

Anthropology of the Memorial: Observations and Reflections on American Cultural Rituals Associated with Death

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Abstract: This paper is a meditation on contemporary rituals in the United States associated with death—in this case, the memorial. The essay addresses David R. MAINES' advocacy of using narrative to address a social (and anthropological) event. There are social expectations at memorials, rituals of talking good about the deceased, rituals of grief. Friends and family come together to communicate about the deceased. Strangers connect by their mutual connection to the dead. Every culture has its own set of rituals and rules when it comes to honoring and admiring the dead; this one is American. From an autoethnographical approach, the author reveals his own inner ritual, a personal memory, of a friend and former lover who has passed. The author discusses the processes of recording dialogue and experience via memory, and the criteria for quality in this autoethnography.

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1. Introduction

This paper is about the memorial, one kind of memorial. The method of this ritual will vary from religion to geographic culture in Western civilization, and could be viewed by the "other" as being just as exotic as a death ritual deep in the jungles of Africa, in Israel, in Ireland, or in Russia. The one I am about to describe is American, in southern California, and can be labeled performance-based ethnography (DENZIN, 2003) and autoethnography (REED-DANAHAY, 1997; ELLIS, 2004). It is a meditation on the death of a friend and the rituals of social memorializing of the dead, as practiced in one sector of contemporary American society. I use narrative to examine a sociological event (MAINES, 1993). My method is qualitative introspection (ELLIS, 1991) through the technique of "first person sociology" (KOLKER, 1996). Ethnography is the writing of culture, so

must be the act of autoethnography: "If one could do participant observation with others, why not with the self as subject?" (ELLIS, 1995, p.422) VAN MAANEN (1988, p.106) refers to auto/ethnography as a "wet term signaling the cultural study of one's own people" when discussing the work of HAYANO (1979, 1982) and categorizes the method as "impressionist tales" (p.102). With this account, I would classify it within VAN MANNEN's (1988, pp.73-79) framework as a "confessional tale" where

"authors normalize their presence coming on the scene, in the scene, and leaving the scene. Adequate ethnographic practice in the confessional requires fieldworkers to tidy up their roles and tell how they think they were received and viewed by others in the field." [1]

I hesitate to claim I am "in the field" when attending the memorial of a dead friend, but I realize that the qualitative researcher—the auto/ethnographer—is *always in the field*, because his/her lived experience is a never-ending research project that examines every day social structures, the intersection of (auto)biography and history (MILLS, 1959) and cultural changes that are moving in the sphere of the self (CARY, 1999) Therefore, this auto/ethnographic account is confessional (VAN MAANEN, 1988), sociological introspection (ELLIS, 1991), and an observation of a small group of people, a tribe if you will, in southern California, engaged in the ritualistic act of remembering the good things about the dead. I am a member of that tribe and try to "understand the complexities of the social world in which we live and how we go about thinking, acting, and making meaning in our lives" (ELLIS, 2004, p.25). [2]

In wanting to write about the memorial, I decided that an autoethnographic approach would best suit my endeavor. I could have left myself out of the process, been the objective observer; I could have maintained a traditional ethnographic approach, yet "the ethnographic text is inescapably reflexive" (ATKINSON, 1992, p.11). In this case, evocative autoethnography (ELLIS, 2004) seemed to me to contain more verisimilitude in the field of "first person sociology" (KOLKER, 1996; HEMMINGSON, 2010) also known as "emotional sociology" (ELLIS, 1991) in qualitative research. [3]

As for my criteria of "quality" in qualitative research, I follow DENZIN and LINCOLN's (2003, p.4) definition that

"qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists a set of interpretative, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world. They turn the world into a series of representations, including field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos to the self." [4]

"The memo to the self" is how I would categorize this autoethnographic account. I wrote it to not only better understand the practice, and meaning, of the Western memorial, but to remember the emotions I experienced during and after, afraid that one day I would not recall the feelings accurately. By writing the experience

down, I have the raw data of my experience always available; and it is available for others to understand the Western memorial, and to relate to: we have all had to deal with the death of a friend, or will, and certainly loved ones, parents, spouses. How we deal with the aftermath of death is a sociological event that can be represented in narrative (MAINES, 1993). My fieldwork is physical—the church where the memorial is held—and intangible: my inner being. The ritual of the memorial occurs in both fields. "The field is shaped by its textual representations" (ATKINSON, 1992, p.11) and my representation, as described, encompasses both outer and inner reality. [5]

