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**Grave Dispositions:  
Implementing Alternative Methods of Burial in the United States of  
America**

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A thesis submitted for partial fulfillment of the requirements for a Bachelor of Arts degree in  
Environmental and Urban Studies and Public Policy Studies

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*To my lovely, wonderful, beautiful, kind, thoughtful Grandma. There aren't enough words to describe you. זיכרונה לברכה.*

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## **Abstract**

This undergraduate thesis will explore how the adoption of alternative methods of disposition, specifically, alkaline hydrolysis and natural organic reduction, interact with the Green Burial Movement, state policy, and contemporary death culture. Currently, there is scant literature that explores the aforementioned relationships, and what analysis does exist is often solely in the realm of theory. Analyzing industry perceptions of alternative methods of death care will inform an understanding of the factors impeding the implementation of these methods. Through interviews conducted with death-care professionals and members of green death organizations, this thesis will examine how ideological tensions, public misconceptions, and policy creation interact to either support, or prevent, successful adoption of alternative methods of disposition.

### **I. Introduction**

Caring for our dead is a final act of love: we do for them what we know can never be returned or repaid. Processes of disposition, or how the deceased are handled, vary across religion, ethnicity, nation, and class. Some embalm, cremate, perform sky burials, or choose to bury the dead with little to no interference to the corpse. The United States is no different in having diverse death care practices; however, while Americans ostensibly have access to diverse forms of death care, the majority of individuals choose embalming and cremation.<sup>1</sup> While this trend could be attributed to the relative popularity of the aforementioned processes, or tradition, it is important to explore how access, policy, and cultural norms inform this choice. A growing body of social science literature suggests that the discrepancy between the popularity of death care methods does not organically stem from a deep-seated desire for cremation and embalming.

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<sup>1</sup>Cremation Association of North America. n.d. "Cremation Process." Cremation Association of North America. Accessed December 9, 2022. <https://www.cremationassociation.org/page/CremationProcess>.

Rather, a combination of accessibility issues, policy that favors the current post-mortem industry, and modern American cultural distancing from death, has cemented these two methods as the norm.

According to Tanya D. Marsh, a Wake Forest Professor of Law, “on the surface[,] the law of the dead is egalitarian[,] but actually [it] favors certain unfair norms and undermines choice.”<sup>2</sup> In this vein, Americans’ conceptualization of death favors certain norms and processes, in part due to access determined by laws and regulations. As it stands, popular forms of death care favor processes that interfere with the natural process of decomposition, and often pollute the surrounding environment. To implement and popularize green death care styles, proponents of these methods must reshape not only the existing legislation but the public perception of, and approach to, death.

This paper will explore how alternative forms of death care interact with the death care status quo and contemporary green death ideology, to understand the barriers standing in the way of green death popularization. Using interviews with professionals in the death industry, as well as members of the green burial movement, I seek to explore how the push for alternative methods of disposition is perceived within the green death industry. These key stakeholder interviews, while focused on green death, engage with diverse perspectives in that realm and illuminate tensions and challenges in policy implementation and green ideology.

Through this interview-based research, I have noted several thematic challenges to the acceptance of alternative forms of disposition in industry, legislation, and the public sphere. Within the green death movement, tensions have formed surrounding semantic differences in individuals and organizations’ foundational concept of what green burial entails. In developing

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<sup>2</sup> Tanya D. Marsh, “Rethinking the Law of the Dead Essay,” *Wake Forest Law Review* 48, no. 5 (2013): 1328

an understanding of successful and unsuccessful implementations of alternative forms of disposition, I have found that educational campaigns and method-specific legalization facilitate acceptance and ease of implementation. This observation strongly suggests that educating policy workers and striving for general industry awareness would help the green death movement gain mainstream acceptance through the promotion of informed consumer choice. This paper seeks to add to the existing literature through the analysis of death industry professionals' perspectives and perspectives of individuals within the green burial movement. Ultimately, I will explore how entrenched cultural concepts of death in conjunction with tensions within the green death movement and improper regulation challenge successful implementation of alternative methods of disposition.

## **II. Background**

Familiarity with concepts relating to the American death care industry is necessary for understanding this thesis' area of study. The various processes outlined below comprise the majority of available death care in the United States. These methods are arranged thematically, going from popular professional practices (embalming and cremation), to the method favored in the green death community (green or natural burial), to newer methods of disposition (alkaline hydrolysis and natural organic reduction). These practices are not laid out in a strict chronological order. In framing them thematically, the way in which alternative practices have been adopted in response to popular, less sustainable methods, is apparent. For the sake of this paper, alternative methods of disposition refers solely to alkaline hydrolysis and natural organic reduction. Additionally, while similar, this paper will use the term 'green burial movement' to refer to the specific movement surrounding natural burial, while 'green death movement' will refer to the decentralized environmentally focused ideology.

## *Embalming*

Although it has been employed in varying iterations from 6000 BC onwards, embalming in its modern form was not popularized in the United States until the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>3</sup> Researchers broadly attribute the popularization of post-mortem preservation to the advent of embalming and the growing usage of trains to transport the deceased during the Civil War, differing from the simple at-home burials of early America.<sup>45</sup> In short, the Civil War was instrumental to the industrialization of death-care. Currently, while the funeral industry does not publish exact statistics, as of 2019, experts estimate that approximately 50% of bodies in the United States are embalmed.<sup>6</sup> This process takes around three hours, in which the body is disinfected, drained of blood and other fluids, and filled with embalming fluid (formaldehyde and other chemicals).<sup>7</sup> The body is then typically dressed and styled with makeup to mimic natural coloring.<sup>8</sup>

Through an environmentally focused lens, embalming poses several issues. The chemicals used in embalming, primarily formaldehyde, are carcinogenic, risking funeral workers. Additionally, these chemicals can leach into the surrounding soil and groundwater, raising concerns surrounding contamination and public health.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Barton Family Funeral Service. n.d. “Embalming History.” Barton Family Funeral Service. Accessed December 9, 2022. <https://bartonfuneral.com/funeral-basics/history-of-embalming/>.

<sup>4</sup> Katie M. Alfus, “Better Homes and Scattered Gardens: Why Iowa Should Legalize ‘Human Composting’ as a Method of Final Disposition,” *Iowa Law Review* 106, no. 1 (2021 2020): 329

<sup>5</sup> Marsh, “Rethinking the Law of the Dead Essay.” 1330

<sup>6</sup> Jones, Maggie. 2019. “The Movement to Bring Death Closer.” *The New York Times*, December 19, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/19/magazine/home-funeral.html>.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid

<sup>8</sup> Ibid

<sup>9</sup> Bruna Oliveira et al. 2013 “Burial Grounds’ Impact on Groundwater and Public Health: An Overview,” *Water and Environment Journal* 27, no. 1 (2013): 99–106, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1747-6593.2012.00330.x>.

