

Death Positivity and Death Justice in the Anthropocene

by

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### **Abstract**

The Death Positivity Movement is a relatively new group of advocates who argue for greater death acceptance in Western society. This thesis explores how the Death Positivity Movement might help humans respond justly to mass death in the Anthropocene, when gross ecological change threatens human extinction and the extinction of other species. Using a number of sociological texts to contextualize the movement's claims—in turn gathered from a swath of popular news articles and the movement's online material—this thesis concludes that the Death Positivity Movement might practically apply to death denial in the Anthropocene, described by the author as the refusal to acknowledge those deaths associated with environmental change and reliance on techno-scientific geoengineering solutions. However, this thesis also draws significantly from Donna Haraway's use of the "compost" to expand the Death Positivity Movement's understanding of social justice and a "good death for all" for a non-human context as well.

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## Introduction

Imagine that you are watching a cat video on YouTube. In the suggestion bar to the right of your screen there are other video recommendations — mostly cats, except for one: “Backyard Burial, Cannibalism, & More! (ASK A MORTICIAN).” The thumbnail image is of a rather pale, black-haired woman with blunt bangs and a shovel, standing in front of an open grave. At first, you wonder why this particular video was suggested to you. Nonetheless, you are avoiding some other time-sensitive task, so you click the thumbnail. The same pale woman greets you: “Welcome, everyone! It is 2017 and this year is going to be our year! Or the year that we all perish. In a fiery blaze of hate. Either way, we need to work on accepting our own deaths, right? Let’s get to it!” You are intrigued. The published date of the video reads January 5, 2017, so maybe you infer that the “fiery blaze of hate” refers to the recent election of Donald Trump in the United States. The woman goes on to answer various extracted Twitter questions sent in for her to answer. The first question is about backyard burial — is it possible? It turns out that technically, yes, it is possible to bury someone in a backyard in many locations in the United States but requires a significant amount of “bureaucracy.” Apparently in Texas and the United Kingdom it is easier to do, and you are usually required to have a certain amount of land. There are more questions, including “What are your thoughts on human cannibalism for survival?” Her answer: In a truly desperate situation, and if someone is already dead, then it is permissible. (Also, other cultures honour their dead by consuming them.)

A video like this one was my first experience of the Death Positivity Movement. The host of the channel *Ask a Mortician* is Caitlin Doughty, the movement’s founder and figurehead. Doughty started her channel in 2011 — the same year that she started The Order of the Good

Death, the organization behind the movement. Since then, Doughty has posted weekly, answering common questions about death and collectively drawing almost 15,000,000 views with over 190,000 regular subscribers. In 2014, she published a *New York Times* best-selling memoir about her mortuary experiences (*Smoke Gets in Your Eyes: And Other Lessons from the Crematory*). The novelty of her work, aided in part by her straight-forward, campy, and light-hearted address of all topics death-related, obtained coverage by many major news outlets including *The New Yorker*, *The Independent*, *The Guardian*, *VICE*, *Rolling Stone*, *O Magazine*, *Entertainment Weekly*, and *NPR*.

The term “Death Positive” arrived in 2013 on Twitter, when Doughty asked why there was a “sex positive” movement but not a “death positive” one (Doughty, 2016, n.p.). The term became exceedingly popular, and replaced what Doughty had hitherto referred to as “death awareness” or “death acceptance” in line with earlier iterations of the movement (ibid.). Like previous iterations, the movement’s primary goals are to help individuals overcome their death anxiety, and to create a general culture of death acceptance in Western society. In Chapter One I trace the history of the Death Positivity Movement and explain its central claims in greater detail.

Death Positivity Movement materials generally refer to the United States and the United Kingdom, with some Canadian content as well. Therefore, in this thesis I use the phrase “Western society” to refer to the dominant attitudes toward death and dying in these geographical locations — which is not to say that all cultures within these regions need to learn to “accept” death. In Mexican cultures, for instance, death is already a matter of annual reflection and celebration on the Day of the Dead, or *Día de Muertos*. Additionally, other



individuals and communities are forced to confront death through daily encounters with violence or precarity — experiences which will be explored in some detail in each of the subsequent chapters.

To date, there are almost no scholarly pieces published on the Death Positivity Movement beyond mentions of Doughty's book or perhaps a few statements in an interview. After conducting an extensive search on my own, I also enlisted the help of the Women's and Gender Studies librarian to unearth any works I might have missed. Since the Death Positivity Movement is relatively new, it is likely the case that other researchers have indeed studied the movement, but that there is a publication delay. I certainly hope so, as the Death Positivity Movement arrives at an interesting time for death.

In 2017, Disney released the children's movie *Coco* about a young Mexican boy who meets and collaborates with his ancestors in the Land of the Dead around Día de Muertos. In Canada, the legalization of medically assisted dying is also creating conversations about death and dying, stemming from the *Carter v. Canada* (2015) decision wherein "The Court found that the government ought to permit medical assistance in dying, subject to certain conditions" (Giroux, 2016, p. 433). In and beyond North America, there are an increasing number of "Death Cafes" — informal non-therapeutic conversation groups who meet to discuss matters related to death (Walter, 2014, n.p.; Elmhirst, 2015, n.p.). The Movement for Black Lives (Black Lives Matter) and activism regarding missing and murdered Indigenous women are also raising questions about death, especially on a national scale. Moreover, the rising number of seniors in Canada associated with "the retirement of the baby boomer generation and significant advances in medical sciences in the past several decades" (Oguamanam, 2016, p. 456)

necessitate more conversations about the conditions of death and dying. The Death Positivity Movement is well-poised to enter the conversation at this point as a movement interested in helping others prepare for their death in a variety of ways, and shifting cultural conversations to better serve the dying, dead, and bereaved. In fact, they have declared 2018 as the “Year of Action” and preparation for death, which means that individuals are encouraged to make a “death plan” and to help others do the same, in addition to joining deathwork<sup>1</sup> efforts through a variety of different means (Doughty, 2018, n.p.).

Since there were few academic materials on the Death Positivity Movement, I turned to a number of other secondary and primary sources. Consequently, I have cited a number of popular news sources, particularly as many major news outlets have interviewed members of the Order of the Good Death or otherwise written about the movement. Interview excerpts have been especially helpful in helping me to understand participant perspectives. I have also consulted a number of websites and social media profiles belonging to the various arms of the Death Positivity Movement, including The Order of the Good Death, Death & the Maiden, and Death Salon. Death & the Maiden is the sister organization to the Order, focusing more on women’s involvement in death. Death Salon, on the other hand, is the major conference of the Death Positivity Movement, and has been held seven times in different cities throughout the United States and the United Kingdom: Los Angeles (twice), London, San Francisco, Philadelphia, Houston, and most recently, Seattle. I was fortunate enough to receive a Graduate Student Association travel award to attend the Death Salon in Seattle in September

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<sup>1</sup> “Deathcare” or “deathwork” for the purposes of this thesis includes any of the labor involved with caring for the dying, the deceased, and the bereaved. Some examples include hospice work, mortuary or cremation labor, memorial jewellery creation, and making shrouds.

2017. Obviously, this was a very exciting and important opportunity to get a better sense of the movement, its goals, ideals, and participants. I have cited the schedule for the conference, which is revealing in terms of social justice content, and conference sessions as well.

To understand the movement's claims, I often worked backward and forward, investigating sources cited directly by the movement like Elizabeth Kübler-Ross' (1969) influential text on the grieving process, and Ernest Becker's (1973) monograph on death denial. The Death Positivity Movement cites *ars moriendi* (Art of Dying) texts as influencing the "good death," and although I didn't dwell on *ars moriendi* for any considerable length of time, my search for related books proved fruitful; many anthologies referring to *ars moriendi* were also books featuring other social and historical information about death from a sociological perspective. Accordingly, I became quite familiar with a number of sociological texts on death and dying from the mid-twentieth century to the 2010s. In turn, these texts often referenced some authors more than others, like Phillipe Ariès (1974) — a medievalist French historian who made critical arguments about the "disappearance of death."

I first became interested in the Death Positivity Movement as a means to alleviate my own death anxiety. However, when I began taking a course on the Anthropocene (GSJ 507 — Feminist Theory Now: Anthropocene Feminisms) I began to imagine the creative possibilities engendered in applying a "death positive" perspective to the deaths associated with large-scale environmental change. The assigned readings on the syllabus were oddly refreshing; it was anxiety-reducing for me to finally read accounts like Elizabeth Kolbert's (2016) exploration of a sixth mass extinction event currently underway — books by authors who concisely explain the devastating state of the planet. No longer did I need to rely on fleeting phone notifications,

flashing pieces of environmental news which disappear almost as soon as they surface.<sup>2</sup> Instead of watching a sad story about a polar bear on Facebook, and learning about an oil spill in the news section of my iPhone screen, all of these disaster items could be encapsulated by the “Anthropocene” — a name meant to represent “that we have entered a new epoch in Earth’s geological history, one characterized by the advent of the human species as a geological force” (Scranton, 2015, p. 17). The Anthropocene encompasses a wide variety of disasters, from rising sea levels to increased droughts, flooding, mass extinctions, and warming ocean waters. The Anthropocene is the epoch associated with what we have come to understand as “climate change” or “global warming.” As it is generally understood to be a “human-made” epoch, there are also other factors which are a part of the Anthropocene: resource-based extraction industries, capitalism, colonialism, migration, and any other human activities which have led to environmental destruction. Others have made the connection between death on an individual scale and death on the scale of the Anthropocene. Roy Scranton, author of *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene* (2015), explains how our penchant for immortality on both scales is about to be challenged by the consequences of environmental change:

Across the world today, our actions testify to our belief that we can go on like we are forever: burning oil, poisoning the seas, killing off other species, pumping carbon into the air, ignoring the ominous silence of our coalmine canaries in favor of the unending robotic tweets of our new digital imaginarium. Yet the reality of global climate change is going to keep intruding on our collective fantasies of perpetual growth, constant innovation, and endless energy, just as the reality of individual mortality shocks our casual faith in permanence. (p. 22-23)

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<sup>2</sup> In the introduction to his book, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011), Rob Nixon refers to our “flickering” (p. 6) and “degraded” attention spans (p. 13), which obscure our ability to comprehend “slow” violent events, like climate change (p. 2) or the long-term effects of nuclear irradiation (p. 7).

My time in that Anthropocene class thus became surprisingly cathartic; an opportunity to be optimistic in the face of increasing danger. It is hard not to be overzealous when you first begin to make new connections and encounter new material. I experimented with an alternative name for the Anthropocene, the *Necrocene*, abstracting its use from Justin McBrien (2016) who proposed the term to refer to capitalism's impact on the planet. I wanted to use the term to talk expressly about death, and to understand the Necrocene as the "Age of Corpses" by gesturing toward the many deaths of this age, but as Donna Haraway (2016b, p. 59) and my supervisor, Chloë Taylor, pointed out, we are not yet corpses, we have not yet reached the end. Consequently, I was left to think through how we should think about death as and with (human and nonhuman) others who are dying, but not yet dead.

The research direction I thought would be the most successful involved applying the Death Positivity Movement directly to the Anthropocene, hoping that it might be used as a kind of corresponding tool. My research question became: How might the Death Positivity Movement help humans respond justly to mass death in the Anthropocene, when gross ecological change threatens human extinction and the extinction of other species? I hypothesized that it would be able to map more or less effectively onto issues of death denial and Anthropocene denial, but I also wondered about an increasing "turn" in the Death Positivity Movement toward social justice and the idea of fighting for a "good death for all." I hoped that perhaps a "good death for all" could be a useful trajectory for thinking through Anthropocene-related denial, and perhaps elucidate some of the social justice politics of dying in the Anthropocene. Chapter One is thus an overview of the history of the Death Positivity Movement, beginning with a general discussion of the formation of Western perspectives on

death and dying and some analysis of the Death Positivity Movement's main tenets. This chapter addresses what "death positivity" entails more directly, and describes earlier iterations of the Death Positivity Movement, along with the movement's "social justice turn."

After a while, however, I became increasingly frustrated with the Death Positivity Movement's focus on the human aspects of death. When it comes to nonhuman entities, the Death Positivity Movement does address the deaths of companion animals. Doughty has a few videos on her channel about pet deathcare, including one (2014) video in which she describes holding a wake and natural burial for her beloved cat. Others — particularly those who have worked in body farms like Katrina Spade (2017), an Order of the Good Death member — refer to bacteria or similar critters involved in decomposing dead bodies. Given that we are living in an epoch of mass extinction, however, these gestures towards nonhuman death seem insufficient.

After reading Donna Haraway's (2016b) contribution to Jason Moore's (2016) *Anthropocene or Capitalocene?* anthology, I sought to explore Katrina Spade's human composting project — a process called "recomposition" — as a theoretical way of supporting the Death Positivity Movement's nonhuman focus. In Chapter Two, I demonstrate how recomposition illuminates not only modern attitudes regarding death and dying, but also the process of interspecies "muddling" in the context of the Anthropocene. Compost then becomes a way of understanding the interconnectedness of death amid environmental change, and a means to focus on relationships rather than techno-scientific geoengineering "solutions" to the Anthropocene which reinforce lines of structural power and human dominance.