2. Literature Review

2.1 Ritual

Many auto/ethnographic accounts deal with the death of a loved one and how the reflexive "I" deals with that loss (ELLIS, 1993, 1995, 1998, 2003; LEE, 2006, 2007; BERG & TRUJILLO, 2008), comes to terms with memory and secrets of the dead (RONAI, 1996; POULOS, 2008) and finds the strength to go on. This writing of the *mystory* text (see both DENZIN, 1988, 2008) and the method of reflection is meant to be part of the healing process for the injured ethnographic "I" (ELLIS, 2004). Anthropologists have always been fascinated with the social rituals of the tribes on remote islands and the villages of isolated societies. BEHAR (1991), however, "laments that anthropologists seek rootedness and meaning in the stories of exotic 'others' while distancing themselves from their own roots" (KOLKER, 1996, p.134). BEHAR (1996) also calls for anthropology that breaks the heart of the ethnographer and the reader; death and loss seems to effectively do that. Rituals are collective performances (CONQUERGOOD, 1985) where individuals are sharing the same experience (KAPFERER, 1986). Anthropologists are always interested in observing, or participant-observing, the rituals of the other, from Balinese cockfighting (GEERTZ, 1973), youth courtship and sexual interaction (MEAD, 1928), a rite of passage in the hunting of animals (ROSALDO, 1986), groups behaving during a carnival (STEWART, 1986) and the act of ritual bathing (DURHAM, 2005). When looking at one's own cultural, there are plenty of rituals that are equally exotic: dating, courtship, weddings, even the ritualized act of the stripper giving a client a lap dance (RONAI & ELLIS, 1989). There are various facets of collectively dealing with death: the funeral, the memorial, and the wake. The funeral is often religious in nature, where prayers are uttered and hymns sung, and the dead body is buried or ashes entombed. The memorial is reflective, where the dead person's family, friends, and associates (maybe enemies) come together to say prayers, recall experiences with the deceased, and generally speak well of the person who is gone. The wake often has a party-like atmosphere, or *is* a party, where the living celebrate the life of the dead by getting drunk and having fun. Rituals continue after these social events, such as tending to one's memory of those lost and the physical attributes of the dead—urns, ashes, tombs—e.g., ELLIS (2003) explains the process of taking flowers to family plots and re-experiencing the emotions associated with the loss. Around graves, ELLIS (2003, para.2) finds herself

thinking of her own ritual of death: "Maybe I *will* want to be buried instead of cremated, I think, in a place where someone might come and remember me ..." [6]

2.2 Autoethnography

The number of labels and descriptions of qualitative research that focuses on the researcher's experiences, feelings, and reflections—the ethnographic "I" (ELLIS, 2004)—are numerous: reflexive ethnography, auto-anthropology, private sociology, narrative inquiry, radical empiricism and so on.¹ Currently, "autoethnography" is the popular term for first person and reflexive accounts in the social sciences, mainly sociology and communications, but embraced by anthropology, health sciences, psychology, and crossing over into the humanities (see DENZIN, 2008). "Autoethnography is an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple levels of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural" (BOCHNER & ELLIS, 2003, p.209). Autoethnography, for this text, is the study of the self in one's own culture (HAYANO, 1979), using sociological introspection (ELLIS, 1991) for analysis of collected data. JEWETT (2008) finds that the autoethnographic text is an intimate act between the autoethnographic self and the Other that "serve as pedagogical semblances that circulate among the many shadowy truths at play in autobiography and ethnography, and in a broader sense, qualitative research in general" (p.4). [7]

3. Death of a Friend

Giggles² called and said, "Hey," and said our mutual friend Cindy was dead, had died several days ago; there was going to be a memorial on Friday. "You should go," she said; "I want you to."

"Dead. What the hell happened?"

"Brain aneurysm," Giggles said. "I found her. Went over there for a bar-be-que and there she was. I—I found her."

"I'm sorry."

"Will you go?" she asked.

"Not sure," I said. "This feels weird," I said.

"Yeah, it does," she said, "it does."

Silence.

"It would be good to see you there."

"Wait," I said, "*you* found her?"

"Yeah."

"On the ..."

"She was in bed."

1 For more definitions and explanations, see BOCHNER and ELLIS (2003).

2 Names have been changed.

"Not the floor."

"She died in her sleep. They said she didn't suffer."

"How ..."

"She had been complaining of headaches," she said. "She went to Kaiser and they wanted to prescribe her this medicine but it was really expensive, she couldn't afford it, so she decided not to. If this were Canada," Giggles said, "she'd still be alive, you think?"