### *Cremation*

According to the Cremation Association of North America, cremation is the “mechanical, thermal, or other dissolution process that reduces human remains to bone fragments.”<sup>10</sup>

Flame-based cremation uses heat to reduce the body to “cremains” or bone fragments which are then pulverized.<sup>11</sup> These remains are then returned to the next of kin in an urn or vessel. Of the listed burial options, cremation creates the most carbon emissions.<sup>12</sup> In a 2021 study, it was estimated that cremations in the United States accounted for 360,000 metric tons of carbon dioxide emissions per year.<sup>13</sup>

### *Green Burial*

Also referred to as “natural burial,” green burial is defined as taking care of the body in a manner that does not inhibit natural processes.<sup>14</sup> Following green burial practices implies three things: corpses are not embalmed, buried in either a biodegradable shroud or casket, and interred in a plot that does not have a concrete vault.<sup>15</sup> It is important to recognize that this practice, while new in its naming convention, is not a recent invention. A wide range of cultures including certain indigenous groups, Jewish people, and Muslim people, have been burying their dead according to these practices for millennia.<sup>16</sup> The modern green burial movement, while formed as

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<sup>10</sup> Cremation Association of North America. n.d. “Cremation Process.” Cremation Association of North America. Accessed December 9, 2022. <https://www.cremationassociation.org/page/CremationProcess>.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid

<sup>12</sup> McDuff, Mallory. 2021. “Ashes to Ashes, Dust to Dust: From Flame Cremation to Aquamation.” In *Our Last Best Act: Planning for the End of Our Lives to Protect the People and Places We Love*, 127-148. N.p.: 1517 Media. DOI: 10.2307/j.ctv1fj84sj.11.

<sup>13</sup> Dominique Mosbergen, “Death Has A Climate Change Problem,” HuffPost, August 31, 2021, [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/green-death-care-practices-water-cremation-natural-organic-reduction\\_n\\_6116c41fe4b0a2603b7db97a](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/green-death-care-practices-water-cremation-natural-organic-reduction_n_6116c41fe4b0a2603b7db97a).

<sup>14</sup> Lincoln Heritage Life Insurance Company. n.d. “2021 Guide to Green Burials (Costs, Grounds, Cemeteries, FAQs).” Lincoln Heritage Life Insurance Company. Accessed December 9, 2022. <https://www.lhlic.com/consumer-resources/green-burial/>.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid

<sup>16</sup> Bailey, Tom. 2020. “Whose Green Burial is it Anyway?” The Order of the Good Death. <https://www.orderofthegooddeath.com/article/whose-green-burial-is-it-anyway/>.



a reaction to the funeral industry's favoring of embalming and cremation, does in some instances frame itself as a return to these older practices.<sup>17</sup> However, it is crucial to recognize that the green burial movement, while overlapping with these cultural practices, is distinct from them.

### *Alkaline Hydrolysis*

Alkaline hydrolysis is the reduction of human remains through “alkaline chemicals, heat, agitation, and pressure.”<sup>18</sup> The remaining bone fragments are then collected, pulverized, and returned to the family or next of kin.<sup>19</sup> Due to cremation's broad definition, alkaline hydrolysis is sometimes referred to as a form of cremation since it is a thermal process that reduces human remains to bone fragments.<sup>20</sup> While this process is legal in twenty-eight states, it is not provided in all.<sup>21</sup>

### *Natural Organic Reduction*

Colloquially referred to as “human composting,” natural organic reduction (NOR) involves the use of traditional composting methods to reduce the corpse to bone fragments and soil, which are then processed and added back to the composted soil.<sup>22</sup> Due to land-use constraints and accessibility issues relating to cost and location, NOR was initially invented as a means of providing urban residents with the option of green burial.<sup>23</sup> Now legal in six states (Washington, California, Colorado, Oregon, Vermont, and New York) NOR presents a new

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<sup>17</sup>The Green Burial Council, “Our Mission,” GREEN BURIAL COUNCIL, accessed March 6, 2023, [https://www.greenburialcouncil.org/our\\_mission.html](https://www.greenburialcouncil.org/our_mission.html).

<sup>18</sup> Cremation Association of North America. n.d. “Cremation Process.”

<sup>19</sup> Ibid

<sup>20</sup> Ibid

<sup>21</sup> Andrew McGee, “Where Is Aquamation Legal? Which States Have Legalized Aquamation or Bio Cremation?,” US Funerals Online (blog), February 2, 2023, <https://www.us-funerals.com/where-is-aquamation-legal-which-states-have-legalized-aquamation-or-bio-cremation/>.

<sup>22</sup> Recompose. n.d. “Recompose — Our Model.” Recompose. Accessed December 9, 2022. <https://recompose.life/our-model/>.

<sup>23</sup> Spade, Katrina M. 2013. “Of Dirt and Decomposition: Proposing a Place for the Urban Dead.” *University of Massachusetts Amherst*.

frontier for the green burial movement.<sup>24</sup> It is often legalized through its inclusion under the legal definition of cremation: natural organic reduction is technically a thermal process that reduces human remains to bone fragments.<sup>25</sup> To that effect, NOR's success is intrinsically tied to both the legalization, and public perception, of other alternative burial practices such as alkaline hydrolysis.

### *Summary*

In brief, these methods of disposition can be categorized as either preventing decomposition, reducing the body to bone fragments, and facilitating natural processes. Embalming seeks to stall decomposition, preserving the corpse and attempting to prolong its appearance. Cremation and alkaline hydrolysis use a combination of thermal, chemical, and mechanical means to rid the corpse of tissue and create a ground powder from its bones. Lastly, green burial and NOR, while different in their process (green burial is single step whereas NOR requires additional processing post-reduction), aim to decompose the corpse. These processes are rooted in varying cultural practices and conceptions of the corpse. Reading them alongside each other helps to illuminate similarities and differences in method, as well as underlying reason for use.

## **III. Literature Review**

### *Conceptualizing the Corpse*

Our cultural understanding of the corpse not only informs how we interact with it socially, but how it is regulated on an economic and political level. In his seminal work, Professor Phillip Olson describes four types of corpse. The “medicalized” or “funeralized

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<sup>24</sup> Kuta, Sarah. 2022. “California Has Legalized Human Composting | Smart News.” *Smithsonian Magazine*, September 21, 2022. <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/california-has-legalized-human-composting-180980809/>.

<sup>25</sup> Cremation Association of North America. n.d. “Cremation Process.”

corpse” wherein the body is seen as something that “must be handled by professionals”—in this case health care workers and funeral home employees.<sup>26</sup> The “sacred corpse” is “deserving of dignity,” often through religious rites, and is cared for by religious leaders and groups.<sup>27</sup><sup>28</sup> The “contaminated corpse,” which is based on the notion that the dead body is inherently “disease-ridden and a danger to public health,” and isn’t deserving of care beyond containment.<sup>29</sup> Lastly, there is the “eco-corpse,” which presents the corpse as a “untainted, wholesome, even nutritive entity.”<sup>30</sup> This eco-corpse is something that, unlike the above three concepts, is capable of giving care and not just receiving it. In applying these conceptions to the literature surrounding American death culture and death policy, it is apparent which practices favor which concepts and vice versa. Understanding the cultural perspectives informing these laws provides a foundation for future study of alternative death practices.

### *The Professionalization of the Death Industry*

The literature surrounding embalming and cremation primarily engages with the creation of the modern death care industry, and the manner in which it has fostered the commodification of death. In analyzing the interplay between these two concepts, one can understand how certain perceptions of the corpse became the dominant culture in the nation, and in turn, shaped policy on a state and local level. From its origin in the Civil War, embalming grew in popularity in the United States, resulting in state regulation of the practice.<sup>31</sup> Jeremiah Chiappelli and Ted Chiappelli, health science researchers, argue this regulation “tacitly encourage[d] embalming by

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<sup>26</sup> Asmara M. Tekle, “Have a Scoop of Grandpa: Composting as a Means of Final Disposition of Human Remains,” *Savannah Law Review* 3, no. 1 (2016): 146.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid* 147

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>30</sup> Philip R. Olson, “Flush and Bone: Funeralizing Alkaline Hydrolysis in the United States,” *Science, Technology, & Human Values* 39, no. 5 (2014): 677.