However, the more I imagined the Anthropocene and the Death Positivity Movement in conversation, the less confident I became about mapping them directly onto one another. As I will discuss in Chapter Three, while the Death Positivity Movement is certainly interested in shifting the cultural conversation about death, its members have a definite stake in improving deathcare. Accordingly, many of the concrete offerings of the Death Positivity Movement are related to funeral planning or fighting for alternative cremation practices. These are important concerns, but they are not necessarily helpful in an Anthropocene context, except perhaps to say that we should indeed prepare for death in a variety of forms — disaster preparedness strategies come to mind, but so does thinking through what kind of death you might like to have. If you imagine yourself dying in old age, what are the conditions of your life that will ensure this end? What does it mean for you to live that long, in the way you choose, for other people and other species on the planet? If, for instance, you imagine yourself as a senior visited by an abundance of grandchildren, what are the environmental costs associated with your reproduction and what kind of world are you creating for those grandchildren?

Chapter Three thus builds on the logic of compost to explore life in, after, and surrounded by death. I analyze how a life-centered approach to death might allow us to resist the very real fears associated not only with individual mortality but with the confrontation of large-scale Anthropocene death, both human and nonhuman. In this chapter I explain the various operations of Anthropocene denial which obscure the realization of life after death, and I extrapolate just what “life after death” entails in a composting sense. This chapter concludes with the Death Positivity Movement’s idea of a “good death for all” and the relevance of this idea to Anthropocene death.

I approached this thesis in the spirit of play, heeding Haraway's (2013) call to "ongoing caring" (p. 268) which "requires that we work with figures of re-mediation that are risky and also fun, that we work, play, live, die, that we are at risk *with* and *as* mortal critters, that we don't give in to the techno-tragic story of self-made final death of the Anthropocene, but that we do inhabit the realities of excess mass death so as to learn to repair, and maybe even flourish without denial" (p. 268). The Anthropocene poses a number of problems for humans and nonhumans, and while many of these problems were long-in-the-making, many of them are still "new" and require innovative approaches beyond those strategies which re-inforce pre-existing power imbalances. In many instances I address geoengineering as a sort of failed approach to the Anthropocene, particularly as many of the associated tools depend on human exceptionalist narratives and promise to only save some lives while discarding others. To get away from these responses, we must be creative, "[w]e must "think" (Haraway, 2016b, p. 34); As Roy Scranton (2015) notes, "In order for us to adapt to this strange new world, we're going to need more than scientific reports and military policy. We're going to need new ideas" (p. 19).



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## Chapter 1: “Death is Political”: The Institutionalization of Death and the Social Justice Turn in the Death Positivity Movement

### Introduction

*The Order is about making death a part of your life. Staring down your death fears—whether it be your own death, the death of those you love, the pain of dying, the afterlife (or lack thereof), grief, corpses, bodily decomposition, or all of the above. Accepting that death itself is natural, but the death anxiety of modern culture is not. (Order of the Good Death, 2018, “Welcome to the Order”)*

The statement above is the introductory greeting for the website of the Order of the Good Death. The Order is the grassroots organization behind the Death Positivity Movement, started in 2011 by Caitlin Doughty. In the intervening years, the Order has grown to encompass the work and leadership of a diverse group of death pundits including “funeral industry professionals, academics, and artists” (Order of the Good Death, 2018, “About”). All of these individuals are similarly dedicated to promoting “death positivity” and educating the public according to these tenets (listed on the Order’s website) defining the term:

1. I believe that by hiding death and dying behind closed doors we do more harm than good to our society.
2. I believe that the culture of silence around death should be broken through discussion, gatherings, art, innovation, and scholarship.
3. I believe that talking about and engaging with my inevitable death is not morbid, but displays a natural curiosity about the human condition.
4. I believe that the dead body is not dangerous, and that everyone should be empowered (should they wish to be) to be involved in care for their own dead.
5. I believe that the laws that govern death, dying and end-of-life care should ensure that a person’s wishes are honored, regardless of sexual, gender, racial or religious identity.
6. I believe that my death should be handled in a way that does not do great harm to the environment.

7. I believe that my family and friends should know my end-of-life wishes, and that I should have the necessary paperwork to back-up those wishes.
8. I believe that my open, honest advocacy around death *can* make a difference, and *can* change culture. (2017, “Death Positive”)

These principles assert that death is in some way “hidden” and that it is preferable to confront mortality; that deathcare should be recouped from institutions; that individual attitudes and actions can educate or influence a broader collective; and that death relates to both environmental and social justice issues. As I will argue in the first section below, these arguments are both historically and socially constituted, made possible by the transition from sovereign to biopolitical power and the emergence of disciplinary institutions. The second section situates the Death Positivity Movement alongside an institutional critique and a brief overview of death revival/positivity/acceptance movements since the mid-twentieth century. Finally, the third section of this chapter is concentrated on exploring the social justice component of death positivity and the Death Positivity Movement. Here, I contend that the social justice politics of the Death Positivity Movement separate the movement from prior iterations, and are worth exploring in the context of the Anthropocene – an argument I will explore in greater depth in Chapter Three.

#### I. A Background to the Institutionalization of Modern Death Culture

In the excerpts above, *The Order of the Good Death* problematizes the modern response to death as marked by anxiety and a general “culture of silence.” Those in the Death Positivity Movement often espouse this dissatisfaction, which produces the need for resistance, change and conversation. A historical or temporal strategy is frequently used as well. It is not uncommon to hear a romantic analysis of the past, as death positive adherents claim a

healthier response to death in some prior time period – maybe the phenomenon of nineteenth-century mourning aesthetics, or the familial deathcare practices of pre-Industrial Europe. (This approach is surely preferable to the common alternative, in which some adherents romanticize the death practices of Indigenous cultures and appropriate them through coarse amalgamation and de-contextualization.) Different participants will allude to different periods because there have indeed been many different responses to death and dying in the West over the last several centuries. Interestingly, these responses are often described as shifting in moments when death seems particularly salient among the population – when vast numbers are dying or recently dead. Strange (2009), for instance, asserts that these changes are associated with “demographic disaster or war” alongside “shifts in popular religious belief or doctrine” (p. 128).<sup>3</sup> Thus, this claim is often accompanied by a similar refrain echoed by many historians and death positive adherents alike: death was once a more visible, constant, or fundamental part of life. Accordingly, in the next several paragraphs I will provide a brief historical overview of the shifting responses to death in the West. In doing so, I hope to ground the claims of the Death Positivity Movement in time, and particularly in terms of historical shifts in forms of power.

In writing about the transition from sovereign power to biopower, Foucault details the departure of death from the everyday. He begins in the Middle Ages, when the sovereigns of Europe enacted power through public executions – “great public rituals” (Taylor, 2015, p. 192-193) and the ability to take the life of their subjects (see Foucault, 1977; 1995; Foucault, 1975-1976b; 1997). The Middle Ages were also host to a variety of other forms of death, including prolific deaths in birth, in childhood, famine, and plague:

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<sup>3</sup> Bourke (2017) notes that “Spiritualist movements flourished” during such moments, but this analysis can be extended more generally to include other responses to death as well (p. 52).

Twenty percent of women died in childbirth, five percent of children died during birth and, in wealthy families, another ten to twelve percent died the following year, with infant mortality rates as high as fifty percent among the poor and in foundling homes. Famines, epidemics, and plagues ravaged the population. The great Famine of the early fourteenth century reduced the European population by ten percent, while the Black Death killed another thirty to sixty percent of the European population a few decades later. (Taylor, p. 192)

Many of these deaths would be preventable now, but medicine in the Middle Ages was of little help to the sick or injured. Galenic medicine was *de rigueur* and limited to an understanding of the body's humors and the use of bleeding for treatment of most ailments (McManners, 1981, p. 37). Physicians were ill-trained and the parish priest was just as likely to dispense medical knowledge as any other person, based on tracts he came across in his travels (McManners, p. 27-28). Thus, and as Taylor notes, "Death could not be managed and was viewed as God's will" (p. 193; see also Walter, 1994, p. 9). The figure of "God" represented yet another form of sovereign power, and since it was through a "crucially public and visible death" that sovereigns maintained their power (Taylor, p. 193), the church prescribed the rituals surrounding death.<sup>4</sup>

My first visit to the Order's website piqued my interest in *ars moriendi* (Art of Dying) texts, which the Order claimed on their "About" page as one of the inspirations for their current death positive ethos. These *ars moriendi* texts were written by Church leaders in the medieval period to assist the dying and their attendants in facilitating a "good death." Julie-Marie Strange (2009) writes, "Since the Middle Ages in Europe, the good death has referred, first, to fulfilling Christian obligations of faith and, second, to a desire to put secular affairs in order" (p. 130).

There was significant pressure on the dying to renounce their sins and their bodies and to ready

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<sup>4</sup> Rituals (like those related to public execution and perhaps the deathbed) manifested attempts to "make death familiar...to integrate it, to make it acceptable and to give a meaning to its permanent aggression" (Foucault, 1977; 1995, p. 55).

themselves for salvation. Ariès (1974) argues that this was a stringent process: You would first “express sorrow over the end of life” (p. 9), then forgive those around you (p. 9), and, finally, “forget the world and think of God” (p. 9). The priest would grant absolution (p. 10), and after that “all that remained was the wait for death” in silence (p. 11). The dying person was the center of this deathbed tableau (p. 11) but there was also pressure on the bereaved, who were expected to pray for the deceased’s ascendance into Heaven (Strange, 2009, p. 130, 131). Death, in other words, was public either at the site of execution or in the family home, and remained the prerogative of sovereign power.<sup>5</sup>

By the eighteenth century and the Enlightenment, sovereign power was replaced by biopower or the institutional management of life. Some lethal problems persisted, including famines (McManners, 1981, p. 21), contaminated water (p. 20), high rates of infant and youth mortality (p. 10-13; 66), and limited medical training (p. 21). Nonetheless, greater technological and medical advances made possible the professionalization of deathcare and life-maintaining power, which meant the populace relied increasingly on individualizing institutions. Thus, sovereign power was increasingly supplanted by biopower, in part, because “death was ceasing to torment life so directly...[and] a relative control over life averted some of the imminent risks of death” (Foucault as cited in Taylor, 2015, p. 193). Accordingly, among the public, there was a “new attitude toward death, a view of grief as an intense and intimate concern of the family, and of dying as a private individual tragedy” (McManners, p. 233; see also Cottrell & Duggleby, 2016, p. 686). As such, the eighteenth century marked a significant departure from the focus on

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<sup>5</sup> Phillipe Ariès (1974) calls death a “public ceremony.”



God between the dying person and their deathbed.<sup>6</sup> In the administration of wills, for instance, men began to dispense inheritances among their family members instead of paying the church to conduct memorial rituals (Ariès, 1974, p. 64).<sup>7</sup> This rise in familial affection, shaped by institutional advancement and the decline of sovereign power, meant death was also becoming “increasingly dramatic” and centered on interpersonal loss (Strange, 2009, p. 128; see also Ariès, p. 56).

The nineteenth century, therefore, is often associated with greater emotionality in responses to death.<sup>8</sup> In fact, the emotional responses of this period are frequently idealized by participants of the Death Positivity Movement and other thanatology scholars such as Phillippe Ariès (Hockey, 1997, p. 101-103), because (and as Ariès posits) emotionality suggests “greater difficulty” or a feeling of greater loss (Ariès, 1974, p. 56) — reflecting “‘healthier’ or more ‘natural’ mourning practices” (Hockey, p. 103). But there is also a large aesthetic component to the valorization of this period. The dominant image of this time, of course, is the grieving Victorian widow, commonly associated with dramatic mourning clothes and elaborate mourning etiquette (Hockey, p. 101).<sup>9</sup> These trappings of widowhood were connected to nineteenth-century “death culture” and the rise of consumerism (Strange, 2009, p. 125). The purchase of consumer items (including brooches made with the hair of the deceased – some of which currently circulate on the online handmade market, Etsy) represented mourning and

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<sup>6</sup> See Ariès, 1974, p. 65 for an analysis of the rejection of the Catholic Church in the eighteenth century.

<sup>7</sup> For an analysis of how the rise of the nuclear family also inspired greater “feeling and affection” among the family unit, see Ariès, p. 65. (See also McManners, 1981, p. 462).

<sup>8</sup> For Ariès, this greater emotion in death was the result of an eroticization of death between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries.

<sup>9</sup> Even young girls could receive mourning clothes for their dolls (Stearns, 2007, p. 38).

remembering a loved one. Here we can see the effect of capitalist modalities, wherein the grieving are surveilled and disciplined into appropriate buying behaviors. By the end of the nineteenth century, people were increasingly interested in spending money rather than participating in emotional ritual (Ariès, 1981, p. 98-102).

The twentieth century is thus marked by an absence of emotionality – indeed, by a sort of disappearance of death altogether. Death became a “technical phenomenon” (Ariès, 1981, p. 88) and dominion over death “passed...to the doctor and the hospital team” – the new “masters of death” (p. 89; Walter, 1994, p. 12). The dying process itself became medicalized as a result, beginning with Kübler-Ross’s (1969) influential text on the topic which (perhaps unintentionally) constructed “the [dying] person as passively moving through a natural process over which they have precious little control” (Walter, p. 116) until one dies generally alone and “out of sight” (p. 122). This process is frequently reinforced by healthcare providers, who are enmeshed in “stage” discourse and may disregard clients’ needs and experiences during dying to assign them to pre-existing scripts (p. 95-96).

