

Introduction to the Discourses on Death Special Issue

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*On a cot by an open window, I lie and remember
While the birds in the trees sing of the circle of time.
Let the dying go on, and let me, if I can,
Inherit from disaster before I move.
-Mary Oliver, from the poem "No Voyage"*

Death is an experience shared by all of humanity, and is one that may, across disciplines, be a part of the narratives and life histories of the people with whom we work. To face death from any angle is to face the limits of our conscious experience, which calls us both as individuals and as community members to create frameworks for incorporating that inevitability into our lives. In this special theme issue of *Arizona Anthropologist*, we hope to address questions surrounding death, using a conference focused on responses to this topic to serve as a focusing lens in the effort to comprehend aspects of the unknowable.

The conference, "Discourses on Death: Conceptualizing Grief, Loss, and Transformative Interaction", was inspired by the 25th annual All Soul's Procession that took place in Tucson on Sunday, November 9, 2014, as well as the local events surrounding Día de los Muertos. As co-organizers of this new graduate student conference, we—Amanda Bailey (UCLA) and Keri Miller (University of Arizona)—sought to understand how we as researchers may sensitively address death and trauma in a way that would honor our participants' experiences with these topics and perhaps even facilitate healing and transformative interaction. We invited abstracts from graduate students pertaining to rituals, traditions, concerns, and creative expressions from diverse cultures and communities as a means of living with the inevitability of death and

loss. It was held over two days preceding the procession. We decided, for the purposes of the conference, we would follow a broad definition of discourse inspired by Labov and Fanshel (1977), in which discourse encompasses the relationship between utterances and actions. Recognizing that the experience of a death is most keenly felt by the living who remain, we felt that including grief and loss in our discussion was not only unavoidable, but also a productive place to situate our engagement with these processes. Realizing that death itself is transformative, we wondered how social engagement and interaction might play a role in the transformation for those who experience it.

The idea for the conference was born, perhaps most aptly, on a journey--in this case on a road trip with a third graduate student to a collaborative graduate student conference that was being held at UC San Diego, an event called Sandrizona. Keri mentioned that a colleague and friend of hers, Adrienne Harris, had once suggested a creating a conference on death to correspond with the Tucson Día de los Muertos events held annually in Tucson. This initially seemed quite overwhelming due to the vastness of the subject, as well as something potentially at risk for seeming sensationalistic in its execution. But as three graduate students contained within a metal box on wheels for eight hours could be expected to do, we began to imagine the possibilities, starting with the local Tucson events and radiating outwards to wondering about rituals and practices related to death in multiple cultures, concepts of social death and justice (or injustice) and even experiences and perceptions of ghosts, hauntings, and life after death.

As the 25th anniversary of the All Souls Procession approached, we were led to ask why the annual event, a community-based walk which is a "celebration and mourning of the lives of our loved ones and ancestors" (ASP website), had grown from one woman's personal tribute to her father, to a public procession with more than 150,000 participants. Among this community of mourners, people may carry hand-made altars, wear face paint and costumes, sing and dance, or simply walk. A large paper urn is carried along the route with

people dropping letters, prayers, or photographs to be burned in their entirety as part of the finale performance. Images from this event are stunningly captured by Danielle Johnson's photo essay in this issue. Of course, *Día de los Muertos* events also take place around the same time in culturally rich Tucson. Throughout the region people may participate in one or multiple events, publically or privately, reflecting the myriad of ways that mourning, remembrance, and the celebrations of loved ones lost may be both an individual and group process.

As the conference began to take shape, we realized that rather than attempting to come up with a framework for addressing topics surrounding death, or a working theoretical model to ground our work within something concrete, we wanted instead to create a space for working through this difficult reality by creating an opportunity to explore the various levels at which discourse addresses and shapes how individuals and communities approach loss. Among the questions we posed as potential points for exploration were: How can we understand liminality—or how do people understand the threshold between life and death? How do various cultures/communities address the questions of spirit world, otherness, and hauntings? How might we consider necropolitics—or which lives are deemed expendable by structures of authority? How do refugee and other immigrant populations treat death and mourning? What is the importance of 'homeland' to such rituals? What is the relationship between human death and other types of loss, including loss of land, environment, language, and traditional ways of life? And how do varying forms of expression (including visual anthropology methods and multimedia), create and influence how death and loss are both represented and understood?

