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Cimetière Naturel de Souché in Niort, France

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Preface

At the crossroads of my interest and fascination for cemeteries, the dead, the living and their meaning-making processes, I feel very lucky to have stumbled upon the concept of natural burial and cemeteries, making mortality such a fun conversation starter. This topic led me to explore different cultural contexts and exchange with people admirably engaged in taking on environmental and social issues around death, dying and burial in France, England and the US.

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Forever grateful. Forever dead.

1 Introduction

The ways we bury, memorialize and localize our dead are by no means static but shaped by various factors relating directly or indirectly to the deceased, the survivors and, of course, the societies and environments they find themselves in. Throughout different time periods, spanning different human and animal species from the Neanderthal to Homo Sapiens, burial practices have been an indicator of not only a capacity, need or motivation to create (im-)material culture (Madison 2017) but also proved to be a source for the observation of groups, societies, nations and cultures, and adaptation to their changing environments in the natural and the social sciences.

Death and burial as research topics in anthropology are vast fields, encompassing the processes and practices involved with the metaphysical “problem” of human death, from dealing with the corpse to deposition of the body and beyond. Given the seemingly infinite possibilities to interrogate the relationship between a group of people with the fact of finitude, I needed a common ground to focus on, preferably frequented by the living, where I could begin to understand and explain a preference for one treatment and burial of the dead over another. The answer to the question of how and where research in the social sciences around and about death could be carried out lies perhaps ‘buried’ in what one of its main commentators, Jonathan Porritt, deemed “the fastest growing environmental movement in the country”, referring to the UK (Callender 2012: 13). The “Natural Burial Movement”, which has been gaining more and more attention over the last few years, encompasses primarily the development of “green”, “natural” or woodland burial grounds, seeking to establish more environmentally friendly alternatives to traditional burial forms, while, at the same time, permitting a modified, more social approach to death and dying. The scarcity of space in urban contexts and the ecological concerns over traditional burial, memorialization and body preservation techniques seem like good enough reasons to embrace a more ecologically and economically reasonable, transnational and cross-cultural approach to dealing with our dead bodies on a large scale. How a group, culture, or society adapts to socio-demographic, financial and ecological changes culturally, are signifiers of macro changes, often expressing themselves in micro adaptations in local funeral cultures. It is, therefore, the main focus of this ethnographic account to trace these back in the context of a novel follower of some of the objectives of the Natural Death Movement.

Seeing the cemetery as not only passively shaped by broader environmental and socio-cultural changes but as a place which actively mirrors these influences in

material culture and immaterial practices on site, I chose to focus on such a “natural cemetery” for my master thesis to highlight a city which just hopped onto the natural burial hearse. Similar to any other rupture or notable event in human life, many spaces and places are connected with them, accompanied by individual creations, collective memories, cosmologies and social norms. Acknowledging the cemetery as a *heterotopia of deviation* representing and mirroring a contested space and inverted reflection of the living society (Foucault 1997), as well as a *deathscape*, constituting a space where death and grief intensifies (Sidaway & Maddrell 2016), my goal was to take the first natural cemetery in France, *Cimetière naturel de Souché* in Niort, as a focus point to contribute to the living and breathing corpus of cemetery research. This specific cemetery’s emergence, utilisation and design, as well as its potential to reflect its creators and visitors visions, agencies, values, beliefs and practices, renders it a non-anglophone contribution in a research field dominated by English and American examples.

The Natural Burial Movement seeks out environmentally friendly burial alternatives, often with approaches resembling the ones of the palliative care movement, ideally converting a good burial into a “good death”, to keep Hertz’ (1960 [1907]) notion and influence in the subfield alive even after a century. This makes it as related to broader changes in society as to the deeply personal and emotional reasons for choosing it, making this account an attempt to intertwine the two perspectives. In short, the goal of my research at the *Cimetière naturel de Souché* in Niort was to generate ethnographical data about a place that implemented, on the one hand, influential ideas from a transnational movement and, on the other hand, translated these into a local jargon by adapting grave designs, burial practices and landscape planning to their socio-cultural context. Emerging from an intertwined, transnational context of a global funeral trend promoting natural burials, the focus of this account was to highlight the embeddedness of this particular example by relating to notions and concepts found in other cases of natural burial grounds, especially in the UK, while respecting the particular context of French funeral changes and the shared priorities, objectives and values of interlocutors *in situ*, both ideologically and materially.

After a topical overview containing a brief history of the anthropology of death and burial (ch. 2), definitions of natural cemeteries and the Natural Burial Movement (ch. 3), an account of the methods employed and hypotheses, objectives and the data gathered will be given and interpreted along the lines of other exemplary studies and anthropological notions (ch. 4 & 5). The main section (ch. 6) is divided into four parts, presenting the ethnographic data and anthropological analysis of the field site. While the first part (ch. 6.1) connects the international movement via a common

narrative with specific French funeral developments, the second (ch. 6.2) elaborates the motivations, conception and consequences of implementing a “natural” approach to cemeteries from the point of view of primarily the creators, cemetery workers and funeral directors. Followed by the third part (ch. 6.3), in which the profiles, motivations, impressions, values and interactions of the visitors with the space will be highlighted, before focusing on the various forms of memorialization and rituals (ch. 6.4), and flowers in the theoretical context of gift giving, sacrifice and care (ch. 6.5). Finally, ch. 7 highlights four main strains of analysing the ethnographic data, before ch. 8 concludes these findings and comparisons.

2 The Anthropology of Death and Burial

The anthropology of death and burial inquires how societies face the problem of death in its organisational and conceptual dimensions. This includes ideas about the metaphysical aspects of death and the afterlife, as well as the manifold responses people worldwide exercise to face and deal with the problem as a collective unit (Abramovitch 2001: 3270).

Death and the emotional task of coping with loss and bereavement has been a long-standing focus in many other disciplines, such as psychology, which was famously shaped by the influence of Elisabeth Kübler-Ross’ theory of the five stages of grief (Kübler-Ross 2009 [1969]). According to the Kübler-Ross model, the nonlinear, non-chronological and non-predictable stages of denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance (also known by the acronym DABDA) depict the emotional processes involved in coping with loss. Her focus, having been based on contemporary handlings of death and dying in a Western setting, is exemplary for the scope of psychological studies on death and dying which, more often than not, assume universal perceptions, attitudes and emotions connected with death throughout different cultures and times.

When we look back in time and study former cultures and peoples, we are impressed that death has always been distasteful to man and will probably always be.

(Kübler-Ross 2009: 2)

Apart from its grim contribution to human existence, the realisation of human individual finitude spurred on creative imaginations and ideological creations about

the afterlife as well as complete cosmologies. As the psychologist Luigi De Marchi (1988) argued, archaeological excavations indicate a long history of spiritual or religious engagement with the end of life, observable through material evidence of burial practices. He reasons that the onset of culture in the Taylorian sense sprung out of what he calls *Urschock*, or the primal shocking awareness of death being an inescapable part of life. He substantiates this claim with the oldest known grave findings of the Neanderthals from 100,000–40,000 BC, which suggest a belief in an afterlife as they included food and hunting gear for a realm beyond the known.

[...] so it seems indisputable, that the so far first known documents of human culture are clear testimonies of a mythical-fantastical denial of death, a psychological resistance of the existential shock and of mortal fear, which accompany and influence the evolution of man and his history in all countries to all times significantly.

(De Marchi 1988: 22)

The point to make here is to distinguish an anthropological approach to research about death, dying, burials and dead bodies in societies or social groups by focusing on the lived reality, including the diverse practices and beliefs surrounding it. Speculations of the kind mentioned above, at the very least, point to a “symbolic and ideological halo around the physiological facts of death” (Goody 1975: 2) and, consequently, to the ability of engaging in abstract thoughts and concepts (including language), which were not physically present for actors engaging in funerary rituals in the Upper Palaeolithic. While tracing the birth of all cultural life or religion back to the graves of a few Neanderthals is a tempting endeavour, it ultimately remains “guesswork” (Goody 1975: 2).

What we are left with and what constitutes the basis for investigations about (but not only) beliefs around death and the afterlife as well as insights about social structures, economic distribution schemes, kinship hierarchies, gender roles and political agency are material artefacts and immaterial practices, giving historians, sociologists and anthropologists alike a broad foundation for conducting research and engaging in interpretation. While the ability to think symbolically does not fossilize, it leaves the discipline of socio-cultural anthropology capable of transcending the present, remembering the past and visualizing the future, allowing us to imagine, create and alter our environment in ways that have significant consequences for the planet (Madison 2017).

Referring to the famous proposition by Ernest Becker, namely, “[...] that the repression of death is necessary and healthy for daily living, that it inspires the heroic deeds of human individuals and the great works of human societies”, Singer and Erickson suggest the opposite, as “[...] through a greater consciousness of our mortality, we can better understand and improve upon the human condition” (Singer & Erickson 2015: 488). In this line of arguing and long after Hertz (1960 [1907]) set the standard for anthropological considerations of the social ramifications of death more than a century ago (Kaufman & Morgan 2005: 323), the subfield is flourishing, extending contemporary research on the ends of life with the rather novel focus on natural cemeteries and burials, whereby it continues to “guess” *in situ*, with the deceased and non-deceased in (to paraphrase Ingold’s definition of anthropology as philosophy with the people in [Ingold 2014: 393]).

By shortly tracing back the history and issues of and within the anthropology of death and burial, the attempt will be made to rise from the Neanderthals grave, supposedly having fuelled human evolution through fear, and seeing burial grounds as fertile environments for the examination of societies and groups in change.

2.1 “How Others Die”¹

Anthropology, as the science of mankind, has been dealing with aspects of death, dying and burial in different societies, cultures and ethnicities ever since its birth, resulting in many accounts of elaborated rituals by researchers on site, as well as interpretations by their armchair equivalents. In its infancy, and, as such, having been a mere by-product in monographs of a given “culture”, the anthropology of death focused on cultural idiosyncrasies concerning its rituals, emotional responses, beliefs in the afterlife, burial practices and phases of death (Kaufman & Morgan 2005: 318). Existing more or less like a neglected sibling up until the 1970s, the subdiscipline experienced a blossoming in the following decades through the interest of several researchers in topics surrounding death and dying in other societies and ethnicities (Robben 2004: 2). Before the interest in all (or rather many) things around death and dying in the social and cultural sciences really flourished, Johannes Fabian (1973) delivered a current diagnosis of the discipline, stating that it’s developments, blind spots and shortcomings can be traced back to popular paradigms at the time, as well as broader changes in the intellectual history of anthropology itself. Fabian saw the subfield as being characterised by processes of parochialization, folklorization and

¹ Title of a paper by Johannes Fabian published in 1973.

exotization. The process of parochialization had the effect of eliminating a transcendental and universal conception of death, which resulted in death not being a subject of study but only relevant as an objective occurrence, its death-related behaviours the only possibility of observation and interaction (Fabian 1973: 545). Given the social and emotional implications which the death of a member of the community usually has on other spheres of social and cultural life, one cannot help but notice a certain “coolness and remoteness” of accounts about burial practices and loss in the literature published before the 1980s (Palgi & Abramovitch 1984: 385). This research focus and style of narrative can be seen as an outcome of the processes described by Fabian, resulting in accounts which tell stories from a “safe distance” in two senses: firstly, and in line with the paradigm of Malinowski’s functionalism, anthropologists study of the behaviour of people, which is determined by cultural orientations, is being put on halt by the death of the individual. An anthropology of death in this line of reasoning, therefore, cannot study death because the individual or informant is inaccessible but can only study the responses to death. It followed that attention shifted towards the social, collective experience and representation of death, which resulted in an obsessive interest in the cultural variation of survivors’ reactions through the rituals, ceremonies, ideological rationalizations or short “folkloric” expressions displayed (Fabian 1973: 549). Secondly, this collectively represented behaviour, analysed and mostly stripped of their individual accounts of emotions, was then placed at a safe distance from the core of one’s own society, which explains many authors’ claim of the process of exoticization. It was only through Lévi-Strauss’ radical structuralism that the discipline was brought back to its universal significance, as he vindicated the logical nature of human reactions to death, or, conversely, with vindicating death as the supreme mediator of those oppositions and contradictions, as a means by which the human mind constructs its universes (Fabian 1973: 556). Fabian, instead, demanded an anthropology of death which focuses on the social construction of death (Robben 2004: 4) to direct research away from striding along the dusty corridors of a cabinet of curiosities peering through the looking-glass. In this sense, he argued for a move away from *how they die* towards an anthropology investigating *how we die*.

Palgi and Abramovitch note, a decade later following these observations, that “Few areas of contemporary anthropological inquiry are still so dominated by *fin de siècle* thinking as is the study of death and mortuary ritual” (Palgi & Abramovitch 1984: 387).

2.2 Future Directions

However, even given the difficulty of engaging in fieldwork around topics in this field, did we, decades later, arrive at a point of inquiring into the social construction of death in its many cultural contexts leading to a “closer” account of how we die? What is certain is that, at least quantitatively, the medial and literary engagement with death, as well as studies within the subfield, have been rising sharply in the last few decades. Kaufmann and Morgan claimed in 2005 that the body of anthropological literature published about these topics has never been more extensive.

The most recent collection of research conducted in the field, the “Companion to the Anthropology of Death” by Robben (2018), moves beyond the perspectives summarized by Bloch and Parry (1982), Fabian (1973), Goody (1975), Huntington and Metcalf (1979) and Palgi and Abramovitch (1984), to highlight the contemporary research focus and themes in the field. In this reader, many assumptions of its founding fathers have been revisited to unravel the relationships between death and the state, the influence of political authorities on public funerary celebrations, and the lasting affective relationships created with the dead through material bonds. By regarding life and death as continuous processes of generation and regeneration, rather than as strictly and universally defined ontologies, the body/corpse itself functions as the basis to mediate the fluid concepts of being and non-being. Referring to the paradox of the dead, “the present absence” or materiality of the corpse has played an essential role in cross-cultural research about the phenomenon of death. It is not the presence of the abstract concept of death itself that sparks the human imagination but the material matter or “the concrete product of death” (Strutz 2015: 3) that remains: the lifeless human body, puzzling artists (Macho 2000: 100) as well as any other non-deceased actors.

Comparative studies show that there is a cross-cultural relevance and importance to elaborate death rituals; nevertheless, few if any, universal practices have been defined so far (Abramovitch 2001: 3270). What we can contend, though, is that a lot of attention has been devoted to the complex relationships between the bereaved and the deceased, implying up until recently that healthy mourning requires an emotional detachment from the materiality of death, or simply the corpse. Instead of turning away from the connections of the bereaved and the deceased, late studies in psychology, sociology and anthropology (Francis et al. 2005; Klass, Silverman, & Nickman 1996; Robben 2014; Stroebe, Schut, & Stroebe 2005; Walter 1999) investigated these relationships and made clear that not only the fluidity of research interests but

also the possibilities of a fluid concept of life and death, materiality and memorialization, or the dead body itself can lead to new insights into the manifold expressions of these particular connections beyond the grave. In place of a detachment from the dead then, these studies rather demonstrate that mourners may refashion their affective relationship with the deceased into meaningful continuing bonds through personal conversations, the display of photographs and the tending of home altars, as well as through public commemorations, religious services, the media, and so forth (Robben 2018: xvi). The dead body, while losing its subjective character at death, does not acquire an object status directly but remains in the liminal sphere of an *abject*, as termed by Kristeva. This category “is especially useful when reflecting over the power of that which transgresses cultural categories and defies order, rather than as something inherently repulsive” (Stutz 2015: 3), as it is located between categories, and disturbs and confuses due to its unruly mixedness and disorder.

A vital part of an anthropology of death in the twenty-first century is precisely the materiality of the corpse, which Robben deems to be awarded with as much attention as spirituality has traditionally received (Robben 2018: xvi). The investigation of the Natural Burial Movement, with its changing conceptions of the body, nature, rituals and landscape practices, seems like a natural development in a discipline rich in conceptualizations of agency and material culture through which the dead are given meaning again.

3 A “Global” Funeral Trend

A silent revolution of funeral rites has been observable worldwide since the 1990s, having its starting point in the creation of ecological or “natural” cemeteries or woodland burial grounds which allow for “natural” burials (Benisek 2017; Davies & Rumble 2012). Ideally, these environmentally friendly cemeteries realise the objective to support the preservation of natural landscapes, the (re-)generation of woodland and a sustainable relationship between humans and their environment (Boret 2014: 1). Since the opening of the first natural cemetery in Carlisle, England, in 1993, there has been a steady increase in different types of natural burial, counting more than 270 natural burial grounds in England (The Natural Death Centre 2017) and over 300 in North America (Nebhut 2016: 9). The concept spread quickly to other countries, counting examples in the Netherlands, Australia, New Zealand, Japan (Clayden et al. 2015: ii) and, since 2014, with the opening of the *Cimetière naturel de Souché*, also France.

Various pamphlets and manuals, for example, The Natural Death Handbook (Callender 2012) for the UK and The Green Burial Guidebook (Fournier 2018) for the US, inform interested parties about the options available and speak out unanimously for a break with the taboo around death, work to spur on conversations about procedures following death and promote collaborations between doctors, undertakers, patients and clients (Higgs 1993: 1212).

With its inter- and transnational appeal, the movement spans different countries and cultural contexts, combining different focuses concerning research, discussion about its true core values, objectives and potentials, leading to heterogenous definitions, as the following citations aim to highlight.

[...] the natural burial movement is a creative resistance to the modernist paradigm (Clayden et al. 2015) that seeks to celebrate decomposition and use motifs of ‘nature’ as a means to understand death and mortality.

(Rumble 2016: 43)

The main purpose of eco-cemeteries is to decrease the negative impacts of the cemeteries on the underground water, natural vegetation and fauna existing in the burial area, to use materials biodegrading more rapidly and to minimize the ecological footprint of the individual.

(Uslu et al. 2009: 1509)

Exemplarily, the first citation by two social scientists highlights socio-cultural interpretations and meaning regarding notions of death and nature, whereas the second highlights the focus on the development of cemeteries according to their environmental impact. These different definitions emphasise the necessity and possibilities an interdisciplinary effort could have for the advocacy of natural burials, as the need for less polluting disposal options for human bodies has not only socio-cultural but very pressing environmental consequences in the face of the climate emergency.

3.1 “Natural” Burial

Describing a form of burial as “natural” carries certain connotations with it that would otherwise seem superfluous in a merely descriptive sense. A “natural” burial generally describes a process in which the body of the deceased will be buried covered in a cloth or in a biodegradable coffin without prior embalming or usage of a burial vault (Benisek 2017: 592). However, given the sheer diversity of operators and cemetery landscapes in England alone, Davies and Rumble note how an all-encompassing definition for natural burial grounds seem not only impossible but also carries different connotations and cultural affinities with it. While one intriguing yet key perspective in this difficulty lies in the fact that what happens above ground frequently seems to set the image and popular perception of natural burial practices (Davies & Rumble 2012: 17). The question as to what part of the burial process is “natural” and how it differs from an “unnatural” burial, therefore, has to be posed in each cultural context to reveal the practices underneath and above the ground. Focusing on different green, natural, ecological or woodland burial grounds in England, for example, “natural” in this context desires independence from the “unnatural” interference of commercial ventures, pleading for an alliance with the organic world (Davies & Rumble 2012: 1).

Whereas British natural burial sites can be classified in three ways, namely, regarding ownership (private, local authority, charity, Church of England), their physical landscape (mature woodland, green/meadow field, newly established woodland) and “green” credentials (that usually dictate the purpose and future role of the site), in the United States, the Green Burial Council focuses their typology upon land conservation, distinguishing three sorts of burial grounds: conservation, natural and hybrid (Davies & Rumble 2012: 25).

3.2 Researching Cemeteries

Anthropologists, often in favour of a physical site involving an exchange with informants on a given phenomenon or “problem”, seem to have found a suitable habitat to inquire into people's relationships and practices surrounding death, burial and memorialization, as a rising amount of literature on the subject indicates. A more specific focus on cemeteries in recently published books, publications and ethnographies has also been noted in other disciplines, such as history, sociology, art and architecture (Assig 2007; Gusman & Vargas 2014). Francis et al. (2005) focused on ethnic and religious mourning behaviours, setting an important direction into the inquiry of social life at cemeteries in their extensive, comparative analysis of six London cemeteries. Their interdisciplinary approach and insights into cross-cultural cemetery behaviour sparked further research within European borders, such as Gusman and Vargas' (2014) inquiries at three Italian cemeteries in Piedmont. Similar to Francis, Kellaher & Neophytou, they plead for an anthropology of the cemetery, devoting their focus primarily on its landscape, design and significance as a social place. Taking up Fabian's argument from 1973 to inquire into the social constructions of concepts of death, they argue for a stronger research focus on projects about the cemeterial institution in contemporary Europe, as a solid foundation is still lacking (Gusman & Vargas 2014: 3). Within the realm of natural burial, academic activity emerged recently from Europe, North America and Asia. In Germany, Assig (2007) analysed the local trend of burying urns in a “forest of quietude” or *Friedwald*, a dedicated woodland where up to twelve burials can take place under one collectively shared tree. In the context of Japan, Boret (2014) focused on individual tree burials, linking the findings of his anthropological study to the changing kinship relationships and notions of ecology, where the individual body is seen as nourishing the earth and, through nature, returns into the cycle of life. In the UK, Rumble and Davies' (2012) anthropological-theological study of a single natural burial ground, together with Clayden et al.'s (2015) interdisciplinary, comparative study of several sites, constitute the main pillars in research about natural burial so far, highlighting emergent spiritualities and landscape practices. While these contributions suggest similar motivations to promote natural burial, the diversity of motivations to operate them and the variety of resulting adaptations suggest a tendency of growing future interest in related topics.

4 Objectives and Hypotheses

The natural burial movement developed in the United Kingdom in the 1990s and mainly gained popularity there; it now celebrates an almost two-decades-long history with more than 270 natural burial sites throughout the country. Within these years, it proved to have influenced and altered not only the appearance of cemetery landscapes but also established a reshaped approach of the processes surrounding dying, burying and mourning within the British context. The manifold reasons of how and why it came about in Britain and why the popularity of this alternative approach has been rising steeply ever since it started, is not the subject of this ethnography, but hints to the complexity of motivations in former funeral cultures and inspired my research aim to conduct an ethnographic account of the first natural cemetery in France. My main objectives were to trace back its conception and management and to explore the effects its construction brought about on the local funeral culture and the people in and outside its biodegradable borders. The more specific objectives and hypotheses upon which I oriented my research were based on literature dealing with death, cemeteries and natural burial in various disciplines and a short explorative visit half a year before my actual fieldwork period. The following assumptions and notions constituted a framework which I expected to be reshaped and redefined through the exchanges with interlocutors and my observations in the field and, accordingly, also changed throughout the process. This approach seemed reasonable, as compared to the larger number of natural burial grounds and their accompanying developments in end-of-life care in the Anglophone world, this site was only at the beginning of its developing branch in France. Expecting the presence of some ideas, values and objectives accompanying other international examples of natural burial grounds, I generally orientated my research questions to the core issues of conceptions about nature, identity, memorialization and design, death rituals, spirituality and sociality. More specifically, I tried to explore the facets of my fieldwork context with the help of four theoretical questions proposed by Clayden et al. asking whether natural burial in the UK constitutes a (1) creative resistance to modernist death care, (2) a part of a re-enchantment of death, (3) a form of collective environmental regeneration or (4) a site for individual identity-making (Clayden et al. 2015: 195).

... closer to the dead?

Hospitals, as “the modern places of death”, create a collective uniformity in the experience of death, which contrasts to a growing variety of individual funeral practices (Mischke 1996: 222). The overwhelming diversity of ceremonies and burial possibilities in recent decades is characterised by not only a focus on environmentally friendly options, such as biodegradable funerary objects, but also a DIY approach to caring for the dead. Examples are the seemingly revived practice of home funerals (National Home funeral alliance 2019) and the rising popularity of accompanying the dying with death doulas (Rawlings et al. 2019). The fact that patients and families are increasingly turning towards placing their trust in those who can advocate for them or fill the gaps in end-of-life care seemed to point to people seeking a closer and more self-determined procedure of their deceased members’ burials. In the case of English natural burial sites, they seem to offer a greater choice of how the living may engage with their dead, all through the landscape where they lie, as they are free of many constraints experienced in more “traditional” disposal locations (Davies & Rumble 2012: 17). Seeing the natural cemetery as a place where death care might be extended through notions of the body, nature and continuity, differing to other burial sites, I aimed to highlight any possible differences present.

... cemetery re-enchanted?

Describing the cemetery as a “*heterotopia of deviation*”, Foucault characterises the cemetery in Europe from the beginning of the nineteenth century as no longer constituting the sacred and immortal heart of the city, but *the other city*, where each family possesses its dark resting place (Foucault 1997: 334). Seeing the decline in beliefs about the final resurrection as having led to the modern “cult of the dead”, he goes on to state that more attention was gradually given to the dead body, “the only trace, in the end, of our existence in the world and in words” (Foucault 1997: 333). Observing this funeral innovation putting a focus on ecology and notions of nature as a source or even a possibility of a life beyond the dead body or death itself, I wanted to interrogate the views on death and the afterlife in a context where plants are as much a part of the landscape as they are of a novel concept of grave design and, perhaps, an emerging spirituality (Davies & Rumble 2012: 124).

... nurturing nature?

