contemporary culture continues to become more aware and mindful of death's presence in everyday existence, it is important to bring a range of academic approaches to the study of death and grief. Librarians are able to employ a wide variety of organizational tools and technological approaches to the creation and dispersion of information, and their ability to perform traditional research and utilize data-based approaches make them highly valuable to the intellectual community. As a field, death studies is open to contributions from various disciplines, and it is this strength that will continue to allow for the development of new and evolving research explorations.

Volume Structure

When we first put out the call for chapters for this volume, we were excited to receive numerous replies from different academic disciplines within humanities and social sciences. The perspectives of these academics on death and commemoration represented in this volume are truly interdisciplinary. Based on the variety of topics and approaches presented by our contributors, we have chosen to break the chapters into three sections.

In part 1, "Archaeological and Historical Examinations of Grief and Commemoration," the chapters use case studies and artifacts to discuss the central themes of the volume throughout history. Tânia Manuel Casimiro and Joel Santos begin by looking at the influence of nineteenth-century burial laws on the burial practices in Portugal,

using three cemeteries in Lisbon to understand changes to monumentalization and the perception of death between 1933 and 2022. Next we move to England, where Dan O'Brien uses printed ephemera from eighteenth-century funerals in the form of trade cards and invitations to explore how funeral practitioners used the iconography—symbols of grief, commemoration, and occasionally anonymous mourners—to identify themselves as respectable undertakers.

Following this discussion, Kaylee Alexander brings the focus toward objects collected from imprisoned Jews during the Holocaust, using them as a proxy to discuss the digitization of archival records and the expansion of their visibility. She asks, to what extent can digital humanities projects dealing with traumatic histories constitute memorial practices? Finally, Ciara Henderson discusses the Irish tradition of *catharín na leanbh*, or "village of children," and discusses evidence that "suggests that Catholic theology and ideology were not the prevailing force in *cillín* burials." She examines the lack of death tradition surrounding stillborn infants, regarded by Christian theology as being of a liminal status, as unbaptized dead. This resulted in the creation of *cillíní*, or "children's burial grounds," a complex and diverse space in the Irish landscape.

Chapters in part 2 consider topics of "Contemporary Grief and Commemoration," examining ways in which these themes are expressed in the present day, through ongoing memorialization, activism, and public mourning. The section opens with a discussion by Katie Stringer Clary, Carolyn Dillian, Acting Chief Cheryl Cail, and Chief Harold "Buster" Hatcher on the ways state-recognized Native American tribes in the United States confront colonial pasts and impacts to their death and grieving traditions. The chapter speaks to the Waccamaw Indian People of Aynor, South Carolina, as a case study, commenting on how their state-recognized status does not give them access to practice traditional burial and death rites, including the use of eagle feathers. This in-depth look at colonial impact on Indigenous peoples also provides a background on the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) and other legislation directly impacting the rights of Native American tribes.

Eliana Maniaci brings a powerful discussion of how grieving and remembrance is affected when the bodies of those who have died are not able to be buried. She brings attention to the kidnapped and missing in northern Mexico, where pink-painted crosses represent victims of femicide, standing as a physical reminder of the loss for the community, in line with public mourning. Next, Linda Levitt discusses the creation of the Field of Empty Chairs, commemorating the victims of the 1995 bombing in Oklahoma City, with concepts of absence and presence. Sarah Rayner focuses on activism and grief in queer communities, taking a material culture approach to discuss the importance of the AIDS quilt.

Finally, in part 3, chapters deal with "Depictions of Commemoration and Grief through the Media." Jessica Freeman and Jessica Elton take a data-based approach to the study of hashtags in the wake of Queen Elizabeth's death. By studying the aggregate of individual responses, they illustrate how social media functions as a conduit for collective mourning. Anne F. MacLennan offers a poignant exploration of how

the grief of widowhood is manifested in several pieces of media. She emphasizes both the prevalence of this theme and the ways in which widowhood has been presented in both constructive and negative lights. Taking a visual analytical approach to vernacular memorials, Cheyenne Zaremba examines the role of memorials that have sprung up in the wake of COVID-19. Lastly, Chris Farrell presents a fascinating ethnological study that explores how the elderly live surrounded by the "stuff" of death along a continuum of liveliness that is exemplified by how retirees spend their daily existence.

The goal of this edited volume is to bring interdisciplinary perspectives to questions of how groups of people,physical towns, familial groups, or found communities deal with one of the greatest challenges in life: the loss of loved ones. Our contributors have crafted a collection that highlights the complexities of processing grief and how individuals/cultures choose to commemorate their dead. It is a subject that affects us all, regardless of our cultural background, and the intention behind this volume is to highlight those traditions and practices through work being done by scholars around the world. It is our hope that this work will make a valuable contribution to death studies scholarship, and will find life outside the classroom.

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