In addition to seeking answers to these and related questions from academic perspectives, we also wanted to hear from voices in the community beyond the campus boundaries. As we began our search, we could not have anticipated how much we would learn from Kristine Bentz, founder of Sweetgrass Ceremonies, a service for guiding people to create custom funerary ceremonies, located in Tucson, Arizona. Kristine has

made a life work of listening to people's "stories, beliefs and values" (<http://www.sweetgrassceremonies.com/about-sweet-grass.html>) and weaving them into unique and meaningful ceremonies to help ease the stress of life transitions. A large portion of the ceremonies she facilitates are those devoted to chronic illness, death, and grief. We invited her to participate as a speaker at the conference and share her wisdom and experiences, which she kindly accepted despite the long hours she was putting in preparing to be an Urn Ambassador in the All Souls Procession that the conference preceded.

We originally met Kristine by way of the Tucson Threshold Choir (<http://tucsonthresholdchoir.org/2011/09/14/welcome-tucson-threshold-choi/>), a group of singers who provide the comfort of song for those facing major transitions in life, particularly the specter of their own impending death or that of a loved one. Kristine then suggested that we might make room for song in our conference, and so we had the Tucson Threshold Choir demonstrate their practices by singing to the keynote lecturer David Gramling (Assistant Professor of German Studies at the University of Arizona) prior to his opening speech entitled "Life-Saving and Face-Saving in Palliative Care: On The Political Economy of End-of-Life Clinical Consultations" which was held on the University of Arizona campus on Friday, November 7, 2014.

The rest of the presentations and events took place at the Tankersley Ranch near Sabino Canyon in Tucson, where some conference participants were able to stay overnight, including the panel discussion, which was moderated by David Gramling and Kristine and Brackette Williams, whose work on how humans sentenced to death experience actions that are intended to convert them from the living to the living dead awaiting execution added yet another valuable perspective, deftly served as our discussants. We felt that this intimate natural setting would facilitate ongoing discussion about topics that call for a bit more time for reflection, and where the structures and landscape itself—vast colorful rooms and verandas looking out to the scrub, spines and flowers the stretched out towards nearby horse farms—allowed for not

only talk, but the silence we require for that which is difficult to say. And with the light filling the enclosed porch where we gathered, the day at the ranch began. From this starting place, we addressed larger questions while our own memories, the emotions surrounding losses (both anticipated and real), and shifting imaginaries filtered through the spaces in-between. As the day went on, and the light shifted throughout the ranch house, each presenter likewise provided a new angle on the ways death, grief, and loss infuse and inform their own work. The final presentation, given by Emily Lucitt of UCLA, "Psychic Subjectivity and the Problem of 'Belief' and 'Knowledge' of Life After Death", occurred after darkness had enveloped the house and was serendipitously accompanied by seemingly disembodied knocks at the door of the ranch house.

This special *Arizona Anthropologist* issue was inspired by the discussions that occurred at the conference itself, those that continued after we all went home, and by those that find themselves engaging with these themes from various angles in their own lives and work. Luminita-Anda Mandache's reflection on her fieldwork in the neighborhood of Conjunto Palmieras, at the margins of Fortaleza, Brazil, questions the process of normalizing the economic instability, danger, and suffering that is experienced in this context, leading her to wonder, "if life has no meaning, does that mean that death has lost meaning too?" Gila Silverman explores the ways that her experiences during fieldwork led her to finding ways to work through vulnerable and transformative moments. A reflection from William Cotter addresses a shift in perspective while in the field, though in this case, he finds that in the process of trying to account for the demands of research and the needs of a community who are living amidst a state of profound loss, he questions what it means to work "on" and "with" a community. And in a paper presented at the conference, Austin Duncan seeks to extend how we might consider loss, or the "simplistic boundary between death and life" through an autoethnographic reflection on traumatic brain injury, and how this might inform work in the area of brain injury more broadly. Finally, the photo essays of Rachael Byrd,

Danielle Johnson, and Gabriella Soto present some of the creative ways people grieve and memorialize, through images of the aforementioned All Souls Procession; roadside shrines, or “descansos” in Arizona and New Mexico; and the building of “spontaneous shrines” in the wake of traumatic event affecting a community.

The work in this issue, as well as the conference that inspired it, illustrate how the ways that we engage in discourses on death are complex, ever-shifting, and never complete. Here, and in the work that follows, we hope to simply open the conversation, and like the poet Mary Oliver wonder how one might “inherit from the disaster before I move.”

References Cited

- Labov, William, and David Fanshel.
1977 *Therapeutic discourse: psychotherapy as conversation*. New York: Academic Press.