Davies and Rumble's (2012) account of the natural burial site Barton Glebe focused on notions of gift giving, spirituality and the self by describing the perception of people who chose natural burial, to "give back" the natural substance they inhabited throughout their lives by "returning to the earth". Termed "ecological immortality", this expression of nurturing nature and, thereby, becoming part of a greater whole, was also adapted by Boret (2014) in his study of Japanese tree burials. Not only is nature regenerated through the practice of planting a tree on top of the burial place, but the individual's physical remains are seen as surviving by entering back into the cycle of regeneration (Boret 2014: 193). Questions referring to these notions regard the management of the site, including the realisation of environmental goals or objectives set out by the administration, reduced water and pesticide use, waste management, land regeneration, as well as regulations about funerary objects and preservative treatment of the deceased present at the cemetery. In this context, the idea of not only a more ecological burial but also the emotional values associated with these practices raises the question whether nature, besides playing a functional role, might replace religion with secular ideas about death and the afterlife.

... individually memorializing life?

In addition to the major relocation of cemeteries from the city centres to the outer borders, the nineteenth century also brought a development with it that Foucault mockingly called the "[...] right to her or his own little box for her or his own little personal decomposition" (Foucault 1997: 334). Nevertheless, the dead body and its destiny constitute an equally important practical and symbolic social concern for all societies (Gusman & Vargas 2014: 6), including the potential to highlight social inequalities. Hoy, for example, noted in his review about the book "Greening Death" by Suzanne Kelly (2015) how, through an almost romanticized view of green burial, it would be all too easy to overlook why the movement has been embraced mostly by Whites, but not nearly as much by other cultural groups who have the most to gain economically from a simpler, less expensive way of ritualizing death (Hoy 2016: 414). Similarly, Krupar, referring to racism and funeral poverty in the US, reminds us of the power relations well beyond life, leaving some with a variety of choice, while others face ongoing forms of exclusion in life and in death (Krupar 2018: 277). Somehow related to this argument and certainly to the diverse motivations of people interested

in either the movement, natural burial or both, Benisek (2017) also highlights the power of choice when reviewing Clayden et al.'s (2015) study:

Selecting a burial ground that prioritizes natural systems and rejects traditional memorialisation may speak to a new movement in sustainability. Or natural burial may simply highlight postmodern notions of individuality and choice.

(Benisek 2017: 592)

This notion of individuality has been referred to as “the ‘individualization’ of the dead, in which a person’s own desires for post-mortem treatment take precedence over the wishes of [his/her] family or the expectations of society” (Rowe 2003: 113). Assig (2007) echoes this process in her analysis by describing interpreting the popularity of the *Friedwald* as a result of an ongoing process of devaluation of the traditional cemetery, which once functioned as a place for the bereaved to represent and process their grief (Assig 2007: 147). Opposed to a collective deathscape proposed by Clayden et al. (2015), I wanted to interrogate the relationship of the private and public control to memorialize the dead or express individuality. Relating to questions of power and choice, profiling the people opting or being able to access natural burial was another focus regarding processes of ex- and inclusion of groups.

Trouble in Heterotopia

The cemetery as a contested space offers a place to observe the persistence of certain beliefs, values and practices along with the repeated introduction of new approaches and, simultaneously, the tensions which these either resolve or stimulate (Clayden et al. 2015: 17). A research team using ethnographic methods at a cemetery in the Netherlands identified five main tensions, which they concluded from interviews with visitors and their observations of the site itself. As a result, the pendulum seems to swing between aspects of the private and public, life and sorrow, leisure and mournful behaviour, feelings of alienation and home, as well as perceptions of nature as being dynamic or static (Nielsen & Groes 2014: 113). These five tensions functioned as a rough orientation to my own inquiries, to which I tried to pay attention while talking to the visitors, staff and other interlocutors.

5 Methodology

Turning to Augé and Colleyn's (2006) answer to the question what do anthropologists do, I will first describe the methods I employed, before reflecting on the access, strengths and challenges of using them at a cemetery. Broadly speaking, anthropologists construct objects of study, choose subjects linked to collective forms of life, go into the field to conduct ethnographic research and also read, or at least scan as closely as possible, the literature touching on the object of research (Augé & Colleyn 2006: 19). Although conducting research at a cemetery and around the topic of death carries certain considerations with it, the methodology remains the same within an empirically based, inductive approach to collecting knowledge or conversing with the interlocutors to create a shared narrative.

Using two metaphors of the interviewer as a "miner" or a "traveller" described by Kvale (1996), I would like to highlight the use of methods and the interviewer's role I tried to combine during the research process, which, in the realm of cemetery research might include its very own specifications of "roaming" and "digging" within the field. According to the *miner* metaphor, knowledge is understood as buried metal, sought by the miner (interviewer), who seeks to quantify objective facts or seeks nuggets of essential meaning. In the process of mining, the interviewer digs nuggets of data or meanings out of a subject's experiences and purifies these facts and meanings by transcribing them from the oral to the written mode, through which these transformations are seen to remain constant and essential meanings can, through analysis, be drawn out by various techniques and moulded into their definitive form. At the end of this process, the value of the end product and its degree of purity is determined by correlating it with an objective, external, real world or a realm of subjective, inner, authentic experiences (Kvale 1996: 4). Whereas the miner understands knowledge as "given" and to be discovered, the traveller seeks to converse, in the sense of the Latin meaning "to wander together", with interlocutors, brings stories back home, recognising that the stories might change the focus of the investigation during the process. This process is viewed as being guided by a method, in its Greek meaning of "a route that leads to the goal", which directs the traveller freely to different places, peoples and topics, resulting in different tales that are shaped into a narrative (Kvale 1996: 5). These two metaphors, each implying a different research process and knowledge transformation, are cited as examples of an approach closer to human engineering, in case of the *miner*, and closer to the humanities and arts, exemplified by the *traveller's* approach. If anthropology should be seen, as Ingold

argues, as more than an “accumulation of ethnographic case studies” (Ingold 2017: 25), then the goal is to create an ethnography that is based on a dialogue between the *traveller* and the *miner*, not only for the sake of creating knowledge in an exchange with the knowledgeable informants in the field, but also for the sake of a felicitous continuation of our discipline that will not continue to spiral into parochial irrelevance (Da Col & Graeber 2011: x). Rather than “letting the pendulum swing” between sociological and philosophical poles (Sanders 2016: 479), intellectual interlocutors from both sides of the scientific coin could certainly profit from an interdisciplinary curiosity. Taking each other and the value of curiosity “seriously” is a thought-provoking, creative venture, which may potentially open new insights into the very issue of what constitutes life (Willerslev 2013: 42) or, in this case, death and the various beliefs surrounding it.

At its finest, ethnography can lay claim to doing something that other methodological practices do not. More than offering [...] a near unique methodological intimacy, it enables the representation of the “whole life” and the “world views” of particular peoples in particular places and at particular moments in time.

(Goodwin-Hawkins & Dawson 2018: 273)

This rather classic focus in ethnographic research mentioned above can be seen as the starting point of research: the goal to interrogate the worldview of a community bound together by, in this case, a shared interest in a more “natural” or ecological way of burying the dead.

Over the course of two months in the summer of 2018, I contacted interlocutors ranging from varied backgrounds related to the cemetery, directly or indirectly, to shine light on the ethnographic present of this newly employed funeral practice. Following one of the most common methods employed in our field, I gathered data through (participant) observation at the cemeteries and the crematorium of Niort, which resulted in field notes and audio-visual recordings, including photographs and video and sound recordings from various cemeteries. By spending as much time as possible directly at the site, I was able to observe day-to-day activities and behaviours, funeral ceremonies, exhumations and interactions of the bereaved and management personal with each other as well as with the gravesites. Being frequently present was also important for the establishment of contacts and short-term relationships, to understand the meaning and value of visiting the cemetery and interacting with the space.

The second main source of information was interactions with informants who were partly sought out and contacted beforehand and partly encountered spontaneously at the field site of Niort's various cemeteries. These encounters resulted in either qualitative semi-structured interviews, which were arranged beforehand, recorded and transcribed subsequently, or such encounters were informal interviews or conversations with informants, which were then documented in the form of written protocols. I employed specific sets of questions beforehand in the form of mind maps that I used during interviews for the interrogation and focus on different topics, adapted to the various informants who came from an array of professions or were motivated to visit the cemeteries for various reasons. These mind maps are provided in the appendix and give an overview of the topics and subjects that my questions asked during the interviews were based on. Complementarily, research in university are at local libraries and archives was an ongoing process that began and exceeded the empirical research period in Niort.

5.1 Safe Researching

Although the scope of topics and contexts of research increased in the subfield of the anthropology of death, one could not help but notice the relative serenity with which the phenomenon of death is met in most accounts, as the research focus lies on the bereaved and the corpse rather than on the dying themselves (Palgi & Abramovitch 1984: 385). Irving notes while researching perceptions of death among people living with HIV / AIDS that interiority or inner expressions of people are rarely the subject of anthropological monographs or ethnographic accounts and are more left to artists, poets and writers (Irving 2017: 72). Paradigmatic orientations alone seem to be insufficient in explaining the non-centrality of the subject in anthropological research if one regards the reality of fieldwork more closely. The "safe distance" which anthropologists often exercise theoretically or abstractly is, on the one hand, a non-negotiable part of ethnographic fieldwork as one plunges into times of emotional, social distress in a context of mourning but also, on the other hand, reflects how death in Western society is regarded as a private matter, accompanied by a death anxiety engendered by the contemporary cultural milieu (Palgi & Abramovitch 1984: 385). Kim also points to a similar view by Metcalf and Huntington (1991), stating that anthropologists are methodologically not well enough equipped to interpret the inner state of people to begin with and cautions against the interpretation of emotional responses. Contrary to agreeing with their line of arguing, she notes the lack of research conducted in the field of academic psychology concerning emotional

relationships forming during ethnographic fieldwork. She highlights the valuable proximity and the privilege to observe and interpret emotions (Kim 2015: 18). Far from dismissing psychological insights, an interdisciplinary approach to the study of death, dying and the resulting (im-)material cultures could be beneficial to understanding the interrelatedness of researcher and informants on a psychological level as well as helping to broaden the cultural scope of psychological research done in a predominantly Western setting.

5.2 Reflection on the Methods Used

Regarding the supposed “sub-disciplination” of the anthropology of death in the anthropology of religion, ritual and symbolism, and the many different aspects of death that have been subject to research (ranging from methods for corpse disposal, emotional aspects and grief work to death’s existential dimensions [Goodwin-Hawkins & Dawson 2018: 269]), this subfield also brings special methodological reflections with it.

Ethnographic research can generally be described as

[...] an approach to social and cultural research involving long-term immersion in research contexts and the deployment of a range of methodological strategies and techniques selected by the researcher as she deems them to be contextually and interpersonally appropriate, but in which participant observation predominates-

(Goodwin-Hawkins & Dawson 2018: 270)

Participant observation remains a main pillar of the realm of ethnographic/anthropological research that is seen as not only advisable but necessary to immerse oneself successfully into a group or a particular context of research interest. Nevertheless, this approach to study phenomena in the realm of death has its drawbacks concerning the amount of research conducted, as Goodwin-Hawkins and Dawson continue to point out: “[...] it is, perhaps, this very immersion that lies at the heart of an anthropological aversion to the study of dying” (Goodwin-Hawkins & Dawson 2018: 270). Rosaldo, nevertheless, advises this immersion, as ethnographic works purporting to study death should include processes of bereavement along with the social and symbolic organisation of funerary rites (Rosaldo 1988: 433). He also notes, in a warning tone, how ethnographic representations of death can be characterised by formality, externality and generality,

and warns researchers to describe human events as homogenous and repetitive, failing to consider the subjectivity of the people described and generalizing “recipes for mourning rituals” that exclude particular agonies of grief (Rosaldo 1988: 425).

In between the attempt to conduct research with the goal of exploring the social construction of death (Robben 2004: 4) and taking caution to not only explore identical forms throughout a group by supposing the notion of a shared culture (Rosaldo 1988: 425), I tried to employ my methods and reshape my expectations and tactics through the responses I got from my interlocutors during research. Herzfeld applies the Italian proverb “*fatta la legge, si trova l’inganno*” (“once the law has been made, one finds a way around it”) to the naturalistic laws imagined by some social scientists (in contrast to those established by natural scientists) (Herzfeld 2017: 10) to this reflexive approach to research. As he also more generally explores shifting paradigms in anthropology and argues for a favourable view of an anthropological realism in a scientific age, the approach to research was a rather dialogical one and the following methods have been employed and varied in ratio as seen fitting throughout the research process.

5.3 Interlocutors, Institutions and other Resources

Attempting an ethnography of a distinct cemetery in Niort, I focused mainly on the people working at and frequenting the site itself. I also included informative elements from other institutions to capture the current funerary culture in this specific setting.

At the beginning of my research, my primary focus remained on the presence at the cemetery, which consisted of observations and spontaneous informal conversations/interviews to get into contact with visitors and experience an impression of cemetery activities and utilisation. Hand in hand with the frequent visits to the natural cemetery and all other cemeteries in Niort went a photographic documentation of them to subsequently analyse and compare aspects of the material culture, memorialization and cemetery design present. This also provided a useful source to observe changes throughout my research concerning flower disposal, grave development and landscape transformation.

The research lasted two months but was interrupted in the middle by a scheduled intensive one-week CREOLE master program in Bern, Switzerland, during which I presented my research, received feedback and, therefore, reshaped my focus in the field. Throughout the first research month I contacted the primary institution dealing with the maintenance of cemeteries in Niort, the cemetery conservation office. In addition to interviewing visitors at the cemeteries, I also interviewed the former and

the present director and the third person involved in the conception and construction of the natural cemetery. The funeral businesses and headstone and/or monument companies were other locations that I visited and arranged interviews at and tours around to grasp the processes and organisation of burial, commemoration and grave monument installation. The focus was, therefore, more upon the explanation and presentation of the cemetery by interlocutors closely involved with it from an organisational point of view. As it was also the beginning of my research and I was trying to establish deeper contacts within the respective fields, I stuck to institutions and funeral businesses, because the access was easier to establish and localize. After contacting all the institutions that seemed most relevant to me, I also tried to take part in some cultural events in the city to get in touch with the population and potential interlocutors.

Contact with employees at the town hall, the mayor and priests of the city unfortunately proved to be unsuccessful, as no interviews or informal talks could be arranged.

After the feedback received at the intensive program in Bern, I sought to establish closer contact with those people that spend most time at the field site: the cemetery workers employed by the city of Niort and the visitors. Up to that point, contact with the cemetery conservation office was restricted to arranged interview situations and a collective cemetery visit with the former and present director and the person responsible for landscape studies and urban planning. Inquiries into further information about the deceased buried at the natural cemetery and upcoming burials or other observable events (such as exhumations) only developed after a certain time of presence and, therefore, deeper, more trusted and at-ease contact with the director and the workers. In addition to the ongoing observations and informal interviews at the cemeteries, the focus in the second part of my research was on establishing further contact with the people tending the graves, planning on choosing a natural burial and the cemetery workers. Through closer and more frequent contact with the cemetery workers and gravediggers, I was able to attend several funerals, exhumations, and a tour and a ceremony at the region's only crematorium. These visits and excursions were more opportunistic than planned, as my possibilities depended partly on the willingness of the interlocutors to show, explain and highlight the broad spectrum of their views on the French funeral culture.

Considering the visitors and people interested in natural burial, I depended on the people I met *in situ* at the site. Reflecting on the length of my research, two months seemed like a short period to get close to people and interrogate their choice for a natural burial further. Inquiring about the customers and people coming to the office

of cemetery conservation choosing natural burial also proved difficult, due to the staff's understandable inclination not to release personal information.

Consulting the public, regional library and the archive of the department Deux-Sevres provided me with some information about the history of the cemeteries in Niort and about the crematorium. The handbooks and guides provided by the office of cemetery conservation proved to be particularly helpful.

Concerning the contact with the interlocutors in the field, or "fieldwork dilemmas", Henry Abramovitch notes, "[...] in many Western cultures, death and mourning can constitute a time of heightened privacy, where the entry into the mourner's space at such times is considered intrusive and inappropriate" (Abramovitch 2016).

Being aware of the difficulties lying ahead when attempting to talk with people in grief or contemplation about their own burial, I soon realised the possibilities and limitations of (participant) observation and informal interviews at the field site. What might be called "ethnographic countertransference" (Abramovitch 2016), namely, the fieldworker's own culture's attitude toward death which is being projected on the individuals in the field, surely has to be taken into account and resulted in the following set of data. The cemetery is an open, public space, and I was able to observe different ways in which visitors interacted with the surroundings and their motivations. This allowed me to adapt my style of approaching them and remaining discreet. Again, realising the limitations of a rather short research period as a single researcher, more profound data and insights could have been obtained through more frequent and repetitive interactions with the visitors and bereaved.

5.4 Compilation of the Data Gathered

The following compilation of data was generated between the 15 June and the 20 August 2018 through the use of the methods mentioned above, interrupted only by the Intensive Program in Bern which took place from the 15 to 21 July 2018 and was part of the CREOLE masters programme. Names have partly been anonymised.

Semi-structured Interviews

All interviews were held in French and subsequently transcribed and translated into English.

- 22.6.18 Dominique Martin, employee at the gravestone company *Bonneaud*, 1 h, recorded
- 22.6.18 Perrine Rouger at the funeral home *Pompes funèbres générales*, 35 min, recorded
- 26.6.18 Morgan Terrasson, head of funeral home *Terrasson et fils*, 55 min, recorded
- 28.6.18 Amanda Clot, Dominique Bodin, director and former director of the cemetery direction office, Eve-Marie Ferrer, works at the office for landscape studies and urban planning, at the *Cimetière naturel de Souché*, 1.5 h, recorded
- 4.7.18 Amanda Clot, director of the cemetery direction office in Niort, at the *conservation des cimetières*, 2 h, recorded
- 10.7.18 Dominique Martin, employee at the gravestone company *Bonneaud*, 1 h, recorded
- 2.8.18 Eve-Marie Ferrer works at the office for landscape studies and urban planning, at the *Cimetière naturel de Souché*, 1 h 15 min, recorded
- 16.8.18 Severin, 19-year-old housemate, at *Cimetière naturel de Souché*, 1 h, recorded
- 16.8.18 Jean Pierre Rousselle, florist at *Fleurs 2000*, 30 min
- 17.8.18 Anne and Phillipe Gabet, married elderly couple at *Cimetière naturel de Souché*, 1 h 30 min, recorded

Informal Conversations

(Excluding informal conversations under 30 min)

- 19.6.18 Family of five at *Cimetière naturel de Souché*, 1 h 30 min
- 20.6.18 Elderly couple at *Cimetière naturel de Souché*, 45 min, recorded
- 23.6.18 Filou, artist and mother of around 35/40 y, at *la Roussie*, 30 min
- 25.6.18 Mother of around 40 years old and two young girls, in front of *Cimetière naturel de Souché*, 30 min
- 27.6.18 Severin, 19-year-old housemate (person I shared a house with for a month), at residence 53 rue Voltaire, 1 h
- 1.7.18 Blandine at *Cimetière naturel de Souché* 1 h, recorded, video footage
- 7.7.18 Elderly woman at parking lot of *Cimetière naturel de Souché*, 30 min
- 7.7.18 Michel at *Cimetière naturel de Souché*, 2.5 h
- 8.7.18 Anna at *Cimetière St. Liguairé*, 30 min
- 9.7.18 Two elderly women at *Cimetière naturel de Souché*, 1 h
- 25.7.18 Marjorie and Christophe, employee/head of the cemetery workers group at *conservation des cimetières*, 30 min
- 4.8.18 Françoise Chollet, elderly woman at *Cimetière naturel de Souché*, 45 min
- 4.8.18 Marion, middle-aged woman at *Cimetière naturel de Souché*, 30 min

Observations

- 11.7.18 Exhumation at *Cimetière cadet*, 1 h
- 26.7.18 Pesticide treatment at *Cimetière des Sablières*, 40 min
- 30.7.18 Burial at *Cimetière naturel de Souché*, 1.5 h
- 31.7.18 Exhumation at *Cimetière des Sablières*, 15.min
- 31.7.18 Visit to cremation, funeral ceremony and burning at cremation, 2.5 h
- 15.8.18 Burial, dispersion of ashes at *Cimetière naturel de Souché*, 40 min

Visits

A total of approximately 35 h hours were spent doing observations at the cemeteries of Niort, excluding the interviews, informal conversations and goal-oriented observations (e.g. burials) conducted at the eleven cemeteries of Niort. The most time was spent at the *Cimetière naturel de Souché*. The goal of these visits was the observation

of the visitors' behaviour, activities and actions and enabled the contact and further understanding of the usage and interaction of the people with the cemetery.

(Audio-) Visual Recordings and Documentation

Supplementary to the audio recordings, field notes and protocols, each cemetery has been photographed and, in the case of the *Cimetière naturel de Souché*, videotaped for further comparison concerning, for example, details of the material culture present at the cemeteries.

6 Ethnography of a Natural Cemetery in France

I would like to begin the chapter presenting the ethnographic data of this “natural” cemetery by elaborating what is understood by its defining term, as Carrithers defines “the deconstruction of perceptions taken as ‘natural’, to find out how culture influences what is understood under the term” as being at the very heart of the anthropologist’s endeavour (Carrithers 2010: 500) and as de Melo encourages its inquiry:

[...] social studies of science have insisted that scientific practice is permeated by problems that are neither “natural” nor “social” because Nature and Culture become part of the inquiry, not the solution.

(de Melo 2012)

Claude Lévi-Strauss himself transfers the Neanderthal, “[...] with his probable language skills, his lithic industries and his funerary rites” (Lévi-Strauss 2008: 49), from the state of bleak Nature to the flowery grave of Culture, as he owns too many skills to be confused with belonging to the animal kingdom. But while attention to and care of the dead is “[...] a if not *the* sign of our emergence from the order of nature into culture”, Hertz (1907) reminds us that the dead have two lives: one in nature, their biological decay, and one in culture, signified through more or less elaborate funerary practices (Lacquer 2015: 8). Remaining with funerary rites, while more focused on the dichotomies of nature/culture, life/death and dirty/clean, we will now turn to the cemeterial realm and, with it, to the definition given by one of the main forces behind creating the natural cemetery of Niort. Eve-Marie Ferrer, the landscape and urban studies planner involved in the research and conception of the cemetery, also acknowledges the variety of concepts around “alternative cemeteries” and their different interpretations, ranging from *éco cimetières* (ecological cemeteries), *cimetières boisés* (woodland cemeteries), *cimetières paysagers* (landscape cemeteries) to *cimetières jardins* (garden cemeteries), before identifying the common denominator of these definitions:

Chaque terme peut se référer à un environnement différent, mais l’objectif majeur demeure le même : faire de ces lieux de mémoire des espaces de recueillement où le visiteur se sente relié à la nature.

Each term references to another environment, but the main objective remains the same: to create spaces of memory, places of contemplation where the visitors can feel connected to nature.

(Mairie de Niort 2015: 4)

Also referring to other appellations, such as landscape, wood, garden, eco-cemetery, the example of Niort is seen as going even further, as the body or the ashes of the deceased are being returned to the soil in the most natural way possible, excluding non-biodegradable funerary materials, such as cement, treated wood or Chinese granite (Mairie de Niort 2015: 3).

As previously mentioned, Davies and Rumble note that although many may speak conceptually of natural burial in terms of what happens below ground, it is mostly what happens above ground that frequently seems to set the image and popular perception of natural burial practice (Davies & Rumble 2012: 19). At Souché, the elements of the *Cimetière naturel* are indeed described firstly with attention to what happens above the ground, namely, the living frequenting the cemetery and interacting with the place. It is only later in the document that informs the public about the altered regulations and priorities of this alternative concept, the thanatopractical aspect regarding the dead bodies and implications for burial below the ground are being elaborated.

6.1 Transnational Cemetery Narratives and Developments

The story of how the first woodland burial in the UK came about merges an environmental with a social concern, led on by a cemetery manager inspired by an encounter with two women from the Scottish Lowlands with concerns about the legacy of traditional burial in Carlisle (Clayden et al. 2015: 1). Having neither any descendants to tend their future graves, nor a strong desire for material commemoration in the form of the usual traditional memorabilia, they shared their preferences for a burial that would be more “natural” in the sense of disappearing into a “nourished” landscape (Clayden et al. 2015: 2). Combined with the reality of the chemical-laden treatment of the cemetery landscape, whose development Ken West witnessed with distress until the 1980s, the encounter and shared concern for a simpler burial reflected his environmentally sensitive approach to landscape management. He first responded with the establishment of conservation zones at the urban cemeteries he was managing, which he took one step further in 1993 by setting aside a part of the Carlisle municipal cemetery as a natural burial ground where trees alone marked the

graves (Clayden et al. 2015: 2). This new concept was the first of its kind, which would respond to the two women's dislike of orderly ranks of memorial stones and to a desire to be buried under a tree in their back gardens (Callender 2012: 16).

The opening of the first natural cemetery in France in 2014 surrounds a very similar narrative, while some aspects and foci vary from the English embracement of the natural death movement. In Niort, France, the cemetery director Dominique Bodin, having worked in the conservation of the city's cemeteries for over 30 years, proposed a concept for a new design that represented an alternative against consumerist pressure, a focus on land conservation and waste reduction. His conviction was that a different approach to thinking, constructing and maintaining cemeteries was not only more cost- and time-effective but could also offer an alternative to the changing needs of the population of Niort.