I didn't know what to think about anything; at that moment, I felt like I knew nothing and knew that any minute, any second, I too would have a brain aneurysm and keel over.

You never know ...

"Have you ever felt a shadow creeping up into your mind, over your heart, through your consciousness?" asks POULOS (2008, p.48). This is a valid question at the moment for me. POULOS addresses secrets of memory that can come back and haunt a person, effecting their present state of mind.

"You guys were close," Giggles said, "for a while."

"Two years ago," I said.

"She asked about you now and then."

"Did she?"

"Yeah."

"What did you say?"

"Oh, I told her you were still writing books and that you were shooting a movie. She was glad for you," Giggles said. "She cared about you," Giggles said.

You never know ...

"So you should go," Giggles said. [8]

4. The Memorial

There was no way out of it. I don't care to attend events for the dead. I can deal with the dead, I don't like being around the living that are grieving for said dead. "Do not feel sad for Cindy," one of her friends declared at the memorial, "because she is in a better place, where there is only love and no more pain. Feel sad for your loss, all our loss. Grieve for the hole that is now in all our lives."

The memorial was held at the Swedenborgian Church in a San Diego, California neighborhood called Hillcrest. I had never been to this church, although I knew the neighborhood well; I lived in the area for three years in what now seems like someone else's life—I was in a very good relationship that went south due to my own selfishness; there was nothing I could do to fix things and the relationship now seemed like a dream, like it never happened, or belonged to someone else and not me.

There is a cheap motel by the church, a place I used to meet a married woman at when I participated in her experiment in the act of adultery. That brought back some memories I didn't want to dredge up either.

I didn't want to revisit memories of Cindy; being around her friends and family, and the mutual people we knew, would inevitably bring up questions and, "Remember when ..." Not that her memories were bad (at least from my perspective), they were simply—futile. Sad, perhaps. Giggles said we were "close." We had sex now and then, we spent some time together, but we both knew it meant nothing; we were just keeping loneliness away for a few hours.

I suspected there would be drinking in honor of Cindy—Cinder—because she loved to drink. White wine and champagne was her thing. She and I could go through three bottles in three hours. But she drank until she passed out. She was an alcoholic, a chain smoker, never married, no children. She had a long-term ex-boyfriend who was constantly in and out of prison and living on the street, selling and using speed. She was afraid he'd find out where she lived and want to move in with her. She was afraid she'd succumb to his wish, as she did for ten years in what she also felt like was someone else's life, someone else's bad relationship.

She lived in a large house in an arts and restaurant community near the airport. She was roommates with six people, two whom were my friends. I had heard of this house before, many actors had once lived there. It was legendary in the local arts community. There was always a party on Saturday nights, a bar-be-que on Sunday. This is how I met her, this is how I started staying over some nights after a party. It was casual. She wasn't looking for anyone and I was suffering in a relationship (if you can call it that) with a woman I loved very much and who did nothing but hurt me, lie to me, and never keep her word and promises (and was severely bi-polar); I kept going back, though, the same way Cindy would return to the criminal ex-boyfriend ... need, hope, addiction, co-dependency, masochism, who knows—what a pair, Cinder and I.

Cindy knew I would only go to the parties, seek her out, be nice to her, touch her, when things were bad with the woman I loved who in turn loved to hurt me; she knew but never talked about it, mentioned it; I didn't think she cared. Her friends, however, accused me of using her. This was one of the reasons I was uncomfortable about showing up to this memorial—would these friends attack me with vitriolic words again, speechifying about what a bad person I was for "utilizing" her for sex? I wanted to say, "She made use of me too, we exploited each other; it was symbiotic that way," but it was none of their business, really. None at all.

Her friends were cordial, however, and smiled when I walked into the space of mourning. They were hurting, they were lamenting, they said it was nice of me to be present and pay respects.

I felt forgiven and it was a warm, if not relieved sentiment. I didn't know why. I didn't feel I ever did anything wrong. I never hurt her, she never hurt me. I simply did not fulfill the biased expectations of those who cared for her. Let's say that their reality did not meet eye to eye with my reality (see GUBRIUM, 1988 on subjective and conflicting shared realities among more than two parties). Still, I

was absolved now—perhaps for everything in my life in that single moment, a fleeting period of general love and kindness when all former trespasses and blunders are elapsed and exonerated, like the final scene in the movie *Solaris*, where the characters are able to return to a blissful moment in their lives and exist in that frozen time where they only know love and peace, and all sins are washed away.