<sup>31</sup> Jeremiah Chiappelli and Ted Chiappelli, “Drinking Grandma: The Problem of Embalming,” *Journal of Environmental Health* 71, no. 5 (2008): 24

linking funeral home licenses with embalming certifications.”<sup>32</sup> This linkage encouraged the literature’s narrative of the “medicalized” or “funeralized corpse,” “displac[ing] the authority of the domestic family by that of ‘the administrative authorities, particularly in the form of medicine, which demanded the ritual of death certification and registration.’”<sup>33</sup> Beyond serving this medicalized concept, embalming also supported the idea of the “sacred corpse” in its creation of “‘memory picture’ for display at a funeral, to help loved ones cope with the process of letting go.”<sup>34</sup> Thus, groups previously opposed to embalming, like the Catholic church, gradually approved of the practice.<sup>35</sup> In this vein, we can understand how a single death practice (embalming) became a dominant methodology through analyzing how it engages with two separate schools of post-mortem thought.

Regarding cremation, fear of the spread of disease during the HIV and Hepatitis B outbreaks in the 1980s furthered the narrative of the “contaminating corpse,” or the idea that the dead body is innately unclean and unsafe.<sup>36</sup> Geographer Shiloh R. Krupar expands upon this analysis, arguing that cremation was seen as a form of “sanitation,” which in turn bolstered its popularity.<sup>37</sup> While the funeralized corpse and contaminated corpse schools of thought may seem in opposition, both concepts served to further the funeral homes’ professionalization and monopolization of death care. In other words, both cremation and embalming fostered what Krupar calls the “commodification of death” as a result of widening cultural distance from death

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid 24

<sup>33</sup> Tekle, “Have a Scoop of Grandpa: Composting as a Means of Final Disposition of Human Remains.” 146; Olson, “Flush and Bone: Funeralizing Alkaline Hydrolysis in the United States.” 669

<sup>34</sup> Alfus, “Better Homes and Scattered Gardens: Why Iowa Should Legalize ‘Human Composting’ as a Method of Final Disposition.” 329

<sup>35</sup> Tekle, “Have a Scoop of Grandpa: Composting as a Means of Final Disposition of Human Remains.” 147

<sup>36</sup> Ibid 147

<sup>37</sup> Shiloh R Krupar, “Green Death: Sustainability and the Administration of the Dead,” *Cultural Geographies* 25, no. 2 (2018): 270.

processes.<sup>38</sup> This metamorphosis in perception influenced not only widespread cultural concepts of death, but also death-related policies and power structures. This paper does not aim to discredit any of these factors or belief systems, post-mortem care is an incredibly personal and often culturally important choice. Rather, it stipulates that further research is required to better understand the ramifications of these death ideologies on an environmental and policy level. In examining the central tensions stemming from these belief systems and how they interact with these alternative methods of disposition, I aim to build a framework of what is stalling, or facilitating, the implementation and adoption of these methods.

### *The Green Death Movement*

Embalming and cremation are the dominant funerary practices in the United States, and they are not without severe environmental costs.<sup>39,40</sup> While embalming is often construed as more sanitary, the fluid used “can contaminate water and cause other health problems.”<sup>41,42</sup> Exposure to formaldehyde, a chemical used in embalming, “affects funeral workers’ health, demonstrated by a high incidence of leukemia and brain and colon cancer among embalmers.”<sup>43</sup> Additionally, American cremation is estimated to create 360,000 metric tons of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions per year.<sup>44</sup> These consequences, along with a confluence of additional cultural factors, galvanized the creation of what is now known as the green death or green burial movement. Proponents of this

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid 273, 270

<sup>39</sup> Alexandra Harker, “Landscapes of the Dead: An Argument for Conservation Burial,” *Berkeley Planning Journal* 25, no. 1 (2012), <https://doi.org/10.5070/BP325111923>.

<sup>40</sup> Bruna Oliveira et al., “Burial Grounds’ Impact on Groundwater and Public Health: An Overview.”

<sup>41</sup> Alfus, “Better Homes and Scattered Gardens: Why Iowa Should Legalize ‘Human Composting’ as a Method of Final Disposition.” 330

<sup>42</sup> Johnny P. Stowe, Elise Vernon Schmidt, and Deborah Green, “Toxic Burials: The Final Insult,” *Conservation Biology* 15, no. 6 (2001): 1817

<sup>43</sup> Harker, “Landscapes of the Dead: An Argument for Conservation Burial.” 151

<sup>44</sup> Becky Little, “The Environmental Toll of Cremating the Dead,” *National Geographic*, November 5, 2019, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/science/article/is-cremation-environmentally-friendly-heres-the-science>.

ideology espouse Olson's concept of the "eco-corpse;" the notion that the dead body is a pure entity that has been unfortunately "sullied by the environmentally toxic practices of the mortuary-industrial complex."<sup>45</sup>

Relevant literature surrounding the green death movement, like that of other death movements, portray it as centered around solving the problem of death.<sup>46</sup> At face value, green burials purport to "minimize environmental impacts by minimizing the use of land, chemicals, and traditional caskets."<sup>47</sup> Katie M. Alfus, a judicial law clerk, frames NOR as posing "a solution to the problem of finite land for burying our dead," and "diminish[ing] the environmental harms of traditional mortuary practices."<sup>48</sup> Asmara Tekle, a Texas Southern University law professor, portrays this mission as spiritual, an "'act of healing' that respects the earth by enriching its foundation: the soil."<sup>49</sup> This act of healing extends to a rejection of the mortuary-industrial complex and an aim to rectify a perceived cultural distance surrounding death care.

Other forms of alternative burial, namely alkaline hydrolysis, became aligned with the green burial movement due to similar origin time and purpose: reducing carbon emissions.<sup>50</sup> Alkaline hydrolysis, also known as water cremation, is the process in which a corpse is reduced to bone fragments using high pressure water and alkaline chemicals.<sup>51</sup> Despite its alignment with the green burial movement, alkaline hydrolysis is a practice which is solely accessible through professional funeral homes, maintaining the narrative of the funeralized corpse.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Tekle, "Have a Scoop of Grandpa: Composting as a Means of Final Disposition of Human Remains." 147

<sup>46</sup> Krupar, "Green Death: Sustainability and the Administration of the Dead."

<sup>47</sup> Alfus, "Better Homes and Scattered Gardens: Why Iowa Should Legalize 'Human Composting' as a Method of Final Disposition." 331

<sup>48</sup> Ibid 346, 348

<sup>49</sup> Tekle "Have a Scoop of Grandpa: Composting as a Means of Final Disposition of Human Remains." 139

<sup>50</sup> Olson, "Flush and Bone: Funeralizing Alkaline Hydrolysis in the United States." 668

<sup>51</sup> Ibid 666

<sup>52</sup> Ibid 679

*The Problem of Alkaline Hydrolysis*

While consistently included in discussions surrounding the green death movement, alkaline hydrolysis is aligned more strongly with mainstream death care and practice. It eschews the notion of the eco or even sacred corpse. Rather, it propagates the commodification of the dead in the funeral industry.<sup>53</sup> Olson asserts that alkaline hydrolysis allows funeral directors to “maintain their professional authority over the corpse, and to keep eco-conscientious funeral consumers within the fold of professionalized and industrialized funeral protocols.”<sup>54</sup> While alkaline hydrolysis presents a greener alternative to cremation in terms of carbon output, its treatment of the corpse as an entity solely for professional handling prevents it from being wholly accepted within the green burial community.<sup>55</sup> This division in underlying belief, between eco-corpse and funeralized corpse, sets the foundation for a tension within the green death movement: shrinking the cultural distance and involving the bereaved in the death care versus conceding to the norm of professional death care in order to reduce carbon output.