Walking along the uniform rows of granite gravestones lined up neatly side by side, Dominique Bodin, the former cemetery director, recounts his observations from his 30-year-long career in the form of a historical narrative. He elaborates on the importance and the work of the *fossoyeur*, a term not only describing what would be a gravedigger in English but, in a way, the guard of the former French cemetery in the 1950s. Taking care of everything concerning the cemetery, Bodin recalls how cemeteries were kept tidy and free of weeds without the use of pesticides or machines. The *fossoyeur* would manually rip out the undesirable weeds and introduce snails to aid this process, which, in hindsight effortlessly promoted the nowadays biodiversity of the cemetery sought after. Around that time, tombstones were crafted by local artisans from regional French chalk to localize, memorialize and commemorate the dead. Since then, Bodin says, the aesthetics and maintenance of French cemeteries has changed drastically, as he dissatisfiedly points to the rows of graves showered in flowers, plaques and potted plants.

Esthétiquement il n'y a rien. Il y a des tombes alignées les unes à côté des autres en rang d'oignons. J'ai l'habitude de dire, ce n'est plus un cimetière, c'est le parking des morts. Et puis des choses ont évoluées, la crémation s'est développée en France [...] on a commencé à faire des columbarium [...] en granite [...] des murs sans aucune architecture... Quand j'ai vu ce développement [...] j'ai dit, ce n'est pas vrais, on passe du parking de la mort aux HLM de la mort.

Aesthetically there is nothing. They are in rows, side by side. That's no longer a cemetery, it's the parking of the dead. Then things changed and cremation developed into something very popular in France [...] we started to erect columbaria [...] out of granite [...] walls without any architectural appeal [...]

When I saw this development [...] I said, “We are passing from the parking of the dead, to blocks of council flats for the dead.”

(Interview Bodin 2018: 33)

For Bodin, this change in aesthetics is rooted in the utilisation of pesticides at these public spaces combined with the use of imported granite. He attributes commercial interests of bigger producers for the grand switch to granite tombstones, first extracted in France and then finally imported from all over the world, carrying with it not only tons of stone, but the weight of its environmental impact of the extraction, transport and work required before their arrival in Niort. Coupled with the aspiration to free the cemeteries from the use of pesticides and increase biodiversity again, Bodin also wanted to respond to changing family structures and their changing economic possibilities and needs. Working with families who struggle increasingly to afford a burial in a traditional sense, including a cement burial vault, coffin, ceremony, sprays of flowers, tombstone and plaques, or simply do not see their needs reflected in the current funeral culture, he wanted to provide the people of Niort with a bigger selection while, simultaneously, respecting the dead and the environment.

These developments and effects of contemporary cemetery design he witnessed over three decades left Dominique Bodin disillusioned in 2014, as they did Ken West in 1993 in Carlisle, and prompted him to set things in motion. Together with a team consisting of local actors, artists, locksmiths and municipal workers, he developed the concept of the first French example of a natural cemetery, the *Cimetière naturel de Souché* in Niort, a public cemetery on the adjacent field of a traditional counterpart.

Historical developments

From a very broad, historical point of view, burial places throughout Europe are characterised by a shift from clerical churchyards, the old reigning regime for around eight centuries, to a new regime, which gathered the cosmopolitan dead into spacious cemeteries at the periphery of the cities (Laqueur 2015: 113). Linguistic, architectural, aesthetic and social changes surrounding burial places in the 19th century share a general narrative, tightly intertwined with religious beliefs about the afterlife, social-spatial hierarchies and juridical regulations present at the time.

Linguistically, the cemetery as the common burial place for the dead was more or less used synonymously with “churchyard”, although its etymology in Greek *koimhthron* and Latin *coemeterium*, defines it as a “sleeping place” or “dormitory” not necessarily

in proximity to a church (Laqueur 2015: 121). Given the dominance of Christianity before the era of Enlightenment, a temporary sleeping place close to the materially holy fitted the dominant belief of resurrection and persisted up until the 18th century until legislative changes were introduced.

Before the churchyard moved and morphed into a cemetery concept ideologically and spatially more remote from the church, its location and design reflected the hierarchical separation of Middle Age society. Accordingly, the clergy and local landed families were buried in close proximity to altars and the saints' relics, while the simpler people rested in the yard beyond the church walls (Laqueur 2015: 116). In France, these privileged burials in and around churches in the centre of town, ostensibly closer to god, were common up until Louis XVI put a halt to them on 10 March 1776. The reasoning for this shift was, on the one hand, spurred on by hygienic concerns resulting from numerous plague and cholera epidemics and, on the other, the low depth of burial at churchyards.

But while highly influential as arguments, hygienic reasons alone are not sufficient to explain the transference of cemeteries from within the city walls, or *intra muros* to the parts of town beyond these walls, or *extra muros*. Beyond reshaping the urban landscape, the closing of old cemeteries and the opening of new ones outside the city centre reflected and reshaped a new understanding of a secularized relationship between the living and the dead (Kselman 2014: 167) often connoted negatively, including accusations of an abandonment of the dead.

The Napoleonic decree of 1804, in addition to laying down strict regulations and placing all cemeteries under government control, attempted to re-establish the cult of the dead following the "scorn and insensibility which it had fallen during the Revolution" (Goody 1994: 154). In accordance with the values of the Enlightenment emphasising medicine and reason, the cemetery, therefore, replaced the churchyard, a space for a *Gemeinschaft* (community), to become a space for a *Gesellschaft* (society) of the dead (Laqueur 2015: 212). In the same year, the Parisian cemetery *Père Lachaise* was opened, which marks an important milestone in not only French cemetery design and the utilisation of it as a public space for several reasons. Juridical regulations, pressing social reasons, health hazards in overcrowded cities, combined with the fear of a diminishing cult of the dead led to a new concept of garden cemeteries, propagating a "natural theology" in which art had its shaping function to diverge between the natural and man-made beauty, as a minister in 1831 relating to another famous garden cemetery emphasises:

Nature under all circumstances was meant to be improved by human care; it is unnatural to leave it to itself; and the traces of art are never unwelcome, except when it defeats the purpose, and refuses to follow the suggestions of nature.

(Peabody 1831)

Together with the French example in Paris, the opening of the cemetery Mount Auburn in Massachusetts in 1831 marked the beginning of the “rural cemetery movement”. These precisely structured landscape cemeteries, rich in vegetation and elaborate monuments, were meant to function as a cultural institution by effortlessly promoting recreation and educational improvement rather than being the source of disease and corruption (Johnson 2008: 787).

The English architect John Claudius Loudon influenced the style of cemeteries significantly with his cult publication *On the Laying Out, Planting, and Managing of Cemeteries; and on the Improvement of Churchyards* (1843), by carefully laying out plans for satisfying hygienic and socio-cultural concerns. Beside the primary objective of disposing of the remains of the dead in a way that “shall not prove injurious to the living, either by affecting their health, or shocking their feelings, opinions or prejudices”, he considered the improvement of the “moral sentiments and general taste of all classes, and more especially of the great masses of society” as a decisive function of the modern cemetery (Loudon 1843: 1–2). The ideal cemetery was accordingly organised in divisions, the graves neatly lined up and enclosed within proper borders, still with an emphasis on nature and art, living in philosophical symbiosis. Incorporating nature in the beautification of the final resting place, the ideal 19th century cemetery followed a design for life and the living and represented an attempt to re-establish a connection to the dead feared lost by growing “[...] from a shunned place of horror into an enchanting place of succour and instruction” (French 1974: 47). Accordingly, the cemetery’s arrangement was created by emulating the plans of a city, to make the visitors feel comfortable and provide the possibility to “roam” beside, not on top of, the actual graves (Miller & Rivera 2006: 336).

Although grave design and types of memorialisation shifted, the representation of hierarchies persisted and took on new forms. The era of the Industrial Revolution brought pomp to the cemeteries and the inception of Victorian and democratic values of property resulted in a social division of classes (Lapouge-Déjean & Royant 2017: 15), expressed in more or less luxurious monuments marking material success of a person. In Niort, the cemetery *Cimetière des Sablières* depicted above reflects the development of French cemeteries and the rise and fall of garden cemeteries influenced by Loudon’s ideas. After the destruction left behind by the two World Wars, the grand trees and

flowerbeds, destroyed along with the cemeteries, were scarcely replanted. This cleared the path not only spatially for the entry of industrial cement, which resulted in the replacing of simple chalk tombstones and making the construction of burial vaults accessible to the broad public. The combination of gravel covered pathways, imported and mass-produced tombstones and the nationwide and extensive use of pesticides, marks the end of garden cemeteries as the French knew it at a time where it was “natural” to tend one’s family grave on a Sunday while examining the genealogy of the village.

In the more recent history, the establishment of a cremation facility in Niort signified a considerably monumental change in funeral developments by causing a steep rise of cremation rates and, consequently, a changing landscape at cemeteries featuring columbaria and graves. The cremation movement had very few proponents in the region of Deux-Sèvres up until the 1980s, but noted a vast interest going hand in hand with three events: the creation of a cremation association for the region in 1981, the inclusion of Niort into the *Union Coopérative des Associations Crématises et d’Économie Sociale – UCACES*, the cooperative union of cremation associations and social economy, in 1986 and the construction of the crematorium Grand’Croix in 1983. Today, the militants of cremation, mostly part of new positions in the catholic church, carry the debate over to new practical areas of concern: hygiene and urban rationality (“keeping the soil for the living”) and economic matters, as this form of burial seem less pompous financially than traditional ways.

This rather secular and utilitarian rationale echoing similar arguments in favour of the transition of cemeteries some centuries before leads us to the *extra muros* funeral culture: to the funeral industry and its businesses managing death beyond the church and cemetery walls alike.

Funeral Industry and Businesses

In the context of the French funeral culture and the control of businesses, the wake of the French Revolution was a time characterised by the transfer of funerals from the exclusive control of the Church to one of state responsibility and by the appearance of private funeral businesses (Trompette 2013: 371).

The legalization of cremation in 1833, and the introduction of the notion of an individual grave in 1887 by Napoleon I, were regulations that signify trends towards secularisation, an emphasis on individual choice and a liberation from the clerical monopoly of religious funerals. In 1904, with the separation of the church and the state, this freedom of choice was expanded, as rites were not, at least in a juridical sense,

conformed to religion only but could include secular and religious tendencies, symbols and ceremonies (Charpentier & Courant 2002: 30).

With the erosion of communal monopolies, dating back to a law from 1904, a funeral market developed in France in the 1970s which started a merchandizing process: it included the design of funeral services complementing and partly replacing former rituals, leaving funeral businesses at a cross-roads of handling two anthropological aspects of exchange: the market exchange and the symbolic exchange (Trompette 2000: 483). The significance of these businesses had imaginable wide-ranging effects on the forms of value and calculation formatting and the private/public responsibility of funeral organisation. Fixing the distribution of prerogatives and profits between the different protagonists of the funeral economy (e.g. public, religious, family), the now differing ways of treating death as a “social question” resulted in a “[...] new institutional conception of the death ritual that appears to be both more standardized and democratized, if not privatized with a funeral aesthetic re-centered around the deceased and the essential intimacy of death” (Trompette 2013: 378).

In addition to changes in the institutional conception of the death ritual, the emergence of a funeral industry also influenced the perception of the people now most closely tied to the processes involving the preparation and commemoration of the dead. Morgan Terrasson, the director of a family-owned funeral business, explains their perception in the public eye as *voleur* “light fingered people”, while Rouger, the other funeral director, describes their profession as *mal vue* “not well thought of” as they are dealing with the two most prevalent taboos in France: death and money.

At the time of the natural cemetery’s planning stage, the gravestone companies were far from fond of the concept and wanted to “destroy the project”, recalls Dominique Bodin (Interview Bodin 2018: 45). This was due to the smaller revenue that they would generate by selling the comparably minimalist headstones. Not only were the size and material of the gravestones smaller, limited to 30 x 30cm, but they were also crafted exclusively out of locally sourced French chalk, a cheaper and simultaneously more ecological alternative, as the stone is left unglazed. Neither the costly construction of a cement burial vault, nor traditional monuments are permitted, which stirred doubts about the success of the alternative cemetery concept, as both were equally significant for many, being necessary staples for a “proper funeral”.

S'il y aurait que des cimetières naturels on pourrait "laisser la clé sous la porte".

If there would only be natural cemeteries, we could "call it a day".

(Martin Interview 2018: 44)

The office manager of the city's main gravestone company, Dominique Martin, admitted to me that, while not being against it and symbolically quite fond of the concept, the natural cemetery was not prosperous for their business and did not give them any work, as the size, material and general choice were limited and left neither room for burial vaults, objects nor other additions to be sold (Martin Interview 2018: 43). This minimalist presence resulting in commercial absence left the gravestone companies with a considerable loss, considering the prices for a traditional covering stone of around 1000 € for an urn tomb to well beyond 4000 € for a stone covering a flat body grave.

The funeral businesses seemed to be less of a threat against the construction of a more minimalistic approach to remembrance, or, at least, showed less concern or interference with their range of goods and services. Morgan Terrasson, the funeral director of the family-owned funeral business Terrassons et fils, relativized the novelty of the natural approach as their business already proposed six different options for biodegradable coffin linings and the families were free to choose the materials in which to dress their deceased, even before the opening of the natural cemetery. He also remarked how the materialization is not bound to the natural cemetery alone but could well be implemented at other cemeteries in Niort. Interestingly though, none of the other Niortais cemeteries features the Souché-style tombstone, indicating a certain exclusive aesthetic bound to a specific place. What seemed to concern the funeral director Terrasson more was the obligation of a burial in plain soil without a burial vault. "Until that's in people's heads still, that won't change much", he said, mimicking the mindset of the, as the expression goes, *l'homme de la rue* "the common man of the street", who values tradition and, apparently, a clean, white, cement burial vault, pristine and free from soil (Terrasson Interview 2018: 395). During the interview, an employee chimed in to our discussion about traditions and how a "normal" French burial should take place, with the expression: "In plain soil, my God, what a nightmare".

Pourquoi le caveau? Les gens veulent que ce soit propre.

Why the vault? The people want it to be clean.

(Martin Interview 2018: 25)

Lowering the coffin into the cement vault would appear to be less frightening, more presentable, respectful and plainly cleaner, as one does not have to look at the earth pit at the funeral, explained Dominique Martin from the gravestone company. The ratio of vaults chosen still outweighs burials in plain soil and, therefore, also represents the “traditional way” to Morgan Terrasson. The funeral businesses and the gravestone companies work in close contact with their clients and are aware of changes in budgets, trends and new tendencies. A sensitivity to requests out of the ordinary and a willingness to respond to shifts in choices related to economic or ecological concerns of the public has always been met by the providers of material funeral culture with a dynamic understanding of traditions that even moves around the seemingly static walls of vaults, until the cement finally cracks.

Considering these gradual changes in funeral culture and having now arrived at the ethnographic present, the data from the most recent innovation towards natural burial can give us insights into the motivations that led to this cemetery’s opening and the effects it has had so far on the visitors’ perceptions and behaviours, the material culture and management, and the intertwined values and beliefs of the different parties.

6.2 The Site: *Cimetière naturel de Souché*

The first and, back then, only natural cemetery in France so far was opened in the city of Niort in 2014, after around two years of research, preparation and work. The “ambitious and avant-gardist concept” (Ferrer et al.: 4) was realised as a collaborative effort between the office of cemetery conservation, the municipal office of urban and landscape studies, local blacksmiths, artists and other actors, united in the goal to create a place of memory and contemplation where visitors could feel connected to nature, all the while reducing their ecological footprint and impact resulting from burial and the various forms of material remembrance.

Design



Figure 1 Art installation "The door" at the entrance of the *Cimetière naturel de Souché*, reading: "To create a garden one needs a piece of land and eternity" by Gilles Clément (gardener and writer).

Situated beside the traditional cemetery of the district of Souché on the outskirts of Niort, the cemetery was built on a bordering field, which already contained several trees and other plants giving the place its basic structure. The natural cemetery is described as being in opposition or contrast to uniform, little harmonic, financially and ecologically costly, traditional sepulchre options (Mairie de Niort 2015: 3). The chestnut fences and walls echo the design of the various other elements present, such as the springs of water and rubbish bins made out of logs, as well as the insect “hotels” mirroring the elements of the bordering fences. The techniques employed for the construction of the new cemetery were guided by an idea of harmony with the already existing environment, with its natural materials and local vegetation, and the municipal resources available. Stone slabs, cobblestones and iron material were, therefore, reused to construct benches, art installations and other facilities at the site.

Ces arbres étaient en place on a voulu rien imposer à l'espace. C'est le site qui nous a guidé [...] on s'est servi d'existant. Le fait de ne pas avoir le budget [...] nous a imposé une réflexion pour trouver des solutions en interne. On a laissé les plantes se développer elles mêmes.

The trees were already here, we imposed nothing on the land, the land guided us [...] we made use of the existing structures. Because we didn't have any funding [...] we reflected upon internal solutions. We left the earth natural and the plants developing themselves.

(Interview Bodin 2018: 45)



Figure 2 Illustration of the cemeterys layout (Ferrer et al. 14)

As the plan above depicts, the park-like space can be divided into three different areas for either inhumation graves, cremation graves or an area for the dispersion of ashes, the *jardin du souvenir* or “garden of memory”. The inhumation and cremation graves are situated alongside the borders of the cemetery space, whereas the area for dispersion forms the centre of it, highlighted by the sculpture of the guardian and an arrangement of stone slabs and a copper tree installation of the *arbre du printemps* “the tree of spring” which is just beside the place of dispersion.

In addition to the “natural” guidance of the landscape to shape the cemetery, the project is described as using the expertise of the municipal agents of Niort to also facilitate an artistic expression of remembrance. The sculptures of the “guardian”, the “door” and the “tree of spring” are outcomes of a collaborative effort between the office of cemetery conservation, the office of urban landscape studies, local

blacksmiths and artists in a collective attempt to construct a cemetery “[...] for a society that evolves in harmony with its environment” (Mairie de Niort 2015: 3).

The landscape is being preserved and biodiversity encouraged by letting nature “express itself” in a less regulated way and by installing niches and so-called “hotels” for insects. Organic plant waste is being composted on site in a designated area, the utilisation of pesticides is strictly prohibited and the intervention of technical measures kept to a minimum, as only the pathways are tended every couple of weeks (Mairie de Niort 2015: 3). This sort of management is being referred to as “soft” management, where spontaneous vegetation is key and machines are used parsimoniously (Ferrer et al.: 16).

Regulations and Charter

The brochure created by the city of Niort (Mairie de Niort 2015) includes a charter of engagement for the families interested in and choosing this alternative cemetery in which not only the new model of landscape design but also the consecutive steps before and after burial have been redefined to reduce one’s ecological impact.

Common clauses for inhumations and incinerations

- Concerning the body of the deceased, going natural in this case implies that the corpse should not receive preservative treatment in the form of thanatopraxy, except in cases where it is absolutely necessary. It is also advised that the clothing of the deceased be made from natural fibres, such as linen, cotton or hemp.
- The coffin itself, used for either inhumation or cremation, should be made of either untreated wood from French woodlands or from recycled and biodegradable materials, such as carton. Any accessories in and around the coffin, such as covers, sheets, lining, cushions, padding and handles should equally be made of biodegradable materials.
- After the previsionary identification of the deceased, provided by the city of Niort, the family of the deceased can consult a stonecutter to opt for a permanent gravestone made out of local French chalk with specific measurements. The traditional tombstone is replaced by a discrete chalkstone, which may or may not be engraved. The stone enables the identification of the deceased in the designated funerary spaces (Mairie de Niort 2015: 3).

- Other than sprays of flowers used at the burial, which are kept at the grave for a maximum of three weeks, no other objects may be left at the graves, as stated by the conservation of cemeteries.

Clauses concerning inhumation



Figure 3 Personalized, partially fenced inhumation graves

- Funeral concessions are eligible from the moment of death up until 15 or 30 years and are renewable after the expiration of the contract. The tariffs are equal to any other cemetery in Niort, ranging from 107 € for 15 years to 449 € for 30 years (space for up to three coffins for one concession).
- No burial vaults are used at this cemetery. The corporal graves of plain soil measure two metres deep, with an additional metre in depth for any subsequent coffins (maximum three per pit). After the funeral, the coffin is covered with tiles should another concession follow, before being topped up and covered with soil.
- After the funeral and after the soil has set itself sufficiently (after six months), the designated space is topped up with another layer of soil. The families can then personalize the tomb by planting types of plants that integrate themselves in the natural environment. There are, nevertheless, restrictions in the choice of plant varieties, as the use of pesticides, exotic, invasive species or plants that require intensive watering or exceed the maximum height of 0.6 m are forbidden. The planting area is limited to the conceded concession space of 1 x 2 m, which is to be tended according to these regulations by the family, but can be intervened by the municipal personnel if deemed necessary.

Clauses concerning incinerations



Figure 4 Incineration graves marked with a chalk tombstone

- Concessions for cremated remains can also only be assigned for 15 years from the moment of death and are eligible for renewal after the expiration of the contract, the same as at any other cemetery in Niort, also for the same tariff of 163 €.
- Similar to the coffins, the urns should be fabricated from biodegradable materials and buried in plain soil in the designated spaces. The families may plant flower bulbs or other plants around the edges of the tombstone. The restrictions regarding the variety of plants and pesticides are the same as for inhumation graves, except for the maximum height of plants, which should not exceed 0.3 m for cinerary graves.
- For the dispersion of ashes, the *jardin du souvenir* “garden of memory” provides a place for burial without a monument, for a one-time dispersion fee of 48 €.
- After being authorized by the town council, the dispersion of ashes can be realised in the course of a ceremony provided either by a municipal agent or a family member. If the family wishes to do so, the otherwise non-materialized burials can be marked and memorialized with an engraved leaf fixed on the copper tree installation. In this space, only natural flowers can be deposited in the designated vases; any other flowers or funerary objects are forbidden.

6.2.1 Responding to Change

Dominique Bodin has observed changes in the material approach to death during his time managing the city's cemeteries, including the design and use of resources, the architecture and the arrangement and style of monuments, which stood in relation to a society with shifting needs and (financial) possibilities. Over the decades, as he was in close contact with the families choosing a cemetery and discussing the options available for burial, he noticed how families were no longer satisfied with the choice of burial options and followed the developments in other municipalities and the ways in which the design and management of French cemeteries slowly took on a different shape.

Lack of Choice and Heavy Debt

Cette pierre qui a coûté aux familles, eh bien, elle va encore coûter la collectivité de la détruire.

This stone that cost families a fortune, well, it will still cost the community to destroy it.

(Bodin Interview 2018: 33)



Figure 5 Tombstones on display in front of a funeral business in Niort

Several factors nourished the team's motivation to respond to ongoing changes observable nationally and internationally, but the combination of three developments and aspects which no longer seemed to fit in with a new approach of landscape in public spaces (including cemeteries) was specific to this project.

Firstly, the lack of choice in extremely costly burial options which grieving families were faced with (linked to development 2); secondly, the ecologically costly monuments that are slowly losing the purpose they once served and continue to burden the landscape even after their abandonment; and thirdly, the changing cemetery landscape in France that had to be met with a different approach to the occurrence of nature and plants due to the abolishment of pesticide use in public spaces in the city in 2011. The facilitation of a pesticide-free management was, therefore, another motivation to construct a model embracing an approach that would hopefully ease a more positive stance towards a greener cemetery landscape in the future.

During the time when Dominique Bodin was in close contact with families choosing a cemetery for their deceased or for themselves in advance, he noticed a change in preferences towards incineration and a reduced frequency of cemetery visits and regularity of grave tending by the families and friends of the deceased. The first response to these observations was to listen to the changing needs of families, combined with a simultaneous process of research that went beyond Bodin's personal experiences and extended into a more historical approach to France's funeral culture.

The concept of this alternative proposal to burial is, therefore, built on an idea going against the main developments in French funeral culture starting in the 1950s. Around this time, Ferrer et al. note that the craft industry was superseded by the industrial production of tombstones and burial vaults. The gravestone industry slowly began to use granite, instead of the local chalk stone used previously, which was extracted locally and crafted into gravestones by regional stone-cutters. The granite which is used for most tombstones nowadays is being mass-produced and shipped to France from the "four corners of the world" (Ferrer et al.: 18).

In addition to the shift from a regional stone industry to an international import system, the cemetery also had to adapt to changes in religious ideology. In 1963, the Vatican lifted its ban on cremation, which resulted in a spiking increase from only 2 % in 1980 to 30 % in 2011 (Ferrer et al.: 10). In a statement from 2016, Cardinal Gerhard Muller, prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, noted that while cremation, green and forest burials are accepted with the proviso that the tree be marked with the name of the person buried at its base, there "is a difference between allowing for the natural decay of the body while protecting the environment and seeing the body of the deceased primarily as fertilizer for plants and trees" (Wooden 2016).

With the rising numbers of cremations, a sudden new need for the adequate storage of the cinerary urns was met with a design which persists up until today – the

stone walls, or, as Bodin called them, “council flats of the dead” (Interview Bodin 2018: 33). These columbaria (used for the public storage of cinerary urns) became a common feature at cemeteries from the 1980s onwards and added to the grey, granite-heavy appearance. In 2018, three out of ten cemeteries in Niort were equipped with such columbaria, entailing the same ecological issues as other monuments and tombstones crafted out of granite, while also featuring an aesthetic which is hard to incorporate into landscape cemeteries.