The institutionalization of death has also culminated in the mid-century diagnosis of “abnormal grief” (Walter, 1994, p. 10) perhaps stemming from what Hockey, Kellaher, and Prendergast (2007) call a “post-Freudian emphasis on letting go of the dead” (p. 40). Religious obligations, complex etiquette schemes, and ritual were largely replaced by psychiatry, which often excludes extended family (Walter, p. 158), and carries definite “expectations of behaviour” (p.159) that are socially mediated (p. 160-161). After all, discipline produces “relational power” wherein individuals supervise one another even as they are supervised themselves (Foucault, 1977; 1995, p. 177). Extending the project of the nineteenth century,

modern grief involves a good deal of surveillance, particularly the “surveillance of...feelings” (Walter, p. 19). This surveillance of feeling means that when we support others in their grief, we also engage in surveillance (Walter, p. 19, p. 57); we “watch others” to “learn how to grieve” (p. 19), and we police their grief in turn – they must grieve and with sufficient (yet not excessive) expression (p. 56). If others grieve excessively, their grief is abnormal and can be categorized and treated (including with medication) (see Bandini, 2014, for modern information about treatment for grief). Caitlin Doughty, the founder of the Order, summarizes institutionalization in the twentieth century in the following interview excerpt:

In the 1930s, there was a rise in both the medical industry and the funeral industry. Both of these industries said, “Hey, we’re the professionals. You shouldn’t die at home and you shouldn’t have the dead body at home. We’re equipped to do both of these things better than you would do yourself.” And the public, because there were growing cities and growing industrialization in all areas, really went along with it. So, we’re at the point now where we completely question whether we’re even able to die at home or have the body at home and take care of it ourselves. We rely on medical and funeral professionals as professionals. (as cited by Kelley, 2014, n.p.)

In this excerpt, Doughty references the institutionalization of the post-mortem body. Indeed, in some of the United States, it is not permitted to host an independent funeral, or to handle the body of a deceased loved one (Copeland, 2015, p. 22; see also Kelley, 2014, for Caitlin Doughty’s take on this). Thus, funerals present opportunities to affirm our ties to institutions (Walter, 1994, p. 62), because they ensure that we rely on the para-medical institution of the funeral industry. Jessica Mitford (one of the infamous Mitford sisters) wrote a scathing critique of the funeral industry in 1963, *The American Way of Death*, which lambasted its sales techniques and influence over the American public.

The response to institutionalization is often some version of “natural” reclamation, based on the premise that “death has become distorted and dehumanised by modern

technological and bureaucratic institutions” and that people would die and grieve better if left alone (Walter, 1994, p. 113). Often associated with this alternative is the valorization or appropriation of other, so-called “primitive” cultures, which are thought to be “close to nature” (p. 42; p. 113). Home death is also often idealized and thought to be “easy—all you have to do is absent yourself from alienating modern institutions and you can let nature and the family take over” (p. 113). Unfortunately, and as indicated above, given the contemporary bureaucratization of dying and corpse disposal, home death and burial often requires overcoming significant barriers — and the emotional and physical labors of others. Walter points out that the risk of this prescription for natural death is just what it seems — another prescription, another “authoritaria[n]” position on how to obtain a “good death” (p. 114).

## II. The Rise of the Death Positivity Movement

Elizabeth Kübler-Ross (1969) was part of a burgeoning wave of publishing dedicated to the subject of death in the 1960s and 70s (Lofland, 1978, p. 10-11). This uptake in death-related research and writing, Lofland (1978) notes, is a reaction to the institutionalization of death (p. 33- 35). As mentioned previously, scholars like Ariès (1974) and Gorer (1955) claimed that death had become hidden or disappeared.<sup>10</sup> In an attempt to overcome this “taboo,” a loose social movement organized to “promot[e] a change in American society with regard to its beliefs...emotional responses...and its legal and normative practices relative to death and dying” (Lofland, p. 77). Lofland calls this movement the “Happy Death Movement,” and notes that it was composed of a “sprawling, diverse, multi-structured, diffuse assemblage of persons, acting independently and as parts of organizations” (p. 75-76). Participants claimed that individuals

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<sup>10</sup> Walter (1994) indicates that death seems more like a societal obsession than a taboo, since “death is more and more talked of” (p. 1).

should “*talk about* [death], *rearrange it* and *legislate it*” (p. 78). Talking publicly about death and expressing emotions (p. 79, p. 99) was thought to counter the categorization of “‘abnormal’ grief” (p. 79). “Death education” was also deemed important (particularly on a national level) (p. 81). Participants wanted the national public to “stop avoiding death and to ‘accept it’ both intellectually and emotionally” (ibid.). Lofland even notes the creation of a “high-school-death course” in this period (p. 81).

Participants of the Happy Death Movement also wanted to “rearrang[e] ...the structure of care for the dying” (Lofland, 1978, p. 83), to return death to the home (p. 84), and “to provide the individual actor with the power to make certain decisions” about their own deaths (p. 85-86). Accordingly, Lofland (1978) notes that the Happy Death Movement depended on a thorough creation of the “enemy” (p. 88-89) – those institutions and practices which facilitated the “conventional view of death” (p. 90-91). Foucault (1979; 1996) was similarly interested in this decision-making process, though with a more explicitly playful spirit. In “The Simplest of Pleasures,” he writes that “One has to prepare [death] bit by bit, decorate it, arrange the details, find the ingredients, imagine it, choose it, get advice on it, shave it into a work without spectators, one which exists only for oneself, just for that shortest little moment of life” (p. 296). He imagines that death might leave the “dreadfully banal” funeral home for other spaces, perhaps like Japanese “love hotels,” “where you can enter into the most absurd decors with anonymous partners to look for an opportunity to die free of all stereotypes” (p. 297). In this short essay, Foucault suggests a “right” kind of death, one full of pleasure and choice.

Though the Happy Death Movement did not disappear, it certainly metamorphosed. To Walter (1994) this would not be surprising. He concludes that there have been many revivalist

turns in the twentieth century regarding death. Walter divides the revivalist movement into two “strands”: postmodern and late modern (p. 39). The postmodern strand brings private experiences into the public (p. 39), while the late-modern strand brings “public discourse” into the private (p. 39). The postmodern revivalist would be likely to say that no one can understand another’s grief (p. 40) and “challenge[s]” expert knowledge (p. 41). According to Walter, “postmodernism descends directly from nineteenth-century romanticism” linked with consumerism (p. 41). Conversely, the late modern revivalist adheres to “stage” theories of death (like Elizabeth Kübler-Ross’s), thereby promoting the infiltration of psychology into the dying and grieving processes (p. 39-40).

The contemporary Death Positivity Movement is identifiable as a postmodern revivalist strand since it is suspicious of “expert” infiltration into death and deathcare, values individual grief experiences, and believes that emotions and death in general should be moved to the public sphere. Much like the Happy Death Movement, the Death Positivity Movement also has a vested interest in education, and particularly in educating the public as to the benefits of confronting and accepting death. The label “Death Positive” is in itself confrontational. It asks us to consider death in a new frame, removed from negative affects. Those in the Death Positivity movement claim that too many of us are anxious about death or otherwise in denial of our mortality, and that this is to our detriment. Indeed, participants insist that embracing one’s mortality can improve one’s life. For instance, Megan Rosenbloom, a member of the Order, says, “There are a lot of studies that say people who think about death more are actually happier because humans are wired to value things that are perceived as finite” (as cited in Oritz, 2016, n.p.). Cozzolino, Blackie and Meyers (2014) would agree, noting the results of

“posttraumatic-growth research, which has documented positive psychological growth among many individuals facing, rather than denying, their mortality” (p. 419). After confronting death, they note, individuals may experience “increased desires for self-direction, closer relationships, and reorganized priorities with a new appreciation of life” (p. 419) and even “increased desires for intrinsic striving and more prosocial behavior” (p. 419). Thus, not only can accepting your mortality and recognizing your demise mean you might enjoy a more gratifying life, but this research suggests you might also reach out to others and develop meaningful community.

However, others argue that “denial” may take a variety of forms (Walter, 1994, p. 74). Individuals may “deny” death for a variety of reasons (p. 74), like protecting doctors from negative feelings (p. 75). Others may even be in “denial” to manage their lives (p. 82) – in fact, perhaps a bit of denial is always necessary. A commonly-cited theorist on the subject, Ernest Becker (1973) (borrowing from Freud, Rank, and Kierkegaard), claimed that individuals deny death in order to function, in order to stave off the “insanity” which would result from accepting one’s mortality and finitude.

Interestingly, in 2014, Walter published a short piece relating to the recent surge in Death Cafes and said that, in the twenty years since he published *The Revival of Death*, various journalists have assumed a newness about whatever present death revivalist movement was popular at the time. Nonetheless, it becomes clear that the Death Positivity Movement is not new but is rather the latest incarnation in a sixty-year trajectory. Moreover, the Death Positivity Movement has been developed alongside a multi-century history of institutionalization and power. However, this time there is an entanglement with other social movements that makes this particular revivalist movement unique.

## I. Women, Feminism, and Social Justice in the Death Positivity Movement

*“At its core, this movement is built on the notion that the way we die today is environmentally and psychologically unsound. And while primarily men have spent decades profiting from normalising this system, as relative newcomers to the industry, women are equipped to see an alternative route.”* (Love, 2017, n.p.)

The Death Positivity Movement was started primarily by women, and even now, The Order of the Good Death “is 80 per cent women” (Love, 2017, n.p.). At Death Salons, or the conferences of the Death Positivity Movement, women attend in far greater numbers than men (Gilmour, 2016, n.p.). This ratio led some in the Order to found “Death & the Maiden” – a sort of sister organization to the Order, concerned primarily with understanding women’s past and present involvement with death matters and hosting its own conference on the subject (Gilmour, 2016; see also Death & the Maiden Conference, 2018, “Panels”).

A familiar refrain, asked by reporters and movement participants alike, is “Why are so many women involved with death?” After all, the rates of women’s participation in death industries has also risen considerably: Gilmour (2016) writes, “According to the National Association of Funeral Directors, women now make up 60 per cent of mortuary school students” (n.p.). Women are similarly creating new (or, perhaps more accurately, newly-imagined) death professions, becoming death “doulas” or “midwives” – “acting as facilitators both for the dying and the ones left behind” outside and beyond the medical industry (Love, 2017, n.p.; see also Pahr, 2017).

The explanation given by many of the women involved in the Death Positive Movement is that women have always been involved with death, and that they are reclaiming their roles after a brief externally-imposed separation (Ortiz, 2016; Kelley, 2014; Colby, 2017, Love, 2017). This sentiment is encapsulated by Caitlin Doughty, who said in an interview that:



Hundreds of years ago, women were in charge of the dead...But in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, that job was taken away from women and given to male “professionals” who charged money for care of the body. Any time a woman washes or dresses her own dead person, she is taking that power back and subverting how corporate funeral homes want death to happen. (as cited in Colby, 2017)

Doughty’s assertion about reclamation and resurgence speaks to the legacy of institutionalization discussed above, but also to the sexism experienced by many women in death industries. Doughty observes in another interview that women’s participation is often associated with a stereotypical view of women, that women are “much more sympathetic than men” (as quoted in Kelley, 2014). The language of reclamation, then, particularly of reclaiming women’s work, is no coincidence. Feminism has long been a part of the movement, and is driven in part by workplace inequalities, or what Doughty describes as “work[ing] twice as hard to get to where we are” (as cited in Colby, 2017, n.p.). Thus, Colby (2017) writes, “[F]eminism is most obvious when it comes to one of [the Death Positivity Movement’s] major tenets: working toward equalizing the playing field, in life and in death” (n.p.). But what does it mean to “equalize the playing field” – especially in death?

Of course, there is the old adage: “Death is the great equalizer” (or “leveller” according to Field, Hockey and Small, 1997, p. 1). But, as Field, Hockey and Small (1997) argue, “worldly inequalities are in no way levelled at the time of death but persist, permeating every aspect of death and dying” (p. 1). Our deaths are constrained by “circumstance” – including social organization, available resources, and the relations in which we find ourselves (Lofland, 1978, p. 57-58). Gender (Field, Hockey & Small, p. 1; Lofland, p. 10), class (Field, Hockey and Small, p. 1; Walter, p. 60), age (Field, Hockey and Small, p. 1; Walter, p. 60), race, sexuality, and gender identity all impact the way we die, where we die, and what happens to our bodies post-

mortem. This concept of the “good death,” developed centuries ago but recently “professionalized” (Cottrell & Duggleby, 2016, p. 687), is only attainable for some because it is most attainable for those with resources and power. A “good death” implies some control over the circumstances of dying (Scarre, 2012, p. 1082), and although it may look different for different people, it is often idealized (as discussed above) as a death at home, surrounded by loved ones (Cottrell & Duggleby, p. 687). In order to die at home with adequate care, however, you must be able to pay for caregivers or rely on the unpaid labor of those around you (see Chai et al., 2014 for an analysis of unpaid care costs in home-based palliative care).

The “good death” is also often framed as a death that is slow in coming, that arrives in old age after sustained illness (Cottrell & Duggleby, 2016, p. 687). However, there are a number of reasons why death might arrive before old age, or that death might be violent, and these reasons too are complicated by vectors of power and oppression. In a blog entry on the Death & the Maiden website, Maggie Rich (2017) writes about what it would mean to facilitate “a good death for all” and argues that the Death Positivity Movement needs to include broader social justice movements. She highlights many of the reasons why some people are denied a good death. For example, Rich writes,

Police violence is a bad death, and black people are disproportionately impacted by it. If death positive advocates seek to create circumstances in which more people can access good deaths, we must seek to dismantle white supremacy and the racist systems that devalue black lives and deaths. We cannot truly be death positive without racial justice, without a culture in which black lives matter. (n.p.)