In states where alkaline hydrolysis has been legalized, it was either referred to as a unique process, or was folded under the pre-existing definition of cremation as a “statutorily as a process (mechanical, thermal, or chemical) that reduces the body to bone.”<sup>56</sup> The inclusion of alkaline hydrolysis under the definition of cremation indicates a potential for other alternative burial methods to be similarly subsumed.<sup>57</sup> Given the temperature requirements for safe human composting, NOR fits under the definition of cremation as a “thermal” process “that reduces the body to bone.”<sup>58</sup> In short, Tekle argues that rejection of alkaline hydrolysis within the traditional

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<sup>53</sup> Olson, “Flush and Bone: Funeralizing Alkaline Hydrolysis in the United States.” 679

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid* 679

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid* 681

<sup>56</sup> Tekle, “Have a Scoop of Grandpa: Composting as a Means of Final Disposition of Human Remains.” 156

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid* 156–157

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid* 156

funeral industry stems from its perceived compromising of traditional cremation practices. On the other side, the green death movement rejects alkaline hydrolysis for its perceived normative professional stance on death, as well as its carbon output (albeit lower than that of flame-based cremation). To that effect, the relative palatability of alkaline hydrolysis in a traditional funeral context is complicated by the manner in which its legalization in a given state could “disrupt the institutional power structures that sustain the US funeral industry’s dominion over dead bodies,” through the door it opens for alternative death practices.<sup>59</sup> It is this subversion of modern death practices and policies that this paper aims to expand upon and explore through qualitative research.

### *Research Gap*

While there is literature that engages with the American cultural concept of the corpse and its relation to death law, the significance of alkaline hydrolysis and natural organic reductions’ legalization, and their implications for the green burial movement remains largely unexplored. The majority of existing literature remains rooted in the realm of theory with little study of the real-world application of green death practices. Additionally, while there is scholarship pertaining to various cultural understandings of death, there isn’t specific study on how these different cultures and traditions incorporate alternative death practices into their belief systems. Gaining perspectives from traditional death care industry workers could aid in informing effective and respectful green death outreach and education. In exploring current death care practices through Olsen’s concept of the corpse, it is apparent how certain methods invoke or favor certain concepts. For instance, embalming furthers the funeralized narrative of the corpse and the renewed interest in green burial emphasizes an ecological perspective of the

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<sup>59</sup> Olson, “Flush and Bone: Funeralizing Alkaline Hydrolysis in the United States.” 682



corpse. While some concepts work in concert, specifically medicalization and contamination in embalming and cremation, these notions are not diametrically opposed, feeding into what I will henceforth refer to as the ‘professionalization’ of the corpse. This term encapsulates the fact that these two conceptions hinge upon the idea that death is something that requires professional handling. For alkaline hydrolysis and natural organic reduction, however, these methods espouse contrasting narratives, sitting at a junction between professionalization and the eco-corpse. This dual concept has not been thus far explored in a meaningful capacity in the existing scholarship. This paper therefore aims to expand upon this existing literature and, using interview-based data, further examine how these seemingly contradicting conceptual frameworks function on a practical level in the implementation of alternative methods of disposition, and how these the relationships are reflected in entrenched cultural beliefs surrounding death as well as on an industry and regulatory level.

#### **IV. Methods**

While current literature has explored the relationship between American death policy and burial culture, specifically as it pertains to the green death movement, there is a dearth of research exploring this relationship on a practical level through the professional experience of funeral home workers. I decided to use interviews as my primary method of data collection since the inclusion of first hand perspectives would not only add nuance to my findings, but provide outlooks I wouldn’t find through strict policy analysis. These interviews were intended to illuminate the influence of American death culture and policy on the green death movement as a whole. From November of 2022 through February of 2023, I gathered interview-based data. These interviews were largely composed of past and current funeral home workers, as well as

individuals working in education and outreach. All interviews were recorded through software on a personal laptop and transcribed through otter.ai, a speech transcription program.

I largely found interview participants through the Green Burial Council's list of green funeral homes. From there I either emailed individuals or reached out through LinkedIn. I also used a snowballing method where I asked participants to share information about my study with other potential interviewees. Through this method I gained five additional participants. Interviews took place over the phone and were roughly 45 minutes in length. Subjects were asked a series of open questions surrounding death care and culture, as well as the relationship with municipal policy and their respective practices. I used an interview script to serve as a guideline and allowed the conversation to flow naturally.

Upon completion of the interview transcripts, I analyzed the data. Given these are stakeholder interviews, I did not use a particular coding method. Rather, I used content analysis, focusing on participants' particular experiences and phrasing, bolding relevant and compelling sections. After I finished this initial read through, I sorted these quotations and key concepts into research buckets or categories. These categories were as follows: education, public perception, misconceptions, and green burial ideology. These categories were not the same I ultimately used in my findings, but assisted in noticing thematic trends.

There are drawbacks to depending upon interview-based data. Relying on qualitative research also required a discerning eye for bias and a good foundation of knowledge of the topic at hand to fact check participants' claims. The effectiveness of this study will also be limited by the number of participants and is subject to response bias. Individuals who want to participate in undergraduate research may differ in significant ways from ones who do not. Additionally, it was difficult zeroing on a specific region due to the widespread nature of the movement and the

networks of communication between funeral homes. However, the benefits of using this means of data collection far outweighed any potential difficulties, thus informing the selection of this method in this thesis. Using interviews from numerous individuals within the same field of work allowed me to compare perspectives and opinions, analyzing the implications of where they overlapped and where they differed. It also provided insight into underlying cultural beliefs that using quantitative data, such as spatial analysis, would not have.<sup>60</sup>

<b>Name</b>	<b>Affiliation</b>	<b>Date</b>
Caitlyn Hauke	Green Burial Council, Inc.	11/28/22
Kahla Flores	White Rose Aqua Cremation, Inc.	12/6/22
Rachel Essig	River View Cemetery	12/6/22
Jeff Hodes	Cemetery Management Solutions	12/12/22
Lee Webster	New Hampshire Funeral Resources	12/12/22
Emily Miller	Green Burial Council, Inc	12/16/22
Barbara Kemmis	Cremation Association of North America	1/18/23
Kevin Bork	Barton Family Funeral Service	1/30/23
Dean Fisher	Fisher & Associates	1/31/23
Katey Houston	Return Home	2/8/23

## **V. Findings**

The following findings are separated into four sections: Misconceptions, Public Response, Legalization and Implementation, and the Green Death Response. While these sections are related to each other, dividing the data in this manner allowed for in-depth

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<sup>60</sup> It should be noted that these individuals don't unanimously share the opinions of all those in their organizations.

examination of the factors influencing it on a smaller scale, which in turn illuminated the manner in which these factors work in concert with each other. Through this analysis, I aim to develop an understanding of how cultural concepts of the corpse, improper regulation, and differences in core beliefs interact with each other and impact the effective implementation of alternative methods of disposition.