As mentioned earlier, an additional steady increase in rates represented another factor that motivated the team to offer an alternative to the city’s funeral options, namely, the increase in funeral costs. The upsurge of prices for funerals by 30 % in the last 10 years has led to families taking out loans to afford a funeral service and a tomb (Ferrer et al.: 10).

The economic difficulties some parts of the population have struggled with when faced with the costly and limited set of choices in the funeral sector seemed especially unnecessary regarding the generally noticeable tendency of contemporary generations, who value visits to the cemetery and grave maintenance less than previous ones. The price for a “traditional” burial, including the burial service, a concession of 50 years, a burial vault and a tombstone, can amount to around 5000 € (Ferrer et al.: 10) per person. Seeing people opting for an incineration, increasingly followed up by a dispersion of ashes without a monument, seems like a solution to the struggle of meeting the economical requirements for an inhumation grave that more and more families choose. It was not only the aesthetic and financial aspects of contemporary funeral culture that disillusioned Bodin but the ecological footprint the deceased left on their path to their grave. The third main motivation of the project was, therefore, to rid the cemetery of its daily waste accumulation, such as potted, freshly cut and artificial flowers, plaques and other non-biodegradable objects, and, furthermore, to manage the “environmental debt” which the abandoned tombs left behind in the form of the tons of granite.

Back to the Roots, or, Snails

During a two-year research period, the former cemetery director Dominique Bodin, together with Eve-Marie Ferrer from the office of urban planning studies of Niort, informed themselves about already existing concepts of natural cemeteries and burial grounds in other countries to inspire a cemetery model adapted to the socio-cultural and historical context of Niort. The result was a document which briefly reviewed the cemetery development in Niort and depicted a collection of exemplary landscape

cemeteries from abroad. Ferrer et al. argued for a greener, more landscape-oriented approach to cemeteries based on a set of arguments explaining the evolution of cemeteries influenced by changes observed and researched by different fields, such as sociology, theology, architecture, history, environment and economy.

Focusing, firstly, on the aesthetic aspect, namely, the design of tombstones and funerary art, the former omnipresence of plants at past cemeteries is highlighted and contrasted with the state of cemeteries today, where grey gravel, columbaria, stone walls and granite tombstones are predominant, leaving little (fertile) room for art or nature to express themselves unregulated. Examples presented are the city's oldest cemetery, *Cimetière Cadet*, which is especially rich in esoteric and masonic symbols, grand chapels and mausoleums, as well as the biggest cemetery, *Cimetière des Sablières*, which features a rich and diverse flora from a time long gone (Ferrer et al.: 4).



Figure 6 War monument and people visiting graves at the *Cimetière des Sablières* (Ferrer et al. 5)

The idea was to, in some way, go back to an ideal cemetery of the twentieth century by taking inspiration from families implementing and incorporating plants into their grave areas at the cemeteries of the city in the last few years and from various examples of landscape cemeteries in Austria, Sweden, California and Canada. This model would include inhumations in plain soil, instead of the usage of burial vaults, an absence of preservative treatment for the body and tombstones crafted from local stone. Turning back to a style of management and design resembling the twentieth-century cemetery culture in France to promote biodiversity and favouring manual work over pesticides, the team also experimented with the introduction of goats to tend the future extension field of the natural cemetery. One might think of these goats as the twenty-first century equivalent to the twentieth century snails employed by the *fossoyer*, in this case, the manual fight against weeds.

6.2.2 Implementing Change

Le fait de ne pas avoir de budget, ça nous a servi pour démontrer qu'on ne pouvait pas avoir le respect pour nos défunts sans mettre des familles en difficulté financière. [...] mon idée, mon projet était à double sens: alléger la charge pour des familles et finir avec les phytosanitaires et le commerce de la mort pour mettre en lien le souvenir et l'environnement et la nature. C'était mes deux [...] «chefs de bataille».

Not having the budget in the end played in our cards to show, that one can respect the dead without putting families into financial difficulties [...] my project had a double meaning: relieving the families financially, and stopping the use of pesticides and the commercial aspect of death, and connecting remembrance with the environment and nature. These two aspects were [...] my "battle leaders".

(Interview Bodin 2018: 51)

Towards the end of his career and just a few years before his retirement, Bodin approached the mayor and, as Eve-Marie Ferrer notes, they were in a lucky position to be in, as the former political climate proved fruitful territory for their project. The former mayor Geneviève Gaillard (mayor from 2008 to 2014), had a certain "sensibility" or openness to ecological issues (Interview Ferrer 2018: 33), which prompted them to act before the city's next elections. In her stance towards plants growing on the sidewalks and the acceptance towards projects with efforts to enflower the public spaces, they saw a chance of acceptance and support. A supported project during her period of office featured a participatory project, where the public could distribute flower seeds on the sidewalks in front of their houses as a way to "mask" the increasing number of weeds. Whereas this solution motivated 3000 subscribers, amounting to 5 % of Niort's total population of 60,000 inhabitants, to participate in a changing landscape, the current technique is to regularly cut all weeds and flowers down mechanically under the new mayor Jérôme Baloge. Although the former mayor, Gaillard, replied with an enthusiastic spirit for the idea, the reply concerning the financial support turned out to be less enthusiastic. Today, Bodin interprets the lack of funding positively, as they had to come up with creative ways and other means to construct the cemetery, relying heavily on recuperated materials and the support and craftsmanship of local actors, which resulted in a cemetery landscape and atmosphere rather uncommon for Niort.

Peach Trees and Architects from One's Own Back Yard

On the way to see the goats tending the future extension field just beside the natural cemetery, Eve-Marie Ferrer, Peter (a photographer documenting the development of the cemetery throughout the seasons) and Amanda Clot stop to pluck the ripe peaches dangling from a fruit tree just beside some of the inhumation graves at the natural cemetery. Standing in the shade of the peach tree, they drop the kernels on the ground and leave by saying, "*Merci Dominique*" ("Thanks Dominique"). I understood the homage they paid to Dominique Bodin a while later, as I remembered our first collective visit to the natural cemetery, when Bodin explained how they constructed the cemetery's facilities from the ground up from recovered and reused materials. Bypassing the peach tree, he mentioned how all the trees and plants present were either already there or donated, as was this fruit tree, by his mother in law. The behaviour of snacking from a fruit tree growing in the vicinity of graves, as well as leaving the organic waste behind, might have seemed unusual on the adjacent cemetery, where gravel reigns and fruit trees are out of sight. Judging from the many kernels left on the ground, however, other visitors seem to have adopted the practice



Figure 7 Peach and grammar book left at the ash dispersion area "garden of memory"

Bodin emphasised the importance of engaging local actors who are familiar with their traditions, culture and lobbies to know which measures would be welcomed, accepted or refused. Rather than employing landscape architects from big cities, the acceptance of this new model was certainly influenced by the engagement of people from their "own community", especially when dealing with a sensitive topic such as death, as "what is true in Paris or Lyon, isn't necessarily true for us here in Niort" (Interview Bodin 2018: 33).

Changer les habitudes des gens ce n'est pas facile et c'est encore moins facile, quand ça touche la mort.

Changing people's habits is not easy and it is even less easy when it involves death.

(Interview Bodin 2018: 25)

The current funeral director, Amanda Clot, sees the concept as beneficial for future cemetery management of space in the city, due to new regulations and changes in cemetery utilisation.

On 22 July 2015, the national assembly adopted a law banning the use of pesticides, generally referred to as the *projet zéro phyto*, at all public spaces, which came into force on 1 January 2017 (Lapouge-Déjean & Royant 2017: 14). From this point on, the municipal workers slowly tried to wean the cemeteries off pesticides, introducing the ban gradually. As Clot explains, this change in the appearance and the amount of labour at the cemeteries were not well accepted by the visitors at first and required a certain time to get used to, also by the cemetery workers. While the main objective remained ideological, meaning to propose a broader choice for the families while respecting the environment, another significant motivation with the establishment of this alternative concept was to aid a certain process of acceptance (Interview Clot 2018: 3). As the manual workload increased dramatically without the use of pesticides, it was important to promote a positive appeal to a changed cemetery landscape that would slowly but steadily include more weeds. To aid this process, the natural cemetery was seen to be an exemplary model of diversity when it comes to funeral landscapes, promoting the message of nature and plants not being “dirty”.

Managing the Site

The extension of the traditional cemetery on which the natural version was built is owned by the city of Niort and managed by the municipal services. Regularly checked up on by two of the four employees from the office of cemetery conservation, the same group of eight public workers that tend the other ten cemeteries of Niort take care of the “alternative” landscape. According to the head of the team of cemetery workers, the adaptation to this new environment turned out to be less work overall and required a minimal adaption in techniques (Fieldnotes 2018: 43). Other employees also described the working conditions as generally preferable and more pleasant at this site, due to the shade and minimal manual and maintenance work required, as, in addition to tending the main paths with a mower, watering merely recently planted flowers and removing bigger branches, the space is left to regulate itself, wild flowers

growing and withering with sunshine and rain. At the traditional cemeteries, in comparison featuring elaborate chapels and large family monuments, several other tasks keep the workers occupied, including general maintenance, painting and restoration. Abandoned tombs neither have to be restored nor kept up regularly, as the tombstone is laid in the ground itself and easily removed for a new burial or grave reuse.

Apart from the bereaved and non-bereaved visitors frequenting the cemeteries, the municipal workers tending the cemeteries are the ones most often present at these sites and, due to their involvement in all the processes taking place within the borders of the cemetery, the most knowledgeable when it comes to operating the different practical tasks involved in managing a cemetery. Between them and the funeral businesses, gravestone companies and cemetery conservators, lies a world of grave dissolutions, exhumations, and tomb and landscape maintenance which they conduct on a daily basis and through which they navigate and reconcile between different notions of nature, cleanliness and respect displayed by bereaved and non-bereaved visitors.

The discrepancy between the funeral homes, the general public and the people working on the site is characterised by a lack of information and driven by financial interests. “*Ca coûte cher de mourir* – It’s expensive to die” (Fieldnotes 2018: 34), a cemetery worker notes during a grave dissolution, while removing the remains from a family grave and preparing the plot for a burial on the following day. While we stand beside his colleagues, exhuming two individuals deceased in 1974 and their once so costly coffin, lining and padding now half decomposed, we discuss the commercial aspect of burials and the natural cemetery as a possible liberation from traditional obligations. The workers referred to it as a rather minor trend but valued the facilitation of their working conditions at the natural cemetery. In addition to providing a shady environment, the presence of “dirty weeds”, which earned them regular complaints by visitors of other cemeteries since the pesticide ban, seemed to be no concern at all here, as they blended in with the remaining flora. Marjorie, the administrative employee at the conservation of cemeteries, echoes the complaints of people about the green spots appearing at the cemeteries after the *zéro phyto* regulation that came “from above, referring to the government (Fieldnotes 2018: 37).

Managing Weeds

During an observation at one of the last cemeteries maintained with the help of pesticides, the cemetery workers treated only specific spots where weeds recurred frequently, especially at the garden of memory, the area of ash dispersion. Several men dressed in white with full-body plastic suits, canisters of pesticides on their backs sprayed down the aisles of graves, creating an eerie scene in the morning sun at the city's biggest cemetery, which was closed off to the public for a whole day, preventing the bereaved from visiting and tending the graves of their deceased. The solution on their backs was a mix of 15 litres of pesticides mixed with 1800 litres of water, used on this cemetery just twice now, in comparison to five times before. Christophe, the chef of the team, said the *Cimetière des Sablières* should be pesticide-free by 2020, finally making the management of the city's cemeteries completely pesticide-free. Apart from using fewer pesticides, the time of the manual work they spent on removing the weeds also decreased from 900 h in 2016, to approximately 300 h by mid-2018. The workers saw a change in mentality primarily responsible for the acceptance of the weeds and, therefore the decrease in manual work, which the administration worked on promoting via signs and communication with the visitors (Fieldnotes 2018: 39).

6.2.3 Overgrowing Doubt

While sitting on a reused stone wheel in the middle of the “garden of memory” at the natural cemetery, Ferrer noted how the biggest doubts they had while planning, constructing and gathering materials for the construction were not financial but rooted in the worry that the concept would not take off or would, primarily, be rejected by the inhabitants and visitors and, secondly, be left unsupported by political authorities or boycotted by the gravestone and funeral businesses. These worries resulted from personal experiences of the team concerning the discreet conversations of matters concerning death, nationwide approaches to (or the lack of) cemetery maintenance and the local political context steering towards different ways of looking at landscape design.

Above All, Not Knowing or Seeing

Ça dérange, la mort, ça aggrave la peur.

It bothers you, death, it makes you more afraid.

(Gabet Interview 2018: 417)

The precedent impression expressed by a visitor on a collective walk at the cemetery was shared by the team, who could recall very similar experiences in their respective social surroundings, where death, dying and burial are never openly discussed and, as best as one can, avoided. General silence, the secretive buying of concessions and constructions of family vaults, with other family members neither knowing nor agreeing, as well as paid and planned-for funerals in advance, are a normality whose behind-the-scenes workings they knew of but missed in terms of maintenance for the material counterparts, the burial places.

A starting point to take their awareness a step further to action was the realisation of an obstacle that they noticed was shared with communities all over the country concerning cemetery management: abandonment. By attending conferences organised by the Centre of Architecture, Urbanism and Environment (*Centre d'Architecture, Urbanisme et Environnement – CAUE*) and the Bird Protection League (*Ligue pour la Protection des Oiseaux – LPO*), where different communities could find a common ground to exchange views about topics surrounding environmental protection and the effects of using or not using pesticides the team noticed a lack of conversation and action regarding cemetery conservation and the potential that an alternative could bring with it.

Laisser comme ça, fermer les yeux et construire un nouveau cimetière.

Leaving them as they are, closing your eyes and creating a new cemetery.

(Ferrer Interview 2018: 157)

In hearing about other communities dealings with their spaces for the dead, the common procedure seemed to be one of complaining about the abandoned and neglected state of older cemeteries, to the point where “[...] no one knows what’s happening there or whose tomb is about to collapse” (Ferrer Interview 2018: 157), followed by the construction of a new one, which would supposedly be taken care of differently in the future, while the more ancient ones would be left to themselves. Far from that being an issue only concerning small, rural communities, Ferrer notes how these issues prevail even in bigger communities or cities. Cemeteries in larger communities usually remain the last places to be involved in these projects which put forth a respectable effort and incorporate more plants into the public sphere and vegetate in a hidden, forgotten and abandoned state. The following issues concern not only the present state of these places, due to the lack of care and neglected appearance, but also the fact that the communities cannot always track down the information about the deceased due to the state of the tombs and are, therefore, unable to proceed with

the process of grave reuse. Legally, a grave can be declared abandoned and, therefore, emptied and its space reused if the family contacted does not respond or refuses to prolong the concession. It follows that if a cemetery is in a state where tombs and the owners cannot be identified, a new cemetery has to be constructed so as not to violate the legislative regulations. A more sustainable approach would, therefore, involve not only a new way of constructing future cemeteries but also ways to reuse grave concessions. Consequently, cemetery landscapes could prove more beneficial considering the scarcity of public space in urban contexts, more ecological maintenance techniques and the potential of opening up a discussion about death and mortality by advocating choice and autonomy within the funeral businesses.

In addition to realising the shortcomings and potentials of cemetery “state-of-the-art”, the platform of communication between different cemetery directors, municipal agents and gardeners also provides room for inspirations. The successful use of sheep (like in the case of the landscape cemetery *Fontain Bleu* in Paris), for example, led to the employment of goats at the adjacent field in Niort (Ferrer Interview 2018: 81). Through this exchange with other communities, the team also noticed a tendency in other cities to introduce more plants and herbs at cemeteries in the form of landscape cemeteries or *cimetières végétalisés*, with positive feedback from the population (Clot Interview 2018: 11). The cemeteries in Niort including more trees, garden-like dispersion areas, bushes and flower-beds separating the different areas and pathways are said to leave a more positive impression on the visitors and are generally favoured over the older cemeteries which are considered “sad, ugly and grey” (Clot Interview 2018: 11).

Cemetery Reuse and Attracting the Living

Traditional cemeteries are apparently not only less and less aesthetically pleasing but, foremost and notably, less and less frequently visited. Verging on a state of abandonment, Clot noted how expanding cities struggle to create new places for parks and other green spaces due to the lack of available space, whereas, at the same time, 17 hectares of well-defined and fenced-in spaces all around the city are no longer or barely used. While she personally deemed it very sad that these well enclosed and tended places are slowly but steadily lacking visitors, the team of former and current cemetery directors also noticed how people would cross through some cemeteries on their way through town more often than before.

Instead of mourning the abandonment of Niorts cemeteries, the opening of the natural cemetery provided an opportunity to see if and how the inhabitants would respond to

changing the face of the other cemeteries. With the goal of “attracting the living”, the team hoped that the new concept would not only serve people in grief by providing them with a pleasant atmosphere but could, simultaneously, revive these public spaces and function as park-like areas for other activities. Given the efforts made at other public spaces and cemeteries after the pesticide ban in previous years, the administration was aware of different approaches to the appearance of weeds and the complaints surrounding them. In order to assure the visitors of the ongoing maintenance efforts and an approach to management that will remain respectful, the solution seemed to be a change in approaching cemetery visitors and informing them about ongoing changes at the cemeteries, which, in hindsight, might have eased the acceptance of the natural cemetery. Regarding communicating the changes following the ban of pesticides at the cemeteries in 2011 to the visitors, the conservation of cemeteries put up signs in areas that were *végétalisé* or vegetated informing the public about the changes that were made at the end of 2016, such as planting trees and distributing seeds. How the new practices of maintenance are transforming the general aspect of the cemeteries, favouring a presence of herbs and plants, was also explained. This should not, the sign reads, lead to worries of neglect on their side but of a different management, which sees its goal as respecting the deceased, their families, cemetery users and the environment.

Cultural, Political Landscapes

The interview with Eve-Marie Ferrer about her formal education and the constraints landscape planning is facing in France were met with occasional bleating from the goats tending the future extension field just beside us. From her experience working in projects related to landscape and urban planning and at the municipal office, she came to observe how the local authorities seem to regard the environment more as a constraint than an opportunity to change the city landscape into something beneficial, especially in public spaces (Interview Ferrer 2018: 149). Although the regional political environment can be as much of help or hindrance as the people’s openness to change, it could happen anywhere, says Ferrer, who does not regard the opening as something bound to the specific socio-political context of Niort. Factors such as formation and employment of landscape gardeners and architects and an openness towards a certain appearance of natural weed were more decisive in her view. Clot, on the other hand, emphasises the role of the city of Niort as more decisive. Being the administrative centre of the region of Deux-Sèvres with over 60,000 inhabitants, she recognises not only the potential for an innovative approach, as the city has larger human and

economic resources than smaller municipalities, but also a task in leading change through exemplary trial and error as an example for those with smaller budgets and means.

Le paysage, c'est culturel.

The landscape is cultural.

(Interview Ferrer 2018: 177)

Ferrer mentions the lack of the inclusion of landscape gardeners in the process of constructing new public spaces in France, which contrasts to the Anglo-Saxon context, where a bigger focus is put on incorporating green areas and plants into emerging urban projects. The results are public spaces that are decorated with cobblestones and preselected unified plants, which are neither indigenous nor adapted to the surrounding environment. This lack of structural awareness and formation, paired with the goal of creating vegetal areas that should cost as little as possible and require minimal maintenance, are also reflected in preceding cemetery designs (Interview Ferrer 2018: 177). While older cemeteries are slowly being transformed, featuring a greener hue due to the ban on pesticides, there is a tendency that new cemeteries in the making, incorporate a stronger emphasis on a plant-rich landscape than before (Interview Ferrer 2018: 89). Where Niort went further than other landscape cemeteries in France, what makes it *natural* and what also constituted the biggest worry of the cemetery creators was the omission of burial vaults and proposing a grave design that would lean towards the German or English style of tombs, where grass would be planted instead of a covering stone.

6.2.4 Undertaking Acceptance

The counterculture is always ahead of what's happening in mainstream culture.

(Muhlke 2017)

Above, the editorial director of Lucky Peach magazine is not referring to the natural burial movement in the article titled "The Hippies have won", but instead what could be termed the "natural food movement" in North America. He opens up his observation about chefs, vegetarian cookbook authors and fermentation enthusiasts from the 1970s onwards to include grassroots practices that may lie outside of a

(culture's) realm of the edible: "It's as true in any creative field as it is in food" (Muhlke 2017). What started out as a counter-culture with home-cookers and alternative minded DIYers embracing regional and organic produce and, thereby, challenging the mainstream food culture in the U.S. which relied heavily on industrially produced TV dinners and fast food diners, has since long reached a global audience as a brand and lifestyle, "[...] giving the promise of a healthier life, or a more enlightened meal" (Muhlke 2017).

Perhaps not explicitly promising a healthier grief, more enlightened death or version of afterlife, the Natural Burial Movement shares at least the approach of counteracting several developments in the funeral world, leaving the actors on the receiving side with little agency in a matter that could hardly be more finite and intimate. The known and pressing factors in cemetery management in France were the driving forces behind the counter-concept, a DIY approach to stepping into the unknown to more sustainably used burial space. Acceptance could be anticipated through personal and professional experience with actors stemming from the community, but not foreseen. The construction, therefore, relied on the chances being in their favour, the team being one step ahead in cemetery innovation, and for the visitors and other communities to follow their lead.

Walk the Walk – Talk the Talk

With local politics and a motivated team aligned promisingly, the project then did succeed. Undertaking a journey of acceptance brought prominent topics and concerns in the local funeral culture of Niort to light, the narrative and discussions following once the paths were cleared, opened and strode along.

With the visual appeal and some merits of a public park, the cemetery seemed to attract not only families and friends of the deceased but also visitors with no affiliate links to the people buried there, drawn to it by either spontaneous curiosity or an intentional seeking-out. Eve-Marie Ferrer, Amanda Clot and Dominique Bodin noticed visitors wandering around to take walks, rest or engage in other quiet activities, individually or collectively during their visits. They also remarked on a certain change in behaviour, as well as a different soundscape and atmosphere compared to the other sites. In these observations, namely, having a place that is not solely restricted to the practices of funerals and grave visits but encourages people to visit, the team saw the potential to open up or motivate discussions around death, dying and funeral arrangements in families.

Morgan Terrasson, the funeral director of one of two family-owned funeral businesses in Niort, noticed over the last few years how job applications for his business were steadily coming in without any advertising on their part, attributing this to an increase in the interest in the topic of death, slowly losing the stigma and taboo surrounding it. He attributed this to a population which, on the one hand, was gradually getting older than any generation before thanks to medical innovations, while, on the other hand, dying increasingly in their 40s and 50s due to cancerous diseases. This, he reasons, makes people think about their own funeral preparations more than when people usually died in their 80s (Terrasson Interview 2018: 135).

The Funeral Insurance

[...] an emerging prospective device associated with the newly burgeoning funeral insurance market.

(Trompette 2013: 371)

A point of conversation around death that is gaining popularity, even if just in the realm of funeral businesses and gravestone companies, is the setting up of a *contrat assurance décès*, a “death” or “funeral insurance contract”. Although one could have the impression that such measures might open up the discussion around death, dying and burial, Dominique Martin from the gravestone company interprets it as quite the contrary, stating that these customers just want it taken care of so they can die “quietly” (Martin Interview I 2018: 80). Not burdening the family with arrangements about the funeral and securing a financial base creates a radically new formula and suggests a form of reverse social cohesion (Trompette 2013: 382), where beyond end-of-life care is being pre-arranged individually by the person him/herself instead of collectively by their family.

Since the 1990s, when the liberalization of the funeral market in France (Sueur Law of 1993) really took off, the volume of new funeral contracts has grown constantly (by 11-12 % per year since 2004), whereas the number of deaths covered by such insurance contracts has passed from 6 % in 2003 (Trompette 2013: 378) to 22 % in 2017 (Lapouge-Déjean & Royant 2017: 108). By the end of 2014, there were 3.9 million contracts registered, amounting to 1.3 billion Euros, which opened up a new market, formerly dominated by funeral services, attracting new actors such as bankers and insurers.

The tendency towards financial and symbolic funerary pre-arrangement is also reflected materially, visible for the eye to see while visiting the cemeteries of Niort.

Several monuments are being kept “on hold”, lined up just beside occupied tombs, they resemble the ones where burial has already taken place, apart from not featuring any engravings or decorations. Dominique Martin links the appeal of prepaid monuments especially to people without children or with less financial means, as they do not want to burden their relatives with the costs in the future (Martin Interview II 2018: 19).

Proposing and Adopting Natural Burials

When talking to the families, the employees at the conservation propose the natural cemetery to people who do not have a fixed idea in their heads already and who they feel would be open towards an alternative, as very few people have heard of it themselves. The arguments they use in favour of it are “It’s green, it’s nature, it’s clean”, which reflects the feedback they have been receiving from visitors saying that it is “cleaner” than the other cemeteries.

The office of cemetery conservation received mostly positive feedback from visitors, other cemetery directors and funeral businesses, who heard about the opening in the news, but the feedback did not remain one-sided and occasionally included harsh critique. Often referring to *respect* as the key factor that is being violated in their respective view, the critics shared their incomprehensibility of this burial practice via phone, email or, very rarely, in person with the cemetery workers or the administration.

On dirait qu’ils sont enterrés comme des chiens.

It looks like they are buried like dogs.

(Ferrer Interview 2018: 169)

The administration’s response to expressions such as the preceding phrase by a man approaching them at a cemetery was one of acknowledging that you cannot please everyone, especially concerning a sensitive topic such as death and remembrance. Nevertheless, they see the potential in such discussions, as they might open up more inclusive conversations in families regarding decisions around burials, funerals, ceremonies, commemorations and grief in general.