The church was full, every space taken in the pews—so many friends, so many co-workers, so many people with very kind and beautiful things to say about the dead.

I wondered, if I were to die suddenly, would I have such a memorial—would I have friends who would arrange it, attend it, and say good sentences about me?

Strangers introduced themselves, shook my hand, asked me how I knew Cinder. One was a lawyer with the U.S. Attorney's Office—she looked familiar and I wondered if I had met her before—short blonde hair, big blue eyes, where and when had we crossed paths? She sat next to me, she touched my face, she took my hand when the group bowed their heads down for prayer. We didn't need to know each other for this contact; we were connected by the dead. She needed someone to touch, a hand to hold, and I was agreeable to provide.

"How did you know her?" this woman whispered to me.

"Through friends," I said. "Giggles and Marty ..."

"You were one of the roommates?" she inquired.

"No," I responded.

"I *know* who you are," she said. She squeezed my hand. "She told me about you," she said.

I said, "... why did you ask?"

"Curious about what you'd say; what she meant to you."

"... friends," I said.

What did she want me to admit?

"Were. And," she said.

And I said, "And things change." [9]

5. Gazing on the Past

... and there was no reason that I could determine for the distance the past two years. There was no possibility of a serious relationship. Cindy was ten years older than me, and I was okay with that; she drank too much, she was always sad, even with that "infectious smile and laugh" many people commented on during the memorial. No one said anything about her being broken, heartbroken by life, by missed opportunities, unrealized dreams; about spending a decade with a man who could not read or write and refused to work and wound up on the street, and then prison; broken by an endless stream of dead-end, low-paying jobs and crappy cars always failing and dying; broken by waking up with a

strange man in bed and not remembering what happened (I was one of those bodies).

It was her desolation that drew me to her two years ago.

Because I was sad, too, I wanted to connect with someone experiencing the same.

Because I was broken, too, I thought that wounded people could help each other heal.

She couldn't help me and I couldn't help her, but we did have some moments when we laughed together, were tender toward one another. We could just lounge around, relax, watch TV, do nothing, think about nothing; zilch, nada. Just "be."

I was drawn to her spirituality—she was interested in the Tarot, psychic readings, past life regression, angels and aliens and lost civilizations of antiquity. She took me to reiki healings, introduced me to friends who claimed to be psychic readers and/or alien contactees.

I needed the distraction back then.

I still need it now.

Yes, I miss(ed) her. [10]

5.1 A note on representation

Addressing my use of thick description (DENZIN, 1989) dialogue is important at this juncture of the text. It calls into question the validity of representation: that is, is dialogue correct with reality, or am I representing it in my "sociological imagination"? Many autoethnographies tend to be expository rather than dialogue-based, with the exception of ELLIS and BOCHER whose co-created texts (ELLIS, 1991) are recorded conversations (see the introduction to ELLIS & BOCHNER, 1996 or ELLIS & BOCHNER, 2006, but just about any collaborative work between them makes use of the dialogue format). I did not record any of the conversations represented herein; I wrote down immediate notes after the fact, and the telephone call from Giggles, because I knew I would include these in the text. I also have a photographic memory—while I realize this is not "pure exact data," I know that the conversations I have written down are verbatim. [11]

6. Return to the Memorial

"The three of us knew each other in a past life, in a distant time and another world," said the stranger holding my hand. "Do you remember?"

I lied □ "Of course," knowing she was testing me again.

I tried to contact Cindy's spirit before going to the memorial, to hear what she had to say. There was no connection. I would never hear her voice again.

Wait. I *could*. I called her cell phone. It was still active, the voice mail was still on.

"Goodbye, my friend," is the message I left. "Say hello to my son for me."

I imagined what I would have done, how I would have reacted, had she answered the phone. "What do you mean I'm *dead*? Are you *crazy*?" she'd go. "Whatever—talk to the hand, guy!"

Songs, prayers, tears. People with children—infants and 'teens. Photographs, flowers, and two cases of champagne. She would have approved of the booze.

I was scared. I was afraid. If I died tonight in my sleep, I thought, if my brain burst a blood vessel like Cindy's did, who would find my body? Who would notice I wasn't around? Who would arrange for a church, flowers, and champagne for me? Who would tell my parents, who would deal with my body, who would care for my cats, who would handle my literary estate, who would finish all the unfinished work on my computer and make my orphaned dreams become books and films?