### **Misconceptions and Entrenched Concepts**

#### “Myth-busting:” Educating Consumers and Fighting Stigma

While newer forms of disposition such as natural organic reduction (NOR) and alkaline hydrolysis are not currently legal nation-wide, other forms of death care, such as various forms of burial and cremation, are perfectly legal and socially accepted options. Lee Webster, past president of the Green Burial Council, claims that the main obstacle for green burial is not grounded in policy issues. She attributes issues in acceptance to education, or rather, the lack of education. Thus, as a proponent of green death in a public facing role, she describes her job largely as “myth-busting.” Webster asserts that people commonly assume that they don’t have “authority [...] and control of the dead body of their next of kin,” that “there’s a funeral police” monitoring their choice. The second prevalent misconception is that “funeral directors are out to gouge [people].” She draws an analogy between calling a plumber versus getting the tools at home depot and learning how to fix the pipes yourself; Webster recognizes that these professionals are “there to make a living” but compares their role to that of seeking professionals for other work that one could technically do themselves. Individuals’ simultaneous requirement of a service (death-care) and contempt for those providing the service is not a new phenomenon: after opening the corpse to prepare it for embalming, morticians in Ptolemaic and Early Roman

Egypt could expect to be driven from the scene under a “hail of stones and curses.”<sup>61</sup> Indeed, not only does the public find it hard to contend with the concept of running a business based on others’ death, industry professionals find it difficult to explicitly engage with the economic side of their work. Numerous interviewees would explain how their particular facility aimed to serve the client and kin first, protect the environment second, all while turning a profit by coincidence. It is perhaps this lack of acknowledgement of the business aspect of, well, running a death-based business, that informs some consumer lack of trust.

These two key misconceptions make it difficult for newer facilities and existing green death facilities to gain consumer trust over ‘traditional funeral homes.’ Combatting the entrenched misconceptions and stigmas outlined in previous sections requires thoughtful and accessible education. Webster describes the aim of the Green Burial Council’s education and outreach sector as,

“We hope that people are going to be able to find us and want to know the truth. [...] **the public does a really good job of regulating this, when the public sees the facts that we put out, and then they see what [...] someone's offering they put two and two together.** It's just a natural [...] supply and demand kind of thing.”

In this regard, the Green Burial Council not only strives to educate the public on their options, but to enable them to make informed decisions regarding potential gimmicks and greenwashing. The thought process is that while facilities improperly advertising alkaline hydrolysis may not be shut down under current state laws and regulations, if the public is properly informed, they can regulate through consumer choice. Webster says she “wish[es] that more people would be patient enough to do their due diligence when they make these decisions”

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<sup>61</sup>John Bodet, “Dealing with the Dead: Undertakers, Executioners, and Potter’s Fields in Ancient Rome,” in *Death and Disease in the Ancient City*, ed. Valerie M. Hope and Eireann Marshall, 1st ed. (Routledge, 2011), 135.

and ensure they aren't getting swept away by "gimmicky, crazy things that ha[ve] no scientific basis" like "mushroom suits and mushroom coffins."

"Nuclear Waste:" The Spread of the Contaminated Corpse

While all of Philip Olson's four concepts of the corpse are still apparent in American society, it is the continued belief in the "contaminated corpse" concept that proves to be one of the most significant barriers to green death acceptance. Caitlyn Hauke, a board member of the Green Burial Council, indirectly refers to this concept in her explanation of how misconceptions surrounding sanitation prevent green burial ideology from gaining traction in the public sphere. One of the main 'myths' concerning Hauke is the notion that if you bury a body without a casket or concrete vault lining the grave, that contaminants from the decomposing corpse will leach into the soil. While embalming has been linked to soil contamination, corpses that have not been preserved have not been linked to any such pollution. Regardless of the validity of this belief in corpse-based soil contamination, several interviewees regarded it as highly prevalent in the public sphere. Hauke described how "there is this [...] misconception that dead bodies are harmful," attributing it to the "disease statement of you need to get this body either preserved or in the ground immediately, or bad things are gonna happen." This sentiment Hauke describes goes back to the scholarly concept of the "contaminated corpse:" the idea that the corpse necessitates sterilization as a protection for the living. From Hauke's perspective, this strong concept of contamination is explicitly connected to "why people tend to be a little bit more reluctant or less open to green burial."

Hauke reaffirms the importance of education to combat this notion, stating that "folks who are participating in the conversation are learning like, this is actually the process of decomposition, and this is what's happening to your body." She sums up the phenomenon saying,

“The funeral industry has done a really good job of convincing people that as soon as your person dies, they become nuclear waste. And only a professional can deal with that. [...] But **the hands that loved you for the last couple of months as you're dying, [aren't suddenly not able to] take care of you just because you're not breathing, right?**”

Similar to Webster's argument, Hauke depicts awareness and engagement with the concept of death as the main means of combating not only fear of death, but harmful conceptions of the body.

## **Public Response**

### “Opening a Dialogue About Death:” Breaking Taboos in American Culture

Taboos surrounding death in modern American culture prevent open conversation and education surrounding death care options. Since embalming and cremation are the most touted forms of disposition, individuals often select these for themselves, or their kin, without much forethought. Hauke elaborates upon this, saying that “the challenge is just opening a dialogue about death in general.” Specifically, in America, Hauke describes the current cultural context as “very death-phobic, it's very taboo to have these conversations.” These conversations are instrumental to the success of green death care. Dean Fisher, founder of the alkaline hydrolysis company Fisher & Associates, furthers this notion, saying that “educating [people] before they need the service [...] so that they can actually make [a decision] when they walk into the funeral home, they know already that we're going to pick this technology” is more successful than attempting to gain clients in the moment. She adds that she believes things are “changing a little bit” and that “people are becoming more open,” but that nonetheless this reticence makes it challenging to broaden awareness surrounding disposition choice. This reticence is in part due to the rampant professionalization of the death industry, which has taken the corpse out of public view and consciousness. In recent years however, particularly due to the Covid-19 pandemic, individuals have been confronting, or confronted by, their own mortality. This opening of public

engagement has begun to shift the cultural tides.<sup>62</sup> According to interviewees, this has led to a larger proportion of pre-need clients, or individuals seeking options in advance of their deaths, interested in exploring their options and engaging with their personal death process.

These changes are important considering the fact that the majority of interviewees explicitly pointed to the lack of awareness the general public has surrounding green burial and alternative methods of disposition as a bulwark to these methods' adoption. Hauke explains that “if you want a green burial, but you don't actually communicate about it, or potentially put any sort of work in the forefront [...] it's harder to actually get that accomplished.” This would explain then, why green death facility professionals claim the majority of their client-base is pre-need. This client demographic also poses an additional barrier to the green death's success in terms of economic viability due to the lack of at-need (already deceased) clients. Funeral homes often gain at-need clients from hospital or hospice referrals, or community recognition. Lacking these at-need clients indicates a lack of community connection, and broader health industry acceptance. Thus, many green death facilities work to actively combat these social taboos surrounding death, hosting seminars, educating communities, reaching out to hospices, and working one-on-one with clients to break past “death-phobic” barriers.

The foundational tenets of green burial are a biodegradable outside container (if a container is used at all), no concrete vault in the burial plot, and a lack of embalming. While NOR doesn't meet the definition of standard green burial, it still aims to uphold the tenets of the practice. Katey Houston, a services manager with Return Home, a NOR facility, describes how adhering to the lack of embalming in particular helps heal cultural death-taboo barriers,

**“The American way of death is death denying, and that's what embalming**

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<sup>62</sup> The Economist. 2020. “Covid-19 is helping wealthy countries talk about death.” October 8, 2020. <https://www.economist.com/international/2020/10/08/covid-19-is-helping-wealthy-countries-talk-about-death>.