6.3 The Deceased and Non-Deceased

Since the cemetery's opening in 2014 up until August 2018, a total of 76 burials have taken place, from which twelve were secondary burials, meaning urns or skeletal remains that were reburied at this cemetery either in a new grave or with a family member.

People can choose between the options of cremation, corporal grave or a dispersion of ashes at the cemetery, for which designated areas have been created. Information about the deceased buried at this natural cemetery, and about the living interested in this form of burial, result from informal talks with visitors at the site, formal conversations with the directors and employees of the cemetery conservation, and an anonymized list of all the people buried there compiled by their office.

Concerning the professions, no consistent conclusions could be drawn from the people buried there, as most were unknown. Nevertheless, the administration noted that professions and social classes were very varied, ranging from university professors to hairdressers, unemployed people and public figures of the city. Further information or contact with the people choosing natural burial proved to be difficult to obtain, as the administration preferred to protect the client's privacy. The two following charts show the marital status and the ratio of the three different forms of burial proposed at the natural cemetery.

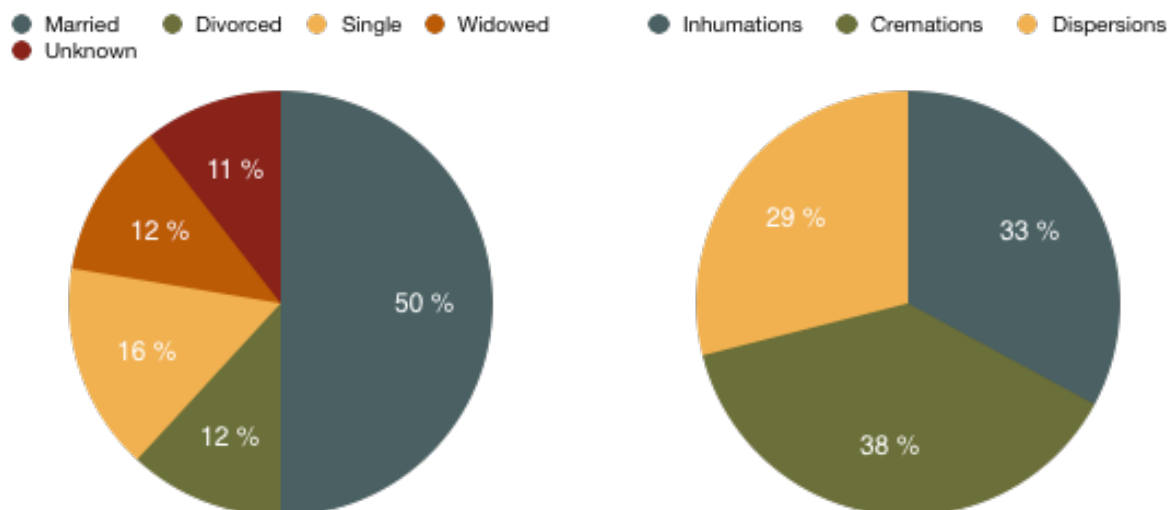


Figure 8 Chart showing the popularity of the natural cemetery among married people in favor of incinerations

The anonymized information about the deceased buried in Souché reflects the variety and lack of striking similarities between those who chose to be buried or got buried there by their family's choice, which was also expressed by the directors. Nevertheless, similarities or similar motivations were noted that could be seen as connecting the interests of a rather broad variety of social and economic spheres of people, namely, a

sensibility or preference towards nature or a particular connection to the place itself. According to Dominique Bodin, people choosing this cemetery for burial are close to the environmental movement, inclined to denounce the harm being done to the planet, and value the preservation and the natural appeal of the place. While the former and the current director agree on the varied backgrounds of the deceased, ranging from “Bobos”, ecologists and economically weaker families, to notable people of a higher social status, Amanda Clot emphasises the primary motivation as being the aesthetic and enchanting appeal of this piece of land, as “[...] most of them fall in love with the place because it is pleasant. They are happy for their dead and they have more pleasure in coming here than to the other cemetery” (Interview Clot 2018: 87).

Other motivations that were described by the creators were an affection for nature or the deceased being close to it during their lifetime, choosing it because the bereaved will feel more relaxed here and that people are dissatisfied with the commercial aspect of burial. The option to choose something simple, something that reflects their style and beliefs, is described as almost a form of rebellion against the “death business” in France. The rising cost of dying and the absence of choice to escape it is a motivation to opt for something which goes against the status quo.

C'est moi le chef, je suis celui qui décide, vous n'avez pas à me dire comment mourir.

I'm the boss, I'm the one who's deciding, you don't tell me what and how to die.

(Interview Clot 2018: 101)

The funeral director Morgan Terrasson concluded from his experience, that the natural cemetery was not a very popular choice among his customers and is often chosen by people with no (big) families. Regarding the prices, he relativizes the significance of having this alternative option, as the concessions are equal at all cemeteries and families with a small budget can demand help from the *Caisse centrale d'activités sociales* – Central Social Activities Fund. The funeral market is unregulated in France; businesses can set their own prices, resulting in the offer of different packages. In the case of natural burial, no big changes were made concerning the price (Terrasson Interview 2018: 119), making it equally accessible to all the families of Niort. Another funeral director also confirmed how the biodegradable urns, for example, were available for the same price (Rouger Interview 2018: 199), leaving the choice to the families and their values and beliefs.

Lively Curiosity

Lapouge-Déjean and Royant describe in the history section of the Guide to Ecological Funerals in France how the high walls of French cemeteries give them a mysterious and inaccessible appearance. Except for the visits connected with emotionally painful burials or to subscribe oneself to the rite of flowering a family member's grave during the national holiday of Toussaint Toussaint (All Saint's Day), they conclude that our society made sure to exclude the sight of the cemetery, its graves and, ultimately, the image of death from our daily lives (Lapouge-Déjean & Royant 2017: 15).

Contrary to having the impression of an atmosphere marked by confrontations with thoughts of mortality, Ferrer noted differences during her visits and interactions with others at the natural cemetery. To her, visitors seemed happy, they smiled, gardened and did not mind the laughter of children nearby, which she saw in opposition to the traditional cemetery just beside, where people's faces were rather closed and where words or greetings were seldom shared with other visitors.

Ce n'est pas gai notre histoire [birds sing in the background] mais ça fait toujours quelque chose.

Our story is not a happy story, but the birds sing.

(Couple Interview 2018: 32)

During the hours spent sitting on benches and walks through the cemeteries, I noticed open discussions about the decorations and style of the graves at the natural cemetery, as I did people curiously exploring it by themselves, including several situations of curious visitors "peeking" over the fence into the natural cemetery (Fieldnotes 2018: 7, 25). The nature of the cemetery being rather unthreatening, enclosed with see-through fences made of logs and low iron gates which are open at all times, people often but cautiously loiter at the borders and hedges after, during or before their visit to the traditional cemetery. Some visitors pass through the natural cemetery to get to the traditional one, inspecting the graves and flowers, stopping at the insect hotels, resting on one of the benches or simply looking at the trees and flowers present. Apart from this distant curiosity, individuals or even groups of elderly people come to visit occasionally to explore the cemetery by themselves, which some of them have considered for their own burial. Six longer informal conversations from interactions with these people resulted in interviews ranging between 30 minutes and almost three hours. During these conversations, two couples, three middle-aged individuals and an adolescent interlocutor, bereaved and non-bereaved, shared their perceptions and

impressions of the space, while also reflecting about their mortality, burial preferences, thoughts about the afterlife, religion, decorations and nature's role within this context.

Ça vie, ça bouge - It lives, it moves.

(Gabet Interview 2018: 69)

A middle-aged woman taking regular walks at this particular cemetery used the space for reflection and for relaxation after her stressful job. The "place of nature" is appealing in one way, as the flora and fauna attracts her and her husband, but also in the sense that it sparks up conversations and thoughts about their own mortality, future burial place and reflections about the afterlife. Coming to the natural cemetery for them relativizes things after a stressful day and they find it easy to philosophise here (Gabet Interview 2018: 225). The return to nature, "to the essential" and a connection with the earth are contrasted with the conventional tombs nearby. Interestingly, they described the presence of death-related thoughts as being more present at the traditional cemeteries compared to the natural cemetery, due to the former's static nature, rigid, with the tombs, the crosses and the Christian symbols (Gabet Interview 2018: 77). The couple had the impression of being in a less controlled space in the natural cemetery, where "life and dynamism could express themselves" through plants growing naturally, with little intervention, compared to the controlled space beside with lots of stone, some abandoned tombs and little flora.

Therapeutic Contemplation

Rumble and Davies (2012) observed a natural burial ground in the UK which was attributed with therapeutic qualities in a "natural" and a "human" sense. On the one hand, visitors to the burial ground at Barton Glebe perceived the physical environment as having a peaceful and comforting effect on them and, on the other hand, working the soil together created a feeling of continuity beyond the natural components.

They define the physical and non-human aspects of the place itself as one channel through which the ontological categories of life and death are brought closer together in natural burial grounds (Rumble & Davies 2012: 45). This includes predominantly the flora and fauna present, which, in their opinion, has a therapeutic effect on the bereaved and visitors, often expressing how the woodland burial continued a cycle that started with the decay of the human body.

At Souché, the visually pleasing environment and resulting relaxing atmosphere at the cemetery were the first things visitors noted and expressed, although less of their

grieving processes and philosophical reflections regarding the dichotomy were shared, as in Davies and Rumble's case. A cemetery enthusiastic couple saying, "When you come here, you remind yourself that you are not a big thing", emphasised the place as a space for meditative contemplation and relaxation. The woman of the married couple linked the atmosphere to the idea of Tao, where, according to Chinese philosophy, the "all" becomes part of everything and imagining herself being buried here would be a bit like that. "It's a bit cosmic here", she concluded (Gabet Interview 2018: 215).

Ça ici, ce n'est pas un jardin français.

This here, it's not a French garden.

(Fieldnotes 2018: 26)

Michel, a regular visitor, often spending hours alone at the cemetery, visits because of the "mystical" appeal it has to him, invoking thoughts about death, the afterlife and the soul, speculating that if there was such a thing as a soul, it would feel better at this cemetery. The "mystical appeal" of this place was described as resulting from its wild nature, which seems more free and natural to him, compared to the strictly fenced in and grey cemetery next door. Nature, in his view, is more honest, because it does what it does in all its cruelty without denying it or pretending otherwise (Fieldnotes 2018: 26). The motivations for visiting a place for reasons connected to relaxation, contemplation and reflexive thoughts about death were in these two cases met with an appeal to a certain spiritual quality of an unregulated, free and natural place. Expressions of a cosmic, mystical environment were noted by visitors without affiliations to the deceased buried at the cemetery, which signifies another way of using and being in the place compared to the bereaved, valuing the therapeutic effect and thoughts about a continuity through nature or their soul resting in a place their loved ones find comfortable. Using the cemetery as a social place, meeting other people and enjoying the green public area by taking walks like the couple Gabet, Michel and other visitors with dogs, or families with their children, is also relevant to some of the bereaved visitors, equally forming social bonds while tending the graves. The cemetery being quite recent and the concept rather novel, this park-like approach to mourning also created concerns and sometimes tensions for visitors adapting to the new environment and behaviours while often being in emotional distress, dealing with their grief.

Respecting Grief

As the uses of the space of the cemetery differ according to the heterogenous profile of the visitors, the perceptions of respect and acceptable activities also vary, with visitors expressing more open and strict views on what can and should be done at a place combining several tensions as observed at a cemetery in the Netherlands (Nielsen & Groes 2014).

Spending time at the cemetery does not appeal to everyone asked; Severin, for example, completely refuses the idea of going there except to pay his respect to buried family members. Bringing a date or eating a pizza with some friends at this park-like space, in his eyes, would be something “dirty” to do, as it constitutes a pure environment, not to be disturbed. The way he sees the duty of visiting his family’s graves and generally behaving at cemeteries were taught to him by his family, teaching him an understanding of respect and reciprocity in these contexts. With no closer family members deceased apart from his grandfather, he projects himself into the future, how he would pay regular visits to his buried family members, as it would be natural and a duty for him to do so.

Pour moi, c’est la même forme de respect, comme dans une église, tout est calme, parce que la mort ne parle pas non plus.

For me, it’s the same form of respect as in a church, everything is calm, because the dead don’t talk either.

(Fieldnotes 2018: 15)

A mother of two, living in front of the traditional and natural cemeteries, when asked about other activities visitors could partake in at these sites, refused to think about using it for anything else than mourning, as it is a place to be sad at and that one should respect people that are grieving there. At the same time, the *cimetière bio* seemed less like a cemetery to her than the other one, reflecting on the possibility of changing the “negative” emotions cemeteries are linked with, of seeing grieving, crying and sad people passing in front of her house, was also difficult for her to see daily. Her daughter and her friend, who on another occasion were playing in front of the cemetery with their bikes, recalled how it was *interdit* – “forbidden” for them to go and play there and how they thought the natural cemetery is even more “bizarre” than the traditional one. Out of fear, they never visit it. Mentioning how the topic of death is generally a taboo in France, the mother explained how she prefers to keep

conversations and mentions of deceased family members to a minimum in front of her girl, as she wants her to be a happy little girl, not invoke sadness in her (Fieldnotes 2018: 13).

Ce n'est pas un endroit de loisirs.

It's not a space for leisure time.

(Elderly Couple Interview 2018: 37)

Seeing the place as an inhibited space, connected to the deceased buried there, Francis et al. note how tensions can arise in a place that is so intimately private, as it is public at the same time as private emotions can be expressed within the performance of public rites of commemoration (Francis et al. 2005: 178). Imagining how the natural cemetery could attract visitors wanting to use it for leisurely activities, this bereaved couple feared that non-bereaved visitors would not understand how for them, a part of their son is still resting at this place, as he is within them. The localization of the dead connected to the place of burial in this case was especially apparent, as the couple explained how they finally found peace burying him at the natural cemetery. Previously, they had taken their son's ashes "everywhere they went", which had eventually become unbearable. While respect and decency are considered central to this elderly couple, they also noted how they often hear children laughing while sitting on the stone bench at the cemetery and expressed their gratitude for it, as they hear how "life continues". Although the funeral director noted how "grief has to be done no matter what" (Rouger Interview 2018: 263), Ferrer, imagining herself in grief, thinks that would benefit from being at a place like this, where nature could help one to deal with the loss of a close one. An example she recalled specifically is that of a young man who had lost both his mother and brother within six months. He came to visit the natural cemetery very regularly and sought out conversations with the cemetery staff, sharing information how this place helped him in dealing with his loss, perceiving the environment as calming and soothing, finding solace here and feeling less "alone" with his grief (Ferrer Interview 2018: 169).

God in Nature?



Figure 9 Overgrown crucifix at the “Cimetière Cadet”

Je fais comme beaucoup de catholiques en France, je sélectionne un peu.

I do as many Catholics in France, I select a bit.

(Gabet Interview 2018: 499)

As the visitor cited above indicated, religious confinement to one homogenous idea constituting “the one proper burial”, death or the idea of the afterlife is rather uncommon; a certain fluidity and intersection of ideas about beliefs and burial is definitely more the case at the natural cemetery than a purely Christian or secular appeal.

[...] a newly configured idolatry of the dead served the interests less of the old God of religion than of the new gods of memory and history: secular gods.

(Laqueur 2015: 212)

From the beginning of the cemetery’s conception, religious symbols or the involvement of the church and the clerical employees were not a focus or a topic of particular concern. Although the individual grave design does not forbid religious symbols featured on the gravestones or in individual expressions of decorations, no comparable Christian symbolism was present, in stark contrast to the other traditional cemeteries. In Niort, besides the mystical appeal some interlocutors described, mentions of religion were kept to a minimum in informal conversations. As two elderly women with differing beliefs shared on a walk at the natural cemetery, the

appealing landscape would, if anything, be more beneficial for the soul to be set free and join the creator or, respectively, be reincarnated (Fieldnotes 2018: 34). The two women wandered around the cemetery, commenting on the tombstones, discussing the design and inspecting the art installations subsequently. They came to the cemetery out of curiosity after having seen a local television report about it and decided to make up their own minds about it. Joining their conversation, they shared their opinions and beliefs about the right way to bury and remember the dead. One of the two women described herself as a believing Christian and rather conservative and traditional in her views. She found the natural cemetery appealing, nevertheless, as she saw the ecological approach only logical and as the next step in funeral innovation, as population rates are rising and space in the city, for the living, is getting scarce. The second of the two women highlighted the personal impression the space had on her and imagined how the atmosphere would be soothing to families in grief, as “the dead don’t care anyway” (Fieldnotes 2018: 29).

What the preceding two women saw as an opportunity to renegotiate or combine different religious or spiritual beliefs, the following pair interpreted as a development resulting from a country still in the process of de-Christianization, creating a personal belief vacuum.

Les personnes dans le monde entier vivent une crise religieuse en ce moment. Christianité, Judaïsme, Islamisme, ils y’avaient trop de tabous, de contradictions, d’erreurs dans le passé. Le problème est que ce n’est plus accepté. Je pense que la plupart des personnes viennent spécialement ici, peut être, je ne sais pas, mais les personnes se détachent d’elles mêmes en matière de rites funéraires.

[...] people all over the world are experiencing a religious crisis right now, Christianity, Judaism, Islam, there were too many taboos, contradictions, mistakes in the past and that’s no longer accepted and that’s a problem. I think a lot of people that come here especially, maybe, I don’t know, but people detach themselves from religion when it comes to funerary rites.

(Gabet Interview 2018: 495)

What is left behind, the couple continued, is a void people try to fill, as they no longer believe in grand political ideologies (Gabet Interview 2018: 227). Describing people visiting graves of idols, such as Michael Jackson or Johnny Hallyday, like a pilgrimage, the couple interprets these practices resulting from a religious confusion, seeing celebrities as the new gods in the post-Christian aftermath of modernity, commemorating them because they are afraid they would disappear (Gabet 2018: 258).

Given the particularly high de-Christianization of the flatlands of Niort (Charpentier & Courant 2002: 29), a rate of cremation burials at this cemetery of 66 % (Clot Interview 2018: 33) and the absence of Christian symbols, a possible ideological link between the rise of cremation and the fall of Christian beliefs in the resurrection of the body could be considered (Charpentier & Courant 2002: 29). But judging from exchanges with interlocutors ranging from believing Christian, to atheist, to those interested in Buddhist and Taoist ideas present at the natural cemetery, no such claim to a particularly religious, de-Christianized or secular profile of deceased and non-deceased can be made, indicating and reflecting the arguments of the administration, namely, that the cemetery had an appeal beyond religious confinements, which doesn't exclude a spiritual appeal attached to nature "stepping in" for processes of meaning-making in a space where religion becomes less visible. Being susceptible to iconography and symbols, a couple noted how many symbols were featured on tombstones or symbolized through the art installations, which they interpreted as rather Christian, such as oak leaves, ivy, fossils, symbolizing eternity, resurrection and continuity, respectively.

6.4 Memorialization and Rituals

The cemetery, especially for those newly bereaved, can become a valuable resource for coping with loss and a space for observing how others cope in a temporal sense. As Francis et al. (2005: 60) note, marginalized grieving behaviour is often evoked and peer practices are displayed. As such, visits and tending the grave offer possibilities for the bereaved to communicate with others or find relief in a collective display of emotions.

Deepening the understanding of the materiality of death, memorialization is not only a cultural response to death, seen as a form of adjustment to mourning the person (Reimers 2016: 4), but also serves the non-deceased to recall and represent the deceased personality through objects (Hallam & Hockney 2001). In this sense, not only the deceased are attributed agency through memorialization but also the animated objects on the grave, becoming an extension of the deceased (Robben 2018: xviii).

Clayden et al. (2015) chose to explore bereaved participants' everyday experiences of a natural burial site over time through the lens of memorialization. They conclude it to be a contentious topic, as many of the bereaved participants struggled with the lack of scope for memorializing (Clayden et al. 2015). In Niort, this scope was, in a way, easier to realise, as objects and tombstones were permitted, as long as they were biodegradable. At the same time, burial spaces were not quite as unregulated and

unbound as in many British burial grounds. Enclosing the grave space signifying the private space and property turned out to be an essential feature for the people to signify the deceased realm, as Clot emphasises, explaining how tree burials in the sense of the German (Assig 2007) and Japanese (Boret 2014) ones would not work:

Ils veulent déposer des fleurs, ils veulent, ils veulent, [...] [dessinant des arbres] ça c'est l'arbre, et ça [en le soulignant] c'est le mien! Nous sommes vraiment comme ça, nous sommes bizarres [...] nous avons vraiment une notion de propriété, c'est fou.

They want to put down flowers, they want they want [...] [draws tree], that's the tree and that [emphasises it] is mine! We are really like that, we are weird like that [...] we really have a crazy notion of property.

(Interview Clot 2018: 67)

As a visitor said: "The dead are something bothering in France, because they leave something behind, something ambivalent that needs discussing" (Gabet Interview 2018: 273). In the case of the cemetery in Souché, so did the practices that memorialize them in the form of *organic*, as Clayden et al. (2015: 113) termed them, and non-organic objects left at the graves, prompting discussions between the administration and visitors. By examining how visitors interact with the cemetery landscape materially, insights into the mourning process, the importance of leaving something behind and the possibilities to connect can be understood through the "lens of memorialization" proposed earlier by Clayden et al. (2015).

Localizing Remembrance

Nous sommes dans une société qui évolue et se transforme. C'est difficile de trouver sa propre place [...]

We are in a society that is evolving and mutating. It's difficult to find your place in it [...]

(Gabet Interview 2018: 503)

The flexible, personalized, fluid and inventive nature of memorialization at the natural cemetery is not only bound to the corporal and cinerary graves. This becomes especially apparent at the "garden of memory", the dispersion area for cremation remains, and the copper tree of spring, with its leaves of engraved names of the deceased. At these places, a need for memorialization exists that is not linked to a "corporeal" location *per se*, as the ashes are scattered during burial. At these spaces of

collective memorialization, decorations and flowers are exchanged at a fast pace by different families sharing the space. Potted, cut, dried and sprays of flowers are either put in the vases provided or beside them, as are occasionally fur, hair, flower petals and flower heads, dispersed as the deceased's ashes were before. This localized memorialization is also notable at the tree of spring, where occasionally cut flowers are fixed beside the leaf of a deceased, pointing to the value of materializing expressions of grief fixed to a name. While cemeteries should provide the bereaved with possibilities of expressing their grief, conflicts about the collective ways to realise them can arise. The staff at the crematorium, for example, explain how they had to change their dispersion technique to combat the clusters of flowers at the place where the ashes were dispersed, switching to scattering them in several patches of the garden, which resulted in people leaving their flowers all gathered neatly underneath a tree in the middle. The need to memorialize the dead, therefore, was not totally abandoned but, with the lack of localization of the ashes, became "unbound", while still attached to a specific space.



Figure 10 Flowers left at the "garden of memory" and the "tree of spring"

Quand on ne sait pas où ils sont, c'est difficile de donner des dons, comme des fleurs.

If you don't know where they are, it's difficult to bring gifts, like flowers.

(Fieldnotes 2018: 16)

The connection between the remembrance of relatives and the respect that is shown through putting something visible down at their grave seemed to also be important in an environment which was preferably private, localisable and intimate. A visitor recalls the burial of his grandfather, whose ashes were dispersed, and the way he could not fulfil his deed or duty because putting down flowers in a public garden was not possible for him. Another visitor mentioned that she mourned the loss of physical tombs with the advance of incineration, as there was nowhere to gather around as a

family, neither were there any traces of the former existence, concluding that it was easier to think of the person if you could go to their remains because “there’s sustainability with a tomb” (Gabet Interview 2018: 163).

A family of five, consisting of two grandparents, their breastfeeding daughter and her two children, visiting the cemetery for the first time, recalled a story by a friend of theirs that puzzled and confused them, exemplifying the fluid notion of the soul while simultaneously highlighting the significance of a material, localized space for continuing bonding and remembrance. The grandmother recalled how a friend, an elderly woman, lost her husband Hubert eight years ago. Although she visits his grave very often and tends to it quite rigorously, always saying “I’m going to Hubert” as she visits him, while emphasising how he is always with her, watching over her, guarding her. This behaviour was quite puzzling to the grandmother, as she does not understand how her friend can believe, on the one hand, that Hubert still lies at the cemetery and, on the other hand, is “a delocalized spirit” (Fieldnotes 2018: 8).

Flowers, in this sense, as a grave gift without the possibility of being returned reciprocally, could be seen as reverberating onto the *sacrier*, in Lambek’s term, “through history, across the community, within the family and in the *heart*” (Lambek 2014: 431, my emphasis).

Oui, dans le coeur, c’est vrai, ils sont dans le coeur et non dans la tête. C’est pour cela qu’ils se rendent moins souvent au cimetière.

Yes, in the heart, that’s right. They’re in the heart not in the head. That’s why they go to the cemetery less often.

(Terrasson Interview 2018: 223)

Regarding this link between the heart and less frequent cemetery visits, the expression of carrying their dead in the heart reverberated with several interlocutors while talking about either someone they had lost or explaining this expression to me, while laying their hands on their chests (Ferrer Interview 2018: 189; Fieldnotes 2018: 18).