"*Now he would never have the chance to finish it,*" HEMINGWAY (1933, p.5) muses about his alter ego's imminent demise in "The Snows of Kilimanjaro."
"*Now he would never write the things he had saved to write until he knew enough to write them well ...*"

Those words have always haunted me.

"*Well,*" HEMINGWAY (1933, p.5) continues, "*he would not have to fail at trying to write them either.*"

I was terrified of my being the accidental hermit, holed away in my apartment for days, weeks, never leaving, ordering delivery, writing novels and screenplays my only interaction with the world email, instant messages, and the telephone ... was this way of life, the writer's existence, the wrong path to take?

HEMINGWAY (1933, p.10) □ "*It was not so much that he lied as there was no truth to tell.*"

I was afraid that I had pushed too many people out of my life, either from anger, jealousy, or apathy.

"*He was at the very end of a story.*" (Raymond CARVER [1976, p.152], the last sentence in "Put Yourself in My Shoes"³)

I realized we can never have enough people, enough friends, enough loved ones—the 100 plus souls with bodies, inside this tiny church, was proof of that.

"Do not feel sad for her," the friend admonished those sitting and weeping.

An infant behind me went "gggahhhhhh," as if the sound was critical commentary.

"Goooooo," I replied to the infant.

We understood each other. Cindy would have nodded in approval, lit a cigarette, and poured more white wine into her cup.

"Ghhheeeee," she would have said.

3 At the time I was writing critical essays on the short fiction of both HEMINGWAY and CARVER; the words of their texts were stuck in my mind.

Someone said, "Feel sad for you, for the person sitting next to you, because Cindy is no longer standing by their side, but she is in their hearts, my heart, your heart, there she is, forever."

Cindy would have responded, "Oh, jeez Louise, so *sappy!*"

She would have said, "You need to get some help."

She would have said, "Pass the bottle," like the wind howling up from a seashell. [12]

7. Analysis

I title this paper *anthropology of the memorial*; as a personal writing, it is self-conscious anthropology (COHEN, 1994) as well as narrative sociology (MAINES, 1993) since the subject matter is about myself interacting in a cultural ritual and arriving to an epiphany in the process. DENZIN (1989, p.22) states that the epiphany is deeply entrenched in Western thought. At least since Augustine, the idea of transformation has been a central part of the autobiographical and biographical form. This means that [auto/ethnographic] texts will typically be structured by the significant, turning point moments in a subject's life. [13]

I did indeed have my epiphany, or several, at the memorial—that I had to stop being a social hermit, that I had to stop pushing people out of my life, that I needed less painful experiences and more joyful ones, that Cindy's friends who once criticized me for sleeping with her accepted me here, and all was okay, all was forgiven in their reality. [14]

If the memorial had a more structured religious bent—say, Jewish or Catholic—if it happened in another country and culture, where the rules of the ritual had different parameters, would my experience been the same? DENZIN (1989) contends the epiphany is a Western experience, possibly with undertones of psychoanalysis, postmodernism, even poststructuralism. Different cultural data would inevitably yield different results. My method and approach would not be the same. The auto/ethnographer uses the personal lived experience as qualitative social data, unlike the traditional ethnographer that use the data of the other, or quantitative sets of data. Addressing this "us vs. them" situation, ELLIS and BOCHNER (2006, p.431) state that the auto/ethnographic method is clearly different than

"the work of the analytical ethnographers. We think of ethnography as a journey; they think of it as a destination. They want to master, explain, grasp. Those may be interesting word games, but we don't think they're necessarily important. Caring and empathizing is for us what abstracting and controlling is for them [...] we want to dwell in the flux of lived experience; they want to appropriate lived experience for the purpose of abstracting something they call knowledge or theory." [15]

The anthropologist can double as an author (GEERTZ, 1988) which is what I am in this account. I have engaged in anthropological self-inscription (REED-DANAHAY, 1997) on the part of both the ethnographer (myself) and "others" who

were studied (the attendees of the memorial) to understand the meaning behind this ritual, and become transformed by it. Indeed, I was transformed by attending and transformed again by writing about it, which is one of the goals of auto/ethnography (ELLIS, 2004). There were two rituals happening at Cindy's memorial—the outer of the attendees and the inner for myself. I did not want to go to the memorial for personal reasons, yet wound up feeling good that I was there. I walked away from it healed, in some way; I walked away with a smile on my face, not tears in my eyes. [16]

The smile did not last, however. An hour after I arrived home, I began to cry: for Cindy, for myself, for something—I could not put my finger on it, exactly, but I cried, and it was good to let it out. [17]

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