**does, it makes people look like they're kind of alive and sleeping [...] And for us, [...] people are not embalmed, they don't look perfect, they often look totally beautiful, but they don't look the same as they did when they were alive. They're sometimes discolored, they're cold to the touch. But they're also more approachable."**

This quotation illuminates how, for Houston, green death is about shrinking the cultural gap that has driven individuals away from caring for their dead. She acknowledges that not every individual seeks that out in their grief-process, that some would prefer distance. Thus, she describes her aim as "returning power to families." Facilitating individual expression of death-based desires is difficult in the face of entrenched cultural norms. Kevin Bork of Barton Family Funeral Service, references "the impact of tradition" and how clients hold "on to the old ways, just because that's how it's always been done." This often manifests in the form of feelings of shame and guilt surrounding emotional expressions and grieving. Bork describes his duty as being a facilitator, not just a director, "a lot of my job is just making people try to feel comfortable, feeling terrible [that] whatever you're feeling is natural, normal and okay." This emphasis on "natural, normal and okay" indicates the manner in which American cultural distance from death has perverted individual and communal sense of what not only death, but grief, looks like.

Rachel Essig of Riverview Cemetery echoes Barton's sentiment, describing her role as not only facilitating death care, but also showing clients that "it's okay to interact with [their] loved one and say goodbye," that they can be a part of the body's preparation and the burial itself. She likens the process to birth, saying "you don't have to go to a sanitized place to give birth [...] something that your body's designed to do [...] It's the same thing with that we [...] created this artificial situation that really doesn't need to be there." This "artificial situation," referring to the professionalization of death care and the taboo of the corpse. Human bodies are,

against our best efforts, designed to die and decompose. The medicalization of dying and professionalization of post-mortem processes has warped individual expectations for not only what their own death will look like, but what they can ask for in terms of taking care of their loved dead.

### “A Breaking Bad Type of Situation:” Stigmas and Misinformation

While individuals seek out alkaline hydrolysis as a purported “gentler” form of cremation, Kahla Flores, a technician with the alkaline hydrolysis facility White Rose Aqua, states that “there’s just a lot of stigma and miseducation.” These assumptions can make it difficult to effectively sell and promote the idea of alkaline hydrolysis. Flores recounts getting phone calls asking if their facility was a “Breaking Bad type of situation” referring to scenes in the show where corpses are dissolved in acid. Individuals will also ask if a “liquid of sorts” is returned back to families (similar to flame-cremation, alkaline hydrolysis returns pulverized bones). Flores elaborates upon these misconceptions, saying that “the number one thing is that people definitely jumped to the conclusion of liquefying people.” She goes on to correct this notion, “we’re not using any harsh products or chemicals or acids” since people commonly believe that the body is broken down and then “flush[ed] down the systems.” While these misconceptions seem rooted in individual fixation on the grotesque and popular culture, they also stem from a desire to care for loved ones in a respectful manner. This desire both informs public contempt for, and as outlined in the following section, public desire for the process.

Additionally, interviews claim many potential consumers were concerned with alkaline hydrolysis’ validity as a green process. Flores recalls receiving “a lot of calls asking, you know, are you guys just greenwashing. We’ve been told that a lot of these water cremation facilities state that they’re eco friendly and sustainable funeral homes, and they’re not.” This alleged lack

of stringency within other funeral homes shines negatively on all facilities associated with the technology. According to Flores, some of these homes even use some of the misconceptions to sell their service, referring to alkaline hydrolysis as a liquefying or acid-based procedure.

Houston echoes some of these concerns specific to NOR, saying that “having companies out there that are not being transparent, in my opinion, would lead to families who may later find out something that they are not comfortable with.” Analysis surrounding concerns with proper regulation and green-washing will be further explored in subsequent sections, however, from a public stand point, these concerns indicate what Webster alluded to in her discussion of consumer regulation. In short, that consumer skepticism does in some ways act as a safeguard against lack of transparency and green-washing.

#### “Gentle Aspect:” Public Response to Alternative Methods of Disposition

Public perception is not strictly negative in relation to these alternative methods of disposition. In fact, interviewees frequently mentioned how some consumers favor these processes not for their environmental benefit, but for their treatment of the dead. Flores notes that clients often bring up the “gentle aspect” of the process alongside mentions of the “green aspect.” She explained that when people learn about alkaline hydrolysis and correct their misconceptions, they tend to remark that it “sounds nicer than cremation” while incidentally being “better for the environment.” Essig remarked upon a slightly different trend in client feedback.

**“When humans are created, you're basically suspended in a water solution in the womb. And so a lot of people will go straight there when we describe what alkaline hydrolysis is and are like, Oh, okay. It's like when you're born, but the opposite, you're deceased and in the solution.”**

Houston's description of NOR supported this narrative as well. She stated that "a lot of people are not choosing it for the green option, [but] are choosing it because it's gentle, and they want something other than what is out there." What these perspectives share is an emphasis not on the green-ness of the process, but the supposed comfort of the deceased. Funeral home workers largely attributed client selection of these processes to this purported desire for comfort and quality of care-taking. The origin of these consumer choices also indicates a tension in the tradeoff between the green ideals informing an organization's services, and a client's wishes. Houston mentioned how Return Home has clients "ship people to us all the time" which "negates anything green about our process" because the aforementioned client sought out NOR "for different reasons."

Balancing the client wishes with the 'green' aims of these facilities is not new territory for the green death movement. Essig, whose facility is hybrid, catering to different forms of burial, as well as alkaline hydrolysis, described the difficulty of maintaining stringent standards for 'green' death in the face of grief. She outlined an example of how one "can have all these restrictions on biodegradable" products for natural burial, but "when the family[...] has this, leather belt that grandpa wore all the time with the metal buckle" that they desire him to be buried in, "all of a sudden that burial doesn't really become green anymore." Her solution, however, is not to double down on environmental standards and convince the family to go against their desires. She says her approach is to "have your environmental wins as much as you possibly can" because from her perspective, it would be callous to stand in the way of the client's "way to grieve." This approach is echoed in the interviews I conducted with professionals working with alkaline hydrolysis and NOR. Ultimately, the purpose of these facilities is to care

for not just the dead, but the living mourners. In the face of this larger purpose green ideology and aims takes a necessary backseat.

## **Legalization and Implementation**

### “Troublesome For Us:” Rushed Policy and Regulatory Concerns

There is a felt sense amongst death care workers that current regulatory measures are ill-suited to the processes with which they are concerned, creating unnecessary barriers to implementation. The purpose of this section is not to conduct an in-depth review of the law, but to show what stakeholders experience as a result of its construction and implementation. To start, stakeholders looking to legalize new methods of disposition can achieve so through several different routes. Barbara Kemmis, a board member of the Cremation Association of North America, explained that if a new form of disposition appears, and individuals want to legalize it, it is easiest if it is a “form of an existing disposition.” From there, the legal definition of the established form of disposition could be altered to include the new form. For alkaline hydrolysis and NOR, Kemmis said that meant “the easiest way was to change the definition of cremation.” According to her, in nine states, the definition of cremation was expanded from a strictly thermal or flame-based process to various processes that reduce the body to bone fragments. In this manner, alkaline hydrolysis and NOR were legalized not as new processes, but alternative forms of cremation.