Regulating Freedom

The function of the objects left by the visitors seemingly did not only serve the purpose of decorating the graves but were a practice that kept them in contact with their lost ones and aided them in their process of mourning. The main form of commemoration at traditional French cemeteries remains flowers, granite/iron plaques or other objects laid down on tombs, making for a personalized material remembrance, rather

administratively unbound and commercially unlimited. Non-biodegradable objects are excluded at the natural cemetery, given the charter the families agreed to respect when choosing this place for the burial of their members, which limits the choice in a sense but opens up alternative practices that have not been thought of at other cemeteries, such as leaving shells, hair, fur, books or signs made of wood at the site. Where visitors of the traditional cemeteries have more possibilities regarding materials and shop-bought objects to remember their members and decorate their tombs, at the natural cemetery, they are able to express themselves differently through planting bushes and flowers directly into the soil and craft objects on top of the grave. When I observed the behaviours, interactions and activities of visitors at the site four years after the opening of the cemetery, I saw a rich diversity of flora and a change in materials left at various graves that were partly copied at the traditional cemetery next door and partly met with dissatisfaction from the conservation of cemeteries.

La particularité ici est qu'il n'y a pas vraiment d'images funéraires. Nous associons la mort avec les monuments etc. Mais ici, tout est différent.

The particular thing here is that there are no funerary images really. We associate the dead with the monuments etc. But here everything is different.

(Gabet Interview 2018: 487)

At the traditional cemetery, plaques, small granite plates engraved with quotes, pictures of pets, houses or objects related to hobbies, give the impression of serving the memory for the living via a material personalization and a representation of the personality of the deceased. At the natural cemetery, the expression of individuality is perceived as equally present if not more personalized and individualized by a visitor (Gabet Interview 2018: 277) than at the bordering traditional cemetery, while the choice of materials is limited and regulated. The director emphasised how intervention is necessary: "If one starts with an angel, everyone wants one" (Clot Interview 2018: 143), and how when they created the charter, they did not anticipate traditions sticking quite so much. Ferrer referred to the practice of families buying sprays of flowers for funerals, which are put on the filled-in grave and left for a few weeks, featuring plastic ribbons with the families' names and "last words" to the deceased.

[...] Quand nous voyons des tombes couvertes... cela nous dérange mais nous ne savons pas comment faire parce que les gens ont toujours ce besoin et estiment qu'il est nécessaire que tout le monde en offre une. Mais parfois il y'a des gens qui disent qu'ils ne veulent

pas une seule gerbe de fleurs sur leur tombe. Donc, ça vient lentement, mais quand même [...] ça fait quatre ans maintenant.

[...] When we see tombs covered in them (sprays of flowers) [...] that bothers us, but we don't know what to do, because people still have that need and they feel that it's necessary and that everyone should offer one. But sometimes there are people that say that they don't want a single spray of flowers on their tomb. Therefore [...] it's slowly coming, but still [...] now it's been four years.

(Ferrer Interview 2018: 209)

The administration visits the cemetery weekly to remove potted plants, plastic wrappings and other objects. They report that usually conflicts arise with visitors not being familiar with the place, whereas regular visitors respect the charter quite well.

A bereaved couple recalled how after having planted a pine tree for Christmas with a plastic golden star on its tip, it was removed by the administration, which the family saw as just respecting the charter that they were willing to abide to, as they thought "the French lack respect for regulations generally". In this line of thought, they also worried about the utilisation of the space as a park, as they were afraid that it would go too far and visitors would not know how to respect the place. While individual grave space was mostly respected and kept apart from other graves, there was a certain fluidity of natural objects noticeable, as bark mulch, wild flowers and apricot kernels from the tree seemed to "move" around at the cemetery, spreading to several graves and areas.

"Tout a un sens, tout porte un sens" ("Everything carries meaning with it"), Francoise Chollet said while rearranging the seashells into the shape of a boat on her husband's grave. The decoration proved to be a direct link to her husband, as the shells and the regional plant were brought from the beach where he used to sail his boat. The two feathers she stuck in front of his tombstone signify his hobby of watching birds with binoculars out of their kitchen window (Fieldnotes 2018: 51). These remarks by a bereaved widow standing in front of her husband's grave exemplify the personal attachment to grave objects and individual memorialization of the deceased, and it proves to be a source of dissatisfaction for the administration of cemeteries.

As the team had a more sustainable, ecological approach to the management of the natural cemetery in mind, the material memorialization was subject to specific regulations. Nevertheless, memorializing the dead remained a topic not only closely related to expressing the deceased themselves but also to the process and representation of grief for and connection with the bereaved. Over the years, the conservation of cemeteries noticed reoccurring violations of the charter, which point

to a creative variety of material expression of agency, remembrance and ways of bonding throughout the cemetery. The charter informs the visitors about the nature of the objects, but *in situ*, the team also tries to promote an aesthetic that relates to a concept of “nature” which focuses on a “wild”, regional and fluid occurrence of flora. In the case of Madame Chollet, seashells and feathers serve as representative of her husband’s hobbies and personality and, therefore, become an extension of the deceased, “animated objects with agency” (Robben 2018: xviii). The administration, commenting on the shells on a collective visit, were displeased with the spreading of seashells, increasingly often found at other graves now, decorating them, arranged in the shape of hearts, stating that they just “did not fit” here, as they are not local or regional and, therefore, almost artificial.

Another recurring memorialization through a “forbidden” object was a schoolbook, replaced weekly, seemingly to keep the deceased, said to be either a professor or a child, “up to date” with the weekly progress of school lessons.

The traditional cemetery is a place where mourners can express private emotions within the performance of public rites of commemoration (Francis et al. 2005: 178), but, in the case of a novel concept involving a “natural” selective aesthetic and incorporating an environmental consciousness, becomes a contested space for the bereaved, where an ideal grave and cemetery is gradually agreed upon through moving and removing organic and non-organic objects.

If we were to compare traditional and natural cemetery regulations, they could be differentiated through the notions of *negative freedom* and *positive freedom*, as proposed by the philosopher Isaiah Berlin in his essay *Two concepts of Liberty*. Kasmirli explains the two notions: negative freedom being free *from* control by others, in opposition to positive freedom, being the freedom *to* control oneself (Kasmirli 2019). Cemetery regulations can be seen as restricting personal freedom, as they are public spaces and, by their nature, regulated. The goal is to secure a collective functioning based on a shared set of respected notions concerning design, mourning behaviour and decorations. In the case of the regulated natural cemetery, conflicts arise, as the bereaved have to negotiate their negative and positive freedom, acting in line with expressions that are, on the one hand, controlled from the outside, while finding new creative ways to adapt their former cultural embedded and embodied material ideals of memorialisation to a new “organic aesthetic”, on the other hand.

6.5 Flowers

An especially apparent topic that seemed to occupy many aspects of the “natural” funeral innovation, while also reflecting some controversies and ambivalent feelings, is the present flora and interactions with it at the cemetery. Apart from providing a significant means of expressing memorialization at the natural cemetery, the practice of planting, decorating and caring for the plants themselves revealed aspects of bonding, communicating and caring for the dead and oneself. Instead of focusing on the cohesion of a small sample of Niortais society bound together by reciprocal grave gifts, focusing on what Durkheim (2014 [1893]) termed “collective consciousness” based on the practice of commemorating the dead, I would like to turn to his nephew, Marcel Mauss, and Henry Hubert (2015) and their proposed notions of gift-giving and sacrifice to elaborate the heterogeneous practices flowers are involved in and how they serve in interactions between the deceased and the non-deceased.

Metabolic Cycling

The natural cemetery provides a place where the implied “commitment” of potted plants as opposed to cut flowers according to the local florist are not welcome, as they are usually sold in plastic pots. In another sense though, the commitment to plant maintenance is taken further here, by giving the bereaved the possibility to plant in the soil around the headstone. This turned out to create new types of behaviours and an added symbolic quality, resonating with impressions of what Davies and Rumble described as a sense of returning, homecoming and a fitting “natural” way of leaving this world while nourishing the soil through the corpse as a gift to the earth (Davies & Rumble 2012: 134).

A bereaved couple described it as a *système de cylindrer* – a cylindrical system, where their son’s ashes, mixed with sand and soil at burial, would make the flowers they are planting every week grow so nicely (Elderly Couple Interview 2018: 6). What the couple described symbolically as returning the ashes into the cycle of nature, plant growth and, therefore, life, Marx elaborated theoretically with his concept of the *metabolic rift*, criticizing how waste produced by man’s natural metabolism, along with the waste of industrial production and consumption, was not recycled back into the production as part of a complete metabolic cycle as it should. This rift, he went on, is produced by processes of industrial, capitalist production, threatening the continuing dialogue between man and nature that must be maintained if he is not to die (Marx

1981: 195). Back to focussing on precisely what happens to the dialogical nature of this relationship *after* man dies, Hayward notes how Marx' concept captures energetic and material exchanges between humans and their environment and is regulated by two sides: the side of nature, with its natural laws, and society, through its institutional norms (Hayward 1994: 116). While a utilitarian view of the corpse re-entering the socio-ecological metabolism sheds light on the use and return of man's materiality, it is mainly the norms of society's institutions that highlight the socio-cultural notions of "returning" and "giving/gifting" in the context of natural burial. The metabolism, in this sense, is given new meaning in relation to nature, as flowers are seen to regenerate life while processing death, not only symbolically but literally, encompassing both the "nature-imposed conditions" and the capacity of human beings to affect this process (Foster 1999: 381) through funeral innovation. Opposed to Davies and Rumble's (2012) account, the deceased body was not particularly referred to or reflected on by my interlocutors, rather, the connection between the deceased, bereaved and nature was most present through the choosing, disposing and displaying of flowers at the cemetery.

Botanical Juxtaposing

Over there, death, the graveyard where things erupt like gravestones, the entity-place. Here, me and life in busting blooming confusion, antithesis of entification.

(Taussig 2001: 310)

What Michael Taussig calls mimesis when he feels Silvia Plath's poems "[...] enter into the things they refer to and take him along with her [...]", he relates to poetry, as "the privileged form of mimetic language that can invoke the spirits of the dead as the ground for communion with things as people" (Taussig 2001: 316). To connect the cemetery as thesis, with life as its antithesis, one might reach synthesis through poetry, following Taussig's line of thinking. Or respectively the study of epitaphs. While the cemetery has been described as a *heterotopia* by Foucault, a real place, reflecting an inverted *utopia*, a fantasy while juxtaposing incompatible spaces within its walls (Wright 2005: 54), Wright attributes a voice to the cemetery itself, urging that "[...] if one sees cemeteries as a rhetorical space, then there are thousands upon thousands of voices clamoring to be heard, a cacophony of remembrances are calling out" (Wright 2005: 60). With only one permitted design, a small chalk tombstone with little space for epitaphs or recalling life stories, the natural cemetery shifts its memorialization to

a botanical juxtaposing, combining dichotomies of life and death, and cleanliness and dirt. The visitors are left in a space where a utopian ideal of living flowers is met with the very real heterotopia of a place containing the deceased.

Il y a de la vie.

There's life.

(Ferrer Interview 2018: 169)

The symbolic quality of flowers as a tool for decoration, showing affection and a continuing will to care, even if just for the tombstone to maintain a social norm of a proper grave, remain powerful at the natural cemetery while adding the aspect of a symbolic continuity inherent in the objects themselves: the practice of enflowering the graves and planting around the tombstone. As a young visitor explained, it produces a nice imagine in one's head to know that "underneath there's something that's dead, but on top of it is something alive" (Severin Interview 2018: 31).

Sacrificing Chrysanthemums

Seeing flowers, in this case, as "symbolic mediators" (Gibson 2010: 626), a notion used by Mauss originally in relation to objects, animals and humans offered in sacrifices, they not only serve to process the abstract idea of death and dying for the bereaved by covering it up with something more colourful and appealing, but also serve as mediators between the bereaved and deceased, a form of symbolic, material communication, or, as the a visitor explained "exteriorized thoughts" – "[...] *c'est une manière d'extérioriser des pensées*" (Fieldnotes 2018: 16). Between worlds, exterior and interior, life and death, and botanical and human, lies the sacrifice, or more precisely chrysanthemums, "To understand sacrifice in anthropological terms, therefore, depends upon our willingness to engage with what lies beyond the organically observable [...] to go to, at least to go along with, sacrifice's other side" (Mayblin & Course 2014: 314).

What was planted or laid down on or beside the grave is linked either directly or indirectly to communicating with the deceased, while not necessarily dependent on but in relation to bringing grave gifts, as two separate widows described during their visits. The first elderly woman brings her deceased husband flowers, or thoughts, as she calls them, to say a little *coucou* or hello. She varies the plants according to the seasons, while abstaining from evergreens or other plants not requiring care or

replacement. The second widow attributes the flowers to “keeping the bond strong” between her and her husband, while also talking to him and her other relatives buried at the cemetery during her visits.

“What Jesus and the lamb have in common is their interstitially, their ability to open and close channels of communication between worlds” (Gibson 2010: 626). Gibson relates sacrificial practices to a trans-worldly communication through a symbolic mediator, most commonly observed in anthropological accounts via the ritual killing of an animal or self-sacrifices of human beings.

While no ritual “killing” of the plant gifts takes place during cemetery visits, the reference to physical embodiments of beliefs and values which accompany many Christian beliefs of gift giving and sacrificing is expressed in this context through the ability to communicate or to externalize thoughts, show affection or bond through these offerings.

Offerings and sacrifices, being rather fluid and contextual terms, nevertheless, merit our ethnographic attention simply by virtue of their mere existence as a key trope for talking about a bewildering range of practices (Mayblin & Course 2014: 314), such as decorating an inanimate stone with plant offerings.

Recent discussions on the nature of the sacrifice in anthropology point to the difficulty of offering universal theories, but Mayblin and Course stress one central idea, namely, that “[...] something (or someone) new can be created through the irreversible giving up of something else, most prominently, a life” (2014: 343). While this raises the question of who sacrificing is whom, it also points to a quality at the site which iconoclastically is rather discreet, namely, the sacred, a prominent part of sacrificial processes. Seeking to re-establish the importance of sacrifice to the discipline, Shilling and Mellor (2013) define sacrifice along the lines of Durkheim, Hubert and Mauss as involving a “setting apart from *and* giving up of something by which that something is *made sacred*” (Shilling & Mellor 2013: 3, emphasis in original).

C'est presque dommage, ce sont de belles fleurs, mais elles sont associées avec la mort.

It's almost a pity, they are beautiful flowers, but they're associated with death.

(Gabet Interview 2018: 397)

In the context of flowers, cemeteries and the sacred, the selection of rituals in Europe within this triangulation, perhaps due to the lack of anthropological studies within the realms of sacrifice, death and, well, Europe, is rather scarce. What we do have, though, is a national holiday commemorating the dead, via a distinctive flower: the

chrysanthemum. Serving in this case as an example of something set apart *and* given up from other gift-giving practices in the social realm, chrysanthemums are made exclusive and, therefore, *sacred*, as a couple at the cemetery answered the question whether it was acceptable to offer the flowers to anyone else than to the deceased:

Les gens pourraient être surpris, ce n'est probablement pas favorable. Ici, chez nous, il n'est pas courant de les utiliser pour autre chose. Si un homme veut faire la cour à une dame, il peut lui donner des roses ou quelque chose comme ça. Si vous êtes invité chez des amis, vous offrez des fleurs, mais pas des chrysanthèmes.

People might be surprised, it's probably not favourable. Here, with us, it's not common to use them for something else. If a man would court a lady he might give her roses or something like that. If you're invited to some friends, you offer some flowers, but not chrysanthemums.

(Interview Gabet 2018: 401)

Giving, Visiting, Reciprocating

As one visitor explained regarding his grandfather's grave, he would not only gift him with these offerings but also himself, because he had accomplished his deed: "It's like offering a gift [...] for someone that you loved [...] and for your ego, your pride and all that" (Severin Interview 2018: 103). While respect is the most dominant argument for Severin, he also sees flowers as a material counterpart to symbolize a visit, a thought or gratitude. These acts are not only important for the sake of dignity and respect within the family, to display care for the dead to other family members and passers-by but also as an homage to the deceased as an act of gratitude, as he knows he would not have been here without him (Severin Interview 2018: 103). Seeing the homage as hopefully reciprocal, Severin mentioned that he does not expect something back from his deed but generally deems it respectful when receiving something back in exchange. Mentioning his father and his rather distant relationship to him, he still regards the future visits as given, as his father enabled him many things, and in the end, gifted him his life.

Because giving is generally unbalanced when viewed at one point in time, a longitudinal perspective more accurately reveals the nature of gift giving.

(Sherry 1983: 158)

A first-time visitor to the natural cemetery described the function of flowers as follows, pointing to a meaning beyond an aesthetic decoration and utilitarian upkeep for order's sake:

Flowers are a sign of love that one brings to the grave. In exchange, because one gives love, one gets something back – it helps with the grief because a relation is being kept alive. One, therefore, actually gives them to oneself, not to the dead.

(Fieldnotes 2018: 34)



Figure 11 Bronze girl offering a flower

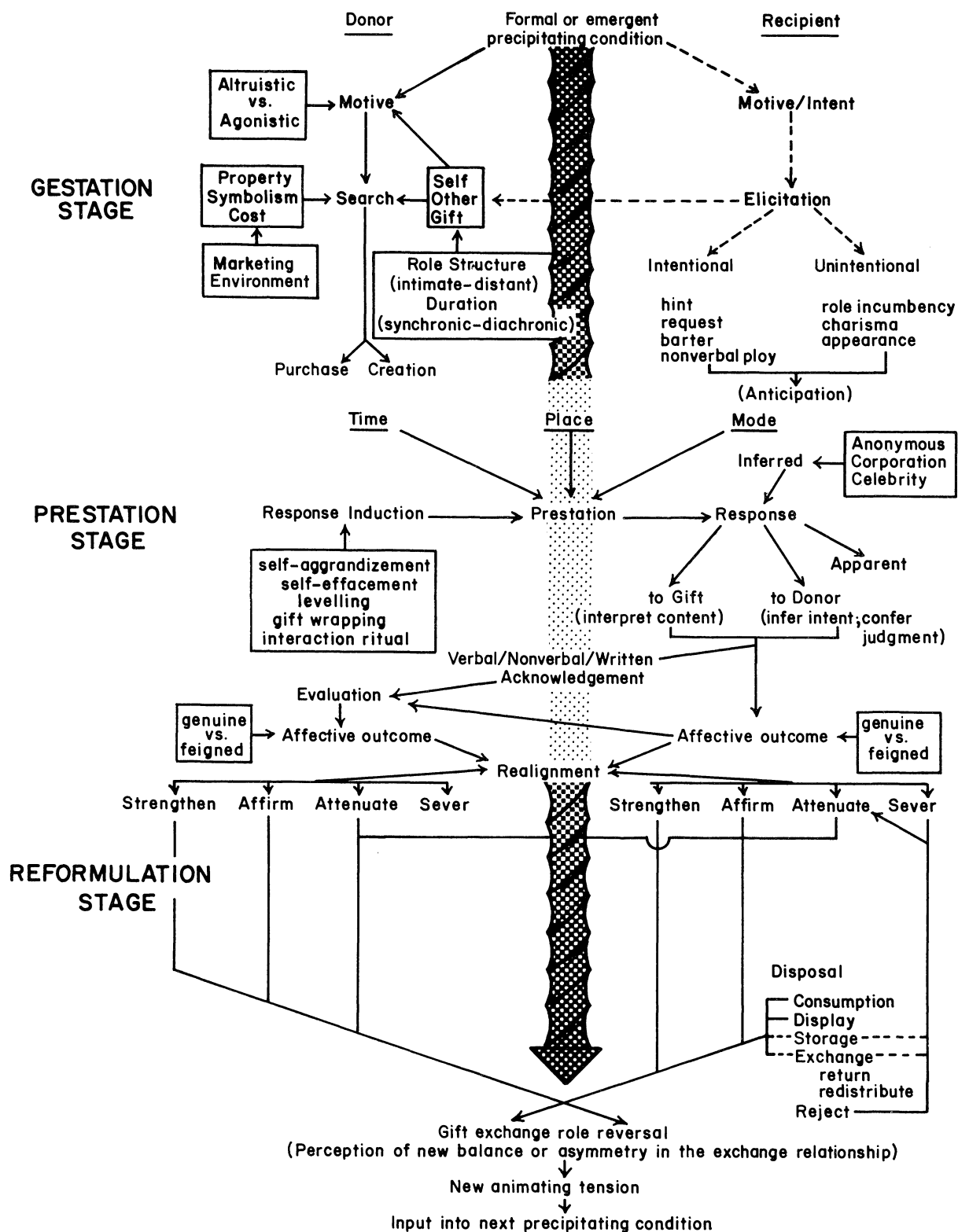
This middle-aged woman's reciprocal view on grave gifts resonates in another young visitor's view of duty/respect and pride connected to flower offerings. In his interpretation, giving oneself the satisfaction of having accomplished a deed is made possible through bringing something material, lasting, to the tombstone. According to the woman, one gets satisfaction from keeping up a bond, helping with the feeling of loss. To understand this way of seeing it as a transaction or exchange, we might examine the function of flowers in the notion of the "gift". Elaborating Marcel Mauss' theory in combination with consumer research, Sherry defines the gift as a reciprocal norm of exchange, where an individual is obliged to give, receive and reciprocate. This threefold obligation, deriving from its cultural embeddedness, is designated through cultural convention, by which intangible essences (such as "Life" or "Hope") also transform into gifts that can be redistributed (Sherry 1983: 160). In this case, the intangible essence is respect, accomplishment from fulfilling a deed, or a bond and connection one keeps up and gets back from a partner of exchange that might not be physically but metaphysically present.

A local florist, selling flowers as well as tending the graves for families who cannot or will not do it themselves and decorating them for special occasions, describes the function of flowers simply as a nice, sympathetic gesture at any time, but when asked about the plastic-wrapped, unopened bouquets at the natural cemetery, he responded

by saying that, “It’s strange that we sell nature in plastic but there’s a whole thinking behind the packaging. It’s offered, being unpacked” (Fieldnotes 2018: 62). What is being offered is very real in this case, as the intention, feelings and receiving end are, although the flowers are never unpacked, the effect and function of receiving and reciprocating which seem to remain the same for the bereaved.

By modifying and extending Banks’ paradigm (Banks 1979), which describes the behaviour of both donor and recipient through four stages of transaction (purchase, interaction, consumption and communication), Sherry (1983) divides the gift-giving process into three different stages: the Gestation, Prestation and Reformulation stages. In this model, the Gestation stage, including all behaviour antecedent to the actual gift exchange, is followed up by the Prestation stage or the actual gift exchange and the final stage of Reformulation, where the focus lies on the disposition of the gift. The proposed model, depicted in the graphic on the following page and applied to the practice of flower memorialization, depicts the process as well as the different dimensions involved and brings us closer to an understanding of the relevance of these acts. In the case of flower gifts, we are limited to the donor’s side and imagination of the recipient’s reaction, influence or reciprocal answer. Nevertheless, the model helps to dissect several aspects of the process of gift-giving behaviour. The Gestation stage highlights the motive (altruistic, agonistic) and the search (symbolism, species, cost of flowers); the Prestation stage focuses on aspects of response induction (self-aggrandizement, gift wrapping and interaction ritual), evaluation and affective outcome; and, finally, the Reformulation stage informs the participants of a realignment that has been reaffirmed or abandoned (via visible grave-tending).

FIGURE
A MODEL OF THE PROCESS OF GIFT-GIVING BEHAVIOR



NOTE: Spiral indicates token gift exchange relationship. Dots indicate decreased significance of token giving. Parentheses indicate potential thoughts, feelings or actions. Broken lines indicate possible antecedents to or consequences of thoughts, feelings or actions.

Figure 12 Gift giving depicted as following a three-stage model (Sherry 1983: 163)

Renegotiating care

Several observations of practices and elaborations by interlocutors point to the significance of flowers involved in processes of bonding, connecting and communicating between the deceased and non-deceased at the cemetery. A woman watering the flowers on her son's grave in the pouring rain (Fieldnotes 2018: 23), or bins full of discarded flower pots in very good condition, might not only point to "our societies wasting habits" (Ferrer Interview 2018: 209) but care beyond the grave, extending to the deceased kin.

Je suppose que cela rend hommage aux morts que vous pensez toujours à eux.

I suppose it renders an homage to the dead that you still think of them.

(Gabet Interview 2018: 391)

Observing cemetery visitors in northern Italy, Goody and Poppi elaborated on the use of flowers, relating the practice to social aspects as a form of "continuing devotion" and "maintaining networks of kin" (Goody & Poppi 1994: 149, 150). As the cemetery and its cemetery-centred rituals combine the family members' negotiations and struggles to reconcile the traditional expectations of kinship with present-day social realities, it constitutes an interesting space to track down certain changes in the care of the graves and, through it, in the care of their kin.

Grave design in France changed in a way that lets families bury and commemorate their dead that required less maintenance, resulting in easy-to-care-for granite tombs or plastic plaques mounted on columbaria which leave no nor require any place for the disposal of flowers or other objects. *Les familles éclatées*, the families spread out all over the Hexagon (metropolitan or mainland France), can, therefore, chose options of burial and monuments that fit their way of living and memorializing. Regarding laying down flowers for birthdays and death anniversaries, religious holidays or other occasions, the florist, funeral businesses and the administration have noticed an increase in "professionalized" grave-tending, by which customers order flowers bouquets and cleaning services from businesses, receiving a picture of the decorations via e-mail or text message. This continuing care for their kin's tombs, might point to "a form of guilt" or "to show towards other families that we take care of our dead" as a visitor put it, keeping up with a collective display of care for the deceased, reflecting family values and continuing bonds or trying to make "[...] up for something that we didn't give when the person was still alive" (Interview Ferrer 2018: 189).