Here, Rich calls for an integration of the Movement for Black Lives and anti-racist, anti-white supremacist activism in the Death Positivity Movement. I could quote Rich at length, as she goes into detail about a variety of other barriers that communities face in achieving a “good

death,” particularly in the U.S. context. Importantly, Rich also draws attention to the post-mortem representation of trans individuals, and how their identities are memorialized after death. Similarly, Sarah Chavez, the co-founder of Death & the Maiden, and executive director of the Order of the Good Death, was quoted in an interview noting that “women and non-binary folk” are also more likely to experience a bad death, as are “trans women of colour, indigenous women in Canada, women in Mexico and El Salvador,” since they are more likely to be murdered than cisgender and white people (Gilmour, 2016, n.p.).

The way the Death Positivity Movement responds to these ethical questions of death and dying well is by turning toward greater inclusivity and a social justice ethos. Caitlin Doughty has said that the election of Donald Trump in the United States was a “massive kick in the butt to be more explicit about [the Death Positivity Movement’s] core values” (as cited in Colby, 2017, n.p.). This may explain why, especially lately, on the Order of the Good Death’s Facebook page, the social justice of dying is a familiar topic. Since the Facebook page is primarily a platform for sharing relevant Order information and news links, with some dialogue occurring in the comments sections, I have pulled some recent shares, asking questions like: What happens to the gravestones of people of color? (Order of the Good Death, August 21, 2017); How does mental illness contribute to death and how can we intervene? (Specifically referring to Sinead O’Connor’s public video plea for help, August 9, 2017); and How can you cut your death’s carbon footprint through aquamation? (July 27, 2017). At the 2017 Death Salon in Seattle, a number of posted sessions reflected this social justice turn. Some of the offerings included Sarah Chavez speaking on women’s involvement in the movement; “reflections upon contemporary artists who are making work that addresses the intersection of race and death”;

a conversation on “Decolonizing Death”; and a presentation on “Green Burial: The Intersection of Ecology & Ritual” (Death Salon, 2018, “Death Salon Seattle”).

The inclusion of ecology and environmentalism is notable, particularly in the context of the Anthropocene and an ailing planet. There are a number of environmental problems associated with the dominant forms of burial and cremation – from the chemicals used to embalm, to the metals we bury along with the deceased (see Love, 2017, for more details).

Love (2017) summarizes some of the more striking issues in the following paragraph:

Additionally, the 827,060 gallons of embalming fluid—which includes formaldehyde—we bury each year has made the pastoral, seemingly natural setting of the cemetery a toxic wasteland, and has degraded the health of undertakers for years. The only other conventional option—cremation—is not much better: The Funeral Consumers Alliance estimates that 246,240 tons of carbon dioxide are released into the atmosphere each year due to cremation, or the equivalent of 41,040 cars. (n.p.)

Some Order members are in the process of developing or promoting alternatives to these destructive models of body disposal. For example, Caitlin Doughty promotes “aquamation” – a process using water and potassium hydroxide to rapidly decompose human (and, in Seattle, pet) matter with one-fifth of the carbon dioxide production of traditional cremation (Bindrim, 2016, n.p.). Former architect Katrina Spade is also developing a new system of “recomposition” through which human remains are bacterially composted like some industrial livestock; the resulting soil is used to support local horticulture and agriculture (Echoing Green, 2017, n.p.). In these new imaginings of deathcare, proponents of Death Positivity are beginning to call for changes benefitting non-human entities, as well as the human, though the efficacy of this strategy will be further assessed in Chapter Three.

## Conclusion

*“From so many levels, death is political.”* (Chavez as cited by Love, 2017)

In this chapter, I have explored the politics of death — both in the institutionalization of death from the Middle Ages to the twenty-first century and in the social justice turn of the Death Positivity Movement. In doing so, I have demonstrated that our current culture of death reflects complex entanglements with the past and the present, with social relationships and systems of oppression and power. In Chapter Two, I will continue to complicate death’s entanglements alongside an analysis of the politics of death in the Anthropocene — this geological epoch marked by human destruction. As will be seen in the next chapter, Spade’s system of “recomposition” is particularly “fertile” ground for thinking through human and nonhuman relationships.

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## Chapter 2: Recomposing the Deaths of the Anthropocene

### Introduction

If we have arrived at a historical moment where the transition to biopower has facilitated the institutional management of life/death and a general “death taboo” in Western society, then we are strikingly ill-equipped to confront the horrors of the Anthropocene – an epoch saturated with widespread death, extinctions, and suffering caused by anthropogenic environmental change. Accordingly, in this chapter and the next I explore whether we might benefit from revivalist movements like the Death Positivity Movement in learning to address and confront these operations of death. Since I will explore this argument in more concrete terms in Chapter Three, it is first necessary to indicate some examples of just what death in the Anthropocene entails. However, this is a complicated endeavour; the deaths of the Anthropocene are often interconnected, spreading across species and resisting neat segmentation into categories. Needing some way to account for this messiness — to embrace it — I turn to “compost.” Compost, particularly as it is used by Donna Haraway (2016) and Kim Q. Hall (2014), is a system — like the Anthropocene — of death, of decay, of muddling, of interconnection, of multi-species becoming. Recomposition, a composting process emerging from the Death Positivity Movement, further illustrates some of these components while the resistance to recomposition exemplifies my arguments from the first chapter regarding the individualization and avoidance of death.

#### I. Recomposition and Becoming Together

In Seattle, Washington, Order of the Good Death member Katrina Spade is developing a human remains disposal project: *Recompose* (formerly called *The Urban Death Project*) (Spade

& Doughty, 2017). Based on the principles of so-called “livestock mortality composting” or the composting of animals deemed inedible, Spade aims to promote “human composting” — a name which has fallen out of favor for the sleek and more ambiguous term, *recomposition*. Toward the end of the last chapter, I described the toxicity in traditional forms of burial and the treatment of dead human bodies. Recomposition is an eco-friendly answer to this toxicity, using “natural” processes and materials to break down human remains in a sped-up version of the “old-fashioned way” (gradual decomposition in the earth). Spade, a former architect, is planning to include this human remains disposal project within a specially designed mortuary. Originally, she had hoped that the top of the mortuary would feature a garden, supported by a giant compost bin in the centre where human remains could be strategically placed to decompose naturally and contribute to the garden above.

After some further research and dissemination of this idea (including a successful TED Talk in 2016), Spade found that her original design was met with some resistance. It turns out that for many members of the general public, there is something indecent about a mass grave, about the collective treatment of remains, and the loss of individual memorial space. People want to visit the place of their loved one’s body, and, curiously, they would prefer to do this in a large (structured and institutionalized) cemetery rather than by a large compost pile. Accordingly, to ensure the success of her project, Spade is now developing a different site design. This site, she says, will host individual honeycomb-shaped pods (indoors) for individual decomposition (the honeycomb shape helps facilitate interlocking and thus space conservation). Though Spade’s project is in preliminary stages — she is preparing both by visiting a “body farm” where scientists study human decomposition, and by requesting donors

to study decomposition at the University of Seattle — she said that she hopes the smallness of the pods will expedite the recomposition process.

Why “recomposition?” Because, it would seem, Spade wants to allay consumer fears about becoming nothing. And, based on the response to her first design, it would appear that people are particularly afraid of *becoming nothing together*.<sup>11</sup> Spade stresses, then, that at the end of the recomposition process, there is a final product: soil (dirt). There is a minor distinction to be made here that may not be intuitive. We might imagine that the final product of recomposition is not dissimilar from the final product of cremation. However, the cremation process leaves behind small fragments of bone, whereas Spade asserts that the final product of recomposition is, indeed, dirt with no detectable parts of “human remains.” This dirt can be carted home and placed in a memorial garden dedicated to your loved one, if you wish. Another interesting distinction can be made here, as the memorial “soil” can be used to grow things, whereas cremation ashes are often toxic. Regardless, consumers may rest easy knowing that the dirt they own was once one (known) person, instead of various other strangers. Thus, instead of becoming nothing, your remains become *something*. Something more “natural.”

I first learned of recomposition at the 2017 Death Salon. As readers will recall, this is the annual gathering of the Death Positivity Movement, attended by any number of death professionals and death-curious individuals. A fellow attendee from the University of Melbourne pointed out that this process could not be as individualized as Spade imagines (L. Leighton, personal communication, September 10, 2018). Spade says in her TED Talk that oxygen is required for the de/recomposition process — in part because oxygen allows the

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<sup>11</sup> Thank you to Jessie Beier for provoking my analysis of “becoming.”

transmission of various bacterial species to break down dead matter. It is unlikely that these bacteria would be considerate enough to work with just one loved one in a honey-comb hive of multiple dead bodies. There is also, of course, the question of the materials used to expedite the composting process. Where do these materials come from? What — or who — are the materials made of? And what does it mean to consider dirt as an individualized substance — a substance of one — when in fact dirt is composed of many substances, organisms, beings (living and dead)? Further, what does it mean to derive this process from animal agribusiness, to compost humans like cattle? What does it mean to become nothing or something in death? What does it mean to *become* and especially to become earth? To become food? To become irrevocably enmeshed with nonhuman species? And, to return to the beginning of this chapter, how can recomposition — and composting, more broadly — inform our understanding of multispecies death in the Anthropocene?

## II. The Metaphysics of Compost

Nobel laureate Paul Crutzen and ecologist Eugene Stoermer proposed the term “Anthropocene” in 2000 (Schneiderman, 2015, p. 180) to recognize the degree of anthropogenic change which has indelibly altered the planet. Or so the story goes. Many have contested this framing of the current ecological state, particularly the clumsy erasure of *which* “anthropos” (humans) have done the most damage (Lorimer, 2015, p. 3; Schneiderman, 2015, p. 193). To remedy this problem, and to restructure the conversation of the Anthropocene, some have proposed alternative names for this epoch: The Capitalocene (Moore, 2016), the Necrocene (McBrien, 2016), the Cosmocene (Lorimer, 2015) and the Chthulucene (Haraway, 2016) are only a few.

Alternative names often indicate a different explanation for the state of the planet, thus suggesting alternative responsibilities, genealogies, and/or solutions. Moore (2016b) writes accordingly, “Once we begin to ask this question—What drives today’s disastrous state of affairs?—we move from the consequences of environment-making to its conditions and causes” (p. 79). Schneiderman (2015) notes that, in fact, political and cultural views have always influenced the naming of geological epochs. As such, it makes sense that “concerns such as disparate power relationships between varied groups of people, colonialism and European expansion into the Americas, impacts of globalized trade, economic growth, and reliance on fossil fuels, are legitimate matters in the [naming] debate” (p. 182). The name “Capitalocene,” for example, extends the start date of the Anthropocene ahead of the Industrial Revolution to encompass the rise of “Cheap Nature” or the capitalist-driven separation of Human and Nature. By eliminating the “Anthropos,” Moore also draws attention to the ways capitalism has structured some individuals as less-than-human, and otherwise addresses *who* is at the root of the planetary problem(s).

It is not uncommon for theorists to use multiple names for this epoch, strategically calling upon different arguments, explanations, and “stories” (as used by Schneiderman, 2015, p. 193) to benefit their trajectories. Considering the content of this chapter, I prefer Haraway’s (2016) use of Chthulucene — a flexible concept which salvages the headiest parts from the other names: “The unfinished Chthulucene must collect up the trash of the Anthropocene, the exterminism of the Capitalocene, and chipping and shredding and layering like a mad gardener,

make a much hotter compost pile for still possible pasts, presents, and futures” (p. 61).<sup>12</sup> In other words, the Chthulucene works within and apart from the other names. Haraway calls upon the Anthropocene for its intelligibility, and the Capitalocene because it situates a beginning ahead of the Industrial Revolution and through other violent alterations to the planet and people — including networks of slavery, colonization, and exploitation (p. 51). The Chthulucene further extends such an analysis, drawing on relationships, “multispecies muddles,” and looking toward the future (and present) via a call for “collective thinking” (p. 34). However, one of the best things about the concept of the Chthulucene, especially for the purposes of this chapter, is how Haraway integrates composting in the Chthulucene narrative, particularly to elucidate the disintegration and re-forming of human and non-human relationships/kinships in the Anthropocene:

[H]uman beings are not in a separate compost pile. We are humus, not homo, not Anthropos; we are compost, not posthuman...Specifically, unlike either the Anthropocene or the Capitalocene, the Chthulucene is made up of ongoing multispecies stories and practices of becoming-with in times that remain at stake, in precarious times, in which the world is not finished and the sky has not fallen-yet. We are at stake to each other. Unlike the dominant dramas of Anthropocene and Capitalocene discourse, human beings are not the only important actors in the Chthulucene, with all other beings able simply to react. The order is rather reversed: human beings are with and of the earth, and the other biotic and abiotic powers of this earth are the main story. (p. 59)

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<sup>12</sup> Haraway’s claim that the Capitalocene and the Anthropocene are too “exterminist” (see also p. 59) may seem at odds with the death-positive approach to the Anthropocene I have argued for elsewhere in this thesis. However, elsewhere Haraway repeatedly claims “our” susceptibility to mortality, of “living and dying well” (p. 47), always destabilizing human exceptionalism and asserting that our lives and deaths are both caught up with the lives and deaths of other beings. This is not, then, an approach which denies death but rather one which is always mindful of mortality and the relationships bound therein.