While expanding the existing legal definition of cremation provides a relatively easy pathway for legalization, it doesn’t facilitate implementation. According to Kemmis, states that used this path often neglected to alter or create alternative disposition specific regulations. She stressed the importance of this in relation to alkaline hydrolysis, saying “from a regulatory perspective, sure what happened in the machines, and in the building was different, but the chain

of custody [...] identifying the body all the way through what the what the family members received on the other end, [...] it's white powder versus gray.” Beyond these aesthetic differences lay issues with the innate differences between flame-based cremation and alkaline hydrolysis. Alkaline hydrolysis by definition involves the use of water and alkaline chemicals. Kemmis stated that subjecting alkaline hydrolysis to the regulations ascribed to cremation creates problems with “wastewater management” and certifications to “handle different chemicals.” According to Kemmis, this regulation is crucial when considering the high volume of water alkaline hydrolysis mandates. Fisher initially agrees with this statement, saying that the majority of lobbying is getting policy workers to “understand[] how the technology works, what to what to worry about [...] you want to make sure the operator state that's operating the equipment, [is making] sure the public is safe, running water samples, so they know the water is safe as it's going down the drain.” However, according to him, states where alkaline hydrolysis was legalized under standalone legislation subject it to “more scrutiny,” making it difficult for practitioners to actually get started.

NOR faces similar challenges in the legal sphere. While not as widespread as alkaline hydrolysis, many states have legalized it in a similar manner —through the expansion of existing definitions of cremation. Houston explained that post-legalization in Washington State, regulators “took a lot of their rules from existing crematory law and then existing compost regulations.” While Houston notes that regulations were put in for soil testing for “fecal coliforms and salmonella and then heavy metals and pharmaceuticals” other regulations were not case specific. As a result of this, Houston not only had to complete cremation training, the NOR facility had to be housed in “an area that is zoned for a crematory.” She sums up the issue saying “things like that where the legislation is rushed through and not really thought about are

troublesome for us.” Regardless of these varying perspectives, it is apparent that the lack of forethought has complicated the implementation of NOR in other recent legalizations. According to Houston, the recent legalization in New York State’s use of crematory regulations has prevented facilities from opening on less than “28 acres” because “you have to be a cemetery to operate a natural gas production facility,” even though NOR is a vastly different process.

Additionally, members of the green burial community expressed concerns regarding lack of standardization. Webster described this issue as “volatile,” stating that “every place has their own little proprietary methodology for doing the natural organic reduction.” She goes on to explain her sentiment, stating “there's no [...] standard to it. [...] As somebody in the death care industry, it kind of makes me a little nervous. [...] I've talked to operators that, oh, my equipment produces one yard of soil, all my equipment produces five yards of soil.” This level of concern varied between interviewees, dependent upon their professional background and stake in the new technology. Regardless of these individual perceptions, while this lack of standardization doesn’t indicate innate issues with the technology or individual facilities’ methods of composting, it does point to a lack of oversight and regulation on a policy level.

### **The Green Death Community**

#### “Different Camps:” Alternating Perspectives on Alternative Methods of Disposition

The green death movement is composed of individuals from varied professional and personal backgrounds. Therefore, while organizations may issue statements on pressing topics, it is difficult to find a unified stance on relevant issues. The emergence and growing popularity of alternative green burial methods, namely alkaline hydrolysis and NOR, have not only been the subject of media and policy attention, but discourse within the green death community. Most individuals adhere to the traditional definition of green burial (no embalming, no concrete vault,

and a biodegradable casket) wherein the body is interred in soil. These individuals, like Hauke puts it, “wouldn't really call alkaline hydrolysis, a green burial, but it is certainly a more green method for disposition.” She acknowledges that there are “different camps when it comes to what people think of with green burial. My personal feeling is that and I think a lot of people share the sentiment that green burial sort of falls on a spectrum.” However, when the fundamental definition of green burial comes down to burial, for some it is difficult to see the flexibility necessary for a spectrum.

Regardless, perception of this spectrum is important. Hauke explains that “certain areas just don't have the land to accommodate a full green burial,” so technologies that “are just as good or close enough” to natural burial are crucial to making green death accessible. Furthermore, while the media can present these newer methods of disposition as alternatives to traditional green burial, that doesn't mean that practitioners themselves further this narrative. Houston echoes this sentiment of accessibility, arguing that NOR is “green burial for urban people, [...] not many people have access to actual green burials. So this is the next best option.” Webster expands upon this, saying “We want to be sure that there aren't people out there calling things green burials that aren't. And, of course, that's become a big issue lately, with the addition of alkaline hydrolysis for human use [...] Those are all reductive processes, just like cremation.”

What Webster means by “reductive processes” is that cremation, like alkaline hydrolysis and NOR, are “incomplete processes.” They reduce the body to bone, but the remains still require additional processing. To this extent, Webster expresses some of the concerns the green burial community has for alternative methods of disposition being touted as more advanced than traditional burial.

“This historic process takes longer and we don't need a piece of equipment to do it. It's just more simple, right? And guess what, [the body] goes right into



there, you know, **we don't need some sort of intermediary object to take care of something that can [decompose] on its own.**"

Webster doesn't denigrate these processes, but stresses the importance of consumers being informed of "how they differ environmentally, and process wise from a natural burial."

In regards to the funeral industry, there is a pressure to stay relevant in order to stay in business. Jeff Hodes, owner of Cemetery Management Solutions, notes that many cemeteries and funeral homes are closing because "they're not able to stay competitive [...] they're not able or willing to adapt." He recalled individuals working in the field referring to cremation as a "passing fad." Other interviewees echoed this sentiment, suggesting a shared belief that alternative methods of disposition such as NOR and alkaline hydrolysis were gimmicky and media-friendly, rather than substantive processes.

Regardless, many proponents of green death acknowledge or profess the benefits of these newer technologies growing in influence. Emily Miller, of the Colorado Burial Preserve, explains that "even though all that news coverage was confusing, it started the conversation, right, it planted the seed [...] if a family talks to me and ends up choosing a water cremation, that's great for the family and great for the planet. So it's a win-win." Going further, Miller highlights the fact that alkaline hydrolysis in particular serves as a greener alternative to cremation, not to green burial. She argues that "alkaline hydrolysis makes the most sense in terms of serving a mass population in an urban environment. I think it also has a good chance of acceptance in public perception much the way cremation by fire has received." She encapsulates the situation by acknowledging that while there is "a bumpy road of reactionary voices in the industry, resisting change, but then ultimately accepting it. I think you'll see water cremation in a lot more places." As evidenced by the above discourse, this bumpy road in reference to

alternative methods of disposition stems from both the traditional funeral industry, and the green death community.

### *Summary of Findings*

Alternative methods of disposition face diverse reactions and challenges on all levels of implementation. The role of education in shaping these responses was a critical thread through the four aspects analyzed above. While consumer feedback is largely positive, be it for the environmental benefits or the style of death care as a whole, there is an information barrier to this acceptance. Rampant miseducation and misconceptions surrounding death and the funeral industry as a whole has made it difficult for green-focused movements and methods to gain a foothold in the face of the perceived need for ‘professional death care.’ On a legislative level, this misinformation allows for speedy, but improper, legalization and regulation. Lastly, within the green death movement, miscommunication surrounding the alleged ‘green-ness’ of a given method, as well as core differences in beliefs also posed a challenge in terms of ideological acceptance of newer forms of disposition.

## **VI. Discussion and Policy Implications**

While there are no laws preventing individuals from seeking more environmentally friendly forms of disposition, socio-cultural norms and lack of relevant education prove to be sufficient barriers. In terms of green deaths, the most basic form, a natural or green burial, is already practiced in a variety of cultures. However, due to the favoring of embalming and cremation in law and practice, as well as the norm of using a professional funeral service, individuals lack the know-how to seek out modes of death care beyond what is popular. The entrenched taboo of discussing death and involving others in our own death process works in conjunction with the lack of education surrounding available death care to maintain this status

quo. In short, while green burial and greener alternatives to popular methods may be more appealing to consumers and in line with the deceased's personal and cultural beliefs, death taboos stand in the way of wide recognition and adoption. Demystifying death and making it approachable is crucial to increasing its sustainability.