Grave abandonment, becoming an increasingly frequent phenomenon at Niort's cemeteries, while in most cases viewed negatively, was generally signified by a "dirty" grave without flowers by interlocutors at the traditional cemetery; a well-tended grave, therefore, constituting a well-cared-for-grave for the deceased. At the natural cemetery, the definitions and expressions of care and abandonment shifted to a more fluid set of notions, as the bereaved expressed very different styles of enflowering the graves, ranging from well-enclosed and low in height, to extending beyond its borders, covering the tombstone with weeds. The solution to such "abandonment" on the side of the administration in the long run meets the families' incapability or unwillingness to tend the grave, while also respecting the demands of their aesthetic of a "clean" cemetery. Abandoned graves at traditional cemeteries are kept clean but empty in terms of flower commemoration or decorations. At the natural cemetery, an abandoned grave still will not be enflowered by the municipal workers but grass will be planted on top of it. Clot explains: "There still aren't any flowers, that's a bit sad, but it will still be clean and tended" (Interview Clot 2018: 135).

Cultural Flowers, Natural Weeds

Grave-tending, visits and botanical offerings were often accompanied by expressions of turning something "dirty" into something "clean" by visitors, as much as this dichotomy seemed to occupy discussions around cemetery maintenance from the administrative side. The distinction and impressions of a "clean" versus a "dirty" cemetery environment were as flexible as they were homogenous among my interlocutors. Whereas visitors at the natural cemetery generally had a very positive impression of the place and the clean/dirty dichotomy was not mentioned at all for the lack of contrast, judgements were generally mentioned from the side of the cemetery workers and funeral directors who compared the different cemeteries on a daily basis due to their profession.

Nous les soignons mais ils doivent réapprendre à tolérer les herbes. Le contrôle des herbes était la preuve d'un cimetière bien apprivoisé. Dans un cimetière ordonné et propre, il n'y a pas d'herbes. Nous devons convaincre les gens que la végétalisation est superbe est que le "minéral" est laid et triste. La transition n'est pas vraiment facile. Ce que nous voulons dire en fait: "Oui, nos cimetières changeront d'apparence, il y'aura des mauvaises herbes et de l'herbe mais n'ayez pas peur, nous serons là pour les entretenir. Mais n'oubliez pas, ancrez le dans vos têtes, les herbes ne sont pas sales!"

We tend them, but they need to relearn to tolerate the grass and herbs, they have become an enemy. Controlled herbs were the proof of a well-tamed cemetery. There are no herbs in a clean, proper cemetery. We have to get into people's heads and convince them that the vegetalization is actually great and that the "mineral" is ugly and sad. The transition is not quite easy. What we say is that the message that we want to get out is: "Yes, our cemeteries will change their appearance, there will be herbs and weeds, but don't be frightened, we'll be here to tend them. But remember, get it into your skulls, the herbs are not dirty."

(Clot Interview 2018: 25)

To understand what a "clean" cemetery means, it is important to consider the regulations and recent changes in the management of public spaces, namely the ban of pesticides in the city of Niort in 2011 and the connection between maintenance and a weed-free appearance of cemeteries that the inhabitants were used to. With weeds slowly populating the cemeteries, accompanied by wild flowers and patches of grass sown to incorporate them into the landscape, visitors connect this appearance with the image of abandonment, fearing that the city's conservation of cemeteries would neglect their duty to tend them. The equivalent of a traditionally well-tended cemetery was, therefore, rich in gravel, granite and flora that was either kept in pots on the tombstones or tucked away behind plastic packaging. Opposed to this, weeds, "crazy" or wild flowers, fallen leaves or patches of grass were signs of a lack of care and a dirty environment. The acceptance of the natural cemetery, where all kinds of flowers and weeds are blended together, indicates a rather flexible nature of defining dirt and purity, leading to definitions of uncleanness, termed famously by Mary Douglas, as "matter out of place":

[...] if uncleanness is matter out of place, we must approach it through order. Uncleanness or dirt is that which must not be included if a pattern is to be maintained. To recognise this is the first step towards insight into pollution.

(Douglas 1984: 179)

Reimers (2016) refers to Douglas' distinction in the context of death, recalling how it is, in most cases, connected to the impure and the function of rituals (and even routines), as defining these dichotomies and keeping them apart to stabilize the social fabric (Reimers 2016: 3). Rituals, therefore, deal with anomalies, to bring order into the chaos of individuals dealing with schemes of classifications, shaped and negotiated in a constant flux between individual and the collective with its standardized values. The mediator between these entities, the positive pattern, in which ideas and values are

tidily ordered, is what constitutes culture according to Douglas, a very public matter and rigid, as “[...] any given system of classification must give rise to anomalies and any given culture must confront events which seem to defy its assumptions” (Douglas 1984: 39). Anomalies of various kinds are, in this way of reasoning, less of an abnormality than a necessity, and as culture plays its role in the order of the universe, so animals and vegetable life does, behaving as it is their nature to live, to anagrammatize Douglas (1984: 179). To deal with anomalies, or bring the natural culturally into order, five possibilities are proposed in her work *Purity and Danger* which highlight the new distinctions and control of plant life at the natural cemetery:

- 1) “[...] by setting for one or other interpretation, ambiguity is often reduced” (Douglas 1984: 40), as the conservation is putting forth the message regularly “Herbs and weeds are not dirt/dirty, nature is not dirty” (Clot Interview 2018: 25), the interpretation of nature is redefined.
- 2) “[...] the existence of anomaly can be physically controlled” (Douglas 1984: 40) through external regulations, such as the charter, as well as appellations to the visitors’ internal judgement concerning what would fit into the landscape and philosophy of the space.
- 3) “[...] a rule of avoiding anomalous things affirms and strengthens the definitions to which they do not conform” (ibid. 1984: 40), in defining the other as being artificial, the nature of a desired organic aesthetic is emphasised.
- 4) “[...] anomalous events may be labelled dangerous” (ibid. 1984: 40), as the use of pesticides is warned against, destroying biodiversity and slowly degrading the land over time, the anomaly of chemical tending is defined.
- 5) “[...] ambiguous symbols can be used in ritual for the same ends as they are used in poetry and mythology, to enrich meaning or to call attention to other levels of existence” (ibid. 1984: 41), art installations at the cemetery referring to “turning the wheel of time”, as the copper statue in the garden of memory is depicted, or the tree of spring giving life to the leaves with the names of the deceased engraved upon them, or other symbols, traditionally symbolizing eternity and resurrection (ivy, cypresses, etc.), could be interpreted as such ambiguous symbols.

Toussaint (All Saint's Day)

Avant c'était un truc chrétien. Qui a la plus grande tombe? Mais aujourd'hui c'est la question de qui a les plus grandes fleurs?

Before it was a Christian thing of "Who's got the biggest tomb?" But today, the questions is: "Who's got the biggest flowers?"

(Fieldnotes 2018: 40)

While care and bonding were important objectives related to flower decorations all year around, observations and informal conversations about the national holiday Toussaint revealed other values and ambivalent views of the practice. A visitor emphasised the aesthetic value above all, saying that flowers are brought on this day primarily because "[...] they are pretty and it makes the cemetery look less sad on the 1 November, it's beautiful with all the colours of the chrysanthemums" (Fieldnotes 2018: 34).

Although the tradition of enflowering the cemeteries with chrysanthemums is still practiced, as I observed on a separate visit after the main research period in November 2018, it seems to lose relevance to the visitors and carries ambivalent feelings about tradition and a certain hypocrisy with it. Most commonly noted, it is losing its significance compared to the past, as cemetery workers noticed by the reduced amount of waste after the holiday and funeral directors and florists received fewer orders for delivering flowers to the cemeteries over the years. Among cemetery workers, the opinions as to why this tradition is still followed by some people were twofold: half of the people asked thought it was done for the people's own mourning process and/or to do something "nice"; the other half thought it was just to keep up for tradition's sake. What they did agree on was a development that is characterised by commercial aspects, as the decorations and flower arrangements are notably more uniform, due to them being ordered and delivered by the local florists. A visitor describes the practice as pleasant but superficial, as for the rest of the year it's *fini*, over, again. Another saw it as a competition of "Whose tomb has got the most flowers on it?", a view reflected by an observation by Ferrer having overheard a woman at a cemetery linking the presence or absence of flowers on this day to kinship care and abandonment:

Oh! Mais c'est, cette personne, pff, il / elle ne pensait pas que le défunt en valait la peine, n'avait pas acheté un gros pot de fleurs, mais j'en ai acheté un plus grand. Ils veulent toujours un plus gros, mais finalement ce n'est pas une question de

cœur, c'est peut-être plus de montrer aux autres de faire mieux. C'est vraiment des vacances très particulières. Les gens ne viennent pas en visite pendant toute l'année et ce jour-là, ils fleurissent la tombe comme des fous, repartant avec la satisfaction d'avoir accompli leur travail.

Oh! But that's, this person, pff, he/she didn't think the deceased was worth it, didn't buy a big pot of flowers, but I bought a bigger one. They always want a bigger one, but finally it's not a matter of heart, it's more maybe to show off to the others to do better. It's really a very particular holiday. People don't come to visit throughout the whole year and on this day, they enflower the grave like crazy, leaving with a satisfaction of having done their work.

(Ferrer Interview 2018: 189)

Visitors in Niort were generally suspicious about the intentions behind the practice, seeing it led more by motives of competition and consumerism than maintaining networks of kin, a similar sentiment also expressed by a merchant in Italy, commenting on the practice on the 2 November:

People are going mad. I can't complain as it is all to my profit but, at times, I really wonder whether this isn't too much. It's no longer got anything to do with the dead. It's just people competing with their neighbours to show that they can do better. It's all *consumerismo*.

(Goody & Poppi 1994: 150)

A local florist in Niort mentioned another aspect and a distinction between rural and urban regions regarding flower arrangements. He linked the difference and changes in decorations to an emerging "society of consumerism and tempo", spreading from the cities to smaller villages, according to which cut flowers, being less permanent, are increasingly more popular than their potted counterpart, seen as a bigger commitment.

Shedding Traditions

In addition to the administration, the funeral businesses and employees of the gravestone company worked most closely with the bereaved and observed certain developments regarding the choice of memorialization, spending habits, ceremonial ratios between religious and civil processions, clothing habits and the frequency and manner of grave visits and upkeep.

The commercial funeral landscape consists of three businesses in Niort, of which two are family-owned and the other is a branch of the former national monopoly of funeral institutions, the *pompes funèbres générales*. Since 1993, this service has not been subject to the regulation of communal monopolies, which makes them a public, but commercially competitive service in charge of regulating their own prices.

As the families can choose between a religious (conducted by religious volunteers and rarely by priests themselves) and a civil ceremony (conducted by the employees of the funeral businesses), the businesses were not only involved in the commercial, material aspect of funeral arrangements but could also provide insights into changes in funeral culture and concerning the adaptations to and implementation of “alternative” approaches.

Morgan Terrasson, the funeral director of one of the family-owned businesses, sees changes in religion reflected in the ceremonies chosen, as he estimates they declined from 80 % religious and 10 % civil ceremonies in the 1980s, to a distribution of 50:50 now. He attributes this to the less individualized, more strict character of religious services being less appealing to younger generations. The funeral director Perrine Rouger echoes the freedom and choice of civil ceremonies (estimating 40 %, compared to 60 % religious) she conducts, emphasising the use of multimedia, the absence of restrictions to individual wishes, noting that there are no differentiable rituals related to natural burial, except for the materials used, which was echoed by the cemetery workers (Fieldnotes 2018: 40).

A bereaved widower reflected on his wife’s funeral procession and recalled how relieved he felt about having the organisation taken off his hands, noting the professionalism the funeral directors displayed, putting him at ease. What seemed to relieve pressure on the receiving end, the bereaved, seemed to be a stress factor for the providing end, as these providers are on their own in leading the procedure in the setting without a ceremony master and especially in a rather new cemetery environment (Fieldnotes 2018: 10).

During two observations of a burial and a dispersion of ashes at the natural cemetery, this intersection of the different roles of cemetery workers and a slight newness to ceremonial succession were most notable, as rituals and ceremonial practices were kept to a discreet minimum. The unpredicted role of a cemetery worker as a “conductor” became especially apparent at the dispersion of ashes, as without a ceremony master, the bereaved gathered there were left with the process of dispersing the ashes, holding a ceremony of their own if they wished to do so. As at every burial, at least one cemetery worker must be present to take care of anything that concerns the “soil” or ground, while the ceremony master, often an employee of a funeral

business, takes care of everything “above the ground”. It was the first dispersion of ashes overseen by Guillome, the worker and implicit but unanticipated conductor of the burial, which he notes went satisfactorily enough but about which he would have preferred to “have a protocol” by someone else but him, as he did not have the proper information and, therefore, could not say anything in the form of a ceremony.

After just having observed a funeral ceremony at the natural cemetery, two workers summarized their impression of the modern funeral practices as generally more “open, less strict, more festive, less sad, more colours worn and music played, it’s nicer” (Fieldnotes 2018: 44). The general take of a decrease in traditions was linked to “former times” or earlier religious ceremonies, involving strict protocols, religious practices and dressing in a certain way. Marjorie, from the cemetery office, observed changes in clothing traditions over the years, stating that the people sticking to the tradition of wearing black belong mostly to older generations, whereas younger ones are opting for brighter colours such as beige, blue or grey, while still dressed elegantly.

Another factor symbolizing the “traditional” burial procedure mentioned by directors and constituting the main concern for worries about the natural cemetery’s success from the side of the creators, was the burial vault. Still used by the majority of people, the vaults are seen as a cleaner alternative to letting the coffin down into plain soil, as it was perhaps less “scary” for the attendees of a funeral to glimpse down into a white painted cement vault (Terrasson Interview 2018: 405).

[...] si vous n’avez pas beaucoup de fleurs, cela pourrait choquer beaucoup de personnes.

[...] if you don’t have any flowers it might shock a lot of people still.

(Ferrer Interview 2018: 213)

Regarding the regulations of the cemetery and especially the charter being unknowingly or knowingly violated by visitors, the administration saw practices such as the enflowering of a recent burial space as being a weight of tradition rather than a process of grieving or commemoration. Beside some traditions fading and others persisting, one form concerning the memorialization during funeral processions was noted to be replaced. While the pages of the funeral condolence book provided at cemetery ceremonies were left blank more often than they were given back written fully, ceremony masters and cemetery workers noticed how members were frequently taking photos with and/or beside the coffin and sometimes filmed the dispersion or burial with their mobile phones (Fieldnotes 2018: 43), indicating a shift to technological preferences for the documentation and remembrance during and after a funeral.

7 Mourning, Grave Gaiety and Environmental Sobriety

From the ethnographic data collected within the possible and accessible tempo-spatial, emotional, social, epistemological and ontological realms, the main objectives, priorities and topics of significance which crystallized out of them will followingly be discussed in this chapter. The intertwined connection between interlocutors and different systems of beliefs went well beyond the field site of this natural cemetery. Extending its roots beyond the biodegradable fences to other institutions, businesses and cemetery visitors, who, in a reciprocal flux, shaped the contemporary French funeral culture?

7.1 Shifting Family Structures

As Boret (2014) showed with his extensive study on Japanese tree burials, changes in funeral cultures are highly dependent on shifting family structures and hierarchies in the broader realm of society. The case example of Niort highlighted several changes in family structures that resulted in an increase of grave abandonments, less frequent cemetery visits, a higher rate of cremation, a professionalization of grave care by specialized businesses and changes in tomb designs. Many of the developments and changes can be traced down or result from more general societal shifts, most notably the splitting of the core family.

Personne viens non plus ici, le monde devient fou. Mes enfants n'entretiennent pas la tombe non plus, c'est horrible.

Nobody comes here anymore (to the cemeteries), the world is going crazy.

My children aren't tending the grave anymore either, it's horrible.

(Fieldnotes 2018: 1)

Exemplified by an older woman tending her husband's grave at the traditional cemetery of Souché, there was a general dissatisfaction expressed regarding the abandonment of graves and the lack of visits, cleaning and enflowering by visitors. This has been explained with the same line of reasoning throughout all the different groups and individuals who were informants: *les familles éclatées*, meaning the splitting up of families due to work or study offers throughout the country. The

possibilities of finding either a job somewhere else in metropolitan France or study in one of the main cities resulted in families dying apart from each other and, consequently, being buried in cemeteries all over the country. This argument is mentioned frequently as the main explanation for the most noticeable changes at the cemetery. The first, most noticeable on a visit to the site, concerns the grave and landscape design. One style of tombstone can be selected to memorialize the dead, all being equal and requiring no further maintenance, cleaning or looking after. The families can opt to leave the grave-tending to the municipal workers, sowing grass on top of it and mowing it regularly if the grave becomes abandoned over time. Dispersion as a choice requiring only a plaque at the copper tree installation also proves a favourable solution. Secondly, the landscape design, resembling a *cimetière paysagé* or *végétalisé* in other parts of the country, offers visitors a burial ground and also the possibility of a park-like green space. As such, one of the main goals of the conception was to promote the acceptance of an array of cemetery usage to being able to further utilise other cemeteries in the city as public, green spaces, due to the lack of ground. This future transformation of urban space requires some adaptation to heterogenous notions of respect and mourning and a view of cemeteries as multifunctional spaces for the bereaved and non-bereaved.

7.2 Deathscapes for the Living

Another main objective of the Natural Burial Movement was the anticipation of creating spaces of burial where the deceased and non-deceased contribute, on the one hand, to the regeneration of former barren land through claiming it and introducing flora, fauna and biodiversity to it, while, on the other hand, creating a form of “collective memorial” where the bereaved people could be able to “anticipate the grave’s future within a wider landscape” (Clayden et al. 2015: 116). The need for memorialization and the acceptance of a deathscape that changes and might result in a shared (mourning) space was welcomed in Clayden et al.’s study at four British natural burial grounds, as the space was seen as a dynamic place which would, similar to their own emotions and needs, change over time, probably resulting in an anonymous landscape of remembrance, as most grave markers were either trees or made from biodegradable material which would merge more or less seamlessly into the surrounding environment over time. Again, landscape design plays a crucial role when it comes to the present management and objectives of the natural cemetery, as much as it does concerning its perception and role in the future for the bereaved

visitors' forms and notions of memorialization, localization and remembrance in relation to their grieving processes. The very novel and minimalist cemetery concept in France, letting go of an appearance primarily occupied by stone of various forms, paths covered in gravel, massive grey columbaria and war monuments, also made a switch from the usually quite elaborate granite tombstones and commercial memorabilia, such as plaques, plastic flowers and various objects of personal form of remembrance, expressing individuality, as well as personal memorialization and continuing kinship relations. Due to the "lack" of volunteers or death care professionals, helping to realise the sites collective transformation similar to other natural burial sites abroad (Clayden et al. 2015; Davies & Rumble 2012; Nielsen & Groes 2014), the physical site of the cemetery in Niort is publicly managed by municipal workers, tending only the landscape and landscape. The conservation of cemeteries is the administrative force behind its management. It fulfils a position at the crossroads of funeral businesses, the bereaved and non-bereaved visitors, landscape design and verifying people respecting the regulations of the charter and their aesthetic of a natural cemetery. Concerning the ceremonial, ritual and emotional processes and aspects taking place at the site, the intersection of these roles becomes especially apparent during funerals, where families and workers are equally new to the landscape, and less traditional burial practices, such as not using a burial vault or a traditional headstone. The general impression of having laxer guidelines when it comes to funeral processions and ceremonies was emphasised to an extent at the natural cemetery, while, from the point of view of the ceremonial masters, workers and administrations, no grand changes were noticeable. Rather, the possibility of planting flowers and only having biodegradable resources at hand for memorialization and commemoration proved to highlight differences and similarities with other cemetery behaviours, indicating a spiritual engagement, meaning-making and caring for the deceased in a reciprocal manner through especially floral and plant matter.

Whereas Clayden et al. could attest that each of their bereaved participants found ways to encapsulate the unique identities of their deceased loved ones through choosing, doing and living with natural burial, the natural cemetery in Niort proved to be primarily a place of contemplation and respectful cemetery use and a place for doing natural burial secondarily.

7.3 Cremation and Ecological Concerns

Closely connected to these shifts, the rise in cremation rates was primarily explained by them proving to be quicker, more practical, as they offer a greater temporal flexibility, and often cheaper, with alternatives, as the bodies can be kept for longer and burial time kept flexible while also making fairly cheap memorialization possible. In 2017, the national cremation association in France released the most recent cremation rate of 36.5 % (*Association nationale crématisiste* 2017), which is steadily rising, as is the total number of deaths per year and the number of crematoria built. According to the funeral director Rouger, the cremation rate in Niort is 50 %, explained by it being the only crematorium in the region of Deux-Sevres, therefore, encompassing other cities' and villages cremations as well.

Although cremation may seem like a more reasonable practice given the savings in space and funerary material, it uses non-renewable fuels during the incineration process, releasing toxic hot gases, mainly mercury and carbon dioxide, into the atmosphere. Cremation, in this case, proves to be an interesting point of departure to compare one of the main objectives of the Natural Death Movement with this case of a natural cemetery, as the ratio of inhumation, disposal of cremated remains and ash dispersions are each 33 %, and cremation-related burials, therefore, constitute a huge two-thirds of all burials taking place at the natural cemetery.

Clayden et al. rightly note how natural burial might present challenges to the usual working practices, which, in their study, were revealed in the adjustments they had to make in order to operate in a new landscape (Clayden et al. 2015: 115). For a successful incorporation of the "natural" to the cultural funeral landscape, high cremation rates proved to be sensical in the case of Niort, as the significance of having a cement burial vault was not permitted at the natural cemetery. This resulted in very few inhumation graves at the beginning (Clot Interview 2018), only slowly growing in numbers over the years.

[...] deep-seated religious values, ethical concerns and scientific arguments are not likely to reach a mutual agreement easily.

(Šmejda 2017)

While the Natural burial movement aims for burial treatments which could bring us closer to posthumous harmony with nature, emergent research by Ladislav Šmejda and colleagues about geochemical signals of mortuary areas, presented at the

European Geosciences Union in Vienna, has shown that the long-term ecological legacy of former burial places is more imbalanced and hazardous than previously thought (Šmejda 2017; Šmejda et al. 2017), making the natural funeral trend, although far from ecologically neutral, a crucial development. According to the research group, decomposing corpses leach essential nutrients, such as iron, zinc, sulphur, calcium and phosphorus, into ground, which are normally beneficial to local biota but are concentrated in cemeteries instead of being dispersed evenly throughout nature, which, in turn, causes overcompensation and imbalance (Le Roux 2017). With bodies receiving posthumous thanatopractical preservative or medical treatments before burial, the chemical cocktail released into the soil, ground water, and atmosphere amount to an environmental threat that has been neglected in biochemical research. However, it proves to be increasingly emergent with rising population and death rates, resulting in more condensed burial places and higher cremation rates.

While cremations are definitely not a “green” burial choice, emitting 55,000 tons of carbon into the atmosphere by cremating human remains per year in the US alone (Nebhut 2016: 1) and raising serious concerns about mercury pollution (Mari & Domingo 2010), the first step towards a more environmentally conscious approach to the disposal of bodies has been made in France. What seems to be equally important now though are developments in further advocating and educating communities and local authorities about more environmentally friendly death care practices. As Nebhut rightly acknowledges, an outright ban on cremations would be immoral, due to religious and cultural importance of cremation to some communities (Nebhut 2016: 3) and as the example of Niort proved, nonsensical, as the natural cemetery would have perhaps never latched on. Instead, there are a number of easy and culturally acceptable ways to limit the carbon emissions of cremations, such as using energy sources most readily available in the region, for example, either biomass or renewable resources, burning the body without or in a wicker or carton coffin, or removing dental fillings prior to cremation to decrease the release of mercury into the atmosphere, and the required temperature needed for cremation.

7.4 Opting for Enchantment

Clayden et al. (2015: 137) contend that while environmental considerations were relevant factors among their interlocutors in choosing a natural burial site, they are rather secondary motivations. The main objective seemed to be the desire to display individuality through the chosen trees and other plants planted on top of the graves,

providing a representation of the deceased and the possibility of engaging with a wider, shared landscape. Similarly, Davies and Rumble concluded that the wish to be part of a collective landscape among their interlocutors developed through the notion of “returning to the earth” (Davies & Rumble 2012: 134). In the example of Niort, the main motivation to choose this burial site according to the administration was the result of an enchantment by the place itself, which was echoed by the interlocutors on the site, stating that they felt more soothed, calm and at ease here than at traditional counterparts. This impression was equally shared by the non-bereaved, using the place for contemplative, meditative (dog) walks, picnics, educational strolling with their children and social encounters in times of loneliness, and the bereaved, appreciating the “lighter”, less sad, more open and friendly environment, where one could garden, strike up conversations as well as noticing birds, children and plants “going on with life”. Apart from a change in soundscape, the visual appeal was also perceived as contributing to a less “cemetery-like” appearance, especially through the absence of big monuments, crosses being rather “shocking” than a relief for contemplations about death, the afterlife and processes of mourning.

[...] by making the dead more invisible via the absence of headstones or grave markers, the options for what can be done, said and felt in natural burial grounds increases, as funerals and grave visiting become more aligned with celebrating life, and therefore less restricted or bounded by duty or etiquette.