Even this excerpt is a good example of compost — multilayered and rich. Haraway asserts that we are still becoming, even in a time that might feel particularly finite. She also posits an important idea that I will stress throughout this chapter, and an idea exemplified by the recomposition process — that there is no separate “human,” that we are indeed co-constituted with other beings, in life and in death. She thus gets at a fundamental crux of the Anthropocene: a reorganization of the ways we have conceived the categories “human” and “nature.”

In theorizing a queer crip feminist politics of food, Hall (2014) proposes a similar “metaphysics of the compost” (p. 190), which also draws out the process of “becoming” and points to the weaving of multi-species relationships: “Like queer and crip, compost is not a singular, fixed thing. It is a process of decomposition, a process of becoming. Compost is simultaneously a materialization of decay and life. It teems with many varied organisms” (p. 191). Hall also reminds us that the final product of the recomposition process — dirt — multiplies rather than simplifies our mutual composition: “Dirt, Ladelle McWhorter writes, ‘circulates, it never stays put or settles down. That’s the trouble with dirt. Dirt has no integrity. Dirt isn’t a particular, identifiable thing. And yet it acts...Dirt perpetuates itself’” (p. 191). In other words, dirt is wonderfully messy; though it is described singularly, it is the summation of many different parts. Dirt is also an agent: It spreads and contaminates and, consequentially, acts as a catalyst of change. Indeed, though the bereaved patrons of the recomposition process might expect to receive a token of remembrance, we must realize that we will never be able to hold just one loved one (Ross, 2016, n.p.), that we are never able to touch just one being. Spade

originally noted the diverse product of recomposition when she was proposing the earlier version of the mortuary:

What's magical is that we cease to be human during this [recomposition] process...Our molecules are rearranged into other molecules, and in fact what's created is not human remains. To give someone back the soil that is created from just their person would be purely symbolic. If what we're trying to do is reconnect with the fact that we're all part of this grand natural world, let's say, ok, we really are part of this system that's greater than ourselves. (n.p.).

While I agree that we are “part of [a] system that's greater than ourselves,” we are also, indeed, more “humus” than we ever were “human.” Just as compost and dirt teem with “many varied organisms” and substances, so too are we comprised of and indebted to other beings – gut bacteria, for instance (Lorimer, 2015, p. 7).

An extension of the logic of compost and of reorganizing the boundaries “human” and “nature” is understanding the dynamics of becoming food. For Val Plumwood (2007) — who was once almost eaten by a crocodile — recognizing our edibility is key to recognizing our co-constitution with other beings: “Since then it has seemed to me that our worldview denies the most basic feature of animal existence on planet earth – that we are food and that through death we nourish others” (p. 1). We deny this food status because we see ourselves as true individuals (understandably, as discussed in Chapter One) and because “Human exceptionalism positions us as the eaters of others who are never themselves eaten” (p. 1). I am reminded again of the fallacy of individual graves associated with recomposition (or even the format of the traditional cemetery) because, as Plumwood mentions, even though we are typically buried in coffins and in other walls “to prevent anything digging us up” (p. 2) these human-made boundaries are meaningless to bacteria and eventually other species as well, who use our bodies for nourishment. James Stanescu (2012) asserts something similar — that recognizing

ourselves as food for other species can be instructional for the way we view relationships with each other and other species: “It is our very ability to be wounded [eaten?], our very dependency, that brings us together” (p. 578). Again, however, our historico-political relationship with death prohibits this recognition. If we do not consider ourselves susceptible to death, then we cannot consider ourselves susceptible to being eaten after death (though, as Plumwood rightly instructs, we are frequently eaten throughout our lives as well – perhaps most irritatingly by mosquitos) (p. 1). Part of the way we stave off this awareness is by insisting on human superiority and difference. Stanescu thus further notes that “[W]e invest a vast amount of intellectual work in trying to figure out what separates and individuates the human species, rather than in what makes us part of a commonality with other lives” (p. 569) even though “we are, in fact, nothing but animals” (p. 570).

The denial of animality and the sequestering of the categories “human” and “animal” have very particular and material consequences. According to Aaron Bell (2011), such a binary makes it possible and acceptable to uphold some lives while devaluing or even consuming others: “The logic of exclusion deployed in the ontological distinction of human and animal and the radical evil of anthropocentrism have been the implements of unimaginable violence” (Bell, p. 171; see also Stanescu, 2012, p. 571). For Zipporah Weisberg (2011), this process can be summarized as speciesism where “the human species positions itself as superior to other species, and gives itself license to inflict egregious cruelties against them, simply by virtue of the fact that they are *not* human” (p. 177). However, some humans have also fallen beneath the category of “animal” rather than “human.” For Moore (2016a) for example, “These exclusions correspond to a long history of subordinating women, colonial populations, and

peoples of color” (p. 2). As I go on to discuss the deaths of the Anthropocene, I am cognizant of the history of the human/animal binary and of the “metaphysics of the compost” outlined by Hall and Haraway. Therefore, even though an earlier version of this chapter had “animal deaths” and “non-human deaths” divided neatly into two separate categories, I will endeavor not to repeat such a strategy as I go on to explore examples of some of the operations of Anthropocene death. It would actually be nearly impossible to do so, as the deaths of the Anthropocene build and compound, affecting (as I indicated in the introduction of this chapter) multi-species across huge swaths of time and place.

### III. Messy Extinctions

Climate change is one of the major threads from which the Anthropocene unravels. It is an umbrella term often used to account for dramatic surges in carbon dioxide and associated rising temperatures across the planet. At this stage in the Anthropocene, carbon dioxide measurements are much higher than they have ever been; In 2007, they were “more than 80 ppm above the maximum values of the past 740,000 years, if not 20 million years” (Hoegh-Guldberg et al., 2007, p. 1737). Such an increase, deemed “unequivocal” by the 2007 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) assessment report (Krakoff, 2008, p. 9), poses exponential threat, including the “acidification of oceans with harm to coral reefs and other species” (Krakoff, p. 10). Kolbert (2014) thus observes that “Ocean acidification is sometimes referred to as global warming’s ‘equally evil twin,’” in part because such oceanic changes have preceded past major extinction events (p. 120). In this contemporary case, the ocean is like a sponge, absorbing the carbon dioxide and other gases from the atmosphere but not releasing them back as it would in “normal” circumstances (p. 113-114). As a result, the pH

of the oceans is dropping and they are becoming “thirty percent more acidic than they were in 1800” (p. 114). An increasingly acidic ocean causes problems for many species, affecting “metabolism, enzyme activity, and protein function,” “alter[ing] the availability of key nutrients, like iron and nitrogen,” “chang[ing] the amount of light that passes through the water,” “impact[ing] photosynthesis” and even “alter[ing] the way sound propagates” (p. 120-121). However, not all species are negatively affected; Kolbert notes that some species may actually thrive under these “elevated CO2 levels” (p. 121), reminding us that critters can be survivors and flourishers — not just victims — of the Anthropocene story. Human superiority really is a myth.

Nonetheless, I would like to focus on coral and how coral is affected by ocean acidification, because coral embodies those multi-species interconnections so critical to compost and recomposition. Coral is also an excellent example because it destabilizes the frequent Anthropocene refrain that humans alone have indelibly altered the planet. Coral has also altered the planet, and in ways both large and small. Birkeland (2015) notes, for instance, that even though coral is very thin, it has “shaped the face of the Earth more than any other organisms, including humans, by creating limestone structures,” and “influenc[ing] the chemistry of the oceans and atmosphere” (p. 6). Kolbert (2014) also puts coral’s impact succinctly: “The way corals change the world—with huge construction projects spanning multiple generations—might be likened to the way that humans do, with this crucial difference. Instead of displacing other creatures, corals support them” (p. 130). Although Kolbert’s analogy is somewhat unfortunate — relying heavily on an industrial and capitalist mode of comparison — I do like the idea of altering the planet supportively, which is not to say that coral do not also

destroy. Kolbert calls them “organic paradoxes—obdurate, ship-destroying ramparts constructed by tiny gelatinous creatures. They are part animal, part vegetable, and part mineral, at once teeming with life and, at the same time, mostly dead” (p. 130). Coral thus embodies compost as unidentifiable and inseparable, a strange mixture of living and dead.

However, the changes in the atmosphere and, as a result, the ocean, mean that coral reefs are becoming “bleached,” left unable to rebuild after routine damage (Birkeland, 2015, p. 12). This is apparently unusual for coral, as they have experienced dramatic changes in environment before but “have always come back” (p. 7). However, researchers predict that the Anthropocene will spell the end for these otherwise “resilient” coral reefs (Kolbert, 2014, p. 130). As a result, the survival of the many species who inhabit or depend on coral reefs is also threatened – and there are, indeed, many such species: “[T]he number of phyla in one 5 m<sup>2</sup> quadrat on a coral reefs [sic] in the Atlantic is substantially greater than all the terrestrial and freshwater habitats (rain forests, savannah, temperate forests, tropical rainforests, tundra, rivers, lakes, bogs) of the world” (Birkeland, p. 6). Many humans’ lives are similarly affected by depleted coral reefs. Reefs are primarily found in “the less economically developed tropical regions” and the people who use them “are estimated to number in the tens of millions” – people who have depended on them for “hundreds and, in some locations, thousands of years as major sources of food for subsistence” (p. 7). Reefs also provide important infrastructure “as protection against wave action” and particularly against typhoons (p. 10; see also Hoegh-Guldberg et al., 2007, p. 1742). One of the other consequences of climate change is “increasing intensity and frequency of extreme weather events” (Krakoff, 2008, p. 10; see also World Health Organization, 2017), including typhoons. The damage to coral reefs, then, takes on

additional context and lethality, meaning less protection for those communities living along the coasts. While I am unable to indicate all of the consequences of coral bleaching, I would like to gesture to the social dimension of coral reef destruction; coastal communities often rely on coral reefs for fishing and there are social and cultural practices built around the coral accordingly (Birkeland, p. 10-11).

It is not difficult to see how one death can trigger other deaths and losses, particularly where biodiversity is concerned. Unfortunately, many other species are dying across the planet, prompting many researchers and theorists alike to argue that we are the midst of a sixth extinction (Schneiderman, 2015; Cafaro, 2015, Braje & Erlandson, 2013; Kolbert, 2014). By either directly targeting some animals or destroying/relocating the habitats of others, human-led activities like hunting, forestry, and global transport have all contributed to biodiversity loss and, of course, warming temperatures and ocean acidification (Schneiderman, p. 191). Cafaro (2015) notes the interplay between many of these activities, which – once again – often “synergistically magnif[y] each others’ harms” (p. 387). Of course — and as will be explored in the next chapter — not all humans have contributed equally to the sixth extinction. While elsewhere Cafaro blames the universal “us” for the sixth extinction, he also observes that the “forces driving extinction are increasing as individuals pursue wealth, corporations pursue profit, governments pursue economic and demographic growth, and even more people consume, degrade, and appropriate ever more resources” (p. 387-388). Alternatively, then, it is not so much the “us” driving the sixth extinction but some of “our” relationships, particularly our relationships to wealth and capital.

#### IV. Deadstock Composting and the Meat Industry

Near the beginning of this chapter, I indicated that the origin of recomposition is animal composting — a process derived from animal agribusiness with many different possible meanings. In fact, it is partly because of this connection that I turned to composting and recomposition to discuss Anthropocene death. A brief summary of the process is as follows: Those animals who die of “natural causes” before they can be killed for food are sometimes ground up before being deposited in massive (though separate) compost piles (Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs, 2015, n.p.). Animals in this context are no longer designated “livestock” but “deadstock,” speaking to their denigration as capital.

“Deadstock” composting is often described in more explicit and graphic detail than human “recomposition.” A 2016 *Wired* article on recomposition uses terms like “ritual” to describe the process, and an accompanying image is abstracted of any reference to a human corpse beyond a pile of soil. Animal bodies are referred to as “carcasses” instead of “remains” or, indeed, “bodies” (Ross, n.p.).<sup>13</sup> Conversely, The Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs (2015) includes graphic pictures of deadstock composting on their relevant fact sheet, in addition to detailed information about the composition of bovine bodies, and which species and materials will break down corpses more expediently (n.p.). Though these are disparate sources, there is something interesting happening in the way we talk about animal deaths versus human deaths. Recomposition “won’t be an easy sell” (Ross, 2016, n.p.) but animal composting is factual; there is a kind of propriety associated with talking casually about the deaths of cattle, and presumably with chickens, pigs, goats, and other animals killed for

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<sup>13</sup> Stanescu (2013) notes that animals are rarely called “corpses” (p. 150).



food. However, as James Stanescu (2012) notes, there is also a way in which it becomes unacceptable to talk about the death of these animals, particularly if you are expressing grief or mourning. If you are, say, visibly upset over the butchering, sale, and consuming of a dead animal, Stanescu says “Most people’s response is that we need therapy, or that we can’t be sincere” (p. 568). Such a response, indicating that the “cure” for grief is therapy, relates to the institutionalization of death, particularly in the twentieth century. For Stanescu, such a response is also tied to a sense of human exceptionalism, reserving grief for those deemed truly “human” and excluding those people and species deemed “animal.” There is a similar exceptionalism at work here, a way in which discussing the composting of “deadstock” is perfectly acceptable, but human composting must be renamed and sanitized.

While most of the Anthropocene literature on animal deaths valorizes the exotic, the rare, and the endangered, if we take the “metaphysics of the compost” seriously then we must also investigate the ways in which we are connected and implicated in the deaths of familiar species. These are, after all, deaths which — although not preceding the species’ own extinction — occur on a staggering scale and are only increasing in number (McGregor & Houston, 2017, p. 2). Tony Weis (2013) asserts that this increase is due to the “meatification of diets” or the increasing reliance on meat across the world, aided in part by a discourse of progress attached to meat-eating. Cudworth (2011) notes similarly, “The eating of meat and animal products is, in most parts of the world, seen as a form of desirable privilege and a mark of status and wealth” (p. 330).

The consequences of increased meat consumption have been alarming, not only for the animals who are indeed killed for food to meet demand, but for many other species and species

relationships as well, often expressed through damage to the “environment.” Cudworth (2011) writes, for example, “The deployment of Western agricultural models and the spread of Western food practices have significant implications for the environment in terms of undermining bio-diversity, localized pollution, soil damage, rainforest depletion, and contributing 18 per cent of all greenhouse gases” (p. 331).

Human population increases and the demands of capitalism ensure that land is increasingly reassigned to industrial agriculture and food production, often disrupting traditional food production with monocultures and animals raised for food – especially cattle. According to Weis (2013), the methane released by cows, and the water (and mono-cropping) required to feed these livestock species continues to devastate the planet. McGregor and Houston (2017) note similarly that cows “requir[e] much more land, water and energy...and are the leading source of agricultural greenhouse gas emissions” (p. 2). Run-off from animal waste, particularly in an agricultural context, is also one of the leading contributors to water pollution as part of the agricultural “nonpoint sources” affecting rivers, streams, lakes, wetlands, and ground water supplies (United States Environmental Protection Agency, 2017, n.p.). Relatedly, run-off from “animal hormones washed downstream with manure” (together with human birth control pills) are posited as the cause for some intersex conditions appearing in fish, and perhaps higher rates of human cancer (Associated Press, 2004, n.p.).

Regardless of all of these consequences, the deaths of animals raised for food often involve significant suffering that should also give us pause. The intense demands on the livestock industry mean that associated animals perish in startling numbers and under often-brutal conditions mechanized for mass lethality. Lisa Guether (2013) even draws connections

between the prison industrial complex and the treatment of nonhuman animals in factory farms, particularly in terms of “intensive confinement” (p. 150). Animals who are placed in limited and sequestered spaces often turn to self-mutilating (p. 152) and “pathological” behavior (p. 150), “blocked from behaving as the kinds of animals they are, with meaningful relationships to the world and to other animals” (p. 152). Guenther’s analysis is particularly illuminating, in that she asserts the mechanisms of the meat industry deprive animals from the “whole network of relations that otherwise sustain [them]” (p. 151). Since I have so far focused on relationships and interconnectedness as humans are involved, in the final section I would like to signal the importance of relations which extend beyond the human as well. After all, compost and the Anthropocene need not involve humans at all.

#### V. Composting Techno-Scientific “Solutions”

I have made many allusions in this chapter to “becoming.” In many ways, I have meant this “becoming” as a process of recognizing our interconnectedness and co-constitution. For Haraway (2016), becoming is inseparable from the collective — we become-*with*, both in living and in dying. Part of becoming-with is grieving together (p. 42) and understanding that the best we could possibly do is to *delay* extinction (p. 41). This is a fundamentally different perspective from the popular response to the Anthropocene, which includes a refusal of grief and mourning and an insistence on immortality and infinite survival, at least for the most privileged. I am speaking here about geoengineering and human engineering, technological solutions to the threat of extinction and the threats posed by the Anthropocene. These scientific approaches seem to be completely at odds with the “metaphysics of the compost.” They are another attempt to “preserve the Nature-Society binary” (Lorimer, 2015, p. 2), and are part of “the

dream of mastery' [which] presents the Anthropocene as an economic and scientific opportunity necessitating more modernization—more knowledge, more technology, and better (i.e., more rational) forms of social and environmental organization" (p. 2). Essentially, geoengineering projects extend rather than rectify the problems leading to the Anthropocene; They are attempts to maintain human control over an increasingly suffering and angry planet – they reinforce “a totalizing and anthropocentric belief in the power of science and technology to either destroy or manage the earth” (p. 3), through which “scientists are represented as the ecological vanguard of the world” (Bonneuil & Fressoz, 2016, p. 80). For example, instead of reconfiguring our relationships with other animals – including those otherwise considered “food” – at least one scientist has proposed a pill (or patch) to create a kind of Pavlovian response to meat by inducing nausea (Andersen, 2012, n.p.). Meanwhile, some animals have been specially engineered to reduce their environmental impact, consequently protecting their status as food for a while longer. Certain pigs, for instance, have been genetically modified so that they secrete enzymes that will reduce the harmful gases released in their waste (Zhang et al., 2018).

Like in the case of engineering livestock species, other ventures may actually result in more death along the way, sometimes causing immediate and deadly side effects for human and nonhuman species. One of the more popular proposed solutions to climate change and thus many of the Anthropocene ills is sulphate aerosol spraying:

It would work by enveloping the Earth with a layer of sulphate particles, probably sprayed into the upper atmosphere by a fleet of specially adapted aircraft, which would reduce the amount of sunlight reaching the Earth's surface. Reducing solar radiation would cool the planet. (Hamilton, 2014, p. 11)

The consequences of such a strategy include “millions of premature deaths from respiratory diseases caused by this gas” (Bonneuil & Fressoz, 2016, p. 25). Nonetheless, even Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer, whom you will remember as the first proponents of the “Anthropocene,” advocate for such a strategy, claiming that it is the responsibility of “scientists and engineers to guide society towards environmentally sustainable management during the era of the Anthropocene” and to “‘optimize’ climate” (Bonneuil & Fressoz, p. 81). An “optimal” climate in these terms is really an optimal climate for humans. What is perhaps worse is that such technological innovations are positioned as the only solutions, as solutions which may be a “last resort,” when in fact many others have knowledges and expertise which could be used in the pursuit of more equitable living and dying:

In the major scientific periodicals dealing with the Anthropocene, everything is presented as if the environmental knowledge and initiatives of civil society did not exist. Indigenous peoples struggling against the devastation of mining or oil exploitation on their lands, activists who build tree cabins in the path of bulldozers constructing pipelines and airports, antinuclear or neo-Luddite, anti-high-tech movements, collectives that experiment with less materialistic and “simpler” ways of living, “degrowth” practitioners or the “transition towns” movement, all of these are absolutely invisible in the grand narrative. If we believe the anthropocenologist experts, serious solutions can only emerge from further technological innovation in the laboratory, rather than from alternative political experiment “from below” in society as a whole. (Bonneuil & Fressoz, p. 82)

Thus, geo- and human engineering entail a sense of becoming, but not a becoming compatible with compost. The kind of becoming encapsulated by these technological and scientific solutions to the problems of the Anthropocene is deadlier and more fearful, more entrenched in human superiority and invested in human domination of the planet. It is also an isolated form of becoming, a resistance to mingling with others across and between human and nonhuman kinship lines.

## Conclusion

Recomposition, and compost more generally, have been central concepts in this chapter, pulling together the ways in which death operates in the Anthropocene. However, compost also directs us toward life, and especially toward holding life and death in tension; as much as the recomposition mortuary and compost piles are containers for death and waste, they are also sites of food, nourishment, birth, and life. For various insects and critters, these piles are inviting spaces where eggs can be laid. Similarly, plants draw nutrients from deposited compost soil, growing stronger as a result. Thus, in Chapter Three I draw attention to the ways in which death is a part of life, and vice versa.

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### **Chapter 3: A Life-Based Orientation Toward the Politics of Death in the Anthropocene**

#### Introduction

One of the fundamental problems of the Anthropocene is the refusal to acknowledge death: the deaths of species, both human and nonhuman, caused by anthropogenic climate change and the challenges of this most recent epoch. Moreover, it is the refusal to acknowledge a particular kind of death — a death which is life-oriented, generative, messy, and always in the context of other relationships — that perpetuates Anthropocene-related harm. Of course, not all humans struggle with this refusal. Death, and a life-focused perspective on death, are both an integral part of many cultures. Further, for those entities who confront death on a regular basis as a result of environmental change, death is not something which can be easily refused.

Nonetheless, there are many humans who fear and deny death. These humans are prone to dismissing the consequences of their actions, and the other operations of environmental destruction in which they are complicit. As a result of this denial, many beings suffer and die. Therefore, it seems only logical that a movement — the Death Positivity Movement — geared toward confronting death could speak to this persistent death denial. However, in my literature review it became readily apparent that it is not enough to acknowledge death operating in the Anthropocene; we must acknowledge the ways in which the politics of death magnify structural inequalities, and that death in the Anthropocene is a social justice issue as well. In this chapter, cognizant of the Western history of death and dying and the multi-species layering of compost, I imagine the possibilities in confronting and embracing death in times marred by anthropogenic environmental change. What does it mean

to risk becoming something else in the Anthropocene, and how useful is the Death Positivity Movement in this discussion? How can we confront death and overcome denial, without succumbing to despair or any other mitigation strategies? How might death direct us toward action instead of inaction and hopelessness? Donna Haraway (2013) asserts that we must learn to traverse the line between action and hopelessness, writing, “Ongoing caring requires that we work with figures of re-mediation that are risky and also fun, that we work, play, live, die, that we are at risk *with* and *as* mortal critters, that we don’t give in to the techno-tragic story of self-made final death of the Anthropocene, but that we do inhabit the realities of excess mass death so as to learn to repair, and maybe even flourish without denial” (p. 268). Here, Haraway encourages us to approach environmental ills with a spirit of play and experimentation. She also cautions against both geoengineering and the glorification of making our own destruction, arguing that we have not yet arrived at the final conclusion of the “end of the world,” and that it is folly to presume that we have — particularly if such thinking results in human exceptionalist narratives.<sup>14</sup> Humans deserve no glory for contributing to Anthropocene deaths, and there is similarly no glory in “saving” anyone/anything from such unnecessary destruction. According to Haraway (2016) the affective responses to “end of the world” sentiments are either “sublime despair” or “sublime indifference” — neither of which are useful in the context of those already dying and suffering in the Anthropocene (p. 4).

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<sup>14</sup> Roy Scranton (2015), the author of “Learning to Die in the Anthropocene,” is one example of a doomsday prophet, who argues not only that it is in the end of this “civilization,” but “we have likely already passed the point where we could have done anything about it” (p. 17).

## I. Death Denial: A Fundamental Life Problem

In Chapter One I noted that societal approaches to death change at moments when many are dying or recently dead. As such, it is interesting that the Death Positivity Movement is resurging in its most recent incarnation now, in this time, not only alongside the Anthropocene concept, but amid a general failure to *act* on a host of slow disasters creeping across the planet — namely struggles over immigration in Canada and the United States, a desperate water shortage in South Africa, and so on. Participants argue that in Western culture individuals and communities once accepted death, and that somehow this attitude disappeared in the twentieth century. In Chapter One I posited that this was an operation of power, particularly of biopower and the institutional management of death and life. However, this death denial is also an inherent condition of the Anthropocene — the inability to see past our own mortality and various attempts to manage death-related fear.

Heather Anne Swanson (2017) uses the term “Anthropocene banality” when referencing a failure to act on anthropogenic environmental change, writing, “There are plenty of troubling things about the Anthropocene, but one of its most troubling dimensions is the sheer number of people it fails to trouble” (n.p.). There are various strategies which may be employed in the process of denial, particularly regarding environmental change (Norgaard, 2011, p. 177); as Chris Cuomo (2011) writes, “Studies show that there is a tendency for people to develop coping strategies such as denial in the face of cognitive dissonance or information about situations they have little power to change, and avoidant denial is all the more attractive when the truth is painful, depressing, or costly, as the truth about climate change certainly seems to be” (p. 703). Therefore, although Swanson rightly asserts that the Anthropocene “fails to trouble,” there are

operations of denial at work beneath this banality: “Apathy is typically understood as meaning the absence of feeling, but it can often reflect a suppression of feeling that serves a useful psychological function” (Hamilton, 2010, p. 5).

The Anthropocene is a phenomenon so large, so long in the making, so deeply and intergenerationally shameful that, in a way, it cannot be comprehended with many of our modern emotional tools or frameworks for understanding: “One of the reasons why we feel so powerless when asked to be concerned by ecological crisis...is because of the total *disconnect* between the range, nature, and scale of the phenomena and the set of emotions, habits of thoughts, and feelings that would be necessary to handle those crises—not even to act in response to them, but simply to give them more than a passing ear” (Latour, 2011, p. 2). Roy Scranton (2015) asserts that “In the world of the Anthropocene, the question of individual mortality—What does my life mean in the face of death?—is universalized and framed in scales that boggle the imagination” (p. 20). Thus, if individuals struggle to confront death on a personal level, then there is little hope for confronting death on the level of species.

In response to the scale of the Anthropocene and the threats it poses, Clive Hamilton (2010) asserts that we use minimization strategies to assuage our fears:

Many people do not deny climate science, but use various techniques to blunt the emotional impact of the scientific warnings. We might “de-problematise” the threat by making its scale seem smaller, or distance ourselves from it by emphasising the time lapse before the consequences of warming are felt. Narratives such as “Humans have solved these sorts of problems before” and “It won’t affect me much” are effective. (p. 5)

The notions that “others have solved similar problems” or “others will solve the problem” are part of another mitigation strategy with conflicting ramifications. First, there is often some ambivalence or doubt associated with the Anthropocene. How do we know for sure that there

are environmental changes currently underway, and how are these changes different from the times before? Others express disbelief about premonitions for the future, as we are predisposed to believe “that climate change ‘will not happen to us’” (Norgaard, 2011, p. 200). We are thus in denial, in part, because we are skeptical of scientific authority (p. 4), of “mediated knowledge” (Latour, 2011, p. 6). Meanwhile, as Hamilton (2010) sagely notes, it may happen that another theory will supersede climate change, but the consequences while we wait are “dire” (p. 11).

Second, the hope that “someone will come to save us” often results in depending upon geoengineering strategies, like those briefly discussed in Chapter Two. Turning to technological solutions to extend some lives is a reaction to the threat not only to individual life but to the lives of many, and possibly even the entire human species. However, as was already discussed, those who are “saved” and those who are harmed by proposed geoengineering strategies are determined through lines of structural violence; as Heather Davis (2013) writes, “This technoutopianism is precisely the kind of logic deployed to divorce us from the conditions of being earth-bound creatures in the first place. It is interested only in the extension of a particular way of life, and the individuals who benefit from it, instead of understanding the cyclical, processual, and transformative nature of life itself” (p. 354). Nonetheless, geoengineering is indeed a popular response to anthropogenic environmental change. Hamilton (2010) calls this part of “wishful thinking” (p. 5), and for Haraway (2013) of course it means that we stagnate in the logic that precipitated the Anthropocene, denying the logics of compost and our mortality:

You could say that about techno-humanism: that we make ourselves the enemy when we enslave ourselves to the heroic-tragic man-makes-himself story. When we cut ourselves off from our collective, our becoming-with, including dying and becoming compost again. When we cut ourselves off from mortality and fear death, we become

our own worst enemy in this relentless story of making ourselves in the image of death.  
(p. 269)

The other “side,” if you will, of relying on others is blame. In the context of the Anthropocene, blame often falls on other countries (Cuomo, 2011, p. 692), on government leaders, on corporations— many of which are large, amorphous, anonymous figures. Hamilton (2010) writes, “Blame-shifting is a form of moral disengagement whereby people disavow their responsibility for the problem or the solution. Belittling out-groups can help solidify one’s sense of self and ward off threats to it, a tactic in play whenever we hear someone say: ‘China builds a new coal-fired power plant every week’” (p. 5). In blaming others for the consequences of the Anthropocene and anthropogenic environmental change, individuals (and groups) relieve themselves of self-blame, and of guilt over their own contributions. However, individuals are also responsible, not only for the “state of things,” but for resolutions as well (Cuomo, p. 692): “To make an anonymous contribution to a mob action is not to be blameless in relation to the cumulative harm caused. Even regarding individual actions that seem imperceptible, we therefore have duties to cease acting if we are contributing to serious harm” (p. 701). Obviously, what kind of action taken matters as well. One of the more popular solutions among many is to “divert attention from anxious thoughts and unpleasant emotions by engaging in minor behaviour changes (like changing light-bulbs) that mollify feelings of helplessness or guilt” (Hamilton, 2010, p. 5). These small behavioral changes would likely not be enough to mitigate the consequences of the Anthropocene, but Cuomo notes that such strategies are part of a global strategy which encompasses all individuals and all collective bodies (p. 708).



The kind of “sublime despair” referred to by Haraway (2016, p. 4) can also trigger particular behaviors for coping with Anthropocene-related terror, particularly if despair manifests in depression and inaction or a reckless, frenzied attitude of expenditure — “check[ing] out, or party[ing] like it’s the end of the world” (Cuomo, 2011, p. 703). Correspondingly, despair may be gratifying for a short duration, but has potentially deadly consequences. Without any action, humans and other entities suffer and die, but hopelessness can equally provoke increased resource extraction, through which more people and entities suffer and die at an expedited rate.

Acting is particularly important, as “to a greater or lesser degree, we are all climate deniers” (Hamilton, 2010, p. 4), and power and privilege influence our relationship to this denial. Swanson (2017) writes, “White middle-class American subjectivities are predicated on not noticing. They are predicated on structural blindness: on a refusal to acknowledge the histories we inherit” (n.p.). Heeding the historical context of our denial, particularly as it relates to the contributions of our ancestors, is particularly important as “climate change has emerged from powerful and deeply entrenched economic and social norms and practices” (Cuomo, 2011, p. 692) and we need to challenge these norms and practices — despite any threats posed to our “cultural identity” (Hamilton, 2010, p. 2).

Once again, one of the major tenets espoused by those in the Death Positivity Movement is “about making death a part of your life. Staring down your death fears—whether it be your own death, the death of those you love, the pain of dying, the afterlife (or lack thereof), grief, corpses, bodily decomposition, or all of the above. Accepting that death itself is natural, but the death anxiety of modern culture is not” (Order of the Good Death, 2018,

“Welcome to the Order”). A key part of this tenet is the accompanying claim that recognizing your mortality can actually improve your life, or otherwise enrich it in some way. Haraway (2016) likewise suggests that we can use seemingly negative affects to propel us toward change: “Shame is a prod to lifelong rethinking and recrafting one’s accountabilities” (p. 111). Accordingly, if the Death Positivity Movement is a guide, then the way to resist Anthropocene denial is to first acknowledge the ways despair is operating in our lives, and then to take action. On the Order of the Good Death website (2018), there is a page on “Fear of Death” which indicates that “The best place to start facing down your fear of death is to define what it is about death that scares you...Once you know why you’re afraid, there are exercises you can do to dive into the fear.” Elsewhere, those in the Death Positivity Movement recommend preparing for your demise via outlining your final wishes for burial and other post-mortem matters. It may not be obvious, but there is a connection between writing wills and preparing for the Anthropocene, not because wills guarantee the dispersal of assets in the Anthropocene, but in the least because such preparation is directed toward a life after death, and toward the succession of a larger collective.

The Death Positivity Movement also integrates a collective focus through another aspect of addressing death denial. Sarah Chavez (2017), Order member and founder of Death & the Maiden, argued at the 2017 Death Salon that confronting death means confronting all of the parts of death — including those matters of social justice which complicate death; to do anything less is still death denial. Chavez calls this approach “Radical Death Acceptance” — a good frame, perhaps, for confronting death in the context of the Anthropocene, which asks us to thoughtfully consider who/what we are, and who/what we want to become.

## II. Life After Death

The language of compost directs us to consider life after death — not in a spiritual or Judeo-Christian sense, of course, but in terms of *becoming something else*. The deaths of compost are inextricably linked with an ongoing multi-kinned life, which grounds us in obligation and responsibility or response-ability. Haraway (2013) defines such response-ability as “the cultivation of the capacity of response in the context of living and dying in worlds for which one is for, with others” (p. 257); it is “irreducibly collective and to-be-made...a kind of luring, desiring, making with” (ibid.). Embracing such response-ability entails reckoning with the potential end of the human species, and yet understanding that there is no separate “human” species; as was explored in the previous chapter, humans are always co-constituted with other beings, some of which/who may live long after we are gone. Response-ability also necessitates a complete overhaul of the way we relate to each other as “mortal critters,” involving “decomposition,” “recomposition,” “acting,” and “caring” (Haraway, 2013, p. 268). Povinelli’s concept of extinguishment — as used by Heather Davis (2013) — is useful here:

As an alternative framework to finitude, Povinelli asserts extinguishment, which recognizes that things live and die, re-composing in a different form, but without the drama of *the end*. Particular configurations of matter, politics, ideas, and organisms obviously cease to exist, while others come into being. However, extinguishment abandons the teleological impulse by recognizing the circularity and fecundity of living systems. *This* civilization may die, but within that death is the possibility for a reconfiguration with what may be left. Humanity will most certainly one day die off, and it wouldn’t be a great surprise if that happened in the relatively near future, but that doesn’t mean that species won’t evolve or mutate, or that our descendants, even if primarily bacterial, won’t inherit the world we leave behind. Apocalypse or the “end of Man” rids us of the questions of inheritance, of a sense of obligation and responsibility to a future, however bleak, too easily. (p. 355)

Extinguishment is ongoing, nonlinear, whereas Davis uses “finitude” to describe “the drama of existence played out in relationship to the teleological orientation of time towards our own

end: a one-way trajectory from birth to growth to death, focused on the individual,” which is the time most frequently claimed in relation to the Anthropocene (p. 353). It is worth noting that the linear, individual death is the focus of the Death Positivity Movement — an element which will be explored below. Nonetheless, Davis and Haraway both call for an orientation toward death which requires simultaneously holding life in tension. When life and death are held together, there is less room for the strategies of denial. After all, death becomes part of life in balance. Death and life also become collectively-minded, and made with others.

Consequently, there is no room for ego. Roy Scranton (2015) argues that letting go of the ego, of the “self,” is a key component of “learning to die” in the Anthropocene (p. 92). However, he also asserts that we must “let go of hope,” of “the future,” and of “death” (ibid.). On the contrary, welcoming life and death together is a useful enterprise, and a more-than-human future-oriented endeavor.

Likewise, Rose (2012) uses James Hatley’s concept of the “gift” to acknowledge that “All living things owe their lives not only to their forebears but also to all the other others that have nourished them again and again, that nourish each living creature during the duration of its life” (p. 131) and then even in death (p. 127). In this theory of time, death is an intimate part of our being, because “One’s kind only comes in the aftermath of generation, of one’s being birthed. That condition of being-birthed, of always coming after death, means that in generational time one’s orientation toward the future is both toward death and toward others” (p. 134-136). Rose and Hatley thus also argue for an alternative version of temporality, one grounded in the past and in the future, in multiple multi-species generations.

If these arguments sound familiar, it might be because they are not “new.” Indeed, Rose, Hatley, Haraway, and Davis all reflect certain Indigenous “eco-cosmologies” (Rose, 2012, p. 129) and knowledges. Incorporating non-human kin, for instance, has long been a part of Indigenous worldviews. In her 2013 article, “Indigenous Place-Thought and Agency Amongst Humans and Non-Humans (First Woman and Sky Woman Go On a European World Tour!),” Mohawk and Anishnaabe scholar Vanessa Watts describes Indigenous Place-Thought, “based upon the premise that land is alive and thinking and that humans and non-humans derive agency through the extensions of these thoughts” (p. 21). “Agency” does not shift or change for the non-human, as humans and non-humans are both considered actors. Watts notes that when settler writers and scholars take up the concept of non-human agency, it *does* shift, becoming less-than human agency, in many cases (Watts, p. 28). Watts also comments more generally on the use of Indigenous knowledges by settlers, which is used to reinforce human exceptionalism, dominance, settler supremacy, and even violence (p. 26):

These types of historical Indigenous events (i.e. Sky Woman, the Three Sisters) are increasingly becoming not only accepted by Western frameworks of understanding, but sought after in terms of non-oppressive and provocative or interesting interfaces of accessing the real. This traces Indigenous peoples not only as epistemologically distinct but also as a gateway for non-Indigenous thinkers to re-imagine their world. In this, our stories are often distilled to simply that – words, principles, morals to imagine the world and imagine ourselves in the world. In reading stories this way, non-Indigenous peoples also keep control over what agency is and how it is dispersed in the hands of humans. (p. 26)

Ultimately, then, Indigenous worldviews are often removed from their context and framed for their use-value by settlers. I have so far quoted Donna Haraway at length, but she has been critiqued by some Indigenous scholars who see her work as either appropriative or a re-entrenchment of the dominant ideals discussed above. As such, Watts (2013) offers this

critique: “Haraway resists essentialist notions of the earth as mother or matter and chooses instead to utilize products of localized knowledges (i.e. Coyote or the Trickster) as a *process* of boundary implosion...This is a level of abstracted engagement once again. While it may serve to change the imperialistic tendencies in Euro-Western knowledge production, Indigenous histories are still regarded as story and process – an abstracted tool of the West” (p. 28).

Such theorizing by settler scholars is partly why many Indigenous scholars express ambivalence about Anthropocene studies. For example, Metis scholar Zoe Todd (2013) describes her “distrust” of the Anthropocene narrative, pointing to “The complex and paradoxical experiences of diverse people as humans-in-the-world,” and reminding us that “Not all humans are equally invited into the conceptual spaces where these disasters are theorized or responses to disaster formulated” (p. 244). Once again, the question of responsibility surfaces; not all humans have contributed equally to the phenomenon of the Anthropocene (Cuomo, 2011, p. 697), and humans are affected differently by its consequences. Kyle Whyte (2017), member of the Potawatomi Nation, thus asserts, “‘Anthropogenic climate change’ or ‘the Anthropocene,’ then, are not precise enough terms for many Indigenous peoples, because they sound like all humans are implicated in and affected by colonialism, capitalism and industrialization in the same ways” (p. 159).

Indigenous peoples are disproportionately affected by anthropogenic environmental change and continue to resist the ramifications and political consequences of those changes (Norton-Smith et al., 2016; see also Krakoff, 2008, p. 1). These effects are compounded by ongoing processes of colonization, which continue to enact violence on Indigenous communities (Norton-Smith et al., p. 2). Dispossession of land, for instance, has long been a

strategy of colonizing powers, and is now borne out through environmental devastation, which often forces Indigenous peoples to relocate (Whyte, p. 155; see also Krakoff, 2011, p. 208, 211) but also impacts “customs, protocols, skill-sets, and identities (e.g. animal clan identities in some Tribes) related to particular plants, animals, insects, and ecosystems” (p. 156; see also Krakoff, 2008, p. 8).

However, Chris Cuomo (2011) cautions that, while it is important to heed “Attention to ecological and social vulnerabilities” (p. 694), it is also important to understand “whether injustices or other harms have put [people/communities] in such precarious positions” and to recognize “the agency, knowledge, and resilience of members of disempowered or marginalized groups” (p. 695). As such, it is equally important to acknowledge the politics involved in “vulnerability” discourses, and to once again distinguish the framework of responsibility in the Anthropocene. For example, experiencing “the end of the world” is not a new phenomenon for many Indigenous peoples, who have already “survived the apocalypse” (Gross as cited by Whyte, 2017, p. 159). Consequentially, Whyte notes that “Indigenous studies offer critical, decolonizing approaches to how to address climate change” (p. 154) based on these experiences and accrued knowledges.<sup>15</sup>

I raise the critiques of Indigenous scholars and questions of agency and resilience because my discussion of death has so far been predicated on the assumption that “we” need to act in some way, and possibly on behalf or for others. Indeed, in many discussions of Anthropocene harms, this is the trajectory: “We” are responsible, and “we” must do

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<sup>15</sup> Sarah Krakoff (2011) also argues in her article, “Radical Adaptation, Justice, and American Indian Nations,” that past examples of Indigenous resilience, resistance, and “political independence” may contribute to Indigenous Peoples’ adaptation amid climate change (p. 211).

something. In this regard, the “we” is as messy as any compost assemblage. If we take *becoming* seriously, then we must endeavor to become together — to also take seriously other knowledges, and other critiques, and to inhabit them when invited, and not just to use them as tools. This is another way of holding life and death in tension: truly understanding that “We are at stake to each other” and that we live and die in community (Haraway, 2016b, p. 59). The next section explores how the Death Positivity Movement speaks to these community deaths.

### III. A Good Life and Death for All in the Anthropocene

The third section of Chapter One detailed the Death Positivity Movement’s “social justice turn,” which raises interesting and important points about who has access to a “good death.” In the context of the Anthropocene, however, the Death Positivity Movement needs to expand their social justice commitments to incorporate those human and nonhuman deaths affected by the consequences of environmental change. The Death Positivity Movement could also benefit from some nuancing around the idea of the “good death” to reconfigure what counts as “good” and the resources required to obtain that ideal.

In Chapter One I noted the limitations of the “good death” — generally a death at home, surrounded by loved ones (Cottrell & Duggleby, 2016, p. 687) — as a state only attainable for those with considerable privilege. However, a “good death” often also entails a particular kind of “good life.” Every single person on this planet contributes to environmental destruction, from the food they consume to the clothes they wear and the heating required to keep them warm. Every year magnifies their consumption. Accordingly, a longer life requires more resources — not just in monetary terms, but in planetary terms as well. In Margaret Atwood’s (2014) story, “Torching the Dusties,” the protagonist Verna is an elderly woman living in a



retirement home when, amid frequent climate disasters and other environmental pressures, young people organize to “torch the dusties,” to kill senior citizens in an attempt to conserve resources for future generations. This is obviously not the future we should aspire to, wherein beings are eliminated based on their environmental impact. Compost invites us to consider becoming something else — something more messy and entangled, which cannot be measured out with the math and ecological management we have relied on thus far.

Nevertheless, “it matters what stories tell stories, it matters what thoughts think thoughts, it matters what worlds world worlds” (Haraway, 2016, p. 39). It matters how we think and who is thinking about what constitutes a good life and death. Just as we should consider whose labor is required to die comfortably at home, we should think about whose lives and deaths are involved in facilitating the kinds of long lives that many of us desire. If a “good death” means living in ways familiar to us, in the ways we always have, with relationships cultivated along lines of genetics instead of across and between species, with lifestyles based on resource extraction industries, then conversely we ensure a “bad death” for many human and nonhuman entities across the globe. To quote Haraway (2016) once again, “[T]he doings of situated, actual human beings matter. It matters with which ways of living and dying we cast our lot rather than others. It matters not just to human beings, but also to those many critters across taxa which and whom we have subjected to exterminations, extinctions, genocides, and prospects of futurelessness” (p. 55).

To an extent, the Death Positivity Movement is already attuned to the different definitions behind “good” and “bad” deaths. In a recent blog post addressing many misconceptions of the movement, Doughty (2018) writes

We don't believe that we should accept bad deaths, especially in our current political climate, as a fixed condition. We should be allowing communities to define what a "good death" means to them, the very real barriers that exist to realizing a good death, and examining and dismantling those barriers. (n.p.)

This is a perspective which admits that what counts as a "good" death shifts depending on who you ask. But who is asked? If we take Indigenous eco-cosmologies and compost seriously, then nonhuman entities should also have the right to determine what a "good death" means to them.

To this point, however, the Death Positivity Movement has struggled to contend with nonhuman matters. On one hand (and as indicated in Chapter One), there are some indications that the movement is indeed incorporating nonhuman sensibilities. In the Introduction to this thesis, I noted that there are some videos on the *Ask a Mortician* YouTube page about pet death. One (2014) video, in particular, features Doughty explaining her "attempt to provide the good death....to a cat." After her beloved cat, The Meow, was diagnosed with feline mammary cancer, Doughty describes creating a kind of hospice for The Meow, and eventually enlisting help for at-home euthanasia. She notes that The Meow's veterinarian offered various interventions, none of which were guaranteed to prolong life. She chose the route she did so that The Meow would not have to live in pain, referring to the steps as "Operation Good Death." Interestingly, Doughty says at the beginning of the video that she originally thought she would have The Meow taxidermied in a humorous pose, but that she changed her mind when she experienced the pain of The Meow's loss. Many aspects of the Death Positivity Movement are aesthetically humorous in nature. Doughty's channel certainly embraces aspects of cheesy humor, but in this instance she wanted to affirm that "Animals are part of your family, and outwardly grieving for an animal or person that you loved is not shameful." While this grief is

certainly important, it is a grief which arguably needs to be extended to other nonhuman entities beyond companion animals — a theme which was explored in this chapter.

The Death Positivity Movement also incorporates some nonhuman sensibilities in their calls for more “eco-friendly” deathcare. This direction reflects concern to protect human and nonhuman beings from the toxic elements of traditional burial, and frequently embraces cooperative decomposition work with other beings (bacteria and otherwise) as well. However, in both of these directions — companion pet deathcare and eco-friendly burial — there is a proclivity toward control and management. Some listening is definitely involved, to be sure, particularly of companion pet suffering or of the suffering of critters who are exposed to, say, mercury in dental fillings.

On the other hand, the sufferings and dyings of the majority of nonhuman beings are not listed as one of the justice issues frequently espoused by the Death Positivity Movement. At the 2017 Death Salon, the founder of Death & the Maiden, Sarah Chavez, was asked about the relevance of the Death Positivity Movement to the threat of nuclear war. Chavez replied by saying that the Death Positivity Movement does not apply to disaster situations or deaths “not in our control.” I was surprised by this answer, and perhaps if pressed again, Chavez would respond differently. Nonetheless, her answer raises questions about where the Death Positivity Movement sees itself positioned on a planetary scale. If the Death Positivity Movement is only interested in environmental justice insofar as control is concerned, then it is likely to only pursue techno-scientific improvements to burial practices, or deathcare relationships with domesticated companion animals. Perhaps this direction would not be surprising, given the Death Positivity Movement’s focus on funereal issues and thus individualized “choice” rhetoric

associated with funeral industry parlance. However, the context of the Anthropocene calls us to reconfigure our relationship to the planet and its other inhabitants. In the same way, if the Death Positivity Movement is truly committed to social justice, participants will begin to understand that all beings have the right to a good death and that, in fact, such an understanding is a way of moving forward to secure a better life and death for all.

### Conclusion

*“The Anthropocene is here. It is our new condition. We have therefore to learn to survive, that is, to leave the Earth habitable and resilient, limiting the frequency of catastrophes and sources of human misery. But surviving is not enough. To continue to thrive as communities, individuals and citizens, we all must strive for change. We have to strive for a decent life for everyone, in a diversity of cultures and an equality of rights and conditions, in relations that liberate human and non-human alterities, in an infinity of aspirations, a sobriety of consumption and a humility of interventions.” (Bonneuil & Fressoz, 2016, p. 289)*

This chapter has argued that compost invites us to become something richer, more fertile, more nourishing. Thus, while one of the fundamental problems of the Anthropocene is the refusal to acknowledge death, it is equally important to consider the lives connected to death in the Anthropocene, the lives (and deaths) that make our lives possible, and certainly the lives that will come after our deaths. If we truly seek a “good death for all,” then we must move beyond visions of comfortable retirement homes or hospice care to resist, imagine, and inhabit other worlds, other futures, and other ways of becoming

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## Conclusion

My primary research question was the following: “How can the Death Positivity Movement add to our understanding of death in the Anthropocene?” This question was, of course, informed by the “social justice turn” of the Death Positivity Movement, which I thought would contribute useful provocations to the devastating deaths of many on a large planetary scale. However, it now seems that the question should also go the other way: “How can the Anthropocene and the Earth expand the Death Positivity Movement’s understanding of social justice?”

This is likely true of all things in the Anthropocene epoch, which will become or are already impacted by the consequences of environmental change. Nonetheless, if we need to acknowledge the Anthropocene and take action to mitigate harm, then we must also confront the realities of Anthropocene-based death. Part of this direction entails understanding why we might want to avoid the topic of death — a denial which has been informed by centuries of biopower . The other part of this direction is perhaps using some of the tools of the Death Positivity Movement to understand that death is not always negative. The logics of compost are also helpful in understanding just how death becomes something more than negative, particularly by manifesting life after death.

It is likely that, at some point in the near future, the human species will cease to exist and, even if some humans survive in the late Anthropocene epoch, we will each certainly die. We should thus turn our attention to the “after,” to who and what comes after us. Similarly, we should consider who and what we want to become in the Anthropocene, both on a collective

and individual level.<sup>16</sup> We — the “we” of privilege, whiteness, individualism — can surrender to the messiness of the compost, and to recognizing the ways in which our survival is already indelibly linked with other human and nonhuman critters, or we can continue as we are, perpetuating harm and worsening the destructions of the Anthropocene. The Death Positivity Movement certainly needs to make this choice if they are truly committed to pursuing justice and a “good (life and) death for all.”

There are, of course, many other possible directions for this work — some of which I hope to explore in further graduate studies. My primary goal going forward is to complete interviews with members of the Death Positivity Movement, and especially with members who are not as famous as the founder and other lead organizers. All of these voices are poorly represented, and should be studied in depth to represent the movement holistically. First, it would be exceedingly useful to obtain demographic information about movement participants. I know anecdotally that many of them come from deathcare industries, but at the 2017 Death Salon I met many other attendees who were unconnected to any kind of deathwork; some worked for government agencies, others for universities in administration. It would also be extremely helpful to understand some of the participants’ motivations for following the Death Positivity Movement, and the extent of their involvement. Relatedly, I am curious if and how gender impacts their participation.

Additionally, I would be interested to know if other participants identify as strongly with the movement’s “social justice turn” or how they see it manifesting in their work and lives. How

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<sup>16</sup> Sarah Krakoff (2008) also notes that we need to take individual and collective steps to address climate change, considering “the kinds of lives we want to lead, the norms we want to aspire to, and the virtues we want to cultivate” (p. 3-4).

does the Death Positivity Movement inform participant actions or thoughts on a day-to-day basis? Are movement participants connected with the social movements claimed by leaders, like the Movement for Black Lives? Do they see the Death Positivity Movement impacting their relationship with these other movements, and in what ways?

For my specific purposes, I am also obviously interested in participants' understanding of death on macro levels. Do participants ever consider those deaths related to environmental change? How do participants think about deaths which occur as a result of "slow violence" (Nixon, 2011)? And, of course, I would love to know whether these questions translate to nonhuman lives. How do participants think about justice when it comes to nonhuman animals? What about trees, mushrooms, or bacteria? One interesting avenue potentially worth further exploration is the relationship of some deathcare workers to bacteria, and to the other critters involved in postmortem labor. Dirt is another recurring partner in deathcare, and offers possibilities in relationship that should be better understood.

I raised Indigenous perspectives in Chapter Three, and this is obviously an area in which all of Anthropocene studies need to become better acquainted. Again, however, writers must be careful to magnify Indigenous voices and to truly understand Indigenous ways of knowing without simply using them as tools — and this is a challenging line. In further studies, I hope to engage further with Indigenous eco-cosmologies and Indigenous authors.

Before I discovered compost, I thought it might be useful to invoke the ghosts of those species and people who *have* died, perhaps as a way to inform new directions in the Anthropocene. Based on the experience of those entities, how could we reconfigure our

approach to anthropogenic environmental change? What would they say if they could speak?<sup>17</sup>

I had hoped to understand the ghosts of the Anthropocene using queer theory in a future-oriented context, particularly with the imaginative work of José Muñoz (2009). I also thought that Avery Gordon's (1997) book on sociological haunting, *Ghostly Matters*, might inform my understanding of spirits. While I went in a different direction, I have since (thanks to my supervisor) encountered some instances of probable Anthropocene ghosts or hauntings, such as in James Stanescu's (2013) analysis of animals on factory farms. Accordingly, I might take up this topic again later on.

If you had told me a year ago that I would be writing a thesis chapter about compost, I would have been shocked. I started graduate school with a very different topic in mind, and even thought the "Anthropocene" referred to a prehistoric time. Nonetheless, the Anthropocene felt urgent, necessary, and compelling. Compost compelled me in the same way. I look forward to communing with other Earth entities and seeing where they take me.

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<sup>17</sup> More recently, I encountered a similar idea in Haraway's (2016a) monograph when she cites Orson Scott Card's science fiction novel, *The Speaker for the Dead*.

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