According to my interview-based data, new forms of disposition, such as alkaline hydrolysis and natural organic reduction, are responses to both consumer desire and a perceived need for funeral industry reform, indicating trends not only within green death, but American death care as a whole. These trends demonstrate a mutual desire on behalf of those within the death industry and individuals outside of it to shrink cultural distance to death at large. Some individuals seek out green death care purely for its purported environmental benefits, hoping to give back to the Earth even in death. Some practice green death care due to religious practices that align with the ideology, emphasizing a return to the Earth that doesn't inhibit natural processes. However, my interview data suggests there is a significant proportion of those who choose these processes due to their desire to care for their loved ones in a fashion they feel isn't accessible through more traditional disposition, such as electing not to embalm. The general perception within the green death industry is that these individuals wish to be present and involved in their loved ones' disposition—a practice many green funeral homes aim to facilitate. While this illustrates the core connections between green death and the death positive movement, it also indicates the ways in which consumers are seeking practices unpopular in the more traditional death care industry. This changing tide in consumer behavior reaffirms the importance of facilitating green death implementation and acceptance in order to meet popular demand.

A consistent theme across the interviews I conducted was the importance of education and awareness in promoting acceptance of alternative methods of disposition—on both a public

and industry level. Interviewees stressed how consumers were not necessarily opposed to green death ideology, but lacked the awareness that these processes were an option for themselves and their loved ones. Additionally, within industry, opposition came both from proponents of traditional methods, as well as green death professionals. This resistance stemmed from varying, and at times contradicting, beliefs surrounding appropriate death care and death care ideology. To facilitate acceptance and adoption local and state governments, along with health care centers such as hospices, should help bridge awareness gaps through advertising the full-range of death care options, as well as informing individuals of their rights.

This work in the public sphere is crucial to gaining acceptance and necessary awareness, however, the barriers posed by improper legalization and regulation indicate further challenges. Through interviews with individuals working in alternative death care, my research suggests that there is a tangible concern regarding the ability of facilities to operate in states that pursue legalization through the expansion of disposition definitions. While expanding definitions of pre-existing and accepted methods of disposition, specifically cremation, enables legalization of newer processes, it poses regulatory and implementation issues. To combat this, policy workers should be properly educated on the processes which they are legislating, along with the simultaneous adoption of method-specific regulatory policies. This would help prevent issues of improper regulation, such as NOR facilities being subject to cemetery zoning laws.

## **VII. Conclusion**

Through interviews conducted with professionals working in diverse areas of death care, I explored how green death has evolved to meet consumer needs, and the implications of this evolution. Cultural, economical, political, and ideological factors deeply affect the acceptance and implementation of alternative methods of disposition. Misconceptions surrounding not just

green death, but death care in general, have proven to be a bulwark to green death ideology acceptance. Prominent misconceptions concerning sanitation risks and disdain towards being near the body are rooted both in entrenched cultural perceptions of the corpse and lack of education. Despite this, practitioners frequently discuss positive public feedback towards their practices upon further education and active amelioration of death taboos.

In my review of the literature, I sought to understand how different perceptions of the corpse interacted with existing death care and informed innovation within the field. These perceptions were not mutually exclusive and often went hand in hand with each other: proponents of the corpse as linked to contamination often favored death care that was ‘medicalized’ and ‘professional.’ While interviewees did not explicitly refer to these concepts in their responses, the manner in which they described their work, and their particular stances on alternative disposition echoed this framework. Understanding these cultural lines and perceptions aided in understanding the tensions existing in public perception, regulation, and ideology.

In my long term data collection and analysis, my research opened up several other avenues of further research and study. To fully understand a subject as broad as green death care, a more intensive analysis of consumer choice and feedback would be crucial. Focus groups with individuals who have selected these methods, either pre-need or at-need, would illuminate just how cultural backing informs death care trends. This would aid in understanding how effective ‘green’ advertising is in the face of more emotional reasoning.

Outside of the scope of future research, the findings of this paper also suggest that effectively popularizing green death and making it acceptable requires an overhaul of how Americans conceptualize death. The modern cultural distance from death is a significant impediment to green death care, or any death care’s, acceptance. To indulge in a cliché, death is

the one constant, yet it is rarely spoken about outside of the instance of its occurrence. Interviewees consistently stressed how their jobs were not just processing the corpse and educating the public on green burial, but facilitating the death process for the living, reassuring their grief and wishes. Individuals are drawn to green death facilities for reasons beyond sustainability: these centers facilitate post-mortem acts of love, allowing kin to care for their loved ones, clean them and wash their hair. This intertwining of green death and death acceptance indicates the importance of healing the gulf between us and the dead. If we aspire to make our deaths sustainable, we must also make them communal.

## **VIII. Appendix**

### **Sample Interview Questions**

Questions drafted for interviews with professionals working in the death care industry.

- (1) How would you describe your organization's core mission?
- (2) What does your work with this organization look like broadly?
- (3) Do you find other organizations/people are open to this style of death care?
- (4) What are some misconceptions people/organizations have about this style of deathcare?
- (5) How do clients' typically find your services?
- (6) What does the typical funerary process look like in your organization?
- (7) How does this process compare to other organizations?
- (8) What is your organization's concept of corpse?
- (9) How do you balance people's traditions and desires while conducting a green burial?
- (10) What kind of outreach work did you/your organization do with the state/local government?
- (11) What has that education/outreach looked like within the death care industry?
- (12) How would you describe green death in your own words?
- (13) How would you say your organization's mission/perception of death interacts with the broader culture in your state?
- (14) How would you describe the relationship between the main ideas of the Green Burial Movement and your organization's work? (are they aligned etc.)
- (15) In your professional opinion, what do you see as the path forward for broader green death practice and recognition?
- (16) What are the challenges of these different techniques as they become mainstream?
- (17) Are there issues of greenwashing in the field?

- (18) If there was anything you could fix or change within the industry or in the public sphere, what would it be?

### Sample Interview Request

Emails varied depending on introduction and familiarity with individuals.

Hello [name],

My name is Zoë Saldinger, and I'm a student at the University of Chicago. It's a pleasure to be in touch with you!

I'm reaching out to your organization because I am seeking interview participants for my thesis project, which focuses on the green death movement and American death policy. Given that [x organization] focuses on similar topics, I wanted to ask if you or a member of your organization would be willing to participate in this research. Interviews should last about 45 minutes via zoom or phone call. I wanted to ask if you could send this request for interview participants to relevant [community members/program list serves/ etc.] as well.

If you are amenable to sharing this request, you are welcome to pass on the following information:

An undergraduate student at the University of Chicago is seeking interview participants and welcomes [members of x/y/z organization] to contribute to the study, which seeks to better understand how the green death movement is informing or shaping state policy and broader American death culture. The researcher is seeking adult interview participants who live in the U.S. and work within the death care industry or in state death policy, and are willing to discuss these topics. Interviews should last **about 45 minutes** via Zoom or phone call. If you have any questions or would like to participate in this study, please email Zoë Saldinger at [zsaldinger@uchicago.edu](mailto:zsaldinger@uchicago.edu). For reference, the study protocol number is IRB22-1673 .

With thanks,

Zoë Saldinger (she/hers)  
The University of Chicago  
[zsaldinger@uchicago.edu](mailto:zsaldinger@uchicago.edu)

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