(Davies & Rumble 2012: 55)

In relation to and exchange with the complex background in the UK of the 1990s that brought forth the natural death movement, Davies and Rumble connect a refocusing of attention from traditionally religious afterlife concepts to more personally constructed beliefs accepted and shared by family and friends (2012: 124). In the case of France, the complex background could be seen as a country, shaped not only by a history of a very official and public separation of the church and the state in 1905, but also by philosophical ideologies and thinkers contributing heavily to ideas of the Enlightenment.

Taussig refers to the famous “disenchantment” of the world put forth by Max Weber when he says that: “It needed the Great Awakening brought by Enlightenment for death to finalize things” (Taussig 2001: 310). Stripping magic and myth from everyday life with the advent of industrialization, science and rationality took over the ideological ship in the West, steered by the forces of industrialism and modernity, paying the price of “enchantment”. Sudabby et al. plead for viewing the world re-

enchanted again through certain practices, as “[...] we cannot ignore the tenacious persistence of myth, magic and enchantment in human beliefs, social practices and institutions” (Sudabby et al. 2017: 1). While it is not my intention to attribute my interlocutors with part-taking in a new emerging “mystical spirituality” at this particular cemetery, the positive aspects of this cemetery design on many visitors in comparison to traditional designs, have to be taken into account and seen as intertwined with changes in values, beliefs and meaning-making within this deathscape.

8 Conclusions

As a growing body of scientific literature and media attention towards new ways of depositing, caring for and burying dead bodies indicates, “Corpses provide a wonderful opportunity for experimenting with the art of governance” (Johnson 2008: 788). As I would argue from a socio-cultural perspective, experimenting with the art of changing notions of life and death, nature and culture, purity and uncleanness, spiritualities and environmental concerns are all reflected in recent funeral developments. A rising contemporary interest in all things dead, ranging from social aspects of end-of-life care, with its roots in the palliative care movement of the 1960s, nowadays taken further with death-doula services (Rawlings et al. 2019), home funerals (Hagerty 2014) and DIY coffins, to environmental concerns of more sustainable forms of dead body disposals, can be seen as closely intertwined with the advent of “natural” burials. My goal with this ethnographic, anthropological contribution was to highlight and contribute to a certain movement, combining social and environmental objectives, sometimes referred to as the Natural Burial Movement.

As Abramovitch noted in his outlook on future research, the anthropology of death will need to investigate how local cultural traditions interact with the wider collective and global context (Abramovitch 2016). After this ethnography at the first natural cemetery in France, considering the differences and similarities of this local adaptation to a transnational and transcultural movement, conclusions can be drawn and compared to the broader movement in general. At the same time, emergent areas of further research and cross-cultural comparison can be defined and proposed and an advocacy for a “greener” death in the face of an environmental crisis promoted.

Referring again to the four theoretical questions proposed by Clayden et al. (2015), asking whether natural burial in the UK constitutes “(1) a creative resistance to modernist death care, (2) part of a re-enchantment of death, (3) a form of collective environmental regeneration or (4) a site for individual identity-making” (Clayden et al. 2015: 195), I will now highlight the findings at this one particular site, giving an insight into a funeral culture in dynamic exchange with broader societal and environmental concerns, while prioritizing the local realm of the possible, or, as the creator of the cemetery put it: “what is true in Paris or Lyon, isn’t necessarily true for us here in Niort” (Interview Bodin 2018: 33).

In France, “natural burial” is limited to one cemetery, at the time of ethnographic research only open since 2014, although a move towards cemetery design following a more “vegetal”, park-like approach has been notable all over France in the last decade (Lapouge-Déjean & Royant 2017). One motivation for the conception of the cemetery, according to the creators, was a form of “rebellion” against the “death business”, referring to the commercial aspect of death, leaving behind massive, imported granite tombstones, seldom visited and burdening the families financially. Due to grave reuse being common in France and perpetual concessions now being a thing of the past, these tombs equally burden the environment after their abandonment, as their non-recyclable material is left behind for eternity.

Weber’s notion of the disenchantment of the world suggests that through processes of an emerging modernity, firstly, the moral cognitive and interpretative unity, characterising the enchanted premodern world-view, was shattered and, secondly, the world embarked on a path at the end of which there will be no more mysteries (Jenkins 2000: 15). According to Weber, disenchantment meant the knowledge or belief that there are no mysterious incalculable forces that come into play, but rather that one can, in principle, master all things by calculation (Weber, 1946: 129–139).

Weber’s notion has been questionable ever since anthropological accounts of the presumably homogenous premodern societies offered, quite contrarily, an immeasurable variety of cultures, nevertheless, opens up areas of interrogation within the Natural Death Movement in relation to notions of life, death, continuity, plant life, spirituality and, by their very nature, mystery. Instead, following his notion by highlighting what humanity had to give up to progress, namely, tradition, myth and superstition (Suddaby et al. 2017: 1), I will take death as the *perpetuum mobile* generating and continuing tradition, myth and superstition, as “even” rational developments, such as more environmentally reasonable options for the disposal of dead bodies, generate forms of re-enchantment through the return of religion (Suddaby et al. 2017), or what Davies and Rumble (2012) preferably deem, the return of spirituality. In seeing the institutions of religion as never fully disappearing but, rather, as simply temporarily suppressed by the sediment of alternative myths until new social circumstances allow them to re-emerge, the authors argue that a new form of religion based on post material values gives precedence to self-reflective questions of spirituality and meaning (Suddaby et al. 2017: 5). The visitors and bereaved at the natural cemetery in Niort, in some cases, referred to the place as “inhabited”, “mystical”, “cosmic” and “full of life”, where the soul (Christian, Taoist, or reincarnating) can be free, freer than at its “grey and sad” equivalent of the traditional

cemetery. The most prominent reason for choosing the cemetery was stated as being “enchanted” by the place, its beauty having a calming, soothing effect on contemplative visitors, as for the bereaved, finding solace in nature. Dismissing the appeal of the cemetery due to it being a pleasant-to-be-in urban green space, bringing by its very nature well-documented potential benefits for mental health and wellbeing (Clayden et al. 2018: 100), would neglect the findings of this ethnographic account. In Niort, the bereaved and non-bereaved using the space as a therapeutic mourning space and a place for reflections about death and the return to the earth, entering back into a cycle of life comparable to the socio-ecological metabolism proposed by Marx (Foster 1999), all indicate the spiritual quality of this place, providing its visitors with possibilities of making-meaning in the face of death and the ecological emergency.

The novel cemetery concept, resembling other landscape cemeteries in France, went further in respecting the environment with the exclusion of thanatopractical treatments of the dead bodies, the utilisation of burial vaults and non-biodegradable forms of material commemoration and memorialization. The continuing greening efforts of French municipalities and cities in relation to cemetery landscapes must surely be regarded in relation to the national pesticide ban passed by the government in 2011, resulting in the sudden occurrence of weeds and other plants in public spaces including cemeteries. This change in appearance highlighted a dichotomy within the French realm of the cemetery, closely connected to notions of respect, fear, abandonment, care and control: the purity and danger of flowers and weeds, to use Douglas’ terminology (1984). Given the high ratio of 66 % incineration to 33 % inhumations, the neatly enclosed graves marked each with a uniform tombstone and the “lack” of volunteers or death care professionals grouping the people together and engaging them in efforts to contribute to the “becoming” of a “collective place of environmental regeneration” (Clayden et al. 2015), I could not confirm the example of Niort as fitting this description. Rather, this concept was realised in an effort to meet the changing needs of French families, who were (1) spread out all over the country and abroad, leaving graves untended or abandoned more frequently than ever before; (2) financially less able or willing to invest in elaborate monuments or grave tending services; and (3) visiting the cemeteries less and less. The administration noticing not only the abandonment of graves but also the cemeteries developing into deserted landscapes, responded with a design that should respect the deceased, the environment and families alike. Introducing a park-like aesthetic was also seen as facilitating the goal of reviving the 11 hectares of cemetery land in the city, by promoting the idea of utilising the cemetery for other purposes and activities.

While individual identity-making proved to be less of a particularly prominent aspect mentioned by interlocutors, the expression of bonding, communicating and continuing (kinship) care through biodegradable materials regulated in accordance to the charter proposed by the administration were a notable aspect in interacting with the site materially, as well as in a metaphysical sense between the deceased and non-deceased. Flower commemorations and planting, elaborated by notions of the gift (Mauss & Hubert 2015, Sherry 1983) and sacrifice (Gibson 2010, Lambek 2014), highlighted the different and similar motivations for the bereaved to interact with the space, finding, giving and reciprocating meaning, through *a system of cylindrer*, a cylindrical system of nature that made the flowers grow so nicely, as one bereaved couple phrased it, while planting flowers on their sons cinerary grave.

Persisting traditions, such as the burial vault, keeping the soil and perhaps thoughts about decay and demise at bay, as well as bouquets and sprays of flowers collectively laid on the barren earth covering the grave pit after a funeral, are practices that might hold back funeral innovations aiming to take off the environmental debt they leave behind long after the momentary socio-cultural significance they provide for the deceased and non-deceased. Funeral practices, signifying death as a social event, transforming the status of the deceased member while promoting cohesion of the non-deceased, must be seen as intertwined with a dynamic culture in flux with socio-demographic, economic and ecological changes. The *Cimetière naturel de Souché*, as the first one of its kind in France, sets forth a bold proposition to change handlings with the dead that are deeply connected to commercial interests of funeral businesses and grave stone companies, as well as embedded in culturally defined notions of respect, purity, emotion, care and spirituality. With a sensibility for the local context, the former cemetery director Dominique Bodin, involved with the Niortais cemeteries for over 30 years, and the landscape planner Eve-Marie Ferrer conceptualized a model for a cemetery respecting the dead, the families and the environment to the culturally highest extent and succeeded, burial vault-free pit and all. Niort, as the administrative centre of Deux-Sevres, once before contributed to the shift and rise in former unpopular, or simply unknown funeral practices, such as cremation, with the construction of the region's only crematorium in 1983. Nowadays, the context is one of an ecological emergency, urging a grand move of the dead from the crematoria towards facilities providing more ecologically friendly options, such as promession (freeze-drying the corpse) or resomation (dissolving it in an alkaline hydrolysis). But the journey has only just begun, resulting in a natural cemetery in Niort that still features a cremation rate of 66 %. The motivations behind its construction were influenced as much by the transnational and cross-cultural Natural Burial Movement

as they were by local considerations, but, in any case, this example proved a flexibility of adaptation and the potential for change within an unsustainable sector. At its very best, the Natural Burial Movement will not only extend its roots to a multitude of local contexts, making it more “natural” to dispose of the dead in an environmentally respectful manner but also promoting the advocating of a more sustainable relationship between death, the dead and the living, dissolving the distinction of “us” and the “others”, preferably in an alkaline hydrolysis instead of a crematorium.

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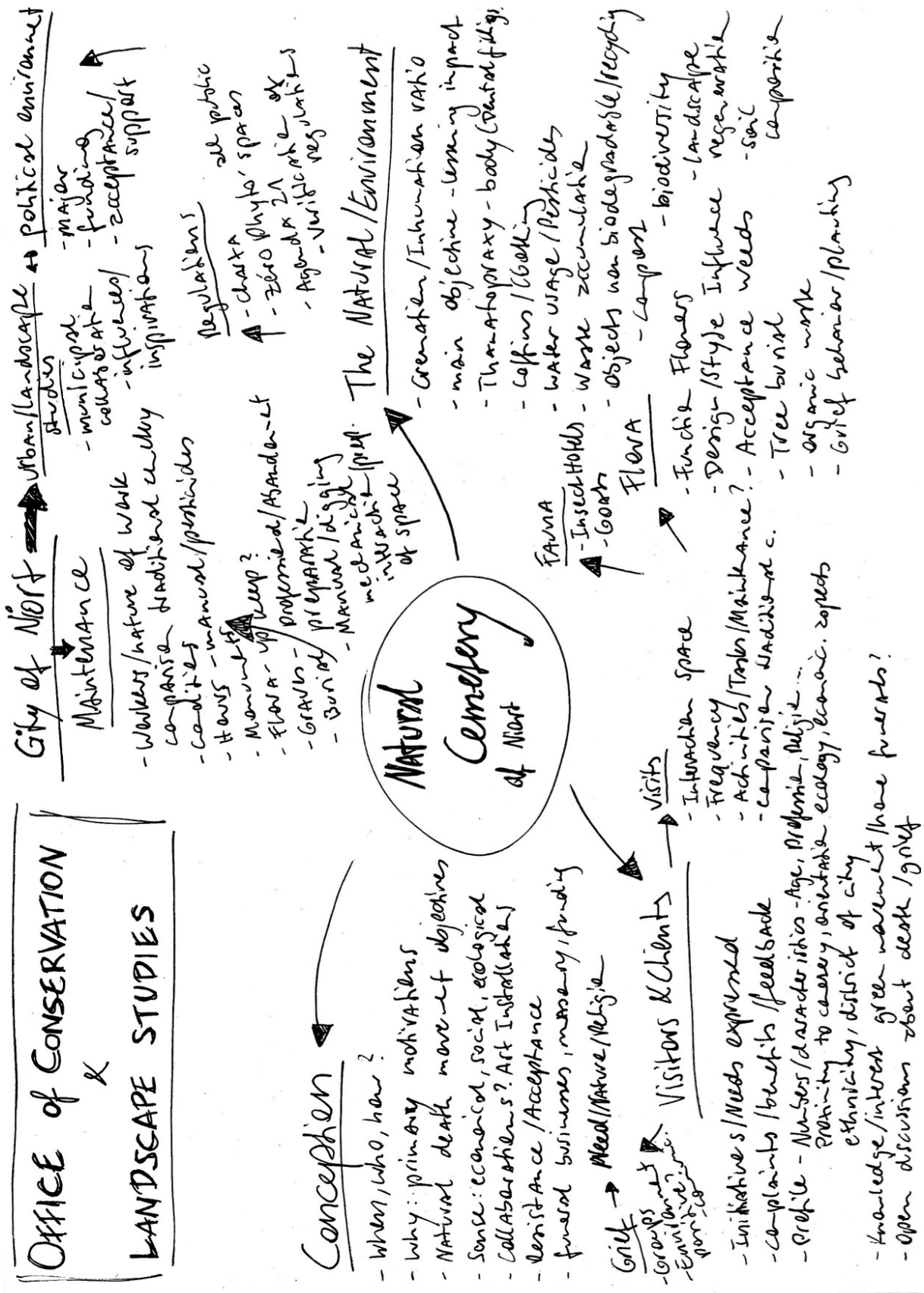
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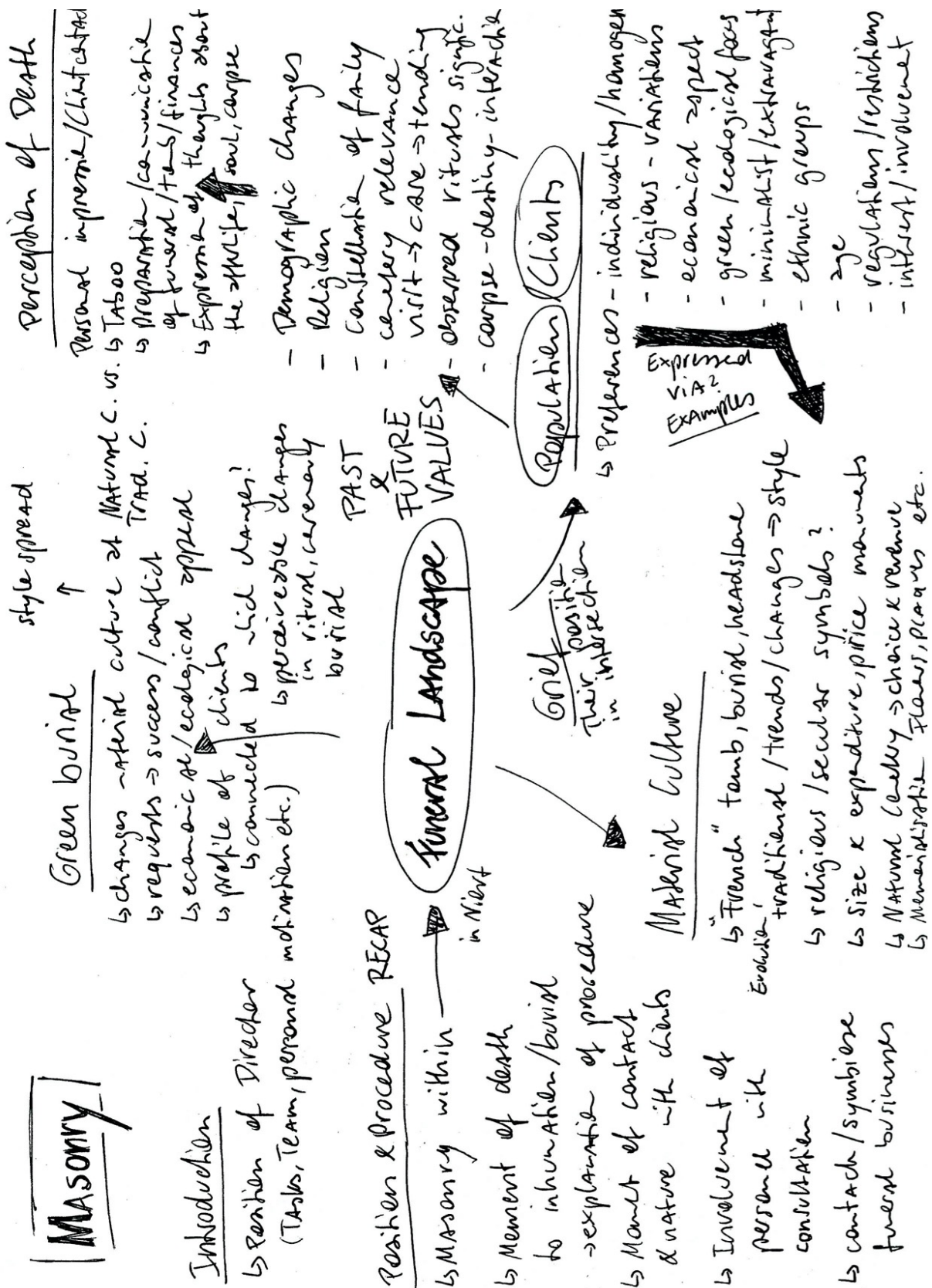
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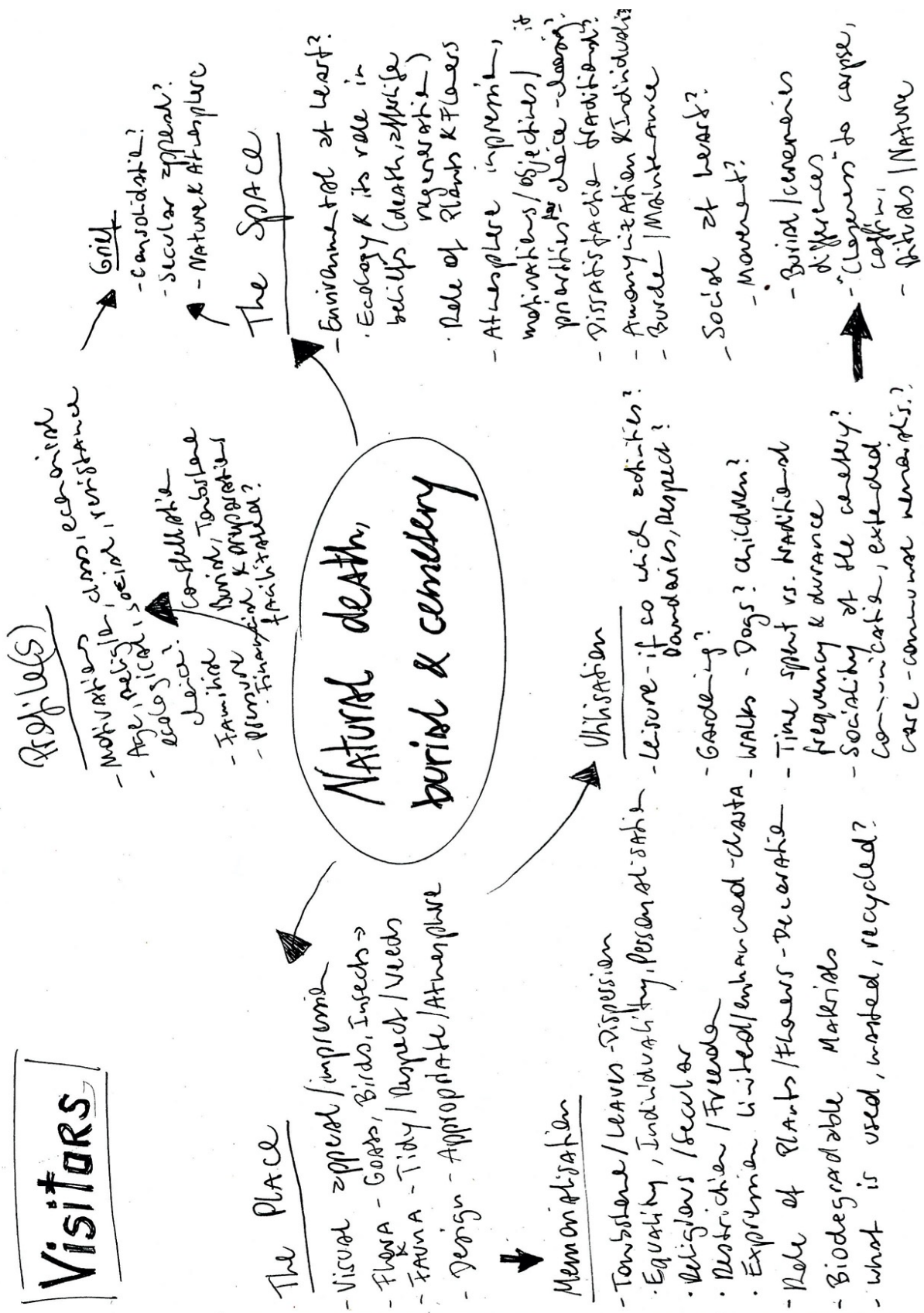
Appendix

Mind map interview guideline for funeral businesses









Abstract English

Death as the great leveler brought, and brings forth, an astonishing variety of practices within different socio-cultural settings when approached anthropologically. Starting in the 1990s in England, a silent revolution of funerary practices and cemetery design labeled as the “natural death movement”, swept over various national contexts, creating a transnational narrative embedded and expressed in local funerary cultures. France, hopping on the natural funeral hearse fairly recently by opening its first natural cemetery “*Cimetière naturel de Souché*” in Niort in 2014, adapted an approach to laying their dead to rest which combines an urban scarcity of space with a desire for autonomy from economically and ecologically costly funeral practices. This ethnographic account took the cemetery as a starting point to examine and reflect the changes in the material as well as immaterial funeral culture in a contemporary, European city. By using qualitative methods, insights about conceptualizations and notions of continuity, nature and culture, gift giving and reciprocity, purity and respect, memorialization, as well as attitudes about death and the afterlife could be gained and compared to the broader movement. As a deathscape and heterotopia, the cemetery mirrored the world of the living and proved to be an insightful place which extended beyond the realm of the dead to reflect pressing objectives concerning urban planning, landscape regeneration, waste management and the need for spiritual interconnectedness between humans, nature and the dead.

Abstract German

Anthropologisch untersucht, brachte und bringt der Tod als großer Gleichmacher eine erstaunliche Diversität an Praktiken in unterschiedlichen sozio-kulturellen Kontexten hervor. Eine Bewegung, genannt „the natural death movement“, steht exemplarisch für ein Umdenken im Bereich der Bestattungspraktiken und Friedhofsgestaltung in Europa, Nordamerika und Japan, indem die BefürworterInnen sich seit den 1990er Jahren für ökologischere und selbstbestimmtere Alternativen im Umgang mit den Sterbenden und Toten einsetzen. Unterschiedliche nationale Kontexte überspannend, wurde so ein transnationaler Narrativ kreiert, der in lokalen Bestattungskulturen adaptiert und verwirklicht wurde. Frankreich zählt seit der Eröffnung seines ersten natürlichen Friedhofes, dem „*Cimetière naturel de Souché*“ in Niort, als junges Mitglied der Bewegung und verbindet urbanen Platzmangel mit Forderungen nach ökonomisch sowie ökologisch günstigeren Bestattungspraktiken. Dieser ethnographische Bericht nahm diesen speziellen Friedhof als den Ausgangspunkt, um

die (im-)materiellen Veränderungen der Bestattungskultur und die Ansichten, Motivationen und Prioritäten der AkteurInnen in einer kontemporären, Europäischen Stadt zu erfahren und wiederzugeben. Mithilfe qualitativer Methoden wurden Konzeptualisierungen und Begriffe wie Kontinuität, Natur und Kultur, Gaben und Reziprozität, Reinheit und Respekt, Memorialisierung, sowie Todes- und Jenseitsvorstellungen im Austausch mit den InformantInnen in Niort definiert und mit der größeren, internationalen Bewegung verglichen. Der Friedhof als Deathscape und Heterotopia wird somit als Spiegel der Welt der Lebenden verstanden und stellt einen fruchtbaren Ort dar, um dringliche Zielsetzungen im Bereich urbaner Stadtplanung und nachhaltiger Landschaftsgestaltung mit Bedürfnissen nach spiritueller Verbundenheit zwischen Mensch, Natur und den Toten zu